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Essentialism and Performativity in the Work of Ana Mendieta

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Abstract

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By Desiree Gonzalez

Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) created earth-body sculptures in the 1970s and 1980s, informed and influenced by the contemporaneous genres of performance, body, and earth art. Thematically, her work incorporated issues related to cultural displacement, gender, and ritual. My honors thesis attempts to understand her complex practice by looking at her work through the context of feminist theory, specifically theories of essentialism and performativity. Interpreted as a way to empower women through the reclamation of the land, these works have traditionally been considered and at times criticized for being "essentialist." Much recent scholarship on Mendieta steers away from the essentialist interpretation, instead employing Judith Butler's performativity theory as if to revalidate her work. I argue that both the essentialist and performative interpretations are valuable to understanding Mendieta's multifaceted practice. When considered together, these two critical readings highlight the coexistence of the eternal and the ephemeral in Mendieta's work. First, an overview of Mendieta's practice will contextualize her work within the conceptual frameworks of the time. Next, I investigate Mendieta's alignment with the feminist art movement. Then I look at how essentialism and performativity have been applied to readings of her work. Finally, I look at key examples from her oeuvre and consider how essentialist and performative theories can be applied to them.

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Finally, I thank my family and friends who have endured hours on end listening to me talking about contemporary art. Thank you for your unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1976, Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) dug her hands into the sands of the La Ventosa, Mexico shoreline, carving out the form of a woman's body with her arms upraised [Figure 1]. The ocean tides slithered up to the cavity, dulling the edges of the body ever so slightly every time the water ebbed away. The powdered red pigment lining the silhouette dissipated with each wave, leaving only a blood-soaked memory of the original image. Mendieta documented the disintegration of her body on 35 mm color slides until the form was no longer recognizable.

This untitled piece points to a tension underlying her work. The upraised arm pose refers to goddess imagery that was popularized with the second-wave of feminism in the 1970s. The Great Goddess was an archetype of a strong female spirit that transcends cultural borders. Conversely, the dissolution of the image pointed to Mendieta's desire to create works of a more ephemeral nature, thus complicating the stability of the female identity. In this work, we can see a tension between two feminist perspectives: essentialism and performativity. Essentialism posits an innate gender identity. Performativity, introduced as a concept by Judith Butler in 1991, negates the notion of an innate identity because identity is a cultural performance, not a natural fact. Mendieta consistently resisted any labeling of her work, whether considered "feminist" or "Latina." She probably would have been intrigued by the fluidity of identity that performativity, a concept that arose six years after her death, offers. Interestingly enough, while scholars traditionally align the incorporation of natural elements and goddess imagery in Mendieta's work with essentialism, Mendieta's early performances, in which she

manipulates her body to take on a number of identities, seem to align themselves with the more recent theory of performativity.

Maintaining the female figure as the central image in her body of work, Mendieta addresses a wide range of identity issues, including feminism, sexuality, spirituality, ethnicity, and cultural displacement. This investigation, however, focuses on evaluating Mendieta's work in light of the seemingly divergent feminist theories of essentialism and performativity. Does Mendieta's work align with an essentialist view of women, or does she perform gender identity in accordance with Judith Butler's notion of performativity? Can her work simultaneously sustain both critical frameworks?

I argue that we can benefit most by integrating both approaches. An essentialist reading of Mendieta's work reveals a reliance on a vision of woman that transcends historical and cultural boundaries. Performativity, however, recognizes that Mendieta wants to complicate this concept of womanness. The repeated disappearance of the body in Mendieta's practice suggests a fluidity that negates any sense of a female essence. By examining her work through these two perspectives concurrently, we recognize an important concept in her work that we otherwise may have overlooked: the simultaneous existence of the eternal, as suggested by essentialism, and the unstable, implied by the performative.

In the first chapter, I explore Mendieta's personal and artistic development in order to provide a foundation upon which to understand her complex practice. While a student in the University of Iowa's cross-disciplinary Intermedia Program, Mendieta's work was primarily performance art that she captured via photographs and film. However, Mendieta is better known for her later earth-body sculptures, an intersection of

performance, body, and earth art. While she did not consider this work as performance, it *is* performance-based: it is time-based, site-specific, and blurs the boundary between the object and the subject. Both in her early Iowa performances and her mature works, the female body is the central focus, whether she is transferring facial hair from a male friend onto her own face or imprinting the silhouette of a female figure in sand or snow. Just as she explores and combines various media, Mendieta alludes to a number of issues that are relevant both to her personal biography and to the sociopolitical context of the 70s and 80s. The merging of disparate themes and identities in her transient and site-specific works make Mendieta's art simultaneously fascinating to encounter and difficult to classify and understand.

The second chapter examines Mendieta's role within feminist art. Beginning in the late 1960s and reaching its peak the following decade, the feminist art movement evolved formulated in response to the general theoretical and activist developments of the larger feminist movement. Through their art, women challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypical representations of the female body. Mendieta was engaged in feminist politics and feminist art circles in the 1970s and 1980s, contributing to the feminist art periodical *Heresies* and showing in the feminist art gallery A.I.R. Despite her involvement in the movement, Mendieta refused to be labeled as a "feminist artist" because she was afraid it would limit the reading of her work. I contend that Mendieta's work falls between this first generation of feminist art and a second generation of women artists who challenged the notion of a fixed female essence. Mendieta's alignment with the ideas of both generations contributes to the possibility of both essentialist and performative readings of her work.

The third chapter delves into the essentialist interpretation of Mendieta's work. For essentialists, sex and gender are biological categories that subsequently produce the gender differences and roles of women and men. Essentialism is criticized for overlooking the effect of social structures on the roles of gender and even of endorsing the sexism that exists within the social structure by labeling it as a part of the natural order. In the 1980s, the second generation of feminist artists accused the first generation of wanting to present an essentialist image of women. This chapter complicates the notion of essentialism, recognizing that, in fact, essentialism takes on various forms and goals. I also discuss the "goddess movement" as it related to both essentialism and 1970s feminist art. The chapter concludes by looking at goddess imagery in Mendieta's work and evaluating the artist's relationship to essentialism.

The theory of performativity and the ways in which scholars have applied performativity to Mendieta's work is the subject of the fourth chapter. I first discuss performativity as a framework that rejects any notion of an innate gender identity. Instead, individuals perform gender through the repetition of socially-imposed gendered acts. Some performance art relates to performativity when it subverts the identity of the artists, audience, subject, and object, just as performativity subverts any notion of rigid gender categories. Because of the production of gender fluidity in Mendieta's performance-based work, I believe her practice can be interpreted as "performative" in Butler's sense of the word.

The fifth chapter aims to apply both the essentialist and performative frameworks by examining three works that represent the three main periods of Mendieta's career. The 1972 performance *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant) represents Mendieta's early work at

the University of Iowa. *Ánima: Silueta de cohetes* (1976), part of her well-known Silueta series, is an earth-body sculpture that represents her mid-career development. The 1984 floor sculpture *Figura de Nganga*, meant to be displayed in a gallery setting, is an example of Mendieta's more permanent, object-based later work. In all three works, I will apply both an essentialist and performative reading, underscoring the coexistence of the eternal and the ephemeral.

In conducting this investigation, I employed diverse primary and secondary sources. Before 1996, much scholarship on Ana Mendieta was concerned with interpreting her work around the sensationalism that followed her death in 1985. It was not until Julia Herzberg's 1996 dissertation investigating Mendieta's formation at the University of Iowa that a scholar attempted to historically reconstruct any period of her life and work. Curator Olga Viso's essay "The Memory of History," written for the catalog of the 2004 retrospective Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, is to date the only comprehensive examination of Mendieta's entire career. Viso also provides access to countless previously unpublished works in her 2008 *Unseen Mendieta*. An interview with Viso, now director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, offered me the opportunity to tap into her wide-ranging understanding of Mendieta's practice. Her research has taken her to Cuba, Mexico, Italy, and remote parts of the United States, the various locations where Mendieta lived, worked, and made connections with the land. She has also talked extensively with Mendieta's closest family, friends, and colleagues. I credit Viso for helping me understand how to position Mendieta within feminist discourse.

I also relied on other sources that allow me to understand the feminist and feminist art context in which Mendieta was working. These sources include writings by artists and critics involved in the feminist art movement, including Lucy Lippard and Gloria Feman Orenstein. In my consideration of the goddess movement, I looked at books Mendieta may have been reading at the time, such as Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*. I also considered seminal texts on feminist theory, including (but not limited to) the work of Sherry Ortner, Simone de Beauvoir, and, of course, Judith Butler.

Finally, this investigation seeks not only to look at the essentialist and performative readings of Mendieta's practice, but also to apply these readings directly to specific works of art, something that many scholars fail to do. I had the opportunity to view rare works documented on 35 mm slides and videos at the Galerie Lelong, which houses the Estate of Ana Mendieta. Thus, while this thesis is guided by feminist theory, I ground my research in the actual works of art to ultimately guide my interpretation.

CHAPTER 1: ANA MENDIETA'S ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1982, Ana Mendieta asserted, "For the past twelve years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools."[1] The statement only scratches the surface of her multifaceted approach to art. Mendieta's earth-body sculptures, a synthesis of performance, body, and earth art, vacillate between the boundaries of artistic genre as well as between a multitude of thematic concerns related to her experiences as a female Cuban American exile. Her practice became a way to connect not only with nature, but also to a greater cultural past and present. In this chapter, I first outline Mendieta's artistic development and later discuss how her practice fit into the context of performance, earth, and body art.

Mendieta was born in Havana, Cuba, on November 18, 1948, to a prosperous and politically engaged family. Her father Ignacio, an attorney and investigator for police internal affairs, was a member of the left-wing Partido Revolucionario Cubano Auténtico (Authentic Cuban Revolutionary Party). Through this capacity he met Fidel Castro, who would go on to lead the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and secure political power for his dictatorial reign. Although an initial supporter of the revolution, Ignacio's loyalty wavered as Castro's politics aligned increasingly with the Soviet Union and communism. The Communist party asked Ignacio to pledge his allegiance, but he refused, citing opposition based on religious grounds. Concerned about the growing unrest in Havana, and because of Ignacio's involvement with counterrevolutionary activities, the Mendietas

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[1] Ana Mendieta, "Personal Writings." In *Ana Mendieta*, edited by Gloria Moure. (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, S.A., 1996), 186.

decided to send Ana, aged twelve, and her sister Raquel, 14, to the United States in September 1961. They joined over 14,000 children through the historic Operación Pedro Pan, a collaborative effort of the U.S. government and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Miami that transported the children of parents opposing the Communist regime in Cuba. Although they first arrived in Miami, the Mendieta girls soon relocated to Dubuque, Iowa, where they lived in various residential institutions and houses with three sets of foster parents.[2] They would be reunited with their mother and younger brother five years later in 1966, and with their father eighteen years later, in 1979.

Mendieta's geographic and cultural displacement from Cuba as an adolescent became a significant energy steering her work. Confronted with an alien culture and language, often facing derogatory remarks from her Anglo classmates, Mendieta developed the sense of an outsider, separate from the mainstream, that she later inserted into her practice. Appropriating elements of Latin American traditions into her artwork, Mendieta sought to refer back to her roots in Cuba: "In my work I am, in a sense, reliving my heritage."[3]

Mendieta remained in foster homes until 1966, when she briefly took courses at Briar Cliff College in Sioux City, Iowa, before transferring to the University of Iowa to study art. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1969 and subsequently two Masters of Fine Arts degrees, the first in painting (1972) and the second in Intermedia (1977).

Toward the end of 1969, Mendieta met German artist and art professor Hans

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[2] Julia Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977." (City University of New York, 1998), 1.

[3] Ana Mendieta (Master's Thesis, University of Iowa, 1977). Ana Mendieta Papers. Quoted in Olga M. Viso. *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 36.

Breder at a Halloween party, beginning of a ten-year romantic relationship and intellectual exchange. Between 1968 and 1970, Breder founded the Intermedia and Video Art Program[4] at the University of Iowa, the first university program in the country to offer an interdisciplinary, cross-genre Masters of Fine Arts. While working on the Masters degree between 1972 and 1977, Mendieta pursued coursework that also provided exposure to the New York's conceptual art scene and allowed her to build relationships with a wide range of artists that would last through out her career.

