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Magical body, political body

Olga Gambari

I am an artist who feels that art is first of all a matter of vocation.
Ana Mendieta

My first memory of Ana Mendieta is the image of a slender human outline burning white bundles of over-exposed film and cutting-room waste amidst flames and smoke. A *silhouette* that appeared in a Super-8 video that was over 30 years old, with a typically grainy look. From this, I discovered that behind that work there was a woman, an artist who had worked on the body of nature and on her own.

Here was a girl with an intense, passionate life, who in less than 15 years produced a rich, vital corpus of works (drawings, sculptures, performances, photographs, videos and installations), in which she sought to understand and explain the secret of that cosmic order that draws every natural and human element into the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth. She did so starting with herself, putting herself unsparingly at the centre of her study, refusing to hide herself behind some purely theoretical thinking, but embodying herself sensorially in every work, with a rigorous intellectual and ethical honesty. She believed "...in one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy."¹

Ana Mendieta is a fundamental presence in contemporary art, with a highly personal position at the crossroads of artistic movements and practices – Land Art, Body Art, Conceptual Art, performance, Minimal Art – which were closely involved in the 1970s in the debate about a re-elaboration of the concepts of culture, politics, society and environment.

And yet, although known and recognized, her name has always remained in some sense mythical, oppressed by a series of biographical events and by an aura of "feminist artist" that paint a wholly partial and incorrect portrait. A name that is still a long way from a real, widespread and historicized awareness of the versatility and value of her perspective and manner of working.

Moreover, both her work, with its physical and material characteristics that are so preponderant, and herself as person, a very part of her art, have not yet expressed in full that power of impact that they might have amongst the public as a whole. Her works have a marvellous ability to speak directly to the observer, to get under the skin first and only subsequently reach the brain, the rational seat.

They are earth, wind, water and fire, the fundamental elements of life, to which she accorded a status of divinity.

It is often hard to circumscribe her works within a precise formal definition – performance, photography or video – because each represents the different stages of evolution of the same artistic idea as it takes form, comes to life, disappears and transforms itself into line. However, these works do not remain extraneous and detached from the spectator, but instead set up an intimate relationship, getting under the skin, pricking at the conscience and sensitivity. Works that are primitive gestures and images, through which our archetypal memory ties in with the everyday.

All this makes them magical components within a search going beyond time and space. Mendieta draws her works out of the spatio-temporal flow, blending past, present and future and indicating a place that is here and elsewhere: this is her surprising contemporaneity. “My works are the irrigation veins running of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world”².

A work able to speak of great themes, like identity, gender, life and death, violence and love, sex, rebirth, unrooting, origins, homeland, but always going beyond these in a cohesiveness that becomes spiritual. Blood, earth, mud, feathers, flowers, leaves, ash, gunpowder, branches, trees, shells, grass, ice, rock, wax, bark, moss, coconut, sand are raised from their purely physical condition to reconnect to an idea of nature that transforms them into ideal and symbolic elements. In this, there is all of the sacredness of Mendieta’s work, even though the “sacred”, understood as a specific cultural and religious category, is a firmly defined aspect in her research.

“My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that tie me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source through my earth/body sculptures, with which I become at one with the earth”³.

A feeling of panic in which the natural landscape becomes a place of permeation between the human and divine (Mendieta called her works “earth/body sculpture”), a living and continuously moving entity in which she seeks and finds herself. Her art originated in, and at the same time continuously returns to, her personal story and experience.

Every detail of her work recomposes a puzzle to which she was intimately tied, which confirmed her total presence, the being an intimate part of the work.

Two traumas, two dramatic events mark the start and end of her life. The first was the enforced abandonment of Cuba and her family in 1961 at the age of 12, together with her sister Raquelín, and her arrival in the United States, with a consequent rootless adolescence, spent between religious institutes and adoptive families in Iowa.

The second was her tragic death: in 1985, she fell from the 34th floor of a New York skyscraper, from the window of the apartment she shared with her husband, Carl Andre, who was at home at the time. Andre was acquitted in the subsequent trial, but the sentence has nevertheless left lingering doubts.

