Imperceptibility as Feminist Epistemology in the Work of Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman

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Abstract   Imperceptibility is not a lack but a feminist way of knowing. Focusing on works by three women artists – Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, and Francesca Woodman – produced amid the long 1970s, this essay shows how thresholds, traces, and blur redirect attention from what artworks display to how they withhold and delay legibility. Centring artist-material intra-action, it interrogates visibility-as-truth, the 'neutral' medium, the disembodied observer, and the premise of self-representation as self-restoration. It politicises attention, reframes absence as a mode of presence, and relocates evidence to process, relation, and duration. The essay moves beyond visibility-as-remedy towards conditions of appearance, withholding, and resonance.

Keywords   Imperceptibility. Feminist epistemology. Intra-action. Situated knowledges. Absence. Material-discursive practice.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Thresholds of the Near-Form. – 4 Acts and Remainders: Index, Duration, Opacity. – 5 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

> To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic: to see differently is to risk the blindness that also makes vision possible.
> (Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 1988)

Donna Haraway's reminder frames the inquiry this essay explores: how imperceptible cues reorient ways of seeing and knowing that do not rely on frontal clarity (Haraway 1988, 583). In 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler named a broader shift – 'dematerialisation' – in which conception and process displaced the finished object, giving abstraction a non-visual inflection (Lippard, Chandler 1968). The reception cliché of 'not enough to look at' registers a recalibration from visual plenitude to durational engagement, far from abolishing aesthetics, this moment exposed the assumptions of order, clarity, and unity, and integrated method into artistic procedure. Within the late-1960s-1970s milieu, and alongside Women's Liberation Movement (especially consciousness-raising), artists pushed toward voids, attenuations, and traces, staging corporeality as partial, deferred, or indexical. Art-viewing moved from instant recognition to negotiated encounter, where perception and interpretation unfold over time. As attention shifted from frontal presentation to procedures, withholding became legible as epistemic work – a way to know bodies without submitting them to full view.

This essay argues that imperceptible cues operate as a feminist epistemic strategy. Through close analyses of works by Eva Hesse (1936-1970), Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), and Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), it examines imperceptibility as both a material procedure and a phenomenological effect, interrogating visibility-as-truth and redistributing evidence across delay, relation, and situated encounter. Two threads structure this interleaved comparative reading: Thresholds and Time / Index / Documentation.

Methodologically, I draw on situated knowledges, diffractive reading, and close, practice-led "writing with" artworks (Rogoff 2002, 48). Here, epistemology names the historically produced rules that organise what counts as knowledge in art – who is authorised to know, how bodies become legible, and which criteria secure claims. I use Karen Barad's intra-action to denote that agencies and objects emerge through material-discursive apparatuses; medium and matter co-constitute procedures (Barad 2007). Against late-1960s-early-1980s Euro-American debates on 'female imagery', I argue that the perceptual and material procedures by which artworks stage imperceptibility remain under-specified as a cross-media feminist operation. Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman rethink corporeal materiality and de-hierarchise artist-material relations. Read together, the chapters test how gendered bodies become knowable

without full disclosure, interrogate period assumptions about medium, visibility, and truth, and unsettle media hierarchies.

2   Literature Review

In "Notes on the Index", Rosalind Krauss characterises art of the long 1970s as "diversified, split, factionalised" and proposes the 'index' to grasp this dispersion. By 'index' she refers to a sign physically caused by and contiguous with its referent; its force is *thereness* rather than iconographic resemblance (Krauss 1977, 68, 78). Mary Ann Doane sharpens the point: the index's *thereness* loosens expressivity and unsettles a unified, authorial "I"; in the trace, "things speak themselves", and the artist pivots from delivering a finished image to selecting and framing conditions (Doane 2007, 3). Imperceptibility marks the 'intra-actions' at play and the interpretive routes they open. Barad defines 'intra-action' as the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" through material-discursive apparatuses; agencies and objects emerge together – medium and matter co-constitute procedures (Barad 2007, 33, 139-41). In this shift toward dematerialisation, artists turned to voids, attenuations, and traces, staging corporeality as partial, deferred, or indexical (Lippard, Chandler 1968; 1999, 46-8).

