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Authors	Hudson, Michelle L
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BEYOND SELF:
STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM IN ANA MENDIETA'S *LA MAJA DE YERBA*

by

MICHELLE HUDSON

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond

ABSTRACT

Artist Ana Mendieta frequently conjoined the female body with nature to express her search for personal identity and support for feminist topics. Her last intended and least scholarly examined work, *La Maja de Yerba* (Grass Goddess), continues specific visual and thematic elements of her previous *Silueta Series* (Silhouette) yet also presents an aesthetically unique creation. Despite its incompleteness as a result of her premature death, the preserved maquette directly stipulates a female form to be planted in grass on the Bard College campus grounds. This alignment of women and nature garners criticism for its reliance on universalism and categorizations of women's experiences; however, Mendieta's use of essentialism in public art contributes to circulating feminist discourse to a wider audience. This paper considers the artistic influences, thematic concepts, and employment of strategic essentialism in Mendieta's *La Maja de Yerba*.

INDEX WORDS: Ana Mendieta, Feminism, Essentialism, Earth art, Goddess, Gender

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MICHELLE HUDSON

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MICHELLE HUDSON

Committee Chair: Dr. Susan Richmond

Committee: Dr. Kimberly Cleveland

Dr. Maria Gindhart

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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INTRODUCTION

Through her artwork, Ana Mendieta intuitively established connections between divergent cultures in her search for personal and communal identity. These creative explorations garnered Mendieta notable artistic success during her career, including numerous solo exhibitions and a prestigious year-long residency at the American Academy in Rome. Attesting to the aesthetic and thematic appeal of her creations, the plethora of scholarship regarding Mendieta's work corroborates the indelible poignancy of her art and life. The convergence of nature and the human form, as well as explorations of trans-cultural traditions and spirituality exhibited in the 1973 to 1980 *Silueta Series*, has especially attracted numerous art historical analyses. Art historian Guy Brett asserts that this series "is her great contribution to art," critic Mary Sabbatino exalts the liberating outcome of the artist's formation of cultural identity within the series, and curator Olga Viso contends that Mendieta "produced some of the most compelling images of body- and identity-oriented art of the 1970s."¹ The artist's personal and feminist ideologies, as well as incorporation of performance, body art, and earth works elicit numerous interpretations and evaluations of her oeuvre.

Conversely, Mendieta has received criticism, frequently for her artistic convergence of the female body with nature. While intended to present themes of female empowerment by coinciding through a shared heritage of ancient matrilineal culture, critics contend that this presents an essentialist and historically incorrect portrayal of women. Scholars such as Toril Moi argue that utopian efforts to unite women corporeally results in a simplification of divergent

¹ Guy Brett, "One Energy," in *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 186; Mary Sabbatino, "Ana Mendieta: Identity and the *Silueta Series*," in *Ana Mendieta*, ed. Gloria Moure (Xunta de Galicia: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1996), 138; Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 7.

experiences and continues the categorization of women as entirely separate from men. Second-wave feminist theory prominent during Mendieta's artistic career frequently upheld themes of female consolidation as a method of advancement; however, more current third-wave feminist theory such as that promoted by Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Donna Haraway instead promotes the concept of gender as a cultural construct rather than a platform for women's progress. Mendieta's work exists at a nexus between these two waves of feminism and results in multiple thematic interpretations.

In response to these controversies, this thesis will argue for the strategic feminist essentialism in Mendieta's *La Maja de Yerba*, one of the artist's last intended and least scholastically examined works. The 1984 commission continued the *Silueta Series*' utilization of female silhouette motifs and use of the land as the prominent medium. This large-scale piece additionally furthered the artist's concept of displaying visual forms that communicate themes of ancient cultural appreciation. Though the creation was never completed due to her premature death, the preserved artist's sketches and maquette directly stipulate a female form to be planted in grass and developed upon the landscape. This analysis will include considerations of scholars' support for and criticisms of Mendieta's essentialist use of the female body as aligned with nature, as well as the effectiveness of the ideologies inherent in this artwork. Identifying the intent of essentialist art highlights the importance of the theory and assists future discussions regarding Mendieta and other feminist artists of her era.

To begin, this paper will assess the popularity of Ana Mendieta as an artist, feminist, and source of significant scholarship. Importantly her biography remains a necessary facet in explaining both Mendieta's artistic practices and the functionalist methodologies frequently used to examine the resulting artworks. Chapter One identifies important factors in the appearance of

La Maja de Yerba, including the pictorial precedents to the drawing as well as the prominent artistic movements, specifically feminist art and the land art movement which further influenced the creation. I will additionally examine the influence of goddess mythology and imagery in the concept for *La Maja de Yerba* and indicate how it reflects the feminist ideologies inherent within the work.

Chapter Two will continue an analysis of Mendieta's personal search for identity and attachment to location. This features prominently in her creations, notably the *Silueta Series*, which, as the reputable precursor to *La Maja de Yerba*, will be used to illustrate the evolving use of ancient imagery and archetypal convergences espoused by the artist. Mendieta's quest for identity originated in the *Silueta Series* and remains an integral component in *La Maja de Yerba*. The creation and public reception of the *Silueta* works profoundly affected the concepts within *La Maja de Yerba*, and specific works from the series that are pertinent to the subsequent intended commission require examination. Additionally, the use of "primitivism" and spirituality in select works from the *Silueta Series* illuminate the similar inspirations and concepts within *La Maja de Yerba*.

Chapter Three will analyze the specific feminist philosophies in *La Maja de Yerba* and the intended functions of the work. Ecofeminist philosophy, as well as theories espoused during the second-wave feminist movement, features prominently in the appearance and desired effect of the artwork. I will also examine how *La Maja de Yerba*'s process of creation promotes a differing concept of land utilization than other prominent earth artists. This exploration will also consider the influence of Neolithic imagery and religion on Mendieta's concept for *La Maja de Yerba* and the importance of earthly cycles in its manifestation, as well as the artist's perceptions of ancient ideology regarding the importance of women.

Chapter Four will assess the implications and usefulness of the feminist ideologies within *La Maja de Yerba*. The theories of French feminist scholar Luce Irigaray feature prominently in the feminist art movement, and the manifestation of these ideas in Mendieta's work are examined. I will consider both the limitations and liberating facets of Mendieta's reliance upon essentialism as a method for promoting women's progress, and include other scholars' analyses regarding the problems and productiveness of utilizing feminist essentialism. The artwork's efficiency in conveying its intended themes of female empowerment will be included in this evaluation. I conclude with an analysis of the ultimate effectiveness of strategic essentialism within *La Maja de Yerba* and its importance in public art and feminist studies.

CHAPTER 1

LA MAJA DE YERBA

Autobiographical themes feature prominently in Mendieta's oeuvre as well as in scholars' examinations of her works. In addition to the indelible presence of the artist in her work, Mendieta's life provides further reason for her popularity and the abundance of academic inquiry. Following her untimely death in 1985 after falling from a window of the thirty-fourth floor in the New York apartment which she shared with her husband Carl Andre, Mendieta surpassed the fame achieved during her career by becoming a symbol of female martyrdom. Prematurely terminating a young artist's flourishing career, the tragedy also halted construction of a proposed series of site-specific land art installations, including *La Maja de Yerba*. In June 1992, the Women's Action Coalition, along with five hundred activists, protested the inclusion of Andre's sculptures in the new Guggenheim Museum in SoHo's inaugural exhibition by upholding banners that read, "Carl Andre is in the Guggenheim. Where is Ana Mendieta?"² This utilization of the deceased Mendieta as an iconic emblem of female exclusion in museum exhibitions, as well as reference to the judicial inequity of Andre's acquittal in her suspicious fatal incident, facilitated the subsequent association of Mendieta with pioneering feminist art. As art historian Jane Blocker observes, "The SoHo protest made it clear that she is tied up with a great many things whose regular disappearance from the art world is mystifying, shocking, and enervating."³ This disappearance ironically resulted in an increased focus on Mendieta's art and her life.

A major thematic influence on Mendieta's art emanated from the Cuban-born artist's exile from her homeland as a child in the 1960s after the ascension of Fidel Castro. Fearing for

² Jane Blocker *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

her safety as a result of her father's political resistance to the Castro regime, her parents placed Mendieta in Iowan foster care via the Peter Pan program, a church agency that aided refugee Cuban children. Resituated in the United States, Mendieta experienced unfamiliar conventions and a feeling of detachment from her surroundings. This sense of displacement caused the artist to repeatedly proclaim, "I am between two cultures."⁴ A subsequent visit to Mexico as a young adult inspired Mendieta to create the *Silueta Series* to exhibit her newfound connection to the country. This series, widely considered to be her greatest works and the major pictorial precedent to *La Maja de Yerba*, dualistically portrays the melancholy of exile from Cuba and the triumph over this imposition through an attachment to another location which contains ethnic similarities.

Mendieta espoused the image of the earth as a feminine life-giver and employed it as her prominent artistic medium for its matristic implications. She explained her personal associations with feminism and the environment by declaring, "I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. Having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast out from the womb (Nature)."⁵ This parallel between place and source shaped the progression of her art. As she noted in 1983, "During the past 10 years my work, as a dialogue between nature and the mythical female body, has evolved dialectically in response to diverse landscapes as an emotional, sexual, biological affirmation of being."⁶ Incorporating these ideas in her anticipated artwork, *La Maja de Yerba* presents the artist's identification with female body imagery as a source of human connection with the earth.

⁴ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio, "Ana Mendieta, A Historical Overview," in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), rpt. in Brett, "One Energy," 181.

⁵ Ana Mendieta, quoted in *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

Upon invitation in 1984 by Bard College at Annandale-on-Hudson north of New York City, Mendieta's proposal for *La Maja de Yerba* exhibits this progressive concept on the campus grounds. The 101 x 56 in. graphite on paper preliminary draft, the largest drawing made by the artist, presents a series of conjoined spirals (Figure 1).⁷ A single ring, the smallest present, affixes into two contiguous circles which then swirl into a large individual oval at the bottom. The motif bears a striking resemblance to a female figure: the curvaceous contours reference a head, an ample bosom, and an encompassing lower-body. Mendieta included a small straight line within the center of each spiral to increase the symbolic body references. The mark at the bottom of the "head" references facial features such as a nose and mouth, while the lineation in the "bust" creates the impression of nipples and areolas. Finally, the downwards-pointing configuration in the lowest circle intimates a vagina. Slightly tipped bottom edges of the middle and bottom rings evoke the appearance of hanging natural breasts and the presence of feet, while the tapered intersection of the spirals denotes voluptuous hips. The final maquette primarily follows this sketch, though Mendieta omits the line demarcations and curls the inner spirals more tightly (Figure 2).

Mendieta intended *La Maja de Yerba* to be interactive with the public. The installation was designed to constitute an outdoor area approximately nine by five feet, a size that enabled visitors to travel within the female form, yet small enough for the motif to remain visible and allow awareness of the figure and therefore provide an impact.⁸ To enhance both the traversing and viewing experience of the sculpture Mendieta stipulated that *Racrostes*, an English grass notable for its controlled tight growth and smooth texture, would compose the labyrinthine

⁷ Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 283.