The two sisters joined the American anti-Castro protection and support project in Cuba, in which her father was extremely active, despite having played an active part in the revolution. With the “Peter Pan” operation, they were flown out of the country to safety. Mendieta describes her arrival in the USA, without parents, without being able to speak English, entrusted to a Catholic orphanage run by nuns. She evokes the sensation of being alien, different, that she bore for many years.

This violent uprooting, in which she forged her transcultural identity, would lead her to try and cure an open wound, a *sense of alienation* – as she herself called it – from which also arose the suffering for the loss of her mother who had remained in Cuba and, even deeper, the perception of loss with regard to belonging to a prenatal harmony, an ideal belly of shared origin. There was a continuous need in her to reconnect to her lost origins. In this lies her strong bond with the Earth perceived as root, as biological and spiritual homeland, and her desire to try to reforge her being, represented on the one hand metaphorically by the *silhouette*, and on the other literally involved as a living performance with the natural elements.

Being in harmony, an element amongst elements, disappearing in an organic camouflage, feeling oneself reabsorbed, rediscovering that archetypal embrace preceding left itself. It is this return to the energy of the universe that takes form in the figure of the female body with a primitive, visceral physicality.

The body of Mother Earth is woman.

For her, this was a self-identification, the projection of her body, a choice that combined with shreds

of ancient knowledge: many primitive matriarchal cultures had an imagery associated with female divinities, with which they paid tribute to the social and biological role of women. This was an opinion shared also by the later feminist movement in the 1970s, to which Mendieta never officially subscribed, however; sharing many of its aspirations, she preferred to remain free.

According to this position, the shift from a long period in which matriarchal systems dominated to a successive one that was instead patriarchal, with the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, was associated with the dramatic moment of the breakdown in equilibrium between man and nature and within society itself. It represented the birth of a new world, marked by a violent, overbearing and colonising mentality towards the environment, towards the female world and all those who were “other”.

Those matriarchal societies, on the other hand, identified the figure of mother nature, the origins, the eternal spirit of the cosmos with the female body, thanks to its capacity to give life and nurture it. There are many sculptures of prehistoric Venuses, from the palaeolithic to neolithic, found in different parts of Europe. The Venuses of Willendorf, Gagarino, Dolní Věstonice, Parabita, Macomer, Savignano, Strelce, Menton and Hluboké Masovki are just some of them. All of them share similar characteristics: a small ellipsoidal volume of corpulent form and accentuated sexual features. Fertile, sensual, welcoming, wise mother goddesses. In particular, the artist was fascinated by the neolithic culture of Malta. A goddess of life used to be adored on the Mediterranean island, together with a goddess of death and of regeneration, to whom sculptures, rock paintings, temples and underground places of worship were dedicated, which repeated the physical form in their circular and spiralling architecture. The artist would say that within these constructions, it was like being wrapped in a large womb. “This is really what art is: it leads and connects us to history”⁴.

In her own family, women had always played important roles; one of these was grandmother Elvira, with her house on the shore of Varadero on Cuba, to whom Mendieta was bound by many childhood memories.

Her historic research made her discover the female divinities in her own land – when she returned to Cuba for the first time in 1980, and the following year, when she was invited to realise a project – which the local native populations, the Taíno, used to give names to the forces of the world.

It was to them that she dedicated her *Esculturas Rupestres (Rupestrian Sculptures)*, cutting her sparsely-drawn *silhouettes* in the caves of Cava del Parco Jaruco, a few kilometres from Havana.

In later years, she produced other similar works on rocks and cliffs at Long Island (New York) and Scarborough Bluffs in Ontario (Canada).

Mendieta made use of the same abundant and curvy forms and circular lines as in the primitive iconographies. The artist delved her own roots of her work back in time in the ancient and female spirit that produced them and which interpreted religion as a form of energetic animism in tune with the natural cycles, as she worked towards a reconnection with the earth.

A total union understood in a personal and collective sense, in which humankind is situated as one element within a great cosmic system. In this operation, the link forming the connection was her own body.

“It is this sense of magic, knowledge and power found in primitive art that influences my personal attitude to art-making”⁵.