Women artists have long worked with – and at times refused – the repertoire of cultural figuration. Within and around the Women's Liberation Movement, "the personal is political" and consciousness-raising positioned lived experience as method (Hanisch 1970). In art discourse, the 'female imagery' controversy crystallised with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's essay in *Womanspace Journal* (1973), advancing 'central-core' imagery – especially the vulvar motif – as a tactic against cultural loathing (Chicago, Schapiro 1973, 14). As the position travelled transatlantically, critics challenged essentialist accounts of female iconography. The polemic hardened into a binary that fixed the epistemic status of imagery either transparently affirmative or inherently suspect – inviting verdicts on 'essentialism' at the expense of attention to display and spectatorship (Jones 1996, 98). Michele Barrett traces the mixed reception to a structural risk of centralised imagery: visibility may operate as a situated tactic of recognition, but it does not guarantee empowering readings; effects remain contingent on reception (Barrett 1982, 46-7). This essay responds by shifting the analytic locus from icon to encounter: thresholds, traces, and temporal indices relocate evidentiary force to procedures and conditions of appearance.

Feminist epistemology asks how gendered assumptions shape inquiry and disadvantage subordinated groups. Haraway contests classical binaries by insisting that vision is embodied. Set against

Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (1986), she names disembodied sight the "god trick" (Haraway 1988, 581, 583): only situated, partial perspectives are objective; making one's stance, instruments, and limits explicit enables accountable seeing. Together with Barad's 'agential realism', this reframing centres material process and resists over-reliance on signification (Haraway 1988; Barad 2003, 815). Methodologically, it links lived experience to procedure and treats change as constitutive, revisiting accounts of 'woman' as a cultural sign.

Aligning with Marsha Meskimmon's account of how art thinks through matter, artworks function as *Gedankenexperimente* (thought experiments) – material thought that generates knowledge (Meskimmon 2019). I follow Alexandra Irimia in treating imperceptible cues as 'empty signifiers' that stage absence through their own rhetoric and topography (Irimia 2018). Extending this, I frame imperceptibility as an indexical operation within a rhetoric of absence, without collapsing it into ontological lack.

Across Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman, imperceptibility foregrounds material-discursive practice and reorients how feminist art history locates appearance and evidence, shifting authority from the mastering gaze. Each tests her medium's evidentiary logics: Hesse's cavities specify space as negative measure; Mendieta's silhouettes index site as an after-the-fact condition; Woodman's blur makes visibility itself a parameter rather than a guarantee. All three artists keep the work's 'subject' open, loosening the seam between icon, essence, and material effect. Imperceptible cues organise attention, distribute evidentiary force over time, and dignify selective appearance. This widens what may count as 'female imagery' and unsettles habits that equate clarity with truth or self-imaging with self-restoration.

3   Thresholds of the Near-Form

Thresholds of the near-form keep visibility in reserve: cavities, coverings, and blurs hold form almost present and make attention itself the site of knowledge. In *Hang Up* (1966) **[fig. 1]**, German-born American sculptor Eva Hesse makes the cavity a measure, turning frame and interval into the work's subject and holding form at the edge of appearance. Secured to a blank wall, a wrapped, thickened rectangular frame encloses only the wall; from its lower edge a coated cord exits, arcs into the room, and yields to gravity. By presenting only the margins, Hesse converts frame and void into material presence, collapsing painting's perimeter into sculptural space (Potts 2000, 337). The frame behaves like a skin that encloses "nothing", while the cord literalises a measured leak – time made