⁸ *Ibid.*

deity.⁹ Synthesizing with the land, over time the artwork would erode back into the earth in order to mirror the similarities between nature and human life cycles.¹⁰

The two immediate precursors to *La Maja* present an evolution in Mendieta's utilization of the earth to signify female strength. *Arbol de la Vida*, 1982, displays a similar figure which creates a loose configuration of a woman's body (Figure 3). Translating to "Tree of Life," this construction, which the artist referred to as a "blooming Silueta," portrays an on-going theme of the fusion between nature and femininity. Created at the Lowe Art Museum in Miami as a public art commission, it has a similar three-part circular motif.¹¹ A tree divides the center of the piece, while a geometric mirror image of the shape dualistically grows on both sides of the trunk. Mendieta affixed a construction of welded copper wire to a tree trunk which forms a topiary cage. Sphagnum moss fills the interior of the compartment, while *Lapia*, an uncontained vine, spreads around the outer portion. The incremental growth of the plants begets a process piece meant to be experienced differently over time. In order to ensure a visual and ecological harmonization with the environment, Mendieta scaled the attachment's size and weight proportionally to the tree. Additionally, the composition does not damage the tree in any way. In her letter of intent, she writes, "It is my hope, having been a conscious collaborator with nature for over a decade, to have this opportunity for creating living, flowering sculptures... The enjoyment and experiences of nature would add brightness and beauty to city dwellers' daily life."¹² The artist desired the artwork to provide a vital entity which offered viewers amicable experiences with nature.

⁹ Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 283.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹² Mendieta, quoted in *Ibid.*, 290.

Mendieta also intended to imbue the visitor's experience with goddess imagery. As Sabbatino explains, "The *arbol de la vida* is an ancient form of a benevolent goddess symbolizing the transmutation of the Divine into the human."¹³ Tree goddess imagery appears in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* from the New Kingdom era, and frequently manifests in funerary art from the 18th Dynasty onward.¹⁴ Consisting of a fusion between the concepts of creator-gods and women's life-giving, Tree Goddesses assist in the cycle of rebirth.¹⁵ A tomb relief in Memphis from the end of the dynasty exhibits a hybridized plant and woman offering a deceased traveler water and milk in the afterlife (Figure 4). Mendieta likely knew of this motif, as just prior to the creation of *Arbol de La Vida* she traveled to the great pyramids of Egypt and created goddess sketches during her visit.¹⁶ Exhibiting this influence in her *Arbol de la Vida*, over time the vegetation living in the piece evolves and must be recreated, just as the Tree Goddess rebirths expired humans.

Mendieta advanced this artwork's scale and the goddess concept in the artwork *Furrows*, created in 1984 for the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. The earth work presents grassy mounds outlining the walkway entrance to the school's art museum (Figure 5). Its head, breasts, and ample lower-body closely resemble that of *La Maja de Yerba*, though the artist employed a minimalist outline instead of the undulating spirals. Despite the size restriction and presence of the building's path which negate a fuller composition, the artwork distinctly appears similar to a female figure. The silhouetted form also evokes the appearance of the earlier *Siluetas Series*, and *Furrows* similarly adopts inspiration from ancient creations and primordial goddess worship. Subsequent to her Egyptian excursion Mendieta observed the mounds at New Grange,

¹³ Mary Sabbatino, "Ana Mendieta: Identity and the *Siluetas Series*," 153.

¹⁴ Nils Billing, "Writing an Image: The Formulation of the Tree Goddess Motif in The Book of the Dead, Ch. 59," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 32 (2004): 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 283.

Ireland while visiting Neolithic sites in the United Kingdom, and indeed the breasts of *Furrows* and *La Maja* resemble the dual circular structures of this pre-historic burial construction (Figure 6). Its spiral motifs bear associations to goddess worship, and its native Irish title, “Brugh na Boinne,” meaning “bend in the river Boyne,” references the maternal River Goddess, Boann.¹⁷ Mendieta similarly utilized circular formations to situate this feminine power in a contemporary setting, and to denote reverence for the maternal earth.

Following these works, *La Maja de Yerba* displays Mendieta’s continued appropriation of ancient female references and motifs. Its exaggerated breasts and hips, as well as anonymous persona, evoke various prehistorical sculptures of women from the Paleolithic era. *Nude Woman (Venus of Willendorf)*, approximately dated from 28,000 to 25,000 B.C.E., presents the most striking similarity (Figure 7). The rounded shapes comprising the body are not naturalistic, just as the absent facial features suggest that the sculpture represented a generalized female form rather than a specific woman. Analogous to Mendieta’s desire to use Racrostes grass for the smooth texture and easily-manipulated consistency, it is believed the distinctive oval formations of the Paleolithic figurine resulted from the creator’s response to the limestone and the existing shape of the piece prior to execution.¹⁸ Presumed to be an ancient fertility figure, the emphasis on the enlarged breasts, torso, and groin overshadows the tiny arms and small legs. *La Maja de Yerba* similarly lacks appendages, and the slight points at the bottom of the spirals representing the bosom and feet evoke the sagging mammilla and triangular configuration of the figure’s buckled knees. Mendieta juxtaposed fertility and the earth in a matristic convergence; the cycles of life mirror the seasonal changes upon the land.

¹⁷ David C. Harvey, “‘National’ Identities and the Politics of Ancient Heritage: Continuity and Change at Ancient Monuments in Britain and Ireland, c.1675-1850,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (2003): 474.

¹⁸ Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, *Gardner’s Art Through The Ages*, Twelfth Edition (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2005), 18.

The iconic image of the strong *Venus of Willendorf* figure additionally presents a source, albeit somewhat idealized, of female empowerment in pre-patriarchal cultures. As historian John Beardsley notes, “Undoubtedly it was Mendieta’s desire to escape the emphatically masculine history of art that led her to reach all the way back to ancient fertility figures as inspiration.”¹⁹ Appropriating “primitive” imagery provides another method to exhibit more distinctly female representations and women’s empowerment. In the most ancient art forms, human representations almost exclusively display women.²⁰ This preoccupation possibly suggests that Old Stone Age societies revered women for their child-bearing capabilities which ensured the survival of the species.²¹ Mendieta espoused the perception of prehistoric reverence for women and female deities, and communicated her desires for this ideology to be reestablished in contemporary society. The artist lamented, “I don’t know why people have gotten away from these ideas. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources.”²² The artist’s implied perception of Paleolithic culture frequently conveys an association of female empowerment with earth reverence. *La Maja de Yerba* similarly presents the image of the fertile female, and through utilizing the land also communicates the earth as a nurturing entity for human life. Mendieta, whose artistic career emerged during the rise of the feminist art movement of the 1970s, aligned her earthworks with the reexamination of Goddess imagery present in second-wave feminist theory.

In the 1970s, women artists frequently presented female deities as symbols for trans-cultural harmony and a source of female empowerment, and supported the theme of reverence

¹⁹ John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1998), 163.

²⁰ Kleiner, 17.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mendieta, quoted in Susan Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” *Art History* 30, no. 1 (2007): 68.

for the Earth as the giver of life and identity.²³ Art historian Gloria Feman Orenstein further explains, “The 1970s were the first time that women’s artistic creations self-consciously extended beyond the patriarchal art-historical parameters and references, and reclaimed matristic visual models and materials from as far back as the Upper Paleolithic and the Neolithic eras.”²⁴ The popularity of this concept is exhibited through the plethora of artists employing goddess imagery to convey feminist ideas.

Mary Beth Edelson, a contemporary of Mendieta’s in the movement, communicates similar themes of ancient matristic power in her 1975 artwork *Goddess Head* (Figure 8). Both artists achieved prominence during the 1970s and likely knew of each other’s work.²⁵ In a photograph taken during a private ritual from her *Calling Series*, Edelson presented herself nude with upraised arms in a rocky landscape. The physical posture, inspired by Minoan sculptures depicting the Cretan Goddess as well as images of the Egyptian Snake Goddess, almost exactly mirrors the pose frequently depicted in Mendieta’s *Siluetta Series*.²⁶ Edelson and Mendieta additionally shared the technique of utilizing their own bodies in their artworks yet obscuring significant personal identifiers to provide a more ubiquitous portrayal of women. In *Goddess Head*, Edelson presents a collaged image of a top shell in place of her face, and the tightly-coiled spiral in the shell resembles the circles comprising the head and body of *La Maja de Yerba*. Additionally, these spirals evoke the centralized core imagery popular in the 1970s feminist movement which used body symbology to celebrate women’s physicality and sexuality. Edelson’s artwork, intended to convey female empowerment through a convergence with

²³ 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*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 187.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

primordial goddess energy, presents a concordant theme to Mendieta's creation of expressing reverence for women through nature appreciation.

The impetus for the promotion of women's ancient association with the environment derives from a feminist intervention in historical narratives. Scholar Lucy Lippard observes in her book *Overlay*, a text owned by Mendieta, that "With the rise of the new feminism in the late 1960s, women's longing for a history and mythology of our own found an outlet in a revisionist view of prehistoric matriarchies."²⁷ Lippard contends that ancient civilizations provide a particularly flexible source of inspiration into which women may interject female respect and accomplishment. She states, "Searching for models of female experience, many have turned to prehistory, which has been colonized but not yet conquered by patriarchal scholarship."²⁸ Despite criticisms emphasizing the historical inaccuracy of ancient matriarchal civilizations, the ideology and imagery of the goddess movement provided an adaptive source of constructed heritage.

Additionally, the association of women with principles presumed to be based upon prehistoric beliefs emanates from stereotypes. Thus the use of "primitivism" becomes a means to reference the subjugation of women. As critic Rebecca Schneider explains, "'Primitivity' is an attribute historically ascribed to 'lower' races just as 'femininity' is ascribed to the 'second' sex."²⁹ Mendieta's references to primordial goddesses, as well as indigenous cultures, express a reverence for the oppressed entities and a desire for liberation.

Connection to ancient sources evokes the theories of psychiatrist Carl Jung, a scholar whose ideas manifest in Mendieta's work. The use of goddess imagery to reference womanhood parallels Jung's concept of the archetype. His works regarding the archetype and unconscious

²⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 41.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 126.

analyses were published and widely-circulated before the emergence of the women's liberation movement, yet its masculine assumptions caused his ideas to be largely rejected by feminists. Despite this dismissal, convergent philosophies frequently appear in feminist art. The second-wave movement with which Mendieta was aligned particularly exhibit similar ideas. In a quest to define a female identity that departed from masculine influences, artworks that utilize symbols to assert a female essence and heritage contain elements of Jung's analyses of individuation and collective consciousness. His assertion that, "just as the individual is not merely a unique and separate being, but is also a social being, so the human psyche is a not self-contained but wholly individual phenomenon, but also a collective one," correlates with Mendieta's themes of cultural and human convergence.³⁰ Jung's theories, though not explicitly supportive of feminist causes, provide a framework for identity formation which functions as a cornerstone of the feminist dialogue in Mendieta's work.

La Maja de Yerba specifically displays essentialist themes articulated by Jung through utilizing the ideal of the archetype, a universal symbol which elicits standard behavior and reactions in all people. He explains, "In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature...there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals."³¹ Jung and Mendieta, while promoting divergent messages, converge in their use of essentialism as a concept for understanding human behavior. Specifically, both rely upon universalist theories of similar experiences shared amongst all people. Though Jung examines characteristics of women and men, this use of essentialism employs stereotypes to describe deterministic outcomes. In *La Maja de Yerba* Mendieta focuses

³⁰ Carl Jung, quoted in Frances Gray, *Jung, Irigaray, Individuation: Philosophy, Analytical Psychology, and the Questions of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

on the convergent female experience and utilizes the ancient *Venus of Willendorf* female form as an archetypal symbol to elicit an unconscious recognition of femininity in all viewers.