Mendieta transformed herself into a mythological Venus, in which the most characteristic feature of that classicism, that purification of form towards a balanced and essential aesthetic ideal came to life once more. The elaboration of her concept of beauty was an exercise in distillation, in striving for the perfect measure, harmony, condition; the last of these rendering the content, even the most dramatic, iconic and universal.

Her *siluetas* evoke the turgidity of primitive sculpture, the dignity of ancient art.

The poetic form to which she has given life is a sort of naturalistic and animist pantheism, a concept of “sacred” in which nature, man and god are exchanged, in which blend popular culture, ancient rites and primitive beliefs, polytheism and paganism, Catholicism and Santeria, Mexican tradition and African Yoruba.

Starting with the half-caste culture of Cuba, a mixture of Catholicism and Santeria, elements of Spanish and African origin, which became a religious practice, together with touches of the everyday and popular beliefs.

Mendieta drew from this to explore and depict the great dimension of immortal energy that becomes short-lived. The divine that in some way descends on earth and becomes human, flesh.

She maintained that the native cultures had an innate knowledge. “And it is this knowledge that gives reality to the images they have created”⁶.

A whole series of material and iconographic elements belonging to pagan and Catholic depictions thus pour into her own work.

Ash, blood, hair and candles derive from the typical rituals for divination of Santeria.

From the video *Untitled (Chicken Piece)* of 1972 – in which, standing and naked, she holds a decapitated chicken that spurts blood all over her – to the candles around the corpses in the funeral works and the outlines traced with fireworks and transformed into standards, like the figures of saints carried in Catholic processions (eg., the *Ánima, Silueta de Cohetes* of 1976, a linear bamboo structure enveloped in flames, tracing out the outline of her body and with a heart at the centre that is last to burn. This is a typical of Mexican tradition and of some propitiatory pagan rites formerly undertaken in the country). And all of the *Fetish* series of *silhouettes*, which reproduce the three-dimensional human form, pierced with sticks, bathed in blood, marked by signs (often taken from Afro-Cuban practices), and surrounded by candles.

Likewise the evocations of the crucifixion in the *Rastros corporales*. It is the body of Christ taken down and covered with a shroud before the resurrection that we discern in the various images of bodies hidden by cloths stained with blood, or the shroud that becomes the Holy Shroud, an apparition in which human and divine co-penetrate each other (as in the photos of the 1970s in the Basilica of Cuilapan de Guerrero in Mexico: a white cloth is displayed in a niche with the imprint of a bloodied body; in another appears a body wrapped in a sheet, standing as though it were a statue. Or a corpse is laid out and covered in a white cloth stained in blood, with an animal heart laid on the chest).

The figure of Christ comes to life again in the *Rastros*, with an evident sacrificial value that also includes some elements of martyrological iconography.

For Mendieta, the primitive power of Cuban Santeria, which links directly to African polytheist religions, to Yoruba rites, emerges and blends with Catholicism. This composite magma of religions, cultures and beliefs, in which gods, saints, healers, priests, faith and magic all rub shoulders, springs out in all her works, expressing itself in an alphabet of signs linked to the body and nature.

The tree as stylized and anthropomorphized form, an ancient symbol of humanity, often returns in her *siluetas*, in the figures in which she appears with open arms and upward gaze – an act of prayer, benediction, embrace and welcome, elevation – tree-woman, in the *Arbol de la Vida (Tree of Life)* series. Mankind delves its roots, buds out of the earth like a plant, a flower, Mankind draws nourishment from and gives nourishment to the earth.

The evident hands, branches laden with leaves and fruit, facing the light of the sun. Hands as a personal and unmistakable sign, DNA recorded in the fingerprints.

It is no coincidence that for prehistoric people, the handprint was a magical symbol, a gateway to other dimensions on the one hand, and on the other the first affirmation of recognition of oneself and of the existence of the other, a ritual sign that used to be impressed on the walls of caverns. The skin of the hand, moreover, evokes the veins in a leaf, another plant-based iconographic element that recurs in Mendieta's work. The extended, soft form of the leaves suggests a female *silhouette*. That all-encompassing sense of perception of nature, in which the human element blends, returns and is totally transfigured.