visible. Hesse called this extremity an "unknown quality" in which the object "accedes to its non-logical self", later remarking that *Hang Up* was "the most important early statement" of that drive (Lippard 1976, 56, 67).
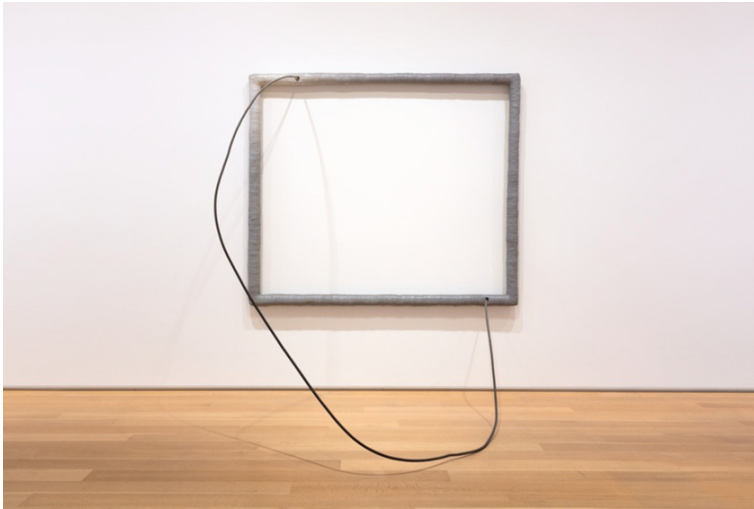
Figure 1   Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*. 1966. Acrylic paint on cloth over wood; acrylic paint on cord over steel tube, 182.9 × 213.4 × 198.1 cm. Art Institute of Chicago. © The Estate of Eva Hesse; Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Contrary to Minimalism's unitary clarity, Hesse uses materials as a mode of thinking. Rope, cord, latex, fibreglass, and rubber are tested at their limits of weight, elasticity, and tactility; wrapping and skinning produce surfaces that look sealed yet behave in time. Present effects – tension and measured descent – are read backward to prior operations (wrapping, piercing) and forward to ongoing forces (gravity). Hesse retains pared literalness yet lets matter exceed schema, keeping perceptual ambiguity active (Shapiro 1973, 77). This process, here termed 'rewinding materialisation', selects and handles matter so as to cue earlier states of making and ongoing forces.

Soft, permeable edges trouble the frame's right angles. Even as *Hang Up* aims at geometry, its friable skin pushes meaning toward experiential relation rather than fixed form (Lippard 1976, 56). Negative space, constructed by literal means, both affirms and dismantles pictorial limits. The work is at once pictorial and sculptural: as sculpture it exposes and defeats the picture's perimeter; as picture it remains tethered to literal presence – a "mutual cancellation" that Hesse turns into a challenge for perception (Fer 1999, 34). Attention shifts from image to proprioception; reception becomes

retroactive and durational rather than instantaneous. In this sense, *Hang Up* unsettles iconographic reading and Minimalist 'Gestalt' by distributing evidentiary force across materials, processes, and intervals instead of centring a coherent image and mastering gaze (Irigaray 1985, 29). Suspended between structure and reference, *Hang Up* functions as a tabula rasa whose surface is as vulnerable and provisional as its meanings. Its near-form keeps appearance selective, dignifying what remains withheld while insisting on presence through procedure.

In Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series (1973-80), imperceptible silhouettes operate as site-indexed thresholds: co-produced by body, place, and camera, and disclosed through documentation. Imperceptibility functions both as material procedure and as phenomenological effect, unsettling the assumption that stable form guarantees stable knowledge – or a coherent national identity (Blocker 1999; Kwon 1996). Here, *phenomenological* signals an analysis grounded in the material sensorium of time and process – weight, rhythm, seepage – and in how such cues reorganise attention. Following Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility, vision solicits tactile imagination; cavities, mud, and ash are felt as much as seen (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 66).