Breder's experimental Intermedia curriculum borrowed from Fluxus and Viennese Actionism its key tenets of collaboration, performance, and site-specifity. With students whose academic backgrounds included studio art, theater, music, writing, and film, the curriculum advanced the creative process through the integration of multiple genres. In a 1995 reflection on the program, Breder described the artistic practice of Intermedia as belonging to a "liminal space where the interplay of two or more media propagate new ideas, new forms, new ways of seeing and being."[5] He brought distinguished guest artists and critics who exposed students to the latest practices in conceptual and performance art occurring on the East and West Coasts, including Allan Kaprow, Robert Wilson, Vito Acconci, Lucy Lippard, John Perrault, and Mary Beth Edelson. Mendieta would go on to forge friendships with many of these artists. Breder's program focused on process, instructing students to "1) formulate a proposal for the work; 2) execute it; 3) document the activity."[6] Mendieta adhered to this training

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[4] The Intermedia program was renamed Multimedia in 1970, Julia Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980." In Viso, 138.
[5] Hans Breder, "Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal." *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 2/3 (1995), 114.
[6] Viso, "The Memory of History," 44.

throughout her career even as she moved away from more performance-based practices.

Mendieta's work from her years at Iowa emphasizes performance and the body, establishing the thematic foundations from which her more mature earth-body pieces would evolve. These works were concerned with gender, its physical representation, and violence against the body. In the 1972 *Untitled* (Glass on Body Imprints) [Figure 2], Mendieta pressed a sheet of Plexiglas against her bare body and face in various poses, resulting in a series of photographs capturing the grotesque deformation. Here she confronted traditional notions of female beauty by taking control of the manipulation of her own body. She created imprints of her body onto the glass surface, much as she inserted her body into the landscape in her later work. That same year, for her Masters[7] thesis project *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant) [Figure 3], Mendieta stood alongside fellow student and friend Morty Sklar, gluing onto her face his facial hair as he shaved his beard. By taking on her friend's masculine feature, Mendieta hoped to access his strength.[8] Manipulating her body in these works, Mendieta created uncomfortable images of herself that challenged the representation of gender as mediated by societal norms.

With the exception of reproducing her 1974 *Untitled* (Body Tracks)[9] several years later, Mendieta never exhibited the documentation of these early performances and

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[7] *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant) was thesis project for her first Masters of Fine Arts degree in painting in 1972.

[8] This work is further discussed in Chapter 5.

[9] In the 1974 performance *Untitled* (Body Tracks), Mendieta dipped her arms into a mixture of tempera and animal blood, stood in front of a wall with her arms pressed against it overhead, and allowed her body to gradually collapse onto her knees as her arms leave a severe red smear revealing their path along the white surface. The streaks of blood, a reference to Afro-Cuban cultures as well as the interplay of life and death, infuse both the human spirit and body into a physical form. The artist's body becomes a paintbrush, obfuscating the boundaries between the subject, or artist, and the object. She

tableaux in a gallery setting, indicating that she considered them more a part of her training than as mature works.[10] However, they establish many of the strategies that are fundamental to understanding her oeuvre. First, she fastidiously documented an action and its product over time through film and photography. Additionally, both in these and her later works, her own body remains the central image. In these early works, she aims to transform the body, whether through its physical distortion, the acquisition of another's power through hair, or violence against the body. Mendieta continues to refer to her own body in her later works, but in a much more oblique fashion.

In the summer of 1971 Mendieta traveled to Mexico as part of a field archaeology program, igniting a series of trips that were pivotal in the development of her work. She returned to Mexico with Breder almost every summer until 1980, each time venturing into less-traveled areas intending to explore the indigenous culture and ancient religions. Mendieta had already developed a fascination for prehistoric and indigenous cultures through coursework in anthropology and primitive art, but it was not until she traveled to Mexico that this interest was reflected in her practice. After years of alienation from her own homeland of Cuba, Mendieta forged a connection to a land that shared her native country's language, history of conquest, and synthesis of indigenous and European culture.

The desire to connect to her native soil through encounters with Mexican culture and history eventually propelled Mendieta to work directly with the earth. In 1973 she created *Imagen de Yagul* (Image of Yagul) [Figure 4] at the Mesoamerican

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filmed the piece, but beyond the filmic representation of the performative action, *Body Tracks* also resulted in a painted trace.

[10] Interview with Olga Viso, January 22, 2010.

archaeological site of Yagul in the state of Oaxaca. She lay in a Zapotec tomb, obscured by bundles of white flowers that seem to sprout from her naked body. By immersing her body into the landscape, Mendieta connected to the earth's past as well as to the rituals of the pre-Hispanic cultures that were performed there. The flowers emerging from her mummy-like body suggest a cycle of death and rebirth.

Years later, the artist would designate *Imagen de Yagul* as the first of her iconic *Siluetas* (Silhouettes) series, her most well-known and discussed body of works. Performing only in front of a small select audience (if anyone at all) in remote locations of rural Iowa and Mexico, Mendieta would sculpt the image of her body on the environment with natural and ephemeral materials such as grass, leaves, rocks, snow, sand, water, gunpowder, and flowers [Figures 5-8]. Over time, ecological forces caused the silhouettes to disintegrate into the land, a process Mendieta documented through film or photography. These resultant images were the artist's way to share her practice with others, whether presented in a gallery setting or published in an art journal. For the 1976 *Untitled* (Silueta Series), described in the introduction, Mendieta outlined her body on the beach, posed with her arms upraised. She subsequently dug out the sand to create an impression in the ground, filled the figure with powdered red pigment, and allowed the ebb and flow of the waves to slowly dissolve the image. [Figure 1]. The work now exists as a series of 35 mm color slides that record the gradual erosion of the female form.

While Mendieta's earliest performances explored gender, its representation, and sexual violence, the Siluetas series' insistence on the relationship between the body and the natural environment linked the artist to other contemporaneous feminist thinking. Her work alludes to the gendered dichotomy of nature versus culture that anthropologist

Sherry Ortner outlines in her 1974 essay "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"[11] By fusing her body to the earth, Mendieta associated with a movement that aimed to empower women through the reclamation of a female identity that fused earth and culture. Mendieta often alluded to female deities. Her interest in the goddess archetype stemmed from an interest in the Great Goddess movement that surged in feminist discourse in the 1970s.[12]

A Visual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts provided the necessary funds for Mendieta's January 1978 move to New York City. Because of the connections she had forged during her time in the Intermedia program, Mendieta was able to easily incorporate herself into the feminist and conceptual art scene.[13]

During the late 1970s, Mendieta pursued her interest in Afro-Cuban traditions as another connection to her estranged homeland. Afro-Cuban religions aligned with Mendieta's interests in spirituality, earth, and the body. These practices most likely first intrigued the artist during her childhood in Cuba, where she was able to clandestinely observe her grandmother's housekeepers performing Santería rituals. Frequent travels to Cuba and Miami allowed Mendieta to investigate the practices further as well as to experience them firsthand. She became familiar with the three main branches of the syncretic spiritual practices derived from West African slaves: Regla de Ocha (Santería), Reglas Congo (Palo Monte) and Abakúa (Ñáñiguismo). Mendieta was fascinated by the adaptability of these religions (especially Santería), incorporating elements of

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[11] For further discussion on Ortner, see chapter 3.
[12] I discuss the goddess movement and Mendieta's relationship to it in Chapter 3. Mendieta's appropriation (and, at times, rejection) of this and other feminist motifs is further discussed in the following chapters.
[13] Chapter 2 discusses Mendieta's entry into the feminist art scene in New York.

Catholicism, Judaism, Freemasonry, and Native American traditions. She related to the Afro-Cuban practices on a personal level, paralleling her hybrid experiences as a Cuban in the United States to the transcultural syncretism of Afro-Cuban practices. The religions' emphasis on blood, sacrifice, and the body as a way to channel one's spirit and identity also resonated with the artist. Mendieta once stated that she began using blood[14] "because I think it's a very powerful magic thing. I don't see it as a negative force."[15] Blood instead was a source of life and symbolized an individual's ancestral past. Mendieta borrowed from Afro-Cuban sacrifice rituals in which blood was often a central component. She was intrigued by the transference of power that occurred when a life source such as blood was extracted from a mortal creature and offered to a deity.

In February of 1976 Mendieta installed *Ñáñigo Burial* [Figure 9] at 112 Greene Street Gallery in New York City. The work takes its name from one of the branches of Afro-Cuban religions. Deviating from her usual practice of imprinting her silhouette outdoors, Mendieta arranged forty-seven black candles as an outline of her body with arms upraised. During the exhibition's run, the candles were continuously burned and replaced, resulting in a puddle of melted wax vaguely resembling a goddess figure. She employed Day of the Dead candles,[16] incorporating Mexican elements into a work named

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[14] Mendieta first used blood in her early performances at the University of Iowa, including *Untitled* (Death of a Chicken) in 1972, *Untitled* (Rape Scene) in 1973, and *Untitled* (Body Tracks) in 1974.

[15] Quoted in Petra Barreras del Río, "Ana Mendieta: A Historical Overview," in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), 29.

[16] Herzberg claims that this piece "refers to Afro-Cuban practices" but "does not correspond to or even attempt to reproduce any specific hand-drawn signs used in Abakúa funeral ceremonies." Instead it derived its ritualistic iconography from Mexico. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980," 170.

after an Afro-Cuban group.[17] The reference to Ñáñiguismo, in the title of the work is strategic. The Abakúa was a secret masculine society with a history of human sacrifice and clandestine rituals that maintained its status as feared and stigmatized. Mendieta's choice of title reveals a desire to give validity to the Afro-Cuban tradition.

In 1980, Mendieta finally returned to Cuba. As the political tensions between Cuba and the United States weakened in the late 1970s, the Cuban government agreed to allow exiles to return for regulated, short-term stays to visit their relatives on the island. Through the cultural organization Círculo de Cultura Cubana, Mendieta joined twenty others on a touching journey to their homeland. Over the next three years, she visited Cuba seven times. These trips afforded her the opportunity to reconnect with estranged family members, form relationships with Cuban scholars, probe into her country's ancestral and historical past, and create works on her native soil.

In the spring of 1983, Mendieta was awarded the Prix de Rome (Rome Prize) in sculpture, a prestigious honor that provided residency at the American Academy in Rome. This was the first time she had a studio, allowing the artist to produce indoor sculptures of a less ephemeral and more marketable nature. Olga Viso reports that "Mendieta fell in love with the Eternal City and found much in common with the Italians,

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[17] Mendieta would often incorporate elements drawn from various cultural practices in her works. One could argue that this synthesis is somewhat culturally insensitive and perhaps essentializing.
I believe that she was more interested in creating a sense of syncretism in her work. Her own Cuban heritage was founded upon an amalgamation of Catholic, Afro-Cuban, and indigenous Taíno beliefs and customs. When she first traveled to Mexico, she found comfort in its cultural syncretism as well. In the same vein, her works often identify similarities between cultures, not as a means to overlook their uniqueness but instead to identify and celebrate their value.

whose Latin spirit she believed had many parallels with Cuban culture."[18] During this European sojourn, she traveled to Malta to investigate prehistoric goddess temples that she later referred to in several works.[19]

While maintaining the female body as the central image and continuing to incorporate the body into nature, Mendieta's later works tend towards more permanent materials and locations. Her first attempt to translate her work into a gallery setting was in a 1978 exhibition at the State University of New York, Old Westbury. Olga Viso describes the gallery space littered with "[b]ranches, scattered leaves, and other natural materials … assembled around moss- and earth-formed Silueta sculptures, with the goal of creating for her viewers the sense of encountering her Siluetas in nature. Mendieta decided that the installation appeared overly contrived, and she never again attempted such a full-scale simulation of the natural environment in a gallery context."[20] Nevertheless, she would continue to explore ways to adapt her practice to an interior environment.

In the three years before her premature death in 1985, Mendieta began to make freestanding sculptures with natural materials that could be transported into the gallery or museum setting. The Totem Grove Series [Figure 10], executed in Rome between 1983 and 1985, consisted of four segments of tree trunks standing upright in a gallery space. Upon the surface of three of the totems, she burned or carved abstract images of human figures along the natural grooves of the wood, perhaps alluding to prehistoric deities.

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[18] Viso, "The Memory of History," 117.
[19] Chapter 3 and 5 discuss *Figura de Nganga*, a floor sculpture which refers to prehistoric Maltese temples.
[20] Viso, "The Memory of History," 101.