Mendieta also used land art to express a universalist connection amongst women. She directly utilized the earth for its trans-cultural presence in human life, and metaphorically associated the environment with women. Though referencing the *Silueta Series*, the artist's explanation that her work "recalls prehistoric beliefs of an omnipresent female force whose body parts made the earth a living creature" provides an appropriate description of the concepts within *La Maja de Yerba*.³² Examining the feminist implications of the goddess imagery present in Mendieta's work, Orenstein writes, "Through her art, she transformed the pain of her separation from her homeland into a metaphor about the pain of all women's exile from the Great Earth Mother."³³ Via a revival of goddess imagery, art works such as *La Maja de Yerba* sought to exhibit a point of convergence for females through history and shared experiences in oppression.

The artist also employed Santería spirituality as a method for referencing human empowerment through nature. Expanding upon her use of the spirituality in the earlier *Silueta Series*, Mendieta employed language to reference a goddess presence and earthly appreciation in *La Maja de Yerba*. In addition to providing a source of ancestral and cultural heritage for the artist, Santería also influenced Mendieta's perceptions of humans gaining power through converging with nature. In this spiritual theology, each orisha, or deity, utilizes a specific environmental force and worshippers may contact the orisha through involvement with the respective element.³⁴

³² Mendieta, quoted in Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 68.

³³ Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story," 184.

³⁴ Mary Jane Jacob, "Ashe in the Art of Ana Mendieta," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 191.

Generally considered the most widely practiced of the Afro-Cuban religions, Santería derives from the Yoruba orisha cults of West Africa and incorporates religious traditions of several beliefs, including Roman Catholicism and Espiritismo, or the Cuban version of the European-derived Spiritism.³⁵ Santería's hybridization of faiths provides a highly flexible platform which may be individualized by the practitioner. However, fear that the credence masked *brujería*, or witchcraft, as well as Cuba's commitment to atheism under communist rule results in a marginalization of the group, while its prevalence amongst blacks produces additional discrimination racially. Furthermore, a global notion that the "primitive" practice lacks the ability to adapt to contemporary society creates heightened minimalization. Mendieta, however, stated that it "was closer to popular culture" and appreciated the hybridization of the faith and its connection to non-Western religion.³⁶

Mendieta imbued her work with a reference to this concept, as *La Maja de Yerba* translates to "Grass Goddess" in Latin American Spanish dialect. Explaining her personal spiritual practices, Mendieta stated, "I believe in water, air, and earth. They are all deities."³⁷ She espoused the archetypal concept of humans converging through this environmental reverence and imbued her art with visual manifestations of what she described as "the belief in one Universal Energy which runs through all being and matter, all space and time."³⁸ The appreciation of nature in the Santería faith correlates with Mendieta's perceptions of Paleolithic and Neolithic environmental practices, and the fusion of the two in *La Maja de Yerba* displays a convergence of supposed ideologies and the continuation of these historic ideals in the Santería faith. As a result of Cuban immigration, Santería is practiced in the United States with

³⁵ Claire Garoutte and Anneke Wambaugh, *Crossing the Water: A Photographic Path to the Afro-Cuban Spirit World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

³⁶ Sabbatino, "Identity and the *Siluetas* Series," 154.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

specifically high populations of devotees in Miami and New York.³⁹ The intended location of *La Maja de Yerba* in New York elucidates an additional intended audience, as well as introduces Santería practices to a public audience on the Bard College campus.

Santería additionally provides a spiritual source of female empowerment. In the religious theology, orishas may possess female, male, or transgendered qualities. In *La Maja de Yerba*, Mendieta depicts a definitively female orisha. Additionally, referencing this ideology presents an alternative spirituality which allows more female autonomy. Men and women equally serve as religious officials, and specific ritual practices are reserved to be conducted only by women.⁴⁰ Mendieta's use of the spirituality departs from the male-dominated priesthoods of Catholicism, the religion of her Cuban parents and predominant faith in which she was raised.

Santería provided Mendieta with a source of personal identify formation. As scholar Mary Jane Jacob explains, Mendieta “identified not only with women as an oppressed minority, but, being Cuban, . . . understood what it meant to be relegated to the category of disenfranchised peoples of the Third World.”⁴¹ Utilizing the earth provided Mendieta with a symbolic reference to the colonization of culture and territory. Mendieta equated colonization of indigenous cultures with maltreatment of nature, stating, “To establish his empire over nature it has been necessary for man to dominate other men and to treat part of humanity as objects. This has had a detrimental effect on both man and nature.”⁴² Critiquing what the artist expressed as a cultural phenomenon of ecological and human discrimination prevalent in Europe and the United States, she articulated discontent with the status of women, ethnic minorities, and the environment.

³⁹ Jacob, “Ashe in the Art of Ana Mendieta,” 191.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mendieta, quoted in Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 67.

In an effort to exhibit constructive alternatives to the treatment of these groups in society, Mendieta employed ancient art forms and religion in *La Maja de Yerba* to provide a nostalgic reference to ancient culture and indigenous spiritual practices devoid of Western influences. The artist's perception of the egalitarian and environmentalist practices of prehistoric cultures provided a societal standard which Mendieta promoted, as the Santería faith contributed spiritual guidance. The visual and ideological influences for *La Maja de Yerba* promote a representative model for individual and communal behavior supported by Mendieta as a method for complete betterment.

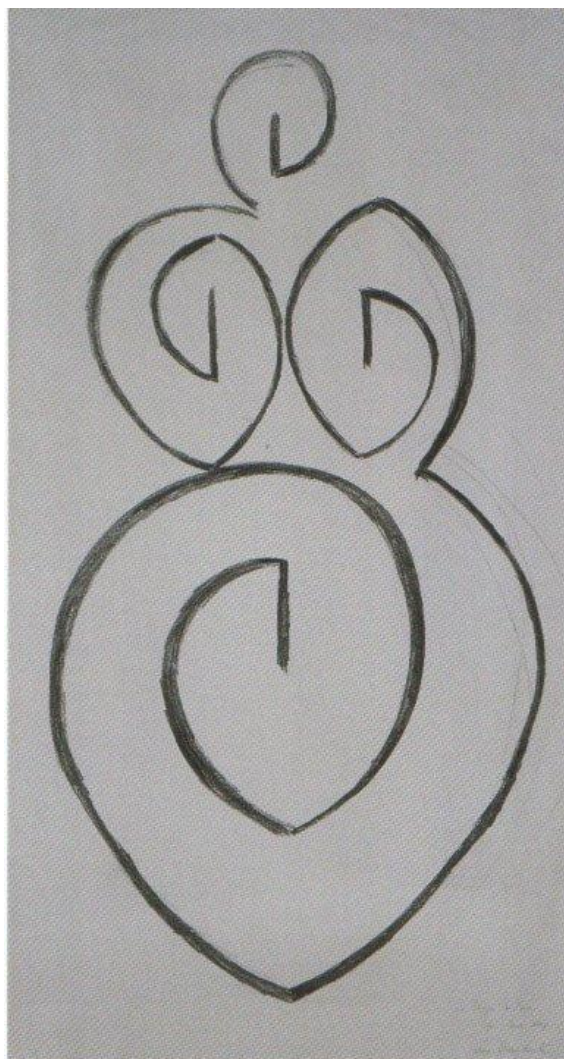


Figure 1. Ana Mendieta, *La Maja de Yerba* (Grass Goddess), 1984. Graphite on paper, 101 x 56 in. Collection Diane and Bruce Halle.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.



Figure 2. Ana Mendieta, *La Maja de Yerba* maquette, 1984. Color Polaroid photograph

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.

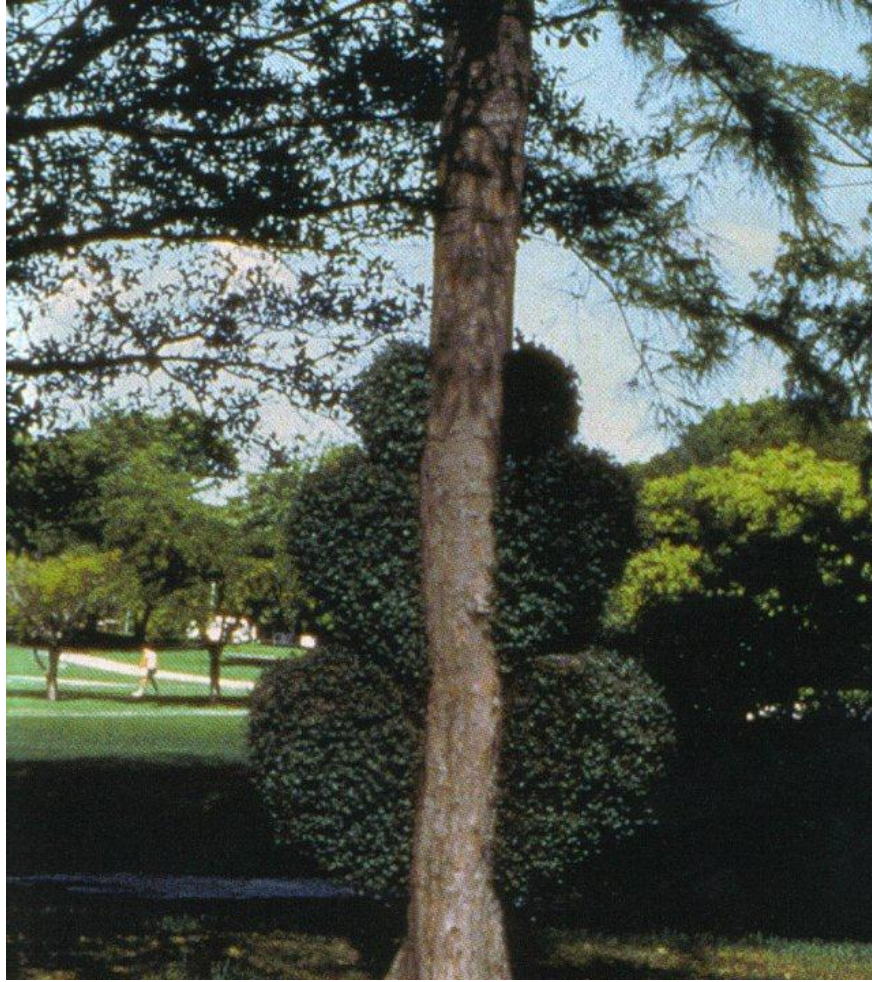


Figure 3. Ana Mendieta, *Arbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life), 1982. Lowe Art Museum, Miami Beach. 35 mm color slide.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.



Figure 4. *The Nursing Tree*. New Kingdom Dynasty. Illustration of a tomb relief in Memphis, Egypt.

Source: Billing, Nils. "Writing an Image: The Formulation of the Tree Goddess Motif in The Book of the Dead, Ch. 59." *Studien zur Altgyptischen Kultur* 32 (2004).



Figure 5. Ana Mendieta, *Furrows*, 1984. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. 35 mm color slide.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.



Figure 6. Royal Enclosure, Newgrange, Ireland, c. 7th century B.C.E.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.