Figure 2
Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, from *Silueta Works in Mexico 1973-77*. 1973. Chromogenic print, 50.8 × 34 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC; Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Source: Photo Don Ross, courtesy SFMOMA

Located in a Zapotec tomb at Yagul, *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) **[fig. 2]** shows Mendieta lying supine, arms close to the torso, legs pressed together. Small white flowers cover the body, softening contour and partially obscuring facial features. Photographed from overhead, the concavity acts as a soft container; low light reduces contrast. As the eye acclimatises, the sensorium – cool stone, soft petals, humid air – comes forward, soliciting tactile imagination. The image oscillates between two registrations: a literal body in a grave-like hollow and an emergent outline that hovers in perception. Rather than stabilising identity by iconic visibility, the work proposes a relational topology – concavity, cover, containment – that recurs across actions and sites as a procedure of appearance (Rosenthal 2013, 208, 244).

Figure 3
Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*: *Silueta Series*, *Mexico*. 1976. Chromogenic print, 33.7 × 50.5 cm. Richard Saltoun. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC; Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co

Indexically – through contact and displacement – the *Silueta* series stages absence while keeping it perceptible as trace, residue, and afterimage (Mourey 1987, 42-3). Its low-amplitude presence questions whether intact presentation secures identity or belonging, unsettling expectations of transparency. Mendieta's practice becomes one of making and unmaking identity through acts-in-place – igniting, eroding, imprinting – with sites that co-author the work. The choice of a pre-Columbian funerary site invokes histories of colonisation and

resistance without reducing the work to heritage display (Blocker 1999). *Imagen de Yagul* stages embodiment through reversible body-world relations, so presence and absence are co-implicated rather than opposed, preparing Mendieta's further procedures: processual recognition at the shoreline (1976) **[fig. 3]**, where foam and tide alternately make and unmake the silhouette, and act-based politics in *Ánima* (1976) **[fig. 4]**, where fire announces presence as event and remainder (Jones 1998, 41).

Figure 4   Ana Mendieta, *Ánima (Alma/Soul)*. 1976. Chromogenic print, 34.3 × 50.8 cm.
Smithsonian American Art Museum. © 1976 Estate of Ana Mendieta

4   Acts and Remainders: Index, Duration, Opacity

From blur to tide to skin, indexical time – exposure blur, tidal overwrite, material ageing – reframes what counts as evidentiary force and trains attention as an ethical practice. Centring on Woodman's self-portraits and bridging to Mendieta and Hesse, I treat 'documentation as disappearance' as an epistemic tactic that secures a right to opacity, shifting certainty from the iconography of the 'female image' to procedures of making. In this register, presence is relocated from image to procedure – acts, intervals, traces – so that opacity functions as a discipline of attention.

American photographer Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) suspends subject-certainty through temporal blur and framing cuts; imperceptibility functions as a selective, durational staging of appearance. Building on Harriet Riches's account of spectral effects,

this chapter identifies three operators – temporal blur, 'agential' framing cuts, and craft-coded making – through which Woodman shifts visibility's truth-claim from clarity to criteria (Riches 2004). Drawing on Camiel van Winkel's analysis of culture's pressure to visualise even the non-visual, Woodman's practice demonstrates that the regime is co-produced by camera, duration, and site; the 'self' does not precede representation but is constituted within it (van Winkel 2005, 15). This process is here termed 'spectral internalisation': the image folds time, cut, and site inward so that 'ghostliness' denotes an epistemic delay rather than disappearance or transcendence.