By 1981, Mendieta had started to experiment with drawing, which evolved into her leaf drawing series the following year [Figure 11]. On a trip to Miami, the artist began engraving body figures onto fresh leaves with a variety of instruments, including ballpoint pen, pencil, a stylus, nails, needles, and spoons. She most often employed leaves of the *copey* (balsam apple) tree, a species found extensively in the Caribbean. Incising the images while the foliage was still green, Mendieta relished how the natural decay of the leaves transformed the colors and created unexpected patterns. The leaf drawings series permitted the artist to expand into more object-based art while upholding many of the ideas in her earlier work. The imprinted figures, now representing a more ambiguous sex, refer to a spiritual connection with the earth. She continued working directly with environmental materials, allowing time and natural forces to create the final image. Using leaves as her primary medium, Mendieta addressed their ephemerality by posing a new question: how can we conserve drawings made out of a material that is meant to decompose?

She was also commissioned to create several permanent public outdoor works, many of which were not completed before her death. The search for permanence relates to a desire to document and leave a trace of her work, an issue she had been dealing with throughout her career. In addition, creating objects allowed her work to be commodifiable in the art market. Her 1981 series *Esculturas Rupestres* (Rupestrian Sculptures) [Figures 12 and 13] evolved from the Siluetas into a similar but more enduring body of work. With funds from a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship as well as support from the Cuban Ministry of Culture, Mendieta returned to Jaruco, Cuba, to carve bodily forms in rock formations in secluded locations. The works were named after

pre-Colombian figures from the indigenous Taíno Indian culture, connecting them to the Cuban soil they were inscribed into. She documented these works with photographs and also had plans to create a book and portfolio of photo etchings with a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.[21] Mendieta did not take precautions to prevent these sculptures from eroding, but unlike her Siluetas, which dissipated often in a matter of hours or days, many of the *Esculturas rupestres* remained visible until the rock was quarried for construction material years later.

Ana Mendieta died on September 8, 1985 after a mysterious fall from the 34th floor of her Manhattan apartment. Her husband, renowned Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, was twice tried and acquitted for her murder. To this day the cause of her death—whether murder, suicide, or accident—is unknown. However, the scandal surrounding her death has complicated art historical readings of Mendieta's work. Irit Rogoff discusses how the media sensationalism surrounding her death taints the way art historians view the death as well as her entire lifetime of work.[22] Jane Blocker addresses the issue of trying to find a place for her in art history amidst the scandal of her death.[23]

The interpretation of her work as dark, violent, and troubled in light of her death is just one of many readings that has been offered for Mendieta's oeuvre. In her recent book on previously unpublished works by the artist entitled *Unseen Mendieta*, Olga Viso reveals that "…Mendieta vehemently resisted being labeled Hispanic, Latina, or

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[21] The book version was never published, as the project was still incomplete at the time of her death.
[22] Irit Rogoff, "Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[23] Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

feminist."[24] Just as Mendieta resisted these labels, her earth-body practice eludes traditional artistic genres. Integrating elements from performance, body, and earth art, most of these works were originally experienced outside of the traditional space of the gallery or museum. Irit Rogoff points out how Mendieta's art defies the idea of a boundary due to the many and constantly changing cultural and geographic spaces that her works occupy, something that many artists were doing at the time.[25]

Although Mendieta abandoned performance art after her years in the Intermedia Program, her mature works nonetheless contain a performative element. The term performance art originated in the 1960s. Allan Kaprow's Happenings are one of the most famous early examples of performance art. Kaprow first coined the term "happenings" in the spring of 1957 to describe participatory events that emphasize interaction between the performer and the spectator. In the 1969 *Fluids*, Kaprow invited participants to build twenty structures measuring 30 feet long, ten feet wide, and eight feet tall made entirely of 50-pound blocks of ice. Built in various locations around Los Angeles, these structures were left to melt. Along with Kaprow, other artists identified with the beginnings of performance art include Yves Klein, Herman Nitsch, Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, and Carolee Schneemann. The works of these artists encompass international art movements such as Viennese Actionism and Fluxus. RoseLee Goldberg claims that "by its nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists" which, like Mendieta's earth-body, "draws freely on any number of

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[24] Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. (New York: Prestel, 2008), 7.
[25] Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

disciplines and media for material…"[26] By calling performance "live art," Goldberg emphasizes that it is bound to a specific time and space—while an event could be repeated, no two performances yielded the same experience. However, the influence from various disciplines indicates that performance art manifests itself in many different ways. Despite the temporal and spatial specificity of a performance piece, the medium itself is rather fluid and subject to transformation.

Perhaps it is performance art's fluid nature that allowed Mendieta to transform elements of performance into her earth-body works. Glass on Body Imprints, Facial Hair Transplants, and Body Tracks are just a few examples of Mendieta's earlier performance works executed during her years as a graduate student at the University of Iowa.[27] While she ultimately considered her work more sculpture than performance, it maintains elements that are inherent to performance art: the emphasis on the process of creation, a ritualized interaction with the materials, as well as an awareness of the temporal and spatial experience that can never be repeated.

In many ways similar to performance art and often considered a sub-category of it, body art utilizes the artist's body to convey meaning, thus serving as the "art object" and blurring the distinction between the subject and object of art. Traditionally, the subject refers to the artist or the viewer of a work, while the object is the work of art itself. Body art disregards the subject/object paradigm by allowing the artist to be the artwork itself, creating an awareness of the artist and his or her identity as inseparable from the piece. Mendieta's body, or at times allusions to her bodily form through

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[26] Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 9.

[27] In chapter 2, I will also be discussing performances *Untitled* (Rape Scene) and *Untitled* (Cosmetic Facial Variations).

silhouettes, is constantly inserted and repeated in her work. Miwon Kwon contends that Mendieta's works, particularly her Siluetas, deviate from the more customary trend (if such a thing exists) of feminist body artists in that she aimed for "erasure or negation" of the body; instead of the "figurative, literal, sometimes 'in-you-face' presence" we see in the works of other feminist artists, "her 'body' consistently disappeared."[28]

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke, and Adrian Piper were using their bodies as the primary medium in their work as a way to subvert sexual and social norms. In a discussion of female artists whose art involves the disfiguration of their bodies, Abigail Solomon-Godeau asserts that "[i]n none of these instances does it seem appropriate to consider the artist as a specific individual revealing, say, her perverse masochistic or sacrificial inclinations," nor does she present women in general as victims.[29] Mendieta employs her own body (as opposed to another individual's) almost exclusively, emphasizing an intimate connection between the work and her specific culture and history. However, by presenting only the specter of the female figure, Mendieta's works retain a sense of distance. For example, to create her winter 1977 untitled Silueta in the Iowa snowscape [Figure 14], Mendieta first created a plywood cutout of her body, depressed it into the powder, removed the wood, and then recorded the imprint's melting form over time. Thus we are thrice removed from Mendieta's body, allowing us to consider the figure as an anonymous and generic being.

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[28] Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta." In *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of the Twentieth Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, edited by M. Catherine de Segher. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 168.
[29] Abigail Solomon-Godeau "The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art." In *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, edited by Lisa Gabrielle Mark. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 343.

In this way, the artist employs her body to create a tension between the personal and the universal.

Mendieta's desire to connect to a cultural heritage and a universal past by working in nature has inevitably associated the artist with the earth art movement. Unlike outdoor sculpture, which is not tied to one particular location and can be viewed in a number of settings, earth art is created directly with the earth, is subject to erosion and change caused by natural forces over time, and requires the viewer to experience both the work of art and the landscape it is embedded in. Because the work is subject to the natural fluctuations of the environment through time, the process of change becomes a central aspect of the experience. When considering earth art, art historians tend to think of the mammoth works of artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, whose enduring *Spiral Jetty* and *Double Negative* emphasize man's imposition on the natural order of the environment. These examples are often considered a masculine approach that hopes to dominate the land. According to fellow artist and friend Nancy Spero, Mendieta "did not rampage the earth to control or dominate or create grandiose monuments of power and authority."[30] Instead she made more transitory and intimate works, such as her Siluetas series, which cast a fleeting imprint of her body in nature. In this sense, Mendieta's work relates to the more meditative practices of artists such as Richard Long. In his 1967 *A Line Made by Walking*, the British artist walked back and forth over a field until the straight trajectory was visible in the flattened grass. He documented the work through photographs. Like Mendieta's work, Long's *Line* was ephemeral evidence of his

[30] Nancy Spero, "Tracing Ana Mendieta." *Artforum* 30 (1992), 77.

body's presence representing more of a communion with, rather than dominion over, the land.

Mendieta's earth-body sculpture is an intersection of performance, body, and earth art, all three of which are based in a specific time and space. Mendieta faced an issue that concerned many of her contemporaries working in ephemeral media: How does one experience ephemeral art after it has disappeared? Can we replicate the experience of viewing a site- and time-specific artwork by viewing it elsewhere, through the media of photography or film? And does the documentation of the artwork through photographs and film ultimately transform the transient performances into objects that can be shown in a museum or gallery, repudiating the artist's intention to defy the conventions of a static art world? Mendieta documented her work through Super-8 film and color and black-and-white photography. While the original experience of her performative art can never be entirely recreated, Mendieta uses photography and film to preserve the artwork, transforming it into a different but still legitimate and valuable experience.

Mendieta's work drew from performance, body, and earth art practices, and integrated themes related to spirituality, sacrifice, rebirth, cultural displacement, and gender. Her own resistance to labels such as a "Latina," "feminist," or "earth artist" cannot be underscored enough. She felt that aligning herself with one of these labels would lead to limited readings of her work that did not consider her multiple, intersecting identities. However, an investigation of her involvement in the 1970s and 1980s women's art movement, as well as scholarship that attempts to locate her within feminist theory, can provide valuable readings of her complex practice.

CHAPTER 2: MENDIETA AND THE FEMINIST ART MOVEMENT

Mendieta was an active participant in the feminist art movement through friendships with fellow artists, participation in exhibitions, publications, and the A.I.R. gallery collective. At the same time, she often refused the label "feminist artist" as it pigeonholed her work and lead to limited readings. This chapter aims to outline the development of the feminist art movement and locate Mendieta's role within it. In this investigation, feminist art as a *movement* refers specifically to the period between the late sixties through the seventies that grew out of the second wave of feminism. However, I will also be discussing the development of a second generation of feminist artists after the 1960s and 1970s feminist art movement. Mendieta embarked on her career as an artist at the height of the feminist art movement, but her practice incorporates elements of both the first and second generation of feminist artists. This chapter will conclude with an examination of Mendieta's participation in the movement.

Feminist art generally paralleled the political and theoretical development of feminism as a cultural movement. While first-wave feminists had achieved legal equality through measures such as universal suffrage and property rights in the early twentieth century, second-wave feminists in the 1960s tackled the de facto gender inequality that still pervaded society. Activists were concerned with providing access and equal opportunity for women in the workplace, education, and politics, as well as with fighting for reproductive rights. Along with these political issues came an impulse to unite in the fight against discrimination by finding a common ground among all women. However, as activism continued through the seventies, many women felt that feminism was an upper

middle-class movement that disregarded the needs of women on the margins of society—those whose ethnicity, class, age, religion, or sexuality fell outside of the mainstream.[31] A new generation of women criticized second-wave feminists for essentializing all women into one rigid concept of femininity. The fracturing of feminist thinking gave way to the third wave of feminism by 1990, embracing a multiplicity of backgrounds and experiences. Judith Butler's 1991 *Gender Trouble* introduced queer theory and performativity, opposing any sort of binary approach to gender and sex.