Mendieta had transformed the print of her own hand into a metal brand, which she would heat and then use to brand the earth, grass, wooden planks and books (on the cover of *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* and of *Blank Book with Hand Print*, both of 1978). A hand that returns as a large outline drawn on the sand at Oaxaca in Mexico in 1977 in *Encantamiento a Olokun-Yemayà (Incantation at Olokun-Yemayà)*.

As in many *siluetas*, this work too has ancient divinities as its point of reference: the trace of a female body dug into the sand, which pays tribute to the goddess Olokun of Cuba, who lives at the bottom of the sea, and who aids those seeking the lost land of origin.

Her college years were marked by intense experimentation, which remained one of the characteristic features of her artistic practice. Whence derives the need to document every performance and artistic project in an almost intensive manner. Together with this, naturally, there was also the need to stop the fleeting nature of the events she brought to life. This method of documentation through photography and video would soon become a fundamental artistic practice for her, as well as the formal choice for many of her works. Mendieta took thousands of shots and about 80 short films, Super-8 and videotapes: silent videos, immersed in her typical mythical dimension, transformed into hieratic and esoteric visions.

In the many works she produced at the University of Iowa as part of the Intermedia Art Program, marked by the total interdisciplinary nature of the arts and enriched by the visits of many conceptual and performance arts, the sharing of themes then animating the debate about the feminist movement is quite evident. A common awareness.

During this period, she abandoned painting: "In 1972, I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the images to convey and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic"⁷.

A reflection on the female body that she defined in many works.

In her *Untitled (Rape Performance)* project of 1973, she staged a rape with herself as the victim in what was a hard emotive performance. The mechanism of *Rape* emerged from an invitation to the other students on her course to go to her apartment. There they found her lying on a table, her clothes pulled up, and stained with blood. A violated body that referred to a serious crime that had occurred just a few days before at the same college. A female body that becomes the universal symbol of violence towards the individual *tout court*, a drama of an individual seeking to be experienced as a crime perpetrated against the entire community. The breaking of an equilibrium that needs to be re-established, that must be transformed into warning.

In the photographic series appearing under the name of *Facial Cosmetic Variations* and dating from 1972, her body became the testing ground for mutations, exaggerations, adhesions and cultural stereotypes imposed by a male-oriented society by tradition; her body, like that of millions of other women. She changed her look with makeup, wigs, hair made using shampoo foam (the *Hair Suds* series), and nylon stockings worn over her face. Or she would crush part of her naked body on panels of glass (*Untitled – Glass on Body Imprints*, 1972), making them monstrous, distorted, unnatural, like the artificiality of the models imposed by society, like accepted canons of beauty. All

inductions to aspire to inhuman, impersonal bodies in which the bodies and minds of women have been enclosed for millennia. An abuse that takes ambiguous forms but is equally violent.

She explored the male control of the image and snapshots in which the woman is manipulated and cages in a mental, physical, cultural and historic control. An action that the woman often perpetrates on herself, educated to be her own murderer. What the artist presented in these works was a body that was neutralized on a sexual and erotic level, a motionless body rendered symbolic. For this reason, she transformed herself into a political body. Like other artists in that historic moment, Mendieta was the artist become art and tool or medium of her message, like Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin, Carolee Schneemann. And in Europe, Viennese Actionism and Hermann Nitsch above all. The artist's body as medium for the emotive involvement of the public, a sensitive and living terrain for direct communication.

It was a search for one's own identity above all, as modern woman, as individual belonging to a category, to a gender, that she questioned her role and social position.

Her ties with Body Art fits within this self-exhibition, this "being" simultaneously thought, flesh, image and venue for the work of art.

What follows is the idea of total art, in which the border between art and life is a mobile, permeable instant, in which her body becomes an absolute artistic object, embodying both the artist and the work. This taking centre stage has nothing narcissistic about it, because the subject bears a multiplicity of values: there is a concept of sharing of self for a collective matter, the honesty of which is attested to by the personal "sacrifice".