Figure 7. Nude Woman (*Venus of Willendorf*), ca. 28,000- 25,000 B.C.E. Limestone. 4 ¼ in. high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Source: Kleiner, Fred S., and Christin J. Mamiya. *Gardner's Art Through The Ages*, Twelfth Edition Volume One. Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2005.



Figure 8. Mary Beth Edelson, *Goddess Head* (Calling Series), 1975. Photograph, collage, and china markers, 40 x 40". Collection the artist.

Source: Broude, Norma, and Mary D. Garrard, ed. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

CHAPTER 2

“PRIMITIVISM” AND GODDESS WORSHIP IN THE *SILUETA SERIES*

Two works from the *Siluetas Series* provide important insight into the inspiration, ideas and appearance of *La Maja de Yerba*. Both of the *Siluetas* exhibit the artist’s use of “primitivism” as a method for reexamining heritage and promoting cultural convergence, which Mendieta expanded upon in her later work. The pieces also present an evolution in the concept of what the artist referred to as “earth body sculptures,” which comprise the visual foundation for both the *Siluetas* and *La Maja de Yerba*.⁴³ An untitled piece created during the early years of the series displays the artist’s use of goddess imagery and exploration of suppressed religious practices that exists as the fundamental theoretical basis for *La Maja de Yerba*. The other featured artwork attests to the increasing importance of spirituality in Mendieta’s art and its intended liberating capabilities for oppressed groups. The two works also highlight the artist’s increasing self-awareness through a more permanent use of the land as her main artistic medium. This earthen connection, as well as employment of worship practices and ancient imagery, manifests in both the earlier *Siluetas*’ and *La Maja de Yerba*’s thematic use of exalting oppressed culture as a source of emancipation.

Mendieta initially employed “primitivism” as an integral component in the expression of selfhood and an exploration of trans-historical traditions shared between humans. The artist frequently utilized indigenous Mexican art forms, as well as a Jungian theory of universal archetypes, to illustrate a relationship between Mexican and Hispanic-Caribbean cultures and highlight the commonalities between traditions throughout differing locations and time.

Mendieta explained:

It is perhaps during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by

⁴³ Jacob, “Ashe in the Art of Ana Mendieta,” 189.

primitive art and cultures. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created. It is this sense of magic, knowledge, and power, found in primitive art, that influences my personal attitude to art making.⁴⁴

Thus “primitivism” within the *Siluetas Series*, and subsequently *La Maja de Yerba*, additionally provided a creative basis through which the artist explored her individual formations of identity that transcended specific ethnicities and physical locations. Inspired by Mexican pageantry and rituals, particularly those relating to death and the afterlife upheld through the funerary traditions in El Dia de los Muertos celebrations, Mendieta infused the earth-body work motif with a central theme of regeneration and rebirth.⁴⁵ “Primitivism” also provided the artist with a perceived source of history which did not reflect the detrimental aspects of Western culture.

The artist’s search for an attachment to her ancestry produced an affinity with original Mexican civilizations. A contributor to Mendieta’s self-identification with pre-Hispanic Mexico emanates from the trans-cultural diasporic consequences of colonization. She asserted that her ancestors in Cuba encountered repression from the Spanish *conquistadores* similar to that inflicted upon the original Mexicans.⁴⁶ Native Cuban civilizations, such as the native Taino Indians, underwent the devastation of total extinction from the violent contact, just as various civilizations in Mesoamerica underwent total or near disappearance.⁴⁷ The destructive implementation of South American and Meso-American colonization originated in western European countries and affected numerous indigenous civilizations in North and South America, and the artist utilized these historic aftereffects as a uniting experience amongst the assaulted societies. Mendieta displayed her identity and the presence of the minority groups through

⁴⁴ Mendieta, quoted in Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 296.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sabbatino, “Identity and the *Siluetas Series*,” 138.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

appropriating traditional imagery and imbuing the *Siluetas* with a theme of transcendence. As Sabbatino expounds, “Cultural identity occurs on the margins of hegemony, however hegemony is defined. However, marginality because of cultural or sexual difference can also become an active *strategy*, and a liberating source.”⁴⁸ The artist refrained from employing European and Anglo-American influences as a form of resistance to further acculturation, thus attempting to bond with her ancestral heritage and examine other native cultures.

Mendieta held a belief that these “primitive” cultures maintained a higher level of authenticity because of their lack of European influences.⁴⁹ Differing from what she expressed as the Anglo propensity to overemphasize individuality and difference, these societies functioned in a more collective existence.⁵⁰ Their pervasive respect for nature and utilization of natural materials further appealed to Mendieta’s concepts of earth sculpture. Studying the art of indigenous and “primitive” civilizations as a student at the University of Iowa in the 1960s provided the artist with knowledge in an area of examination previously underappreciated both nationally and globally. Art historian Barbara Braun notes that it was not until the late-nineteenth century that the Aztecs were accepted as a source of national Mexican identity; additionally, this genre of “primitive” art did not attract analytical scholarly attention in the West until the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵¹ Following Mendieta’s transformative identification experience in Mexico, the *Siluetas* exhibit an incorporation of various traditional Mesoamerican motifs and religions which previously have not receive adequate scholarly attention.

This synthetic approach appears in an untitled *Silueta* created in 1976 to signify a pre-Columbian presence in Mexican worship practices (Figure 9). Performed at the sixteenth-century

⁴⁸ Sabbatino, “Identity and the *Siluetas* Series,” 138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Barbara Braun, “Pre-Colombian Art in the Post-Columbian World,” in *Pre Columbian Art in the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 39, 35.

Dominican Church complex at Cuilapan de Guerrero, originally Zapotec and subsequently Aztec land as well as the site of the majority of the *Silueta Series*, the artwork references a historical revitalization of “primitive” culture.⁵² Standing in a vaulted niche used to display iconic statuary, a skeletal form imprinted in blood on a white sheet completely enshrouds a seemingly human figure. While visually resembling a religious depiction, it does not pertain to a specific saint, and the lack of a title precludes further deciphering. Mendieta’s positioning of this form in the place of an icon hints toward the indigenous occupancy enveloped in Catholicism, as the Aztecs and other native peoples adjusted the Spanish concept of saints to their precepts of patron gods.⁵³

Born into a Catholic family in Cuba, through her upbringing Mendieta personally identified with the imposition of foreign religion upon the indigenous peoples and their incorporation of pre-existing worship practices into Christianity.⁵⁴ This *Silueta* resembling La Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, creatively furthers the prevalent theme of cultural identity and indigenous revival within the *Siluetas* by referencing this nationally and individually recognized holy symbol. The subtle contrapposto pose and shadows of the vaulted niche frame the figure in a similar manner as the arching rays of light outline the iconic rendition of Mary as La Virgen de Guadalupe in the sixteenth-century tilma image from the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Figure 10). Mendieta symbolically utilizes red gladioli to adorn the feet of the silhouetted figure, a direct reference to Mary. Mendieta’s untitled *Silueta* visually resembles the saint’s garb, exhibited in the robe-like appearance of the loose fabric and the white sheet alluding to virginal purity.

⁵² Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 79.

⁵³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine, A Western Religious History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 204.

⁵⁴ Julia P. Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta’s Iowa Years, 1970-1980,” in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance*, 160.

La Virgen de Guadalupe further embodies Mendieta's theme of cultural synchronization and "primitive" rejuvenation through its hybridity of Christian and native deities. Scholarship frequently indicates that La Virgen represents a combination of the Catholic Mary and the pre-Columbian Mother Goddess, Tonantzin. The Guadalupe Basilica stands on an Aztec pilgrimage site; according to tradition La Virgen appeared to the native convert Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac, the former location where many worshipped Tonantzin, and addressing him in the Nahuatl language instructed a church to be built there.⁵⁵ The presence of Tonantzin within La Virgen de Guadalupe imagery manifests the indigenous cultural heritage which Mendieta exalts in her *Silueta Series*.

Situated within a niche in a Dominican Church, the untitled *Silueta* exhibits the revered position of La Virgen de Guadalupe, while the figure concomitantly reflects a "primitive" pagan representation. The blood-imprinted image strikingly resembles a sixteenth-century Aztec sculpture depicting the Aztec earth goddess, Coatlicue (Figure 11). A skull positioned in the middle of the sculpture's abdomen closely resembles the skeletal face of the *Silueta*, and the two images contain prominently outlined hollowed eye sockets and triangular noses. Also, both exhibit a nearly identical representation of a wide, opened rectangular mouth. An indentation on the crown of the Coatlicue skull mirrors the negative white space seen on the upper-forehead of the *Silueta*. Furthermore, the *Silueta*'s blood-imprinted figure, which lacks a neck connecting the head to the body, may allude to the goddess's reception of human sacrifice and her subsequent violent death by decapitation. The inclusion of Coatlicue, referred to as "the image of life and

⁵⁵ Patricia Harrington, "Mother of Death, Mother of Rebirth: The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 25.

death, of the past and the future,” assists the *Siluetas*’ theme of cultural transcendence, syncretism, and feminist-infused historical accounts.⁵⁶

In addition to promoting cultural convergence through adopting “primitive” motifs, Mendieta also included references to female empowerment within the *Silueta Series* which provides a major source of inspiration for *La Maja de Yerba*. Mendieta used her own body to create a female silhouette with upraised arms, which she referred to as the *arbol de la vida*, “tree of life,” posture.⁵⁷ This representation continues the theme of seeking self-identity and cultural convergence, as well as introduces a supplementary method of communication. Exhibiting what Sabbatino aptly refers to as “the concept of *absence* to denote the fullness of *presence*,” the simple outline offers the metaphorical implications of the artist removing reference to a physical body and replacing it with a discrete outline.⁵⁸ The more permanent, essential qualities of the figure preserved upon the earth propose an alternative to the inherently ephemeral display of the artist’s body in the previous untitled *Silueta*. Instead of the performance ending when the artist exited the piece, she leaves the silhouette to linger and then naturally disintegrate into the soil. In this new exhibition technique, Mendieta introduces a heightened confidence in adopting Mexico as a surrogate source of identity by producing a more enduring manifestation of her figure.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Afro-Cuban religion offered another method of this “primitivist” approach devoid of European influence in the creation of the series. In *Fire Silueta*, 1977, Mendieta used white candles to outline the female silhouette figure with upraised arms in the Iowan landscape (Figure 12). Creating this artwork in the United States, she communicates her newfound ability to connect with her heritage despite the location.

⁵⁶ Leonardo Lopez Lujan, “Mexicas,” in *National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City*, ed. Felipe Solis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004) 208.

⁵⁷ Sabbatino, “Identity and the *Silueta Series*,” 153.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Additionally, the rituals of the Santería faith provided a source of inspiration in the execution of the piece as well as displayed Mendieta's birth heritage. Influenced by the ideology and performance, as well as its connection to an indigenous past, Mendieta incorporates Santería rituals in the creation of the *Fire Silueta*.