The feminist art movement developed in conjunction with the second-wave of feminism, which I will refer to as the first generation of feminist artists. The 1960s and 1970s marked the first time women artists came together as a cohesive and widespread movement that employed their practice to challenge gender roles and establish their own representations of the female body. In line with the second-wave feminist goal of uniting women, these artists were concerned with establishing an identity separate from the male artists who traditionally dominated art history and the art market. While it is impossible to characterize feminist art through stylistic means, there were several tendencies that emerged in many of the artists' practice. These artists were interested in promoting political agendas related to the feminist movement. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) commemorated women by presenting an extravagant ceremonial banquet with place settings for 39 important female historical figures represented by variations on

[31] "Chicana Feminism" (1976) by activist Anna Nieto Gomez, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1978) by poet and activist Audre Lorde, and "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism" (1981) by Mitsuye Yamada are examples of texts from the 1970s that criticized the women's movement as favoring the needs of middle-class white women and ignoring the concerns of groups on the margins of society, including Chicanas, black women, lesbians, and Asian Americans, among others.

vaginal themes. The body became a primary subject as well as a medium: many artists employed their own bodies as a way to regain control of the representation of women that had historically been dictated by men. One of the most recognized images of Carolee Schneemann's shocking 1975 performance *Interior Scroll* is of the artist extracting and reading a scroll from her vagina. In the piece, Schneemann transforms the female body from a passive object dominated traditionally by men into an active, speaking subject. Performance was quickly incorporated into feminist art, perhaps because it often concerned itself with the body and also because its time- and site-specificity defied easy commercialization and therefore subverted traditional patriarchal art world hierarchies. When Judy Chicago established the nation's first feminist art program at Fresno State University in 1970, [32] she hoped to outline several strategies for the feminist art movement, such as collaboration and use of traditional craft.[33] Chicago's program underscores another aspect of the feminist art impulse in the 1960s and 1970s: it was the first time women came together on a large scale as a movement to tackle issues of gender and representation through a visual medium. Across the country, as in California, female artists organized into collectives, published periodicals, and organized exhibitions around feminist issues.

Towards the end of the 1970s and through the 1980s, many women artists shifted their focus to challenging the ways female identities are socially constructed through visual imagery. These artists constitute what I call the second generation of women

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[32] Fresno State University is now known as California State University, Fresno. In 1972, with the help of Miriam Schapiro, Chicago expanded and moved the program to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

[33] Although not associated with the program at Fresno State, Faith Ringgold is a feminist artist who incorporated traditional crafts into her work. She is best known for her painted story quilts, employing a folk craft to create her politically charged works.

artists, not immediately involved in the feminist art movement that reached its height in the 1970s. Artists were no longer concerned with creating an empowered vision of woman and instead questioned the value of establishing a fixed representation of women. Artist Mira Schor reflected that at the time, women artists believed it was better to make images that "were if and about representation" as "mediated by culture."[34] The work of photographer Cindy Sherman embodies this impetus. By staging photographs of herself clad in various costumes, Sherman transforms herself into chillingly realistic alter egos ranging from film noir actress to circus clown. Rather than present woman as universal as Mendieta does when she imprints the anonymous silhouette of the female body into the land, Sherman juggles numerous identities to contend that there is no one view of "woman" or of the "self."

I have outlined above a first generation of women artists that constitute the feminist art movement (deriving from the second wave of feminism), and a second generation of women artists that lacked cohesion of an organized movement but generally reacted to their predecessors' goal of representing a unified vision of women. Despite these general delineations between the feminist art movement of the sixties and seventies and subsequent work by women regarding feminist issues, it can be problematic to categorize these artists concerned with the representation of women within these discrete groups. Many artists, including Mendieta, cannot be classified in one generation or the

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[34] Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 1994.

other.[35] By looking at her involvement in the feminist art movement, we understand that Mendieta straddled the first generation of feminist artists that focused on addressing political issues and presenting an empowered vision of women, and those of the younger cohort that challenged the notion of a fixed femininity. Surprisingly and somewhat ironically, Mendieta expresses a concern for the representation of gender in her early performance pieces, corresponding to the later generation of women artists who use their art as a way to play with identity, whereas her more mature Siluetas in many ways reflect tendencies of the first generation of feminist artists who employed their work to unite women.

Mendieta became familiar with feminist art practices during her graduate education at the University of Iowa. Through Intermedia's visiting artist program, she had the opportunity to attend exhibitions and lectures by artists involved in the feminist art movement such as Lucy Lippard, Mary Beth Edelson, Dotty Attie, Lynda Benglis, and Lyn Blumenthal. Mendieta's early works there reveal that she was already addressing women's concerns of sexual violence and representation. In the 1973 *Untitled* (Rape Scene) [Figure 15], she invited professors and classmates to her apartment, where they were surprised to find her half-naked body strewn across a table, covered in blood-like pigments and surrounded by broken dish shards. She executed the work in response to a recent on-campus rape-murder case, hoping to present the scene exactly as it had been reported in the press. By recreating the event, Mendieta took a lifeless newspaper article and forced the community members to experience the horror. Mendieta preferred to call

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[35] Other artists that, like Mendieta, share the ideas of both the first and second generations of feminist artists include Marina Abramovic, Rebecca Horn, and Teresa Hak Kyung Cha. Interview with Olga Viso.

pieces such as Rape Scene "tableaux" rather than performances because they stage the aftermath of the violent act, allowing the viewers to act as investigators of a crime scene rather than witnesses. The 1972 *Untitled* (Facial Cosmetic Variations) [Figure 16] addresses societal expectations of female beauty. Employing common cosmetic products such as stockings, make-up, and shampoo, Mendieta manipulates her face into grotesque expressions. The contortions of her face are bizarre and uncomfortable, yet certain images emerge as poignant and beautiful, despite the manipulation. In every photograph, Mendieta directly faces the viewer, forces him or her to confront her gaze. By subverting the products that ostensibly highlight women's beauty, Mendieta raised several questions: Who dictates what is beautiful? Can we use a few products to transform our outward appearance? Does our physical image determine identity? Mendieta's appearance changes from image to image and forces us to question the idea of what constitutes beauty.

Because of the connections she had forged during her time in the Intermedia program at the University of Iowa, Mendieta was able to join the feminist and conceptual art scene in New York. She first met critic and art historian Lucy Lippard in 1975 during Lippard's lecture "Women at Work" at the University of Iowa. After viewing Mendieta's work, Lippard gave the artist her first exposure in the international art press, citing her work in essays published in prestigious magazines such as *Ms.* and *Art in America*.[36] In these writings, Lippard was the first to discuss Mendieta's work in the context of the greater feminist art movement.

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[36] These first two exposures were "Transformation Art," *Ms. Magazine* (October 1975): 33-39 and "The Pains and Pleasure of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," *Art in America* (May-June 1976): 73-81. Both essays are published in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*. (New York: Dutton, 1976).

As a graduate student, Mendieta also made contact with feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson. The two artists met in 1976 when Mendieta travelled to New York to install *Ñáñigo Burial* in a SoHo gallery. Two years later, as a visiting artist at Iowa, Edelson presented installations and performances in which Mendieta participated. Edelson was a politically involved artist at the center of the feminist movement. Ranging from collage to performance, her work took gender, political activism, and the representation of women as its central themes. In the 1973 *Woman Rising*, Edelson uses china markers to embellish a photograph of her nude body assuming a goddess stance. The lines radiating away from her face are meant to draw out prehistoric energies of the goddess Edelson believed pervaded every woman. Edelson was instrumental in introducing Mendieta to other women artists, particularly her colleagues at the artist collective A.I.R. Gallery. Edelson was responsible for Mendieta's acceptance to the gallery's spring 1977 "Out of New York Invitational." As a vociferous proponent of Great Goddess archetype,[37] Edelson shared books such as Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of Archetype* that furthered Mendieta's interest in goddess mythology. Perhaps because of her friendship with Edelson, in the mid-1970s Mendieta began to christen many of her silhouettes after goddesses, her first overt references to goddess mythology.

Mendieta joined A.I.R. only six months after her move to New York. Founded in 1972, A.I.R. (Artists In Residence) was the first non-profit, all-female cooperative gallery in the United States. Established at a time when white male artists dominated the commercial gallery scene, the gallery provided a space for women artists to exhibit work, network with critics, and engage in discussion. Founding members Dotty Attie, Maude

[37] The goddess archetype and its manifestation in Mendieta's work will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Boltz, Mary Grigoriadis, Nancy Spero, Susan Williams, and Barbara Zucker selected 14 other artists to join them as the original members of the collective. As stakeholders of A.I.R., members were responsible for determining the vision of the gallery, voting in new members, managing administrative gallery tasks, and curating exhibitions of their own work. Aside from mounting solo and group exhibitions, the gallery presented public lectures and panels, connecting artists with museums, collectors, and critics.

Following a studio visit by Edelson, Spero, Attie, and Grigoriadis, Mendieta was voted into the collective in June of 1978, and remained a member until she left in October of 1982. Mendieta had two solo exhibitions at A.I.R., exhibiting Siluetas at the gallery's original 97 Wooster Street, SoHo, space in 1979 and premiering her Cuba works at the new Greene Street site in 1981.

A.I.R. became an avenue for Mendieta not only to engage with other feminists but also to address her status as an ethnic minority in the United States. She was an active member of A.I.R.'s Task Force of Discrimination Against Women and Minority Artists, founded in 1978. Mendieta participated in several panel discussions, including "Latin American Women Artists" alongside María Lino, Liliana Porter, and Susana Torre in May 1979, and "Theoretical Concepts in Feminine Art" the following year with Harmony Hammond, Martha Rosler, Joan Semmel, and May Stevens. In response to the lack of representation of minority women within the New York art scene, she co-curated an exhibition and organized a panel titled "The Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States" in 1980.

During her years at A.I.R., Mendieta contributed to the journal *Heresies*. Mendieta's friends and colleagues Lippard, Edelson, and Spero were among the group of

critics, art historians, and artists who founded the Heresies collective which fostered "feminist publication on art and politics." The magazine was first published in 1977 and published irregularly thereafter, producing 27 issues before ceasing in 1992. Each issue had a distinct theme and editorial board selected from interested members of the collective. Mendieta served on the editorial board for the thirteenth issue, "Feminism and Ecology." In this issue, she also published a photograph of an earth-and-gunpowder silueta *La Venus Negra* [Figure 17] juxtaposed with the legend of the goddess after which this work was christened. Images of her siluetas were also published in the eighth issue titled "Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other" and issue 15, "Racism is the Issue." The eighteenth issue, published in the fall of 1985, was dedicated to Mendieta after her death.

In many ways, Mendieta's commitments to A.I.R. and *Heresies* situated her in the center of New York's feminist art movement as well as the larger conceptual art scene. Through exhibitions, panels, and parties, Mendieta met major artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Sol LeWitt, and her future husband Carl Andre. And, as mentioned above, her involvement in the feminist art movement also encouraged her exploration of other issues such as ecology, mythology, and the marginalization of third world women.

Despite Mendieta's immersion in the feminist art scene, she expressed a desire not to be pegged as a feminist artist on many occasions, fearing such a perspective would limit her work not only to essentialist readings but also overshadow other themes in her work. At the onset of the 1980s, she began to disassociate her work from Mary Beth Edelson, wanting to avoid being criticized as essentialist. The following chapter examines Ana Mendieta's work in light of essentialism.

CHAPTER 3: ESSENTIALISM

Because of the use of the natural landscape and allusions to "primitive" as well as goddess mythology, Mendieta's practice has traditionally been aligned with the ideals of feminist essentialism. This chapter first problematizes the idea of a single "essentialism," when in fact there are many variations and consequences of essentialism. I also investigate the arguments made against essentialism. This chapter investigates the Great Goddess movement, its relationship to essentialism, and its use in 1970s feminist art. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on Mendieta's use of goddess imagery in her work and how it contributes to an essential reading of her work.

Essentialism is a term borrowed from philosophical vocabulary that refers to the specific characteristics that any entity within a category must possess; in other words, it seeks to define a being's essence. Within feminist theory, it refers to the belief that all women possess certain intrinsic features that are not only shared among the entire group but that ultimately are necessary to define their femininity. While performativity is a theory and therefore consists of series of beliefs that drive a political practice, essentialism did not arise as a theory. Essentialism is instead a loosely defined perspective that is manifested in many different ways. Biological essentialists strictly adhere to the notion of innate sex and gender differences that are not mediated by cultural values. Strategic essentialists employ essentialism as a political strategy within the women's movement in an attempt to replace the disparaging images of the feminine (as historically constructed and imposed by men) with a unified, strong vision defined by women. Whereas gender essentialism creates a binary opposition between men and

women, cultural essentialism opposes Western and non-Western cultures. The implication of cultural essentialism on feminist studies is that we view gender categories as constructed by our particular culture, and because these distinctions are ostensibly natural, these categories of man and woman become difficult to resist.