Figure 5
Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island. 1976. Gelatin silver print on paper, 13.9 × 13.9 cm. Tate. © Woodman Family Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London

Figure 6
Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island. 1976. Gelatin silver print on paper, 13.9 × 13.9 cm. Tate. © Woodman Family Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London

In *Space²* (1976) **[fig. 5]**, a small square print, Woodman stands in a bare corner; light enters from a right-hand window, only its inner frame visible. Her feet – firmly planted, the right slightly ahead – are crisp; pointed heels cast narrow shadows that pierce the floor, anchoring the gaze. Above the knees, the torso dissolves into motion blur, arms leaning forward as if moments from touching the ground. In another *Space²*, Providence (1976) **[fig. 6]**, she occupies the corner with feet hip-width apart; the torso is more legible, broad shadows fall behind, and the face blurs with head movement, resisting photographic clarity (Krauss 1999, 162). *Space²* foregrounds photographic temporality: what appears instantaneous is the record of an interval. Blur functions as an index of time; the figure is not a disappearance but a redistribution of 'self' across duration and exposure. Thus the image makes its own construction legible – time, cut, and site become subjects of the work, and 'ghostliness' signals epistemic delay.

In the *House* photographs (1975-76), dilapidated interiors recur as staged domesticities – laboratories for light, shadow, and the recording of movement. Rather than a space that devours the subject, peeling walls and seams operate as an apparatus of appearance, a domestic lab that tests visibility (Solomon-Godeau 1986). In *House #3* (1975-76) **[fig. 7]**, cracked plaster and placed debris lead the eye to a single shoe as the body whirls into blown-out window light; in *House #4* (1975-76) **[fig. 8]**, the figure slips behind a mantel into the *hors-champ* (off-screen space) remainder (Deleuze 1986, 30). These images are assembled with tripod, timer, calibrated daylight; taped paper, panes, and scraps act as working elements. Following Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, Woodman's procedures read as a camera-based 'femmage': layering, cutting, and assembling within a domestic register (Schapiro, Meyer 1977-78; Bryan-Wilson 2017, 13-14). She de-hierarchises the alignment of 'masculine mechanism' with 'culture' and 'feminine domesticity' with the 'decorative' (Auther 2010, xi). Through this, Woodman contests photography's myth of automaticity: her photographs result from chosen, crafted assembly rather than mechanical capture. The dilapidated house becomes an active surface into which the body can disappear – a macrocosm of Woodman's 'spectral internalisation'. "It's a matter of convenience; I am always available", she remarked – a wry acknowledgment of the self as material at hand, and a form of craft (Rankin 1998, 35). The prints' small scale fosters close looking, opening a self-reflexive space to consider how the self is constituted through procedures of making and seeing. Thus Woodman's ghostly blurs are crafted processes that make the conditions of selfhood's visibility palpable.

Figure 7
Francesca Woodman, *House #3*.
1975-76. Gelatin silver print,
16.4 × 16.2 cm. National Gallery
of Art. © Woodman Family
Foundation / ARS, New York

Figure 8
Francesca Woodman, *House #4*.
1975-1976. Gelatin silver
print, 20.32 × 25.4 cm. Marian
Goodman Gallery.
© Woodman Family Foundation
/ ARS, New York

In the shoreline *Silueta* (1976) **[fig. 3]**, Mendieta excavates a body-sized cavity at the waterline and photographs from a fixed vantage as the tide advances. Small waves briefly complete the figure with foam; larger waves erase its edges, dispersing pigment and effacing the outline. Process becomes legible as holding, filling, and erasing – governed by porosity, grain size, wave interval, wind – and by framing and sequence. As Jane Blocker notes, Mendieta's representational modes mirror travel's departures and arrivals: the absent body suspends signifier-signified closure and substitutes cyclical return for narrative

finality (Blocker 1999). The silhouette functions as an apparatus of emplacement, visible only insofar as it momentarily holds water, foam, or pigment; presence is encountered as 'event' rather than as stable form.

In concert with Woodman – whose 'spectral internalisation' folds time into the image via long exposure so that the self is constituted within camera, duration, and site – Mendieta entrusts time to tide and shore; 'what counts' appears between element and image, and the document keeps that in-between open to view (van Winkel 2005, 15; Kwon 1996).