To create the piece, the artist knelt on the ground and systematically lit the flames outlining the silhouette figure with a larger candle. Ceremonial rituals in the Santería practice frequently employ symbols within acts of cleansing, healing, and thanksgiving.⁵⁹ Similar to the native Mexicans imbuing the La Virgen de Guadalupe with their mythology regarding Tonantzin and Coatlicue, Santería provided a method for Africans to continue their religion in Cuba under the guise of Christian worship. Devotees construct domestic altars to honor these processes and the assisting deities, which frequently contain candles similar to those in the *Silueta*. Religious scholar Eugenio Matibag presents the significance of symbols in Afro-Cuban religion, delineating the function into a three part examination regarding the nominal basis, or the meaning of the name, the substantial basis which alludes to the natural materials used to construct the symbol, and the artifactual basis, or "the manner in which the symbol is worked in the culture."⁶⁰ Mendieta followed these precepts by providing the artwork with a more descriptive title and by utilizing the landscape as a prominent artistic tool for the silhouette. Analogous to her appreciation of indigenous culture's earth-friendly lifestyles, the Santería faith satisfied Mendieta's predilection for organic art forms by observing the earth as a source of spiritual essence. Additionally, of greatest importance to the artist, the *Fire Silueta* communicates a multi-cultural harmonization. Combining surrogate and birth heritage in the Mexican and Afro-Cuban religious rituals to create the piece in her exiled Iowan homeland,

⁵⁹ Eugenio Matibag, *Afro-Cuban Religious Experience, Cultural Reflections in Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Mendieta effectively synchronized her three most influential sources of identity and culture. Revived and illuminated through the energetically glowing flames, the “primitive” worship practices of indigenous Mexican and Cuban groups lie upon the United States land in an act of convergence.

This trans-cultural connection amongst Latin American and Western societies exhibited in the *Silueta Series*, particularly untitled *Silueta* and *Fire Silueta*, manifest Mendieta’s selfhood and idealization of indigenous civilizations. She considered culture to be a more powerful influence than nationalism, a connection which provided a platform of affinity for the societies.⁶¹ Employing what Brett describes as “looking ‘back’ to go forward,” she adopted motifs of native Mexican civilizations as a source of heritage celebration and as a personal manifestation of self-identity.⁶² Stating that “This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs at work within the human psyche,” Mendieta discovered a wellspring of similarities in cultural and religious practices between her native Cuba and the surrogate Mexican homeland.⁶³ This provided not only creative stimulation but a sense of self and place, which highly influenced her feminist ideologies expressed within *La Maja de Yerba*. Reconciling differences of location and ancestry, through the series she exhibits her emerging realization of personal identity.

⁶¹ Brett, “One Energy,” 181.

⁶² Brett, “Unofficial Versions,” in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller (New York: Routledge,) 90.

⁶³ Mendieta, quoted in Judith Wilson, “Ana Mendieta Plants her Garden,” *The Village Voice* 13 (1980):13; rpt. in Brett, “One Energy,” 181.

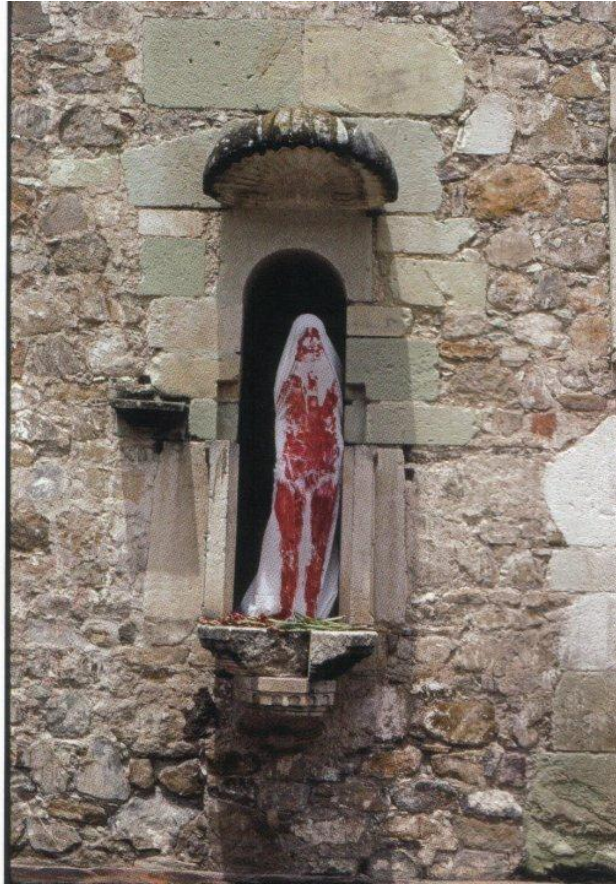


Figure 9. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta Series)*. 1976. 35 mm color slide.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.



Figure 10. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, tilma image. Sixteenth Century. Oil and tempera on cloth, 172 x 109 cm. Basilica de Guadalupe, Mexico D.F.

Source: Wolf, Eric R. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol." *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 279 (1958).



Figure 11. *Coatlicue*. Late Postclassic. Basalt, 350 x 130 x 130 cm. Collection National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.

Source: Solis, Felipe, ed. *National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004.

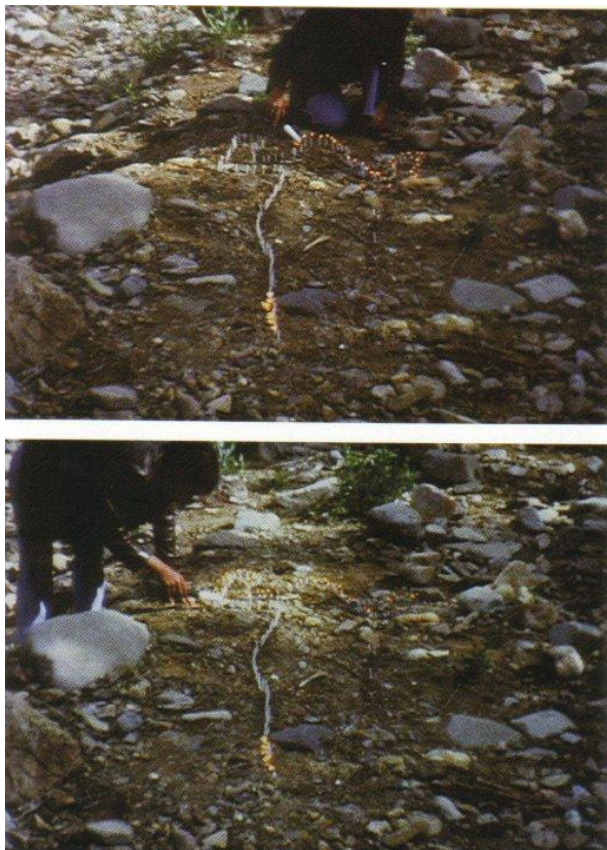


Figure 12. Ana Mendieta, *Fire Silueta*. 35 mm color slide.

Source: Viso, Olga M. *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008.

CHAPTER 3

THE EARTH AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Mendieta's utilization of the earth was partially influenced by the rise of land art in the 1970s, as artists extended the scope of visual presentation and exhibition space by voyaging out of the studio and into public spaces. The resulting implications and symbolism of substituting the communal sphere in place of the gallery evoked dialogue regarding the importance of public viewing experiences and appreciation for nature. Furthermore, the rejection of the museum for a more inclusive atmosphere reflected a challenge to traditionally patriarchal institutions.

Heightened political and cultural awareness instigated by the rise in ethnic and gender liberation movements during the era produced additional incentives to create art outside of the gallery.

Brett's contention that the museum's exhibition component remains unchanged explains the rigidity that precipitated this museum-avoidance phenomenon. He writes, "They construct their official version by selection (by displaying some objects and consigning others to the basement or storeroom); by classification (the choice of what is said on the labels); and by their very nature of being 'removed from life.'"⁶⁴ In addition to inflexibility, artistic institutions also harbor patriarchal prejudices. Lippard decries the art world's acceptance and even appreciation of "Clement Greenberg's patronization of artists...the 'master-piece' syndrome, the 'three great artists' syndrome, and so forth," that reinforce the prevailing male bias.⁶⁵

This historical practice of ethnic and gender discrimination in museums produced an atmosphere antithetical to Mendieta's intended message. *La Maja de Yerba* circumvented the oppression of the traditional exhibition establishment through its intended site-specific installment in an effort to connect to the location and a more generalized audience. In contrast to

⁶⁴ Brett, "Unofficial Versions," 114.

⁶⁵ Lucy Lippard, "Changing Since Changing," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 7.

the relative geographic isolation of the *Siluetas Series*, this intended artwork would exist as an easily accessible creation to a large public audience. Because of their ephemeral qualities the *Siluetas* required photographic documentation to preserve their display, though this format ironically reinforced their temporal nature. As philosopher Roland Barthes explains, photographs “embody the illogical conjunction of the *here* and the *formerly*.”⁶⁶ Again expanding upon the earlier series, *La Maja de Yerba*’s more permanent constitution ensured a longer lasting display. The subject matter as well as installation location were utilized by the artist to circumvent the suppression of her message.

Mendieta’s intended treatment of the earth in *La Maja de Yerba* additionally conveys a feminist ideology. Associating nature with female spiritual forces, the artist planned to maintain the artwork as ecologically innocuous. Partially emanating from her Santería spiritual beliefs and perceptions of prehistoric reverence for women and nature, Mendieta also expressed ideas regarding the earth as the primordial genesis for creativity, stating “art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated.”⁶⁷ The synthesis of art and earth in her intended public work, and additionally within the previous *Siluetas*, communicates the artist’s concept of nature as the initial provider of her craft. As a result, *La Maja de Yerba*’s female appearance additionally infers women’s importance in the visual arts.

Though synchronous with other land artists in creative usage of the earth, Mendieta departed from the ideologies espoused by many of her contemporaries. The artist explained, “Opposed to the earthworks of the 1970s, which use nature in its most literal sense, my purpose and interest is rooted in nature’s symbolical meaning. My works do not belong to the modernist

⁶⁶ Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 74.

⁶⁷ Mendieta, quoted in *Ibid.*, 71.

tradition which exploits physical properties.”⁶⁸ Mendieta presumably references earth art by artists such as Robert Smithson, whose utilization of nature in works such as his iconic 1970 *Spiral Jetty* displays a controversial utilization of the earth for art (Figure 13). Though some scholars such as Caroline A. Jones argue that Smithson’s work does not represent an entirely genderized performance, many critics consider Smithson and other land artists to be aggressive pillagers of the earth.⁶⁹ Art historian Amanda Boetzkes asserts that Smithson and other prominent earth artists did not create out of respect for the environment, but rather exemplify the precept of “going to nature, but relating to it as dirt.”⁷⁰ Mendieta, in order to communicate her ecological conservation ideals and to promote her reverence for the land, ensured that her earthworks would not negatively affect the environment in any way. Smithson and Mendieta unite in allowing their works to disintegrate back into their natural surroundings; however, Mendieta’s admits a minimal impact.

Indeed, the creation of the piece required the natural progression of the earth’s cycles. Ensuring this process remain cultivated, the artist specifically stated in a 1984 letter to Bard College that proper irrigation and nourishment would be essential to the maintenance of *La Maja de Yerba*.⁷¹ The visibly earth-friendly techniques utilized in the creation of this public land art installation garnered praise from notable feminist artists, including Nancy Spero, who noted the differences in ecological ideologies between Mendieta and other land artists such as Smithson and commented, “Ana did not rampage the earth to control or dominate or to create grandiose monuments of power and authority.”⁷² The intended display of the synthesis between vegetation

⁶⁸ Mendieta, quoted in Viso, *Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 293.

⁶⁹ Caroline A. Jones, “Robert Smithson’s Technological Sublime: Alterities and the ‘Female Earth’” in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 145.