Essentialism has undergone such severe criticism that now the term is largely taboo. Simone de Beauvoir was the first to question the idea of an innate femininity in her celebrated 1949 book *The Second Sex*.[38] By declaring "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Beauvoir contended that gender is a cultural construct and not a natural fact. Society assigns the gender categories of "man" and "woman," and by trying to define the essence of woman, essentialists concede to the patriarchal system.

Another critique of essentialism arose from a plurality of voices within the feminist movement in the 1970s and beyond. Essentialism reinforces the binary opposition of man and woman and thus does not allow for a plurality of viewpoints. By defining the "essence" of woman, essentialists pinpoint only one source of identity and neglect the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and disability (among others) in the production of an individual's identity. Along with the condemnation of false universals, critics argued that essentialism leads to a reductionist perspective that considers sexism as the worst form of oppression while regarding other issues such as classism, racism, and homophobia as secondary.

Despite the stigmatization of essentialism in the 1980s, many scholars have recently reconsidered essentialism's value. Naomi Schor claims that in pinpointing a

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[38] Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* predates the women's movement discussed in Chapter 2 by a quarter of a century. Her seminal writings on the social construction of gender, however, were adopted as the theoretical foundations of many feminists.

definition for essentialism, antiessentialists in effect essentialize it: *"it is to act as if essentialism has an essence*."[39] Critics of essentialists often fail to recognize that there are many types of essentialism, as described above. For example, the "feminism of difference" maintains that women and men are fundamentally distinct due to biological, psychological, or emotion characteristics. Within the women's movement, difference feminists employed the doctrine to identify women in a celebratory fashion. Strategic essentialists, on the other hand, acknowledge differences within a group, but find it advantageous for the group to essentialize themselves to empower and unite women. Thus while difference feminists and strategic essentialists may disagree on whether all women innately share a certain essence, they employ their varying brand of essentialism to the same effect: to present gender as transcending time and culture. I contend that while Mendieta rejected the idea of a feminine essence, she shared the goal of creating an image of woman as universal and timeless.

Belgian feminist and philosopher Luce Irigaray is perhaps the best-known proponent of feminist essentialism. She borrows from her training in linguistics to argue that while society claims to have two categories for gender, in actuality there is only one. Because terms like "man" are neutralized to represent all of humankind, "man" becomes the universal referent, thus elevating men as the standard and ignoring women entirely. Therefore, in her 1977 *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray endeavors to create two positive and autonomous terms to acknowledge both sexes. Because of this desire to

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[39] Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray." In *The Essential Difference*, edited by Naomi Schor. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 47.

assign new categories for women and men to counteract pervasive sexism, Irigaray's doctrines are sometimes considered a form of strategic essentialism.

Despite her alignment with strategic essentialism, scholars have attempted to reinterpret her writings through antiessentialist frameworks. Susan Best finds that these "innumerable efforts [that] have been made to defend Irigaray against the charge of essentialism" create "a very interesting parallel with the efforts to defend Mendieta."[40] She recognizes the tendency of feminist scholars to reinterpret the complex works of figures like Irigaray and Mendieta to avoid the categorization under the stigmatized framework of essentialism.

In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars Elizabeth Grosz, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford supported essentialism in the same strategic vein of their predecessor Irigaray. Grosz claimed that the political women's movement has no foundation if we cannot consider "woman" or "femininity" as a category. Thus, women must define an "essence" for themselves in order to establish any sort of common ground for upon which to establish the women's movement.[41] Diana Fuss also reconsiders the value of essentialism, maintaining that it "can be deployed effectively in the service of both idealist and materialist, progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistive discourses."[42] Ultimately, she considers herself "an anti-essentialist who wants to preserve…the category of essence."[43]

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[40] Susan Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta." *Art History* 30, no. 1 (2007): 66.
[41] Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 341.
[42] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), xxii.
[43] Ibid., xiv.

The 1970s feminist art impulse to establish a triumphant and cohesive representation of woman by women artists was, in the 1980s, denounced as "essentialist" by critics. Artists like Judy Chicago, Harmony Hammond, Mary Beth Edelson, Hannah Wilke, who used their art to celebrate qualities of femininity, often as a political strategy against sexism, were accused of confining women to a narrow, prescribed identity. Even as early as 1972, Patricia Mainardi expressed discomfort with artists' search for "feminine sensibility" in their work.[44] These essentialist designations, however, were imposed in the 1980s onto artists after the fact. The term "essentialist" was applied retroactively to 1970s feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro by the second generation of artists. Mira Schor contends "most women artists who were condemned for being essentialists did not consider themselves as such, once they learned the meaning of the terminology."[45] Mendieta similarly resisted such labels after being criticized as essentialist.

The desire to establish a "feminine sensibility" led to a shared vocabulary among 1970s feminist artists. As discussed in the previous chapter, the female body was a central image in a movement that wanted to reclaim the representation of women. The use of vaginal imagery was a way for all women to feel connected to each other and to claim control of their own sexuality. Several exhibition reviews describe the simplified female form Mendieta imprints over and over into the land as an abstract vaginal opening, although this is by no means the most common interpretation.[46] Mendieta was

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[44] Patricia Mainardi, "Feminine Sensibility?--Two Views." *Feminist Art Journal* 1 (1972): 4-25.
[45] Mira Schor, 254.
[46] In 1979 review in *Soho Weekly News*, William Zimmer dubbed the Siluetas "vaginas on the hillside or on the grass," as cited in Barreras del Rio Perreault, 3. A recent example

aware of the vaginal imagery that was common in 1970s feminist art, and thus most likely recognized the connection between it and her own art. However, vaginal imagery was not as important a force as her desire to integrate the female body into the land.

Working with nature was also prevalent in feminist art. In her seminal 1974 essay "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" anthropologist Sherry Ortner developed the gendered dichotomy of nature and culture.[47] Ortner asserts that the oppression of women is universally found in all cultures, although the degree of oppression varies. Traditionally, "woman is being identified with—or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself": that is, nature.[48] Ortner equates this culture/nature dichotomy with man/woman. Men dominate women just as culture aims to dominate nature. The female body, the source of human life, has been typically associated with the earth. Thus under these traditional associations, women are earthbound and primitive whereas men belong to the superior intellectual and spiritual order of the heavens. Mendieta's own writings reflect Ortner's argument, extending the analogy to include other marginalized groups. In a lecture titled *Art and Politics* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, delivered on February 18, 1982, Mendieta proclaimed that "To establish its empire over nature, it has been necessary for man to dominate other men, and to treat part of humanity like objects."[49] Mendieta

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of vaginal interpretation of Mendieta's work is Eleanor Heartney, "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta." *Art in America* 92, no. 10 (2004): 138-43.

[47] Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture." In *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartowski. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 201-210.

[48] Ibid., 203.

[49] Ana Mendieta, "Personal Writings," 200.

equates the domination, assimilation, and disappearance of non-Western cultures at the hand of their Western colonizers to the domination of women by men as an attempt to "establish [man's] empire over nature."[50]

Rather than regard the gendering of nature and culture as oppressive, feminist artists celebrated the female connection with the land, often challenging the nature versus culture dichotomy by elevating nature beyond the physical to a mystical level. Proponents of the Great Goddess mythology aimed to do just that. The Great Goddess did not necessarily refer to a specific goddess or culture but instead to a female archetype that incorporated deities from many cultures. If, traditionally, male gods occupy the celestial realm, the Great Goddess (also referred to as the Great Mother or Mother Earth) derives her power from the land. A loosely organized phenomenon in North America, Europe, and Australia in the 1970s, the Goddess Movement brought together women who wanted to worship the Great Goddess instead of traditional male spiritual figures. Many artists, though not strictly goddess worshippers, borrowed imagery, mythology and rituals of the Goddess Movement in their artwork as a strategic device to create a vision of women as powerful and to provide an alternate to patriarchal religious representation.

Developing alongside second-wave feminism, the movement was aided by an increased access to mythology through scholarly literature. Mary Beth Edelson reports having shared books such as Erich Neumann's 1955 *The Great Mother* with Mendieta, prompting her increased interest in the Great Goddess. Neuman borrowed his mentor Carl Jung's approach to psychology to claim that the Great Goddess existed in the universal psyche. His research reveals how this common feminine force has manifested

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[50] Ibid.

itself from prehistory to the present in cultures around the world, proving to be a valuable resource for women investigating goddess mythology. Published in 1976, Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* examined art historical images and objects of goddesses from pre-patriarchal cultures. Many artists used Stone's book as a resource for the imagery they incorporated in their work. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas provided a sense of scientific authority to goddess mythology through her excavations in Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures, first published in the 1974 *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. These publications made goddess images, as well as historical and archaeological interpretations of mythology, accessible to both worshippers and artists who appropriated goddess iconography. The richness of the authors' research presented a figure that was not entirely universal, providing many different types of goddesses from diverse cultures.

Many feminist artists found the goddess archetype appealing because of its insistence on the interconnectedness of nature and culture as well as matter and spirit. The goddess presents an image of woman that is strong and unapologetic, deriving her power from the earth while also achieving the divinity of traditional male gods. Additionally, Gloria Feman Orenstein argues that the universalizing tendency of the 1970s archetype "was perceived to be the one symbol that could transcend difference, diversity, and division."[51]

Because of the desire to find a universal feminine image that cross-culturally unites women, the use of goddess iconography, like much feminist art in the 1970s, would be discounted as essentialist a decade later. Some critics view the goddess

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[51] Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 187.

archetype as upholding the traditional, gendered, nature-versus-culture dichotomy instead of subverting it. In December 1987, a panel discussion at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York titled "The Great Goddess Debate—Spirituality vs. Practice in Recent Feminist Art" exemplified two extremes of the spectrum. Held in conjunction with the Mendieta retrospective at the museum, the panel consisted of artists Nancy Spero and Lyn Blumenthal, and art historians Arlene Raven, Kate Linker, and Helen Deutsch. While the audience was replete with ardent goddess worshippers who were unaware of the use of goddess imagery in 1970s feminist art or the implications of labels such as "essentialist," Linker and Deutsch presented a staunch anti-goddess stance that rejected an iconography that they believed aligned itself with essentialism. Orenstein claims that feminist artists who employed goddess mythology fall somewhere in between these two poles—the ardent goddess worshippers on one end and anti-essentialists like Linker and Deutsch on the other. Instead, artists borrowed goddess imagery primarily as a mode of artistic expression and not as a mystical invocation of the goddess. Of course, that claim in itself overgeneralizes the use of goddess iconography in feminist art, because artists made references to the archetype for a wide range of purposes. Mary Beth Edelson's trance-like performances in historic sites of goddess worship aimed to directly communicate with ancient goddesses. Joined by artists like Monica Sjöö and Donna Henes, Edelson's work was a part of subgroup of feminist artists whose artistic practice was a part of their worship.[52] Conversely, other artists, including Mendieta, Betye Saar,

[52] Painter and writer Monica Sjöö was a main figure in the Goddess Movement and an ardent goddess worshipper. Along with Barbara Mor, she authored *The Great Cosmic Mother* in 1987 to help revive the history of the great goddess. She incorporated ancient goddess imagery in paintings. A self proclaimed "urban shaman," Donna Henes donned the persona of Spider Woman to conduct healing rituals. She created sculptures of giant

and Yolanda M. López,[53] integrated goddess imagery in their work to represent a strong vision of women but not as a means of worship.

Meeting Edelson in 1975 was significant in influencing Mendieta's use of goddess imagery. Since 1972, Mendieta's *Siluetas* had employed a general female body modeled after her own. Viso claims that these early imprints likely allude to prehistoric deities, perhaps influenced by her personal academic interest in primitive cultures and her expeditions to ancient sites in Mexico.[54] After exposure to feminist art, goddess literature, and other artists interested in the goddess movement, Mendieta applied goddess imagery more readily to her own work. Mendieta often employed the traditional goddess pose, in which the female figures' arms are upraised jubilantly rather than resting by the side of the body.

Produced in 1977, *El Ix Chell-Negro* (The Black Ix-Chell) [Figure 18] was Mendieta's first work named after a specific deity. As homage to the Mayan goddess of weaving, medicine, and childbirth, Mendieta wrapped herself in a black cloth to resemble a mummy and lay motionless across a white sheet marked eerily with black arm and handprints. Julia Herzberg posits that Mendieta first referred to a primitive deity in *El Ix-Chell Negro* only after critic Lucy Lippard likened her work to other artists working with

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spider webs embedded in the environment with the goal of honoring the figure from the Navajo Emergence Myth. In the mid-1970s, she organized equinox and solstice celebrations that incorporated rituals from various goddess cultures into her performances. Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "Recovering Her Story."