Her atomisation into a thousand simulacra, her blending with nature in the universal flow enlivening every single organism, is a gift of her own identity to the concept of plurality, thereby becoming universal icon.

In 1975, Mendieta's body was transformed into a simulacrum, a pure *siluetas* of itself, becoming a depiction transfigured into that of nature. In fact, she herself disappears, replaced by other materials and evocative forms, in a complete identification that becomes vital permeation.

Two works represent this shift, the conjunction between real and evoked presence, perfectly. The first is a photographic series in which one gradually rediscovers her face made of white flowers (1973), and the second is the video entitled *Mirage* (1974). In the first, she transforms her features, literally becoming a bunch of flowers, disappearing in the midst of petals and corollas. In the other, she is sitting naked in front of a large mirror in the middle of the lawn, woman and nature reflecting each other and becoming a single reality, the one blended into the other. The mirror as symbolic gateway, as frame for this total transfiguration. The two works offer lyrical, pictorial images with a concept of classical, Romantic beauty.

Starting with this aspect, this absorption of the artist's body into that of nature, effigy and non-presence, two vital questions emerge, which are the concept of the depiction and that of the transfiguration of her body and of her identity. Both concepts that are in an osmotic mutual relationship.

Her depicted body becomes symbol, although remaining human; a symbol that identifies with the very body of nature, which is also History.

Her transfiguration implies a circular process of birth, death and regeneration between human, natural, divine and newly human element: a circuit that places commonplace, earthly materials, such as mud and ash, and their spiritual embodiment at a superior, ideal level.

Her recognition of herself as an element of nature – and in nature – is a process that makes her disappear in it, becoming a pure form of energy.

She is the burnt wood, the sand eroded by waves, the moss on the bark, the grassy meadow, the

incised rock, the bundle of branches, the bed of flowers, the mud near the riverbed, the embers of the volcano, the floating trunk, the water trapped in ice. A state whose principal ontological condition is transitoriness, an ongoing mutation.

A conceptual dematerialization that takes place, however, on another level: the body itself of her works disappears, endowed with an ephemeral duration and consistency. The art object takes form and at the same time dissolves into the landscape.

Hers is a task of deconstructing the object and subject (the “artist” is a figure that condenses the concepts of identity, author and history, a position elaborated by post-modern thinking that began to take form during the 1970s), both submitted to an uncontrolled crumbling into the material and conceptual environment.

This process of dematerialization in reality makes possible a process of strong reaffirmation, a continuous rematerialization in the almost obsessive repetition and reiteration of the same form in the various *siluetas/simulacra*.

This dive of the body into nature is equivalent to a sort of reawakening, of rediscovery of those ties with the cosmos, one’s roots, from which one emerges and to which one returns. That’s where it wants to get to.

“It is only with a real and long enough awakening that a person becomes present to himself...To know oneself to know the world...”⁸ For her, this awareness becomes the means of understanding art.

There is a moving perception of nature’s breathing, within which humanity itself breathes. In many works, Mendieta underlines the co-existence of human and natural breathing, literally making grass breathe (*Grass Breathing*, video, 1974), as well as earth (*Genesis* of 1975), a heap of stones (*Burial Pyramid*, video, 1974). Faced with her continuous identification with nature, the observer never knows at what point lies her metamorphosis and the shift from human and natural element (in the *Albor de la Vida* series, woman-bark, women-tree with the arms that become branches, crowns and also roots of trees; the woman’s body is a tree of life, that buds and causes to bud are at the origin). Between human and animal element (in the photographs in which she appears in a wolf’s skin, wolf-woman in the *San Felipe* series of 1973, or in both the *Blood + Feathers* and *Ocean Bird Washup* videos of 1974, and in the photographs of *Bird Transformation* of 1972, in which she covered herself with feathers, transforming herself into bird-woman).

She places us in an unstable situation with regard to the perception of the body and its relationship between the real and its depiction. Between the material and the idea.