⁷⁰ Boetzkes, quoted in Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 67.

⁷¹ Mendieta, quoted in Viso, *The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, 293.

⁷² Spero, quoted in Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 67.

and weather cycles in order to generate and perpetuate the artwork, as well as the alterations in its appearance through evolutions of the seasons, implies an intimacy with nature. Observing the similar utilization of the seasons in the previous *Siluetas Series*, Susan Best aptly states that “the importance of the earth comes forward as the affective meaning of the figure’s actions recede or are withheld.”⁷³ The inclusion of the female body as the motif presents a reference of an additional dialectical cycle, that of woman as nurtured by and nurturing the earth.

Mendieta’s work espouses ideologies promoted within the ecofeminist movement. Rising as a response to the feminist, gender, and environmental liberation demonstrations of the 1970s, the campaign asserts that feminism cannot advance without an increase in appreciation for nature. Explaining the basic concepts of the group, activist Greta Gaard explains, “Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, eco-feminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality... is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature,” and continues that “Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.”⁷⁴ Though Mendieta did not directly admit her involvement with the movement, the thematic elements of her art express strikingly similar views.

Paralleling ecofeminism’s concern with the secondary status of women, the environment, and subjugated ethnic and social groups, Mendieta imbued *La Maja de Yerba* with references not only to feminism and earth-friendly practices, but also to the oppression of indigenous societies. While the *Siluetas* referenced pre-Hispanic civilization, *La Maja de Yerba* communicates the suppression of prehistoric culture. The use of goddess imagery, including the *Venus of*

⁷³ Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 70.

⁷⁴ Greta Gaard, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1.

Willendorf, provides an important reference to female and ecological liberation. Referencing the appearance of the *Siluetas*, Best's observation that "the goddess pose could be read as facing the earth or the sky," provides an apt description of Mendieta's later intended earth work.⁷⁵ Best continues that "most importantly, the pose presents intimate contact with the earth, not quite an embrace or a caress, but certainly in the domain of some kind of close, private communion," which references the artist's environmentally conscious practices while creating her works.⁷⁶

The prominent role of nature in *La Maja de Yerba*'s creation also evokes elements of performance art, a genre that rose in prominence during Mendieta's career and frequently appeared in her earlier works. The 1960s and 1970s American art scene begat a proliferation in the exhibition of creative performance, which, similar to earthworks, was detached from the traditional drawings, paintings, and sculptures preserved within the confines of a museum. The genre also featured prominently in the feminist art movement for its inclusion of spontaneity which provides an additional facet for promulgating messages of liberation. Performance facilitates artists' use of the body, which increases the physical presence and imbues the piece with a more personalized aura than most other techniques afford. An aid to philosophical inquiries regarding identity, much of the performance art produced during this time reflected an introverted focus on the self and body.

Mendieta exhibited similar ideologies espoused by the performance and body art movements within *La Maja de Yerba*. The artist's allowance of the natural cycles of the earth to create the piece reflects the acceptance of improvisation inherent in performance. Furthermore the female form presented within the artwork exhibits an evolution in Mendieta's body imagery and sense of place. As a result, the intended project is one of her most assertive works.

⁷⁵ Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Progressing from the silhouette traced from her own body which served as the foundational motif in the *Siluenta Series*, the physical shape of *La Maja de Yerba* clearly lacks reference to the artist's body. She explained the genesis of *Siluetas* as a manifestation of her "search to find my place, my context in nature," yet her statement of intent for her last creation only refers to providing the urban public with an enjoyable nature experience.⁷⁷ Though the earthwork contains many personal influences and continues many ideas expressed in the *Siluetas*, through displaying a more abstracted, ubiquitous female body it ultimately exhibits an alteration in the thematic narrative of the piece. Transcending the more individualized format of the previous works, *La Maja de Yerba* portrays a more definitive expression of feminism than previously exhibited in Mendieta's art.

This increased confidence predominantly emanates from the replacement of Mendieta's body with a new female form. Implications resulting from depicting a non-specific body emanating from the landscape present a shift in the artist's intended message. *La Maja de Yerba* communicates a reciprocal relationship between nature and humans and imbues this theme with particular emphasis on women. The earth produces the female body, and, as a result of the eco-friendly techniques implemented by the artist, cyclically assists the environment from which it grew. Explaining the concept within her use of the human form in her art, Mendieta explained her belief in "visualizing the body as an extension of nature and nature as an extension of the body."⁷⁸ This portrayal of the body as a female corpus, specifically a figure lacking overt reference to Mendieta and therefore functioning as a master symbol of women, references a generalized convergence of women. Firmly planted in the ground and evolving in conjunction with the earth's cycles, the intended piece figuratively expresses a continuation of feminism in

⁷⁷ Mendieta, quoted in Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 72.

⁷⁸ Mendieta, quoted in *Ibid.*, 73.

contemporary society after the pioneering efforts of the liberation movements in the previous decade.

Ironically, rather than a time of continuing support for feminism, the 1980s were a decade of increased opposition towards women's rights that contrasted to the advancements achieved in the 1970s. Observing this regression, critic Susan Faludi asserts that "backlash against women's rights is nothing new in American history. Indeed, it's a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality."⁷⁹ Jennie Klein provides a similar observation, stating that "because of the backlash of the Reagan years, popular feminist magazines...grappled with declining resources and by the 1990s had all but disappeared."⁸⁰ Faludi further notes that "the monitors that serve to track slippage in women's status have been working overtime since the early '80s," including a decrease in females in corporate and political posts and a drastic increase in the rate of female poverty and domestic abuse.⁸¹

Mendieta's *La Maja de Yerba* perhaps provides reference to the oppositional climate of the 1980s. The female figure, though explicitly aggrandized to convey a message of definite female presence, simultaneously expresses a sense of isolation. Devoid of similar environmental surroundings, it conspicuously exists without ecological counterparts. Correspondingly, its intended function as a public art construction heightens a sense of detachment, as the figure references a woman but is not actually living as a human. The artwork and viewer may come into physical contact with one another yet the viewer cannot entirely assimilate the artwork. Mendieta's use of body imagery heightens the emotionalism of this disconnect. Scholar Bryan Turner aptly elucidates the paradoxical status of harmonization and isolation emanating from the body, stating:

⁷⁹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991), i.

⁸⁰ Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 596.

⁸¹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 9.

The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing- a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity. The body is the most proximate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location and of my personal enselfment and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment.⁸²

Mendieta's cited lamentation for the contemporary loss of prehistoric reverence for women and the earth provides further influence for insinuating the persecution of the two entities. *La Maja de Yerba* communicates a theme of optimistic women's empowerment by displaying a continuing presence of the female figure throughout the symbolic alterations in the seasons, yet also references candid implications of the adversarial atmosphere of the time.

These binaries contribute to the strategic essentialism in *La Maja de Yerba*. This intended artwork featured a discernable female figure, yet its thematic significance elicited multiple interpretations. Though the work remains distinct from the audience, the size and format allow viewers to physically engage with the piece by entering and navigating through it. The viewer and the work therefore coexist in a harmonized realm which alludes to the perceived utopian pre-historical societies exalted in Mendieta's art. This convergence of an aesthetically pleasing visual display of earth art, references to ecofeminism, spontaneity from performativity, and nostalgia for prehistoric matriarchal civilization provided a method for artistically communicating essentialist feminist topics to a general audience.

⁸² Bryan Turner, quoted in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, ed. Amelia Jones (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 12.



Figure 13. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Black basalt and limestone rocks and earth. 1,500 ft. length. Great Salt Lake. Estate of Robert Smithson.

Source: Jones, Caroline A. *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

CHAPTER 4

STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

The feminist messages in Mendieta's *La Maja de Yerba* heavily rely upon essentialist theories, a conceptual framework for expressing the constitution of a specific entity's existence. Though the concept does not contain an immutable definition, it pertains to the analysis of image construction and compositional inquiry. Critic Elizabeth Grosz defines essentialism as "the attribution of a fixed essence to women."⁸³ Author Diana Fuss explains the term as "most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity."⁸⁴ The inquiries regarding what comprises and creates objects and specimens function within the philosophical exploration of identity. Essentialist rhetoric frequently manifests in feminist discourse, as it provides a facet for constructing both personal and communal coherence. Fuss further explains feminist essentialism by asserting that "essentialism can be located in appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order."⁸⁵ She continues that "Essentialism emerges perhaps most strongly within the very discourse of feminism, a discourse which presumes upon the unity of its object of inquiry (women) *even* when it is at pains to demonstrate the differences within this admittedly generalizing and imprecise category."⁸⁶ Examinations regarding what comprises and defines a woman, as well as what constitutes femininity, continue to remain debated topics and essentialism provides a facet for exploring such topics.

⁸³ Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problems of Essentialism," in *The Essential Difference*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 84.

⁸⁴ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xi.

⁸⁵ Diana Fuss, "The Risk of Essence," in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, ed. Hillary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 528.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Mendieta examines these topics in her art and employs essentialism in a multifaceted, strategic manner. Since the foundation of her work regards constructing identity for herself as well as themes of women's experiences in historic and contemporary society, she imbues her works with essentialist theories to provide tangible manifestations of womanhood. Mendieta's use of essentialism predominantly exists in her convergence of women and nature. Constructing a concept of femininity, the artist defined women as a parallel entity to the environment. The use of an analogous relationship between women who promulgate humanity in a similar manner to the way the earth cultivates life exhibits her artistic interpretation of the correlation between the female body and the land. Additionally, her references to the trans-cultural and trans-historical oppressive treatment of women and nature align within essentialist theory, as it contains an element of generalization. As Fuss again expounds, essentialism "can also be read in the accounts of universal female oppression, the assumption of a totalizing symbolic system which subjugates all women everywhere, throughout history and across cultures."⁸⁷ Furthermore, Mendieta's intended message of women's empowerment through convergent female solidarity in *La Maja de Yerba* displays the third form of essentialism, a technique which Fuss argues, "underwrites claims for the autonomy of a female voice and the potentiality of a feminine language."⁸⁸ In order to achieve such a feminist discourse Mendieta's work displays the separation of women and men as distinct biological and sexual entities.

Referred to as feminism of difference, this ideology of dissimilarity appeared more frequently within second-wave feminist theory which prevailed during Mendieta's career. Appearing in her art via the master symbol of a solitary female figure, she expressed beliefs in fundamental distinctions between the sexes. Regarding the earth-friendly techniques of her

⁸⁷ Fuss, "The Risk of Essence," 528.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

works in contrast to the more invasive procedures of her then contemporary land artists as discussed in the previous chapter, she stated, “Men artists working with nature have imposed themselves on it. Definitely my work has that feminine sensibility.”⁸⁹ This expression of a belief in emotional distinctions between the sexes, as well as physical disparities via the repeated portrayal of the female body in her examinations of women’s functions in society, disassociate from men in an effort to define femininity and promote a convergence of women as a form of empowerment.