[53] Betye Saar alludes to African and Haitian goddess figures in works like *Voo Doo Lady with Three Dice*, 1977. Yolanda L. López employed the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to represent three generations of women in her family in the 1978 *Guadalupe Triptych.*

[54] Olga Viso notes that she took various courses in prehistory including Introduction to Primitive Art and elementary anthropology classes. Her travels to Mexico also filled requirements for archaeology coursework. Viso, 45.

the goddess motif.[55] Lippard was not the only critic in the 1970s who situated Mendieta within goddess iconography. In a 1978 issues of *Heresies*, Gloria Feman Orenstein outlined the development of the goddess movement and its relationship to the practice of several contemporary female artists, including Mendieta.[56]

Mendieta references a wide range of goddess figures in her earth-body works. In a 1980 issue of *Heresies*, Mendieta published photographic documentation of a gunpowder and earth Silueta christened *La Venus Negra* [Figure 17]. La Venus Negra, or the Black Venus, referred to a popular nineteenth-century legend of a Cuban woman who resisted the forces of the Spanish colonizers by refusing to wear their clothing or eat their food. Mendieta included a text of the folktale alongside the image. La Venus Negra is a folktale figure and not a goddess, but Mendieta hoped to forge a connection to the Roman goddess Venus in the name of the Cuban folktale. By fusing knowledge of the indigenous folktale with a tradition of the Great Goddess, she creates tensions between a culture-specific figure and the universal vision of woman. The 1981 *Guanaroca* [Figure 19] depicts the Taíno goddess Guanaroca, purportedly the first woman who was sent to earth to accompany the lonely first man Hamao. As a part of her *Escultura Rupestres* project, Mendieta incised the image into the rocky landscape of Jaruco, Cuba. Unlike the *Siluetas*, which use the outline of Mendieta's body as a template, this figure's form followed the natural curves of the rock. Short stubs for arms hang limply over her bulbous lower body, consisting of enlarged thighs and a pronounced vaginal opening to emphasize the

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[55] Julia P. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980," 176.
[56] Reprinted Feminist Art Criticism in 1988. Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "The Reemergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women." In *Feminist Art Criticism*, edited by Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer and Joanna Frueh. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1988.

goddess' fertility. By referring to the Taíno mythology of her native land, Mendieta connects with the greater goddess movement on a personal level.

Jane Blocker insists that Mendieta's use of goddess imagery is confined to Santería practices and Taíno mythology, employing goddess imagery only to connect to her specific cultural history and thus not falling into the generalizing essentialist trap.[57] However, Mendieta demonstrated interest in goddess mythology that fell outside of her heritage. In early 1984 during her residency in Rome, Mendieta traveled to Malta to view the ruins of the temples at Hagar Qim, Manajdra, and Tarxien—known sites of goddess worship. That year, she created the indoor earth sculpture *Figura con Nganga* [Figure 20]. Destined for display on the floor of a gallery, the figure comprised two globular sections of the body, the torso/head and the legs, echoing the circular architecture of the Maltese shrines she visited. *Figura con Nganga* represents only one example of the direct influence of non-Caribbean goddess mythology.

How should a twenty-first century scholar consider Mendieta in light of essentialism? The question of whether Mendieta is an essentialist or not becomes somewhat irrelevant once we recognize that there are multiple manifestations of essentialism. Like many of her contemporaries, Mendieta is clearly calling upon goddess imagery, but only with the goal of invoking the image of a strong woman, not with the intent of worshipping a female deity that transcends culture. Her use of essentialism is strategic. She is more interested in the outcome of essentialism—this universal, powerful vision of women—than the belief that gender manifests itself from an innate essence. Despite Mendieta's late-career resistance to the label "essentialism", an insistence on the

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[57] Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 19.

connection between woman and the earth and references to goddess mythology suggest that Mendieta's work was informed by the universalizing tendencies of 1970s feminist art. However, her refusal to align herself with cultural categories points to an insistence on a fluid identity that aligns itself more with performativity than with essentialism. The following chapter discusses Mendieta's work in light of reinterpretations via the theory of performativity.

CHAPTER 4: PERFORMATIVITY

Recent scholarship on Mendieta and feminism tries to steer away from an essentialist interpretation, presumably because essentialism has become largely taboo. These authors have invoked postmodern theories in examining her work, almost as if to (re)validate it. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduced the landmark theory that gender is a cultural performance and not natural fact. In this chapter, I consider the feminist theory of performativity, its relationship to performance art, and how performativity has been applied to Ana Mendieta's work. In order not to confuse the feminist theory of performativity and the creative genre of performance art, I will use the adjective *performative* to describe ideas deriving from both J. L. Austin and Judith Butler's philosophical notions of performativity, and the adjective *performance-based* to describe art that borrows elements from or is reminiscent of performance art.

British philosopher J. L. Austin first introduced the concept of performativity as a linguistic concept in his work on speech act theory. Austin was a British philosopher of language whose work advocated studying how words are used in context rather than just analyzing the abstract structure of language. In the 1955 William James lecture series at Harvard University, now published as the seminal linguistic text *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin differentiates between constative and performative utterances. Constative utterances are statements that can be judged as true or false, such as "The ham is in the refrigerator." Performative utterances, however, cannot hold any sort of truth-value, because the value of the statement lies in their ability to carry out an action. Thus sentences such as "I pronounce you husband and wife" and "I apologize for my actions"

are utterances that, as the title of his book proclaims, *do* something with words. Without the utterance of the words "I apologize," the apology has not occurred.

In order for performative utterances to be what Austin calls "felicitous," or successful, the speakers involved in the speech act must adhere to the same set of social conventions. A marriage does not simply occur when any speaker proclaims "I pronounce you man and wife." The words must be uttered in conjunction with a set of conditions that culturally satisfy the requirements for marriage in a particular context. Among many things, a marriage requires that the words be uttered by an ordained officiate; that all of the individuals involved, including the bride, groom, and officiate, agree with the speech act; and that the words be uttered during the course of a wedding ceremony. A performative utterance has no power if it is not uttered within the particular set of conditions necessary for the act as dictated by cultural norms.

Austin's theory of performativity has been extended to—and indeed interpreted, molded, and reinvented by—many other fields. American philosopher Judith Butler draws upon J. L. Austin's work on speech act theory as the foundation of her theory of gender performativity, as argued in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. She is attracted to the notion that performative utterances have the ability to perform an action, but this capacity relies on socially imposed rules. In effect, "Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise binding power."[58] By uttering a performative that is bound to a set of social conventions, a speaker reinforces the authority of the culturally-defined rules.

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[58] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 225.

The production of gender, she claims, functions like performative utterances. She suggests that "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[59] Gender is not what one *is*, but rather, as in Austin's performative utterances, what one *does*. Commonplace and seemingly inconsequential actions like gestures, speech, and movements construct one's gender. These repeated acts that reinforce our gender identities are in fact dictated by social conventions. We could say that to perform gender "felicitously," an individual must adhere to the culturally imposed notions of what gender is, just as the performative sentence proclaiming a couple man and wife must be uttered in compliance with the conventions of marriage.

Ultimately, Butler's theory negates any notion of an innate gender identity. She draws upon the example of drag performance to illustrate her theory. Drag negates the notion of an original gendered identity because it "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity."[60] Drag parodies and challenges a binary gender system by allowing an individual to navigate in and out of a multiplicity of gender expressions.[61] Whereas the term "essentialism," as discussed in the previous chapter,

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[59] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.
[60] Ibid., 174.
[61] In a 1994 interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Butler recognized that the example of drag has problematically been interpreted as a "paradigm for performativity." She contends that drag should not be considered a "paradigm for the subversion of gender" because drag must adhere to certain culturally-imposed restrictions as well. Osborne, Peter, and Lynne Segal. "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994).

incorporates a variety of interpretations and strategies, performativity, as a theory, is a set of beliefs that drives a political practice. Butler's goal, thus, is to make individuals aware of the gendered acts we stage to perform our gender identity.

Butler's theory extends beyond the social constructionist view first articulated by Simone de Beauvoir. Butler agrees with Beauvoir on the socially imposed gender categories of woman and man, but she also challenges the distinction between sex and gender altogether. Whereas social construction feminists distinguish between the biological category of sex, defined by an individual's chromosomes, hormones, and internal and external sexual organs, and the historical-cultural category of gender, Butler argues that sex is a socially defined as well, regarding "the construal of 'sex' no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies."[62] Because of the complete deconstruction of the categories of sex and gender, the ideas Butler proposed in *Gender Trouble* were significant in laying the foundations for the field of queer theory in the 1990s.

As I mentioned above, Butler's performativity theory and performance art are distinct entities, the former being a theory that questions traditional categories of gender and the latter a genre of conceptual art that emerged in the 1960s. However, performativity relates to performance art in interesting ways. Because of its reliance on the artist's body as the medium as well as exchange with an audience, performance art subverts the distinctions between the artist, the audience, the subject, and the object, just as performativity subverts gender identities. Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that as

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[62] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2-3.

documentation of the performance becomes a central component of the experience, "specificity of the visual object [is] in question."[63] Thus even the identity of what constitutes the artistic product becomes fluid.

Since 1996, several authors have applied the performative's fluidity of identity in reading Mendieta's work, often invoking the connection between performativity and performance art. We must remember that Mendieta considered herself above all a sculptor, not a performance artist. However, her practice is in many ways performance-based. Gil Perry suggests that in all performance-based activities, "the identity of the protagonists is continually being negotiated and interpreted through the artistic process."[64] Mendieta's Siluetas in particular align themselves with performativity because of the "obsessive repetition" of the body imprinted into the land, thus creating a female identity over and over again.[65] Between 1973 and 1980, she executed over one hundred Siluetas in both Iowa and Mexico. Every time she fashioned a bodily form of grass, flowers, twigs, ignited a female form with gunpowder, or outlined the contour of her body in mud, snow, or sand, Mendieta performs what Butler called a "stylized repetition of acts." It is only by reiterating the bodily form persistently that Mendieta is able to establish a sense of the feminine as related to the earth. According to this performative perspective, the relationship between woman and the earth is not innate, but rather produced through Mendieta's performance. Not all of the following interpretations refer overtly to the theory of gender performativity. As we have discovered already, Butler's performativity posits that there is no innate gendered identity but that we instead

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[63] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 338.
[64] Gill Perry, "The Expanding Field: Ana Mendieta's Siluetas Series." In *Frameworks for Modern Art*, edited by Jason Gaiger. (New Haven: Yale University Press 2003),159.
[65] Ibid., 171.

perform identity through culturally-mediated acts. The implication of the performative is that, once we challenge the idea of a fixed gender identity, all identities become suspect. The authors discussed below incorporate notions of an unstable identity that therefore negates a feminine essence.

Miwon Kwon does not invoke Butler's theory explicitly in her 1996 "Bloody Valentines: After Images by Ana Mendieta," but the claim that it is impossible to fix any sort of identity in Mendieta's work relates her approach to performativity. She addresses the rift between essentialist and postmodern feminist readings of Mendieta's work, questioning whether these binary oppositions are necessary and hypothesizing that the opposition is in fact detrimental to understanding Mendieta's work. While I applaud Kwon's recognition of the dialectic between essentialist and postmodern readings, I find her reading of Mendieta's work to be ultimately anti-essentialist. She contends that what makes Mendieta's art different from her contemporaries and complicates a feminist reading is the erasure of the body in the *Siluetas* at a time when the majority of her contemporary artists desired visibility of the female body. The disappearance of the body points to an "irretrievable origin,"[66] an impossibility of connecting with an essential identity. While Kwon recognizes the fluidity of identity in Mendieta's work, she does not refer explicitly to the theory of gender performativity. Performativity cannot be unequivocally equated with anti-essentialism. Criticism of essentialism can take various forms and does not imply a socially constructed notion of sex and gender that individuals take on through performance. While Kwon does not explicitly refer to Butler's

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[66] Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: After Images by Ana Mendieta." In *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, edited by M. Catherine de Zegher. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 169.

performative, the fact that she explores the notion of an unfixed identity does relate her work, albeit obliquely, to the goals of performativity.