Figure 9 Eva Hesse, Contingent. 1969. Fibreglass, polyester resin, latex and cheesecloth, eight units, 350 × 630 × 109 cm. National Gallery of Australia. © The Estate of Eva Hesse; Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Extending this logic materially, Hesse's *Contingent* (1969) **[fig. 9]** behaves as a time-porous skin: making and unmaking are co-legible. The rigid bite of fibreglass abuts the fragility of latex; heavier attachments pull sheets taut while light seeps through thinned skins, staging a poised contrast between endurance and susceptibility (Lippard 1976; Potts 2000). Imperceptibility here is a managed delay – never fully pictorial, never mere 'material' – a 'non-' zone between formation and deterioration. Over the course of display, the banners embrittle and no longer tolerate strong light; altered by the same forces that formed them, unmaking becomes their mode of making. This 'rewinding materialisation' trains perception

retroactively: viewers read present effects (sag, glow, brittleness) back to prior procedures (impregnation, layering, suspension) and forward to forces still acting (Potts 2000).

The result is a durational, "anamorphic mode" of viewing: order appears in one sweep and dissolves in another, so that evidentiary force arises from intervals and thresholds rather than from a single, mastering glance (Krauss 1999, 99). Together with Woodman's temporal blur and Mendieta's tidal sequence, Hesse's installation confirms the chapter's claim: index and duration do the epistemic work. Opacity emerges not as withdrawal but as an ethics of attention that dignifies selective appearance and keeps knowledge answerable to time, site, and material change (Riches 2004; Kwon 1996; Potts 2000).

5 Conclusion

This dissertation argues that imperceptibility is not a lack but a feminist epistemological strategy: a way of knowing that unsettles the certainties of visibility, mastery, and presence. Through Hesse's 'rewinding materialisation', Mendieta's dispersing silhouettes, and Woodman's spectral blurs, I show that works are apprehended less by what they disclose than by how they withhold, delay, or elide their own conditions of legibility. As John Berger reminds us, perception is selective, organised by learned schemata; what falls outside dominant frames can remain unseen even when materially present (Berger 1973). Imperceptibility exposes this tension between the visible and the invisible by relocating attention to processes, intervals, and traces.

Two insights follow. First, phenomenological encounters with imperceptible procedures cultivate perception differently: they slow and politicise attention, aligning with feminist accounts that centre the material, affective, and sensory webs through which the world becomes meaningful (Haraway 1988; Barad 2003). Imperceptibility thereby enacts a politics of perception, making the unapparent a site of feminist force. Second, imperceptibility destabilises entrenched binaries – presence/absence, form/content – and reorients feminist art history from visibility-as-remedy toward conditions of appearance, withholding, and resonance.

Methodologically, a practice-led, 'writing with' approach allows attentional and material procedures to test theory *in situ* (Rogoff 2002). In dialogue with Meskimmon's account of art as material thought, I treat artworks as *Gedankenexperimente* that generate knowledge through handling, duration, and site (Meskimmon 2019). Reading Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman together is not to fuse them

into a style but to let their divergences work diffractively, so that difference itself carries analytic and political force (Barad 2007).

This study has limits. Its Euro-American focus risks reproducing the frames it critiques, and its readings remain entangled with established receptions. Future research should widen the scope of imperceptibility across other geographies, media, and ecologies, and attend to how our disciplinary binaries – object/process, evidence/affect – quietly organise interpretation.

If absence is approached as surplus, this conclusion withholds closure. To attend to imperceptibility is to remain attuned to resonance, to think 'with' rather than only 'about' artworks. The urgent task may be less to 'discover' what was never acknowledged than to return to what has been sedimented in our habits of seeing and made imperceptible by repetition and selective forgetting. What appears absent may be what we once attended to and then allowed to recede. The epistemic payoff, then, is not only to open new objects of study but to reconfigure how we read the already-known: how might reading again through gaps, traces, and withholdings reorient what we thought we understood about feminist art strategies – and about art history itself?

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