La Maja de Yerba exhibits additional unique categories of essentialism. The work includes elements of biologism, a theory which emphasizes women’s biological capacities that includes a particular emphasis on reproduction and motherly nurturance.⁹⁰ Mendieta’s utilization of a female body motif with aggrandized breasts and a circular stomach region encompassing the entire lower section of the body visually alludes to pregnancy, and the striking comparison to the presumed fertility figure *Venus of Willendorf* provides additional references to procreation. *La Maja de Yerba* additionally implies naturalist essentialism, which posits that women’s attributes may be derivative of ethereal enlightenment.⁹¹ Utilizing references to ancient goddesses and the female power in the Santería deities, the earthwork implies a celestial involvement within femininity and the female body. The artwork also contains elements of universalism, a slightly different format of essentialism, which according to Grosz pertains to “the attributions of invariant social categories, functions, and activities to which all women in all cultures are assigned.”⁹² She continues to explain that “this may be the result of biology or ontology, but just as frequently it may reflect universal social or cultural requirements...[and] tends to suggest only

⁸⁹ Mendieta, quoted in Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 72.

⁹⁰ Grosz, “Sexual Difference,” 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the commonness of all women at all times and in all social contexts.”⁹³ The themes of convergence which Mendieta espoused in her art heavily incorporate elements of universalism amongst women.

The concepts present in Mendieta’s work are closely aligned with feminist scholar Luce Irigaray’s treatises on female sexuality. Reacting against the perceived misogyny in explanations of the female body by theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Irigaray sought to establish a feminine identity not defined in association with men’s bodies. Her influential 1977 essay “This Sex Which is Not One” asserts that “female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters” and opposes the phallogocentric analyses of women and the perception of the vagina as resulting in female physical passivity.⁹⁴ Though Irigaray rebels against the attempts of previous male philosophers to explain female sexuality and acknowledges in her work that femininity cannot be definitively categorized, in her attempt to disunite women from male-oriented analyses she does promote concepts of female specificity. Irigaray promotes women gaining control over their bodies, stating “A woman’s (re)discovery of herself can only signify the possibility of not sacrificing any of her pleasures to another, of not identifying with anyone in particular, or never being simply one.”⁹⁵ She maintains that such an evolution by women would result in a collective betterment, and calls for women to “tacitly go on strike, avoid men long enough to learn to defend their desire notably by their speech, let them forge a social status which demand recognition, let them earn their living in order to leave behind their

⁹³ Grosz, “Sexual Difference,” 85.

⁹⁴ Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Press, 1981), 99.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

condition of prostitute.⁹⁶ This proposal infers a generalized status of women and contends that all women experience discrimination. And, according to the author, as a result of this aggregative and subjugated condition, womankind must unite in an organized effort to resist this secondary placement.

Again converging with Irigaray's assertion, Mendieta also based the premises in her artwork on the presumption that collective female empowerment is possible and will be facilitated by women gaining specificity. In Mendieta's art, this defining process is facilitated in conjunction with ecological dialogue. Her work proscribes women being integrated with nature as a format for converging women through a shared constitution. Therefore, according to the thematic narrative of the artwork, abusive behavior towards the earth and the oppression of women exist in a dialectical relationship. Describing a similar postulation, Irigaray contends, "It's not that we [women] have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves."⁹⁷ The ecofeminist ideologies in *La Maja de Yerba* promote opposition to patriarchal culture by asserting women's claim to the earth. Irigaray uses the term "morphology," a biological concept associated with anatomy in which the relationship between forms is examined, to reference the association of women's physical bodies with their symbolic representations.⁹⁸ Mendieta's morphological synthesis of the female body motif with the *Racrostes* grass, as well as references to the perceived environmentally-conscious societies within ancient matriarchal history, supports a rejection of the "fatherland" as described by Irigaray and inserts a form of collective female identity.

⁹⁶ Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," 104, 106

⁹⁷ Irigaray, quoted in Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 66.

⁹⁸ Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 97-98.

Irigaray proposes that women reexamine maternal genealogies as a source of establishing female symbolism, a similar precept exhibited in Mendieta's use of ancient matrilineal goddesses. Reflecting on the subservient female subject, Irigaray determines it is impossible to disentangle women from the Western patriarchal symbolic system which utilizes a universal masculine object.⁹⁹ In order to combat this hierarchy, she references lips as a source of empowerment, stating "Open your lips; don't open them simply...Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth."¹⁰⁰ Referencing a double-entendre to both the mouth and female genitals alludes to the phallogocentric treatises of philosophers such as Freud and Lacan; however, Irigaray refrains from symbolically replacing the phallus with the vulva and rather promotes female bonding. As critic Maggie Berger explains, the lips metaphor "opposes the fetishization of women whose exchange manifests the power of the phallus, by reestablishing the links alienated from one another by a competitive market."¹⁰¹ Establishing commonality, as well as difference, provides a format for women to function distinctly from patriarchal systems. This theory utilizes pre-existing generalizations of women as a source of empowerment. Berger continues, "Irigaray's discursive construction of the body inevitably has a political effect...our perception of the body is already always mediated, so that the textual body, its 'ideology,' is the body as far as we know."¹⁰² A prehistorical matriarchal symbol in *La Maja de Yerba* upholds a correlating ideal by alluding to an identifiable source of women's shared history and physical traits, a strategic choice for public art.

The complexity of categorizing what comprises a woman or describes female embodiment results in a continual metamorphosis of scholars' proposals for these questions, and

⁹⁹ Maggie Berger, "Luce Irigaray's 'Contradictions': Poststructuralism and Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 51.

¹⁰⁰ Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," 209.

¹⁰¹ Berger, "Luce Irigaray's 'Contradictions,'" 67.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 56.

resultingly the use of essentialism has become extremely controversial in feminist discourse. Opposing scholarship refutes the ideology that all women share similar attributes and experience, and furthermore discredits the thought that femininity can be defined. Constructionism, another facet of feminist philosophy, promotes instead the concept that gender is a social and cultural creation. Prominent critics such as Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Julia Kristeva assert that essentialism imposes uniform attributes upon women, utilizes incorrect historical biases, generalizes women's experiences within a single category, and ultimately minimizes the complexities of women and is not conducive to social change. Scholar Toril Moi, criticizing the flaws of the essentialist concepts within Irigaray's proposals for female betterment, states, "Her superb critique of patriarchal thought is partly undercut by her attempt to *name* the feminine."¹⁰³ Moi continues to denounce the effectiveness of essentialism, declaring "If...all efforts towards a definition of 'woman' are destined to be essentialist, it looks as if feminist theory might thrive better if it abandoned the minefield of femininity and femaleness for a while."¹⁰⁴ As a result, constructionists offer alternative and less static explanations of gender and oppression.

Butler articulates such constructionist ideology in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." In this study, the author contends that gender is a social creation comprised of connotative meanings. Reflecting upon de Beauvoir's infamous assertion that "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman," Butler explores the basis of identity and gender apprehension.¹⁰⁵ She writes,

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the

¹⁰³ Moi, quoted in Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 66.

¹⁰⁴ Moi, quoted in Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ de Beauvoir, quoted in Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988); rpt in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 356.

stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. . . . In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performance fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control.¹⁰⁶

According to Butler, those who do not do not engage in this gender performance experience societal discrimination. This hypothesis opposes the theory of Irigaray and essentialist scholars that backlash against women is predicated upon sex.

Mendieta's work certainly contains the assumptions and generalizations of essentialism that constructionists condemn. The ideology within *La Maja de Yerba* presents women as separate entities from men, which increases perceptions of gender polarizations. It also alludes to a trans-cultural status of women as undergoing male oppression, which undermines the global diversity of women's experiences. Emphasizing subjugation illuminates a perception of women as a weaker sex, and the utilization of "primitivism" in the work's visual motif possibly assists this perception. References to the Santería religion and female deities, as well as goddesses, provide an additional form of "magic primitivism" that conjectures a spiritual quality within all women. *La Maja de Yerba*'s display of the female body infers that women share similar physical attributes, and the references to procreation via the aggrandized reproductive organs perhaps generalize women's physical functions. The accentuation of ancient society and promotion of matriarchal culture may infer that women are less evolved and that female-dominated civilizations could not adapt to societal changes and belong in the past. Furthermore, even the existence of goddess worship and matriarchal culture in prehistoric times remains a debated contention amongst historians. Mendieta's reliance upon presumably ahistorical inventions removes an accurate basis for the theory within the artwork.

Additional factually incorrect parallels in *La Maja de Yerba* manifest in the predominant

¹⁰⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 356, 364.

theme of women and the environment as convergent entities. Implying women imitate nature again over-generalizes females both physically and emotionally, and imbues the gender as functioning in a more primitive state. Correspondingly, indicating that the environment emulates women presents fictionalized ideas. As Jones delineates, “It has never been earthshaking to assert that representations of land mobilise social categories of gender. The English phrases ‘virgin land’ and ‘Mother Nature’, religious goddess cults,... all make metaphors of earth as if the planet’s soggy biosphere possessed but a single sex.”¹⁰⁷ *La Maja de Yerba* exhibits this scientifically false comparison via its utilization of shrubbery and grass to create a female form, alluding to the similarities of nature and the human body. Though this association exists ubiquitously, it minimizes the multitudinous complexities of both entities. Jones continues, “in such western thought patterns, the earth’s sex is modeled on human reproduction; most metaphors do not draw on the more complex reproductive structures of plants (which are themselves mapped through human models separating supposedly ‘male’ from putatively ‘female’ parts.)”¹⁰⁸ Resultingly these comparisons abridge the biological intricacies of women and the environment.

The artwork relies upon incorrect knowledge and underestimates biological complexities of the environment and women, yet various critics contend that Mendieta’s art exhibits a complex theoretical understanding of feminism, especially pertaining to the entrapment of essentialism through the use of performance in her works. Following the logic expressed by Butler, gender functions as a fluctuating entity exhibited through repetitive performance. Opposed to the presumption that gender serves as a dominant source of identity, constructionist theory proposes that it is a façade. Including Butler’s theories in her analyses, Blocker contends

¹⁰⁷ Jones, “Robert Smithson’s Technological Sublime,” 133.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

that Mendieta references a parallel precept through the conspicuous level of performativity in her work. She writes, “In the performance of identity, and in identity as a performance, Mendieta is and is not ‘herself.’ She negotiates among identity possibilities that themselves emerge with the act of performance. No one true identity exists prior to the act of performing. No one identity remains stable in and through performance.”¹⁰⁹ According to Blocker, the natural materials utilized to create the artworks, as well as the fluidity of interpretation derived from Mendieta’s use of performance, imbues her artworks with an ethereal nature that does not rely upon essentialist theory.

While Blocker predominantly examines the *Silueta Series*, the artworks’ concern with identity construction appears in an evolved state in *La Maja de Yerba* and contains similar aspects of performativity. Mendieta’s use of nature to create a female form employs cyclical repetition akin to the concept of a “stylized repetition of acts” that Butler asserts comprise gender.¹¹⁰ The unique use of a body motif not derived from the artist’s physique but still imbued with references to Mendieta personally, notably inferences to her Cuban heritage via the Santería qualities and Spanish title, provide a hybridization of alternating identity construction similar to Blocker’s description. Contending that such strategies provide liberating facets, Blocker continues that “understanding identity as having these ‘performative’ qualities enables a discussion of gender, color, nation, and ethnicity that bypass essentialist categories.”¹¹¹ The format of the piece also imposes performance on the audience, as the viewer must engage with the female form by maneuvering through it on a controlled path. This diminishes the boundary between active performer and passive viewer to create an engaging artwork, and the public exhibition of *La Maja de Yerba* facilitates a more egalitarian performance with the audience.

¹⁰⁹ Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 25.

¹¹⁰ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 356.

¹¹¹ Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 25.