Jane Blocker extends Kwon's contemplation of the "irretrievable origins" to performativity in the 1999 book-length study *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile.* In this investigation, Blocker considers Mendieta in light of the postmodern and post-colonial theories, especially Butler's gender performativity. She aims to apply the performative to her reading of Mendieta's work. She defines the performative as

> a special class of actions that are derived from and may be plotted within a grid of power relationships. Like the more common notion of performance, its emphasis on liminality over legibility and change over fixity is effective in placing interpretative emphasis on actions rather than commodifiable objects.[67]

Her consideration of the performative thus relates to Butler's performativity through the emphasis on power relationships in the social construction of identity and the conclusion that identity is not stable. She argues that the disappearance of the body is what implicates Mendieta's work as performative, thus linking Kwon's argument directly to performativity: "it is a performative marking, a refusal to satisfy the question at all, a means to trouble the very assumptions that enable it to be asked."[68] Blocker contends that as the images of the silhouettes fade, so does a sense of innate identity. The dissolution of the body represents the lack of an essence.

Like Kwon, Irit Rogoff does not explicitly forge a connection between performativity and Mendieta's work, but her analysis does maintain that we must consider Mendieta's work in light of the instability of identity. She theorizes that culture

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[67] Jane Blocker, 24.
[68] Ibid., 34.

and identity create an abstract geography, delineating conceptual categories such as the center and the margin, or the First and Third Worlds. Rogoff applies the concept of a border to study how Mendieta's work has resisted boundaries in culture and geography. Displaced from her native land, Mendieta vacillates between the cultures of Third World Cuba and the capitalist United States. By fluctuating between borders, Mendieta's identity remains unfixed, much like the fluid gender identity that Butler posits.

These various analyses of Mendieta's practices emerged less than a decade after Butler first published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, just a few examples of the widespread influence of performativity not only on art historical research but on a panoply of scholarly fields. The authors present arguments that are appealing alternatives to essential readings of Mendieta's work utilizing a new and groundbreaking theory. Unlike essentialism, with its tendency to create a unified vision of women, performativity offers a perspective that considers her multiple intersecting identities as a Cuban woman growing up in the United States. It also supports her unwillingness to be labeled as a "Latina" or "female artist." Performativity is a valuable lens through which to study Mendieta's practice because it underscores the ephemerality of her earth-body works. Mendieta worked directly in the land, knowing that her Siluetas made of natural materials such as snow and flowers would eventually disintegrate. However, applying performativity to Mendieta's work is not limited to the physical instability of the work. The subject, on the one hand, is representative of both a universal female figure and on the other hand is modeled after Mendieta's individual body. As the subject of the works is subsumed into the environment, this tension between an innate female identity and the

individual manifestation becomes even more tenuous. Her disappearing body evokes Butler's idea of a fluid identity.

However, there are weaknesses to interpreting Mendieta's work solely through the framework of performativity. These various authors only vaguely refer to Mendieta's practice, failing to study specific works closely. They also overlook the value of an essentialist reading. Essentialism provides an interesting perspective on Mendieta's desire to tap into more universalizing image of women. In the following chapter, I look at examples from each period of Mendieta's artistic career and consider both feminist perspectives.

CHAPTER 5: ESSENTIALISM, PERFORMATIVITY, AND MENDIETA'S WORK

Essentialism and performativity are only two of a number of feminist readings that can be applied to Mendieta's work, but they provide insight into the tension between the ephemeral and the eternal that underlies her practice. Although there are many different forms of essentialism, feminist essentialism stems from the belief that all women possess certain intrinsic features that define femininity. Essentialism's effect is thus to present an image of gendered identity that is universal, ahistorical, and unchanging. As we have seen, Mendieta's tendencies to work in nature and to refer to goddess figures are some of the reasons critics have called her work essentialist, a label she resisted toward the end of her career. Insistence on multiple perspectives and rejection of the term essentialist leads me to believe that any essentialist impulse is, at best, strategic. Her imagery often conjures a feminine identity that she does not necessarily believe is inherent in all women. Mendieta instead strategically exploited goddess imagery to create a sense of a strong, empowered woman who does not dominate over but is equal to the land.

While feminist essentialism is based on the idea of a female essence, the theory of performativity rejects any original, inherent gender identity. Instead, gender—the feminine—is produced and performed through the repetition of culturally-defined acts. Because we must continually perform our identities, identity is constantly unstable. Mendieta's resistance to identity labels suggests a strong link to performativity. Yet, her multiple identities are not completely unfixed. What makes complicates Mendieta's practice is that she *is* able to ground her identity—by fixing it to her gender, Cuba,

Mexico, Afro-Cuban rituals, among other influences—if only for a moment. These identities do not seem to spring forth from nothing, or at least are not entirely culturally imposed. While her figures are fleeting, she wants to refer to something more universal and transcendent.

As we saw in the first chapter, Mendieta's practice deals with a number of themes and influences. Her work does not attempt to answer the question of whether gender is innate or culturally defined, but the recurring motif of the female body begs us to consider how Mendieta might have valued these two feminist readings. The value of essentialism and performativity lies in that both readings in concert the coexistence of the ephemeral, linked with performativity, versus the eternal, related to essentialism.

In this chapter, I look closely at three examples of Mendieta's work from each of her stages of development. As her thesis project for her first Masters degree in painting, *Facial Hair Transplant* is an example of Mendieta's early performances produced during her years as a graduate student at the University of Iowa. Executed four years later in Oaxaca, Mexico, *Ánima, Silueta de cohetes* is representative (although not the most typical example) of the well-known body of work that has become synonymous with her practice: the Silueta Series. Designed to be exhibited in an indoor gallery space, the floor sculpture *Figura de Nganga* represents her later, more permanent practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the documentation of these fleeting works, which also contributes to the tension between the eternal and the ephemeral.

In the 1972 performance *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant) [Figure 3], captured on 35 mm color slides,[69] Mendieta stands alongside fellow student and friend Morty Sklar as

[69] Herzberg notes that her project may have also been documented on Super-8 film but is

he shaves his beard. As he hands her his facial hair, she glues it onto her face in the same location he cut his hair from. Her accompanying thesis statement reveals a fascination for the cultural significance of hair, ranging from a symbol of celibacy through the shaved heads of ancient Egyptians and tonsures of Catholic priests, to biblical figure Samson's loss of strength with the cutting of his hair.[70] She claims that in her performance, the transference of hair "gives me that person's strength."[71]

In some ways, her statement points to a performative reading of this work. She cites Marcel Duchamp's commentary on his 1919 reproduction of the Mona Lisa, titled *L.H.O.O.Q.*[72], in which he defaced the famous portrait by adding on masculine facial hair:

> He stated: "The curious thing about that moustache and goatee is that when you look at it the Mona Lisa becomes a man. It is not a woman disguised as a man. It is a real man, and that was my discovery, without realizing it at the time."[73]

The addition of the ink moustache is not merely a costume cloaking the Mona Lisa's gender. Instead, Duchamp suggests that the moustache and beard are what transforms the Mona Lisa into a man. The Mona Lisa does not possess an inner gender identity that defines her femininity, but rather she performs gender through culturally imposed

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no longer in existence in Julia P. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980," 147.

[70] Mendieta alludes to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. God granted Samson the gift of herculean strength on a number of conditions, including that he not cut his hair. When Samson falls in love with Delilah he confides that he would be powerless without his hair, and she subsequently shaves off his seven locks while he is sleeping. Perhaps by invoking the story of Samson, she suggests that while she gain's strength through the addition of Sklar's hair, Sklar is in fact losing his strength.

[71] Ana Mendieta, "Personal Writings," 179.

[72] The title of the piece is a pun. When the letters are read aloud, they form the French sentence *El a chaud au cul* ("She is hot in the pants").

[73] Ibid.

features. Hair, in this instance, is one of many ways we perform our gender identity. Mendieta notes that her identity is also compromised by the transference of hair:

> After looking at myself in a mirror, the beard became real. It did not look like a disguise. It became a part of myself and not at all unnatural to my appearance.[74]

Her new moustache becomes natural with such facility, pointing to an instability of identity that can be molded by acts such as growing facial hair.

Mendieta chose to adopt her friend's beard even though facial hair is something that, with effort, she could have grown herself. In Western culture, female facial hair is culturally stigmatized, but not unheard of. In her self-portraits, Mexican painter Frida Kahlo did not censor her own suggestion of a moustache and unibrow. Mendieta undoubtedly admired the artist. For a 1979 costume party in honor of Louise Bourgeois in which guests were asked to dress as their favorite female artist, Mendieta chose to represent Kahlo. Instead of growing facial hair herself, she chooses to adopt Sklar's moustache only temporarily. Mendieta is not interested in the stigmatization of women with masculine features such as facial hair, but she instead is concerned about channeling the power and individuality that is attached to Sklar's hair.

By sporting the traditionally male facial hair, Mendieta reminds us of the photographs Cindy Sherman would begin producing several years later toward the end of the 1970s. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sherman donned various costumes to transform herself into various personas. Her works question how individuals create their identity through the way they represent themselves to society by the manipulation of their body with make-up, gestures, and clothing. Similarly, Mendieta is able to incorporate Sklar's

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[74] Ibid.

"strength" into her own identity by adding his facial hair. By performing an act such as adopting a man's beard, Mendieta is able to slip in and out of different gender identities.

However, an essentialist reading would argue that Mendieta hopes to extract an intrinsic identity in this act of transference. The symbol of hair as strength derives from specific cultures and myths. Like Butler's performativity, Mendieta is concerned with the cultural imposition of gendered characterizations. An essentialist would argue, however, that Sklar must possess some sort of original identity in order for his hair to be imbued with his strength. The beard, in effect, serves as an indicator of a male identity. I find the importance of this image somewhere in between the performative and essentialist readings. Mendieta recognizes there is some essential identity, but it can be transferred from body to body.

In the 1976 film of *Ánima, silueta de cohetes* (Anima, Silhouette of Fireworks) [Figure 21], a pitch-black environment is suddenly overwhelmed with red flames as the outline of a woman's body, arms upraised toward the heavens, is revealed. The fiery figure provides enough light to discern a mountain range in the Oaxaca, Mexico, landscape. The woman shines steadily for thirty seconds before the embers begin to falter. By the end of the 2 minute and 23 second video, all that is left the glowing heart of the woman.

Mendieta executed this *Silueta* during a trip to Mexico in the summer of 1976. She used fireworks after witnessing their importance in many Mexican festivals. The burning figure is a reference to Mexican effigies, named Judas figures after the apostle who betrayed Christ, that are ignited during Easter Holy Week. *Castillos* (castles), shaped structures lined with fireworks, are used year-round in Mexican festivals. Mendieta

commissioned a *castillo*-maker living in a shantytown outside of Oaxaca to produce the frame for this piece. After sundown, she and Hans Breder documented its lighting outside of his home using Super-8 film and color photography. Her personal notes describe her planning process:

> Idea for a firecracker piece made out of bamboo. Have it made in my size, of five feet. Make each part so that it lights up at different times. Film it on the beach. If it works out, make another and bring it to the States. Do it outside.[75]

While she never again used fireworks in a Silueta, she would continue experimenting with pyrotechnics, by exploding *Siluetas* lined with gunpowder, the following summer.

This figure is atypical within Mendieta's *Silueta Series*. Instead of lying embedded in the land, the body projects vertically on a pole, hovering a few feet in the air. Representing Catholic image the soul in purgatory that is prevalent in Latin American, the *ánima* is literally caught between the earth and heaven.

This work represents a synthesis of both Catholic and indigenous symbolism. Mendieta came from a devout Catholic family; her father refused to support Communism on religious grounds. However, Mendieta herself was not a practicing Christian. The invocation of Catholic symbols came out of her interest in the synthesis of Christian, African, and indigenous cultures. As mentioned above, she witnessed effigy burning in Mexican Easter traditions. Additionally, perched vertically on a pole with her arms stretched out, the *Silueta* resembles a blazing crucifix. Mendieta also refers to prehistoric mythology and indigenous Mexican imagery in this work. The figure assumes the archetypal goddess pose, an image present in Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures in Europe and Latin America as well as various ancient civilizations of Asia and the Middle East.

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[75] Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980," 170.