Though essentialism contains numerous entrapments, it remains the most applicable explanation of the feminist methodology utilized by Mendieta. Irigaray and other essentialist feminists rose to prominence during Mendieta's career and likely influenced her ideals. Notably the interpretation that Mendieta's work includes constructionist concepts illuminates specific parallels between the two theories. The constructionist movement emerged as a response to the earlier essentialist treatises, and ironically despite these circumstances of constructionism's inception it continues various concepts within essentialism. Though critiquing essentialist categorizations and generalizations of females, constructionists' utilization of the very term "women" perpetuates classifications. As Fuss astutely recognizes, "It is common practice in social constructionist argumentation to shift from the singular to the plural in order to privilege heterogeneity and to highlight important cultural and social differences... While this maneuver does mark a break with unitary conceptual categories... the essentialism at stake is not countered so much as *displaced*."¹¹² This observation highlights the necessity for groupings to exist in order to comprehensibly discuss issues such as feminism.

Mendieta's efficiency in displaying feminist issues within her work derives from similar precepts. The artwork's visual display clearly pertains to women's issues, and, since categorizations are inescapable, communicates an easily decipherable thematic message of progressive advancements for women. The linguistic necessity of using such classifications facilitates feminist issues and discourse to circulate to a broader audience. As Grosz questions, "If women cannot be characterized in any general way, if all there is to femininity is socially produced, then how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex? If we are not justified in taking woman as a category, then what political

¹¹² Fuss, "The Risk of Essence," 529.

grounding does feminism have?”¹¹³ Critic Peggy Kamuf poses similar rhetoric by stating, “How is one supposed to understand essence as a *risk* to be run when it is by definition the non-accidental and therefore hardly the apt term to represent danger or risk?”¹¹⁴ Displaying a similar conjecture, Mendieta generalizes women in *La Maja de Yerba* to present a discernable, multifaceted examination of issues that many women experience. Rather than diminishing women’s physicality and occurrences, she highlights the importance of specific issues and the necessity for women and men to exhibit concern for prominent topics which affect the female sex. Feminism of difference, albeit flawed in its polarity, does provide a platform to discuss issues more pertinent to women. Biology, sexuality, and discrimination have and remain important subjects in feminist discussion because they are relevant in life. Mendieta’s artwork combines these topics to exhibit their prominence, as well as includes progressive themes of female empowerment through facets such as reverence for women’s bodies and capabilities.

Dualistically evoking Irigaray’s generalizations of women as well as similar precepts to Butler’s contention that social constructs dictate perceptions of identity, Mendieta’s presentation of female body in *La Maja de Yerba* unequivocally represents a woman. The recognition within viewers that the curvatures of the form connote a female, especially despite the somewhat abstracted nature of the piece, demonstrates the existence of a defining concept of the female body and its function as a master symbol for femininity. Utilizing readily recognizable signifiers assists the theme’s communicative qualities and functions as a format for additional dialogue. Examining the potent effects of master symbols, critic Eric R. Wolfe contends that “Only where such forms exist, can communication and coordinated behavior be established...providing the cultural idiom of behavior and ideal representations through which different groups of the same

¹¹³ Grosz, quoted in Best, “Serial Spaces,” 66.

¹¹⁴ Kamuf, quoted Fuss, “The Risk of Essence,” 531.

society can pursue and manipulate their different fates within a coordinated framework.”¹¹⁵

Utilizing symbols imbued with essentialist qualities and that contain well-known significances abet forming convergences amongst those represented and particularly facilitate communication in visual art.

In this quest to promote progressive ecological and feminist discourse, artistic intention features as an extremely important factor in both essentialist philosophy and Mendieta’s work. Though certain aspects of essentialist theory contain risks, Mendieta’s art displays an understanding of these inherent problems. The purpose of these concepts is to progressively advance feminism, and criticism that the utopian themes of collective female betterment present an inaccessible objective overlooks the importance of its proposed outcome. Paradoxically these suggestions garner a significant amount of objection despite the altruism of the projected message. Scrutiny and constructive critique undeniably assist improving the ideas within the essentialist framework, and constructionism presents intelligent concepts which offer advanced insight into feminist issues such as gender and identity. However, essentialism provides important contributions to feminist strategizing by presenting clearly-delineated problems and projected outcomes. Promoting a similar idea, critic Gayatri Spivak contends that while the ideology requires critique, appraisals of essentialism should be based upon its effectiveness, or “a strategic use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”¹¹⁶ She writes,

We have to look at where the group...is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. Now I think my emphasis would be on noting how we ourselves and others are what you call essentialist, without claiming a counter-essence disguised under the alibi of strategy...Vigilance, what I call building for difference, rather than keeping ourselves clean by being whatever it is to be an anti-essentialist, that has taken of much

¹¹⁵ Eric R. Wolf, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958): 34.

¹¹⁶ Spivak, quoted in Hilary Robinson, “Reframing Women,” in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, 538.

greater emphasis for me.¹¹⁷

Ultimately the intent must prominently factor into appraisals of essentialism and art.

Similarly, the themes in Mendieta's proposed *La Maja de Yerba* warrant merit in an analysis of its effectiveness. She utilized essentialism to communicate more clearly to the public audience. The aesthetically pleasing visual presentation of the artwork additionally facilitates increased reception with the viewers. Via archetypal metaphors and environmentally conscious creation methods, the artwork displays a decipherable message of female reverence and ecological respect. This method is particularly effective for circulating the eco-feminist message within a public exhibition format and facilitates the theme to be viewed and discussed amongst a wider audience. Furthermore, while the earth work infers themes of feminist issues and ecological conservation, it remains sufficiently abstracted to elicit personal interpretations.

Mendieta stated in an explanation of her creative purposes that her art "is grounded in the belief in one Universal Energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy."¹¹⁸ She continued that "my works are the irrigation veins of the Universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world."¹¹⁹ Certainly her utilizations of archetypes and master symbols reflect this desire, and, though this statement clearly contains a benign theme of the search for origin and human connection to the earth, it remains slightly obscured and relies on individual thought. Continuing the ideology in *La Maja de Yerba*, Mendieta imbued the piece with multiple messages and trans-cultural signifiers to produce an artwork that transcends the parameters of essentialist thought. Analogous to the liberty Mendieta allowed herself in the quest to establish her identity, this format allows

¹¹⁷ Spivak, quoted in Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Mendieta, quoted in Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 34.

¹¹⁹ Mendieta, quoted in Ibid.

reflective freedom for the viewer. Although depicted in a work that clearly converges women with the environment, this flexibility permits personal responses to the work and ultimately invites individuals to ponder the implications of the artwork and determine their mental interpretation and physical involvement with the piece.

This viewer interaction provides the basis for the strategic essentialism within *La Maja de Yerba*. The categorization of women and use of an archetypal image, albeit conceptually simplistic, intertwines idealized history with the present to evoke nostalgia for the past. Mendieta clearly communicated to the audience her perception of a constructed ancient history which revered women and the earth for the contributions to perpetuating human and environmental life. Examining the effectiveness of evoking nostalgia, scholar Rita Felski delineates that while one type of nostalgia minimizes the oppression of the time it references, the other “may mobilize a powerful condemnation of the present for its failure to correspond to the imagined harmony of a prelapsarian condition.”¹²⁰ *La Maja de Yerba* corresponds to the latter by highlighting glorified aspects of prehistoric culture and referencing the lack of these beneficial traditions within current society. However, the earthwork alludes to the capability of environmentally-conscious egalitarian precepts to reemerge via the repeated blooming of the female figure. This activates what Klein refers to as proactive nostalgia, or “a conscious recreation of the past in order to create a better present.”¹²¹ Mendieta balanced social critique with recommendations for how to improve culturally, thus exhibiting a productive display of essentialism within the public art sphere.

Mendieta’s constructive incorporation of essentialist thought provides an example for promoting feminism in art. This combination of referencing women’s importance in prehistory,

¹²⁰ Klein, “Goddess,” 594

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 595.

spirituality, and the environment highlights the timelessness and adaptive qualities of feminism. The inclusion of essentialism alludes to the progressive intentions of the theory and the women with which it is associated, an important topic to emphasize in the feminist movement, and identifying the flaws of the concept enable further progress via dialogue and revision. Mendieta indicated the importance of recognizing the achievements and hazards of essentialism, a strategic display for improving and advancing feminism.

CONCLUSION

La Maja de Yerba, despite its incompleteness, remains a testament to the conceptual fortitude of Mendieta's art. The visual and thematic appeal of her works facilitates the recurrent analyses of these creations and the continuing popularity of the deceased artist. As a result, this attests to an appeal within Mendieta's work that exhibits her apt diagnosis of the preferences of the public as well as her ability to surreptitiously imbed commentary on poignant issues within her art. The technique ensured that through their allure the works would circulate to a larger audience and therefore widely disperse the artist's messages.

Additional commendation to her theoretical concepts derives from her reinvention of preexisting ideals. Bypassing restrictions, she inserted women into an ancestral heritage and emphasized their prominence. Considering the progressive implications of these techniques, Orenstein observes, "While this pursuit may be seen as simplistic today, . . . it was revolutionary in the seventies."¹²² Acknowledging the political effectiveness of the art movement, the author continues, "There was, in my opinion, an important feminist political move in the way that the Goddess art of the 1970s ignored cultural specificity and transgressed many historic and geographic boundaries by importing, transporting, and transplanting images freely, and by using them as universal symbols for a notion of 'Womankind.'"¹²³ Though these goddess interjections largely do not maintain such prominence in contemporary feminist art, this practice reflects a historical attempt to concentrate on women. Female convergence, not explicit historical accuracy, was the projected outcome of this imagery.

The importance of intent continues in the use of essentialism. Criticism of the over-generalizations inherent in this ideology legitimately warrant expression, and such observations

¹²² Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story," 177.

¹²³ Ibid.

offer effective assistance in improving feminist discourse. However, the purpose of the theory, as well as its function in Mendieta's and other essentialist artists' work, should not be minimized. The categorization of women provides a conceptual foundation and accessible outlet to discuss feminism. Importantly, the artist's communicated ideas and purpose for *La Maja de Yerba* and the conceptually similar *Siluetas Series* require consideration in assessments of the aspirations and achievements of her art. Mendieta designed *La Maja de Yerba* to represent visually and principally female empowerment and reverence for the earth, and the techniques and ideas imbedded in the work reflect these intentions.

Similarly, rather than expressing scientific or philosophic truthfulness, the purpose of her convergence of women and nature requires analysis. The most recurrent fusion within her works, it exists as a cornerstone of her creative concepts and personal viewpoints. Notably, this merging possibly increases the popularity of her art. As Best describes, essentialism facilitates the ease in which Mendieta's works may be deciphered, and the use of nature further assists communicating themes of women's empowerment and ecological conservation. She writes, "Mendieta's capacity to generate images that hold in tension such contradictory states demonstrates that the essentialist link between the female body and nature is not to be repudiated."¹²⁴ Concordantly, as viewers appreciate the aesthetics and varied themes in her art, various critics and scholars aptly critique the flaws of the art's ideology yet also examine the artwork's projected function of expressing support for feminism. The continuation of the presented concepts, as depicted in the progression from the *Siluetas Series* to *La Maja de Yerba* and its precursors, enables the legacy of Mendieta to progressively advance and ultimately provides a satisfactory answer to the infamous question, "Where is Ana Mendieta?"

¹²⁴ Best, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta," 78-79.

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