Mendieta also witnessed female figures assuming the upraised arm posture in contemporary indigenous Mexican art. By infusing both Christian and indigenous symbolism into this Silueta, Mendieta refers to the syncretism that characterizes not only Mexican traditions but also those of her native Cuba. The allusions to Jesus Christ allow Mendieta to equate a more primitive female figure with the Western world's spiritual figurehead. She wants to imbue the great goddess figure with the power and validity that Western cultures have bestowed upon Christ. Finally, the use of fireworks and Catholic imagery represent a celebration of the cycle of life and death, a theme that Mendieta also found in her study of indigenous cultures. Just as Christ died and was resurrected to provide eternal salvation for humankind, *Ánima* finds power in the cycle of death and regeneration.

How can we consider *Ánima, silueta de cohetes* from an essentialist point of view? The reference to goddess mythology is a part of one tendency in 1970s feminist art to present woman as a strong, universal figure. The cycle of life reflects a desire to connect to a transcendent, eternal image of woman. The title *Ánima*, referring to the soul caught in purgatory until the final judgment, also insinuates an eternal state. While Mendieta is not claiming that there is one intrinsic female essence, she does present woman as a powerful figure that transcends multiple cultures.

As the female body is extinguished at the end of the film, we are reminded that a performative reading offers perspective on the fleeting quality of her work. Deriving her inspiration from a culture that is not her own, we can say that Mendieta is performing an identity that is not intrinsic to her identity. The ephemeral nature of the piece and thus the need for documentation also contradicts the more universalizing qualities that the

essentialist reading suggested. Despite the *Ánima*'s performance-based origin, the piece far removed from earlier performances such as *Facial Hair Transplant*. Like her other Siluetas, *Ánima* was ignited in front of a limited audience. Mendieta employed film to represent the work's disintegration that she and Breder witnessed firsthand, but the film omitted key elements of the original experience: the smell of ash, the crackling of the exploding fuses. The filmic and photographic traces, although distanced from the original experience, become just as important as the execution of the work. We cannot fix the work of art in only one experience—the original lighting of the figure or the film Mendieta left behind—and perhaps Mendieta suggests that there may not be an original experience, just as performativity theorizes that there is no original identity.

The 1984 sculpture *Figura con Nganga* (Figure with Nganga) [Figure 20] is an example of Mendieta's later, more permanent work. The sculpture lies flat on the gallery floor, reminiscent of earlier Siluetas imprinted directly in the earth. The artist fashioned two separate components made of earth and binder to form an abstracted, bulbous human figure. The top of the body consists of a small head jutting from a larger circular torso. The bottom mirrors the top half of the body, in this case a simple circle lacking any appendages. The figure's mud surface is cracked, reminding us of an arid landscape. The limits of the figure are delineated with a raised mud border, with a short vertical line uniting the torso and the bottom.

Nganga, deriving from Bantu, is a spiritual healer in many African and Afro-Cuban religious practices. In Cuba, the *nganga* also refers to the *prenda*, a cauldron that contains human, animal, and plant remains. A central component of Palo Monte religious traditions, the *prenda* serves as a vessel housing the deceased individual's spirit. The

shape of Mendieta's *Figura* echoes both of these symbols: the swollen pieces are round like a cauldron and form an abstractly human figure to denote the spiritual healer. Through these Afro-Cuban religious references, this work, like *Ánima*, alludes to the cycle of death and rebirth.

Again, essentialist and performative readings reveal the tension between the eternal and ephemeral. *Figura con Nganga*'s title may refer to Afro-Cuban practices, but the formal elements allude to goddess imagery. The use of natural materials and positioning on the floor reminds us of the Siluetas, evoking the spirit of a goddess figure. As discussed in Chapter 3, the rotund shape also reminds us of an aerial view of Maltese goddess shrines that Mendieta had visited earlier that year. While the gender of the figure is ambiguous, the allusion to Maltese goddess shrines suggests an image of woman as divine and potent. The essentialist reading is furthered when we consider that unlike her *Siluetas*, this sculpture is an enduring object. By creating sculptures intended for the indoor gallery setting, perhaps Mendieta hopes to locate a more permanent, universal human essence.

Yet the natural mud she employs poses another problem: how are we to preserve materials that are subject erosion? Should we endeavor to preserve the sculpture at all? Of the three works examined in this chapter, *Figura con Nganga* seems to benefit from a performative interpretation the least. The piece integrates a number of cultural references, but it does not seem to suggest that the identities linked to these cultures are in any way fluid. However, the sculpture still maintains its ephemerality by utilizing fragile, natural materials.

The three works discussed above reveal that the issue of documentation was a persistent concern in Mendieta's work. How does one experience time- and site-specific art after is has disappeared? Although she considered herself first and foremost a sculptor and never a photographer, she sought and appreciated both the static, singular image of the photograph as well as film's ability to capture change over time. As we saw in chapter 1, Mendieta first gained an appreciation for the documentation of her artistic activity under Breder's tutelage. While maintaining the imagery of her body and its performative relationship with nature, Mendieta's later works, like *Figura de Nganga*, tend towards more permanent materials and locations. Reflecting on the work she produced as a student in Iowa's Intermedia program, Ana Mendieta once said,

> The viewers of my work may or may not have had the same experiences as myself. But perhaps my images can lead the audience to speculation based on their own experience or what they might feel that I have experienced. Their minds can then be triggered so that the images I present retain some of the quality of the actual experience.[76]

She recognizes that the translation from the ephemeral work to a stable documentation will change some of the original meaning. However, she bestows upon the viewer quite a lot of agency: the original experience of her performance-based works and the audience's interpretation of the work's documentation are different, but both are valid. Documentation, in effect, creates the tension between the eternal (Mendieta's original experience, now lost) and the ephemeral. In this sense, employing both essentialist and performative frameworks in studying Mendieta's work is useful in understanding issues of documentation.

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[76] Mendieta, "Personal Writings."

The value of applying essentialism and performativity to Mendieta's practice only emerges when we consider the two concurrently. A feminist essentialist reading searches for a female essence that is universal and innate, while a performative reading recognizes that identity is socially constructed and therefore subject to change. Through her practice, Mendieta hopes to complicate the idea of identity. By pulling from prehistoric and indigenous traditions, she recognized the possibility an ahistorical, universal female essence. While Mendieta's eventual rejection of the label essentialism indicates that she did not believe in this female essence, she used it strategically to present women as strong and transcending cultural boundaries. The theory of performativity also suggests this same desire for crossing cultural boundaries. By acknowledging that identity is fluid and culturally defined, Mendieta can take on a number of identities. Considering Mendieta's work in light of both essentialism and performativity reveals an interplay between timelessness and ephemerality.

CONCLUSION

Essentialism and performativity are valuable frameworks for evaluating Ana Mendieta's work. We have seen that Mendieta employs essentialism strategically to provide a powerful vision of women. While she may not agree that there is one immutable, inherent female essence, she integrates goddess imagery—which itself posits a transcendent female spirit—as a way to address feminist concerns. However, by looking at her work through a performative lens, we understand that Mendieta's conception of a gendered identity is much more complicated. Performativity theorizes that there is no innate gender identity and instead gender is performed through repeated acts. Mendieta's multiple intersecting identities and her resistance to labels align with performativity's concept of a fluid identity. It is only when we work through both frameworks in conjunction that we resolve the tension between the eternal and the ephemeral.

Investigating how Mendieta considers gendered identity—whether there is a female essence, or whether our gender identity is completely performative—only scratches the surface of the many ideas she dealt with throughout her career. Although it is impossible to get a full sense of the issues Mendieta raises in a thesis investigation, I have attempted to provide a general understanding of the complexity her work. Mendieta's practice borrows from a variety of media, including performance, body, and earth art. She explores a number of concepts, including but not limited to the exploration of gender, cultural displacement, and indigenous ritual.

While this investigation is concerned with looking at her work using feminist theory (and within feminist theory, employing only the two approaches of essentialism and performativity), it testifies to the importance of viewing Mendieta's work through more than one lens. With such a multifaceted intersection of media and themes, it would be an injustice to only consider her work through a single approach. What I hope this thesis reveals, more than anything else, is that Mendieta's work must be examined through a number of perspectives in order to understand her practice's complex hybridity.

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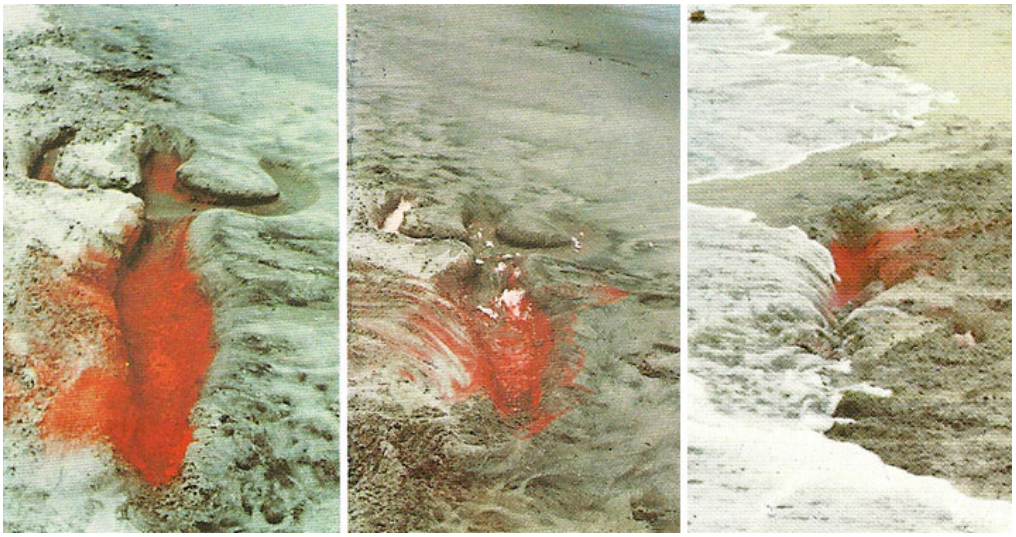
FIGURES

Figure 1



Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled (Silueta Series, La Ventosa, Mexico),* 35 mm color slides, 1976.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 2

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprint)*, 35 mm color slides, 1972.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 3

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant), 35 mm color slides, 1972 (Marieluise Hessel Collection, on permanent loan to the Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York).

Figure 4

Mendieta, Ana. *Imagen de Yagul* (Image from Yagul), lifetime color photograph, 1973.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 5

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Silueta Series), 35 mm color slides, 1977.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 6

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Silueta Series), lifetime color photograph, 1979 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

Figure 7

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Silueta Series), 35 mm color slide, 1979.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 8

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Silueta Series), color photograph, 1975 (Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York).

Figure 9

Mendieta, Ana. *Ñañigo Burial*, 47 black ritual candles, 1976.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 10

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Totem Grove Series), wood and gunpowder, 1984-1985 (Two pieces in Collection Ignacio C. Mendieta and two pieces in Collection Raquelín Mendieta Family Trust).

Figure 11

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled*, design on leaf, 1982-1984.

Figure 12

Mendieta, Ana. *Esculturas rupestres* (Rupestrian Sculptures), lifetime black-and-white photograph, 1981 (Collection Carlo Lamanga).

Figure 13

Mendieta, Ana. *Esculturas rupestres* (Rupestrian Sculptures), lifetime black-and-white photograph, 1981 (Collection Christine C. De Metrius).

Figure 14

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Silueta series), color photograph, 1978.

Figure 15

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Rape Scene), 35 mm color slides, 1973.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 16

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (Facial Cosmetic Variations), color photographs, 1972.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 17

Mendieta, Ana. *Untitled* (La venus negra), lifetime black-and-white photograph, 1980.

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Figure 18

Mendieta, Ana. *El Ix-Chell negro* (The Black Ix-Chell), lifetime color photograph, 1977 (The Carol and Arthur Goldberg Collection).

Figure 19

Mendieta, Ana. *Guanaroca* (Esculturas rupestres) [First Woman (Rupestrian Sculptures)], lifetime black-and-white photograph, 1981 (Collection Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz).

Figure 20

Mendieta, Ana. *Figura con Nganga* (Figure with Nganga), earth and binder on wood, 1984 (Collection Ignacio C. Mendieta)

Figure 21

Mendieta, Ana. *Ánima, silueta de cohetes* (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks), still from Super-8 color silent film transferred to DVD, 1976.