This being woman and nature brings to mind another great woman artist, Frida Kahlo from Mexico whom Mendieta knew well. An anecdote revealing her affectionate admiration for the Mexican tells of a party organized in New York in 1979 in homage to Louise Bourgeois, with the theme “Come dressed as your favourite artists,” at which Mendieta appeared dressed as Kahlo.

The two artists shared the idea of symbiosis between man and nature, and that of the continuous transmutation of states: in the *Portrait of Luther Burbank* of 1931, a plant rises from the corpse of a dead and buried man, and its leaves unfurl into the hands of the famous botanist, Luther Burbank. Death feeds life, fertilizes it. This concept is present already in the Mexican tradition of the cult of the dead. A sense of animist magic linked to the myth of Mother Earth, to the female body as natural organism. In another picture, *Raíces (Roots)* of 1943, Kahlo also transformed herself into a plant, and in her self-portrait, *My Nurse and I* of 1937, she feeds at the breast of a wet-nurse who is no longer an individual but instead a creature of plants and flowers.

Another point in common is the iconography of the woman-tree and the reference to ancient traditions, a set of imagery blending Catholic and pagan elements, together with a focus on the

hands, raised to symbolic status. And the theme of violence against women and of blood. In *A Few Small Nips* of 1935, which was inspired by an actual event, we witness a violent scene: a dead woman covered in cuts, lying on a bed, bathed in blood, with her murderer standing next to her. The frame of the painting itself appears spattered with blood-like paint.

Conceptually and visually, Mendieta took to extreme lengths the identification with nature that Kahlo had herself felt and noted with a surrealist and *naïf* approach.

Another artist, Francesca Woodman, developed some incredible points of contact with Mendieta. They never met each other, although they were contemporaries, and they both died prematurely (Woodman was born in 1958 and committed suicide in 1981). They had two cities in common: New York and Rome. And, above all, their work. In Woodman's photographs too, there is always the body, which is both presence and absence. A simulacrum in which she searches, notes, studies, analyses, draws and sculpts. Self-portraits above all.

In her photos taken outdoors, the naked body is camouflaged in the landscape, blending with nature. The body of the woman becomes landscape, returning to the first-born and welcoming Mother Earth. The two identities, human and vegetable, become natural, and then become image, photograph.

Looking through her works, some reveal some excitingly familiar points.

There are images in which the female body is literally inserted in the form of a tree, or in the embrace of the roots, in the heap of fallen leaves, between the clods of mossy earth (1972-1975).

In a series of tests during the summer of 1980, the artist appears in the midst of a copse of birch and inserts her *silhouette* between the trunks, dematerializing herself and the trees into pure, curved lines, one within the other. She even covered her arms with bark, becoming a woman-tree.

In another photograph, she used blood as an organic paint, evoking life and death, enclosed within the symbolism of the artistic gesture, a performance-based dripping with which she "painted" the wall and her body (*Splatter paint*, 1977-78).

She produced many studies with her naked body; close-up studies in which she squeezed, flattened and wrung it with plates of glass, sticky tape, clothes pegs and stockings (photographs all dated 1976).

In one photograph, a human form is covered by a white cloth like a shroud (1975-78).

In a photographic series, during the production of which a video was also made, her body left a print, a sort of anthropometry, the trace of which is a burn (1976).

Woodman's work is a dramatic and obsessive self-analysis, an existential study in psychoanalytical style, which in the material flesh seeks a firm point in the alienation, identifying the condemnation and salvation of the individual in the body.

Spirit and tonality, on top of aesthetic formalizations that are different to those of Ana Mendieta, certainly, but not so very different.

A sap runs through Mendieta's veins that unwittingly draws nourishment from the history of art, which traces out its history and makes it its own, shot through with echoes and reverberations. The sinuous prosperity of Pieter Paul Rubens, Francisco Goya's *La maja desnuda* and *La maja vestida*, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and Henri Matisse's women-collage cut out of pure colour, the sylvan sensuality of the Pre-Raphaelites, the stylized nudes of Amedeo Modigliani.

"...I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art. Using my body as a reference in the creation of the works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature"⁹.

It was only during her Roman period in 1983-85, in residence at the American Academy in Rome, and thanks to winning the “Rome Prize” (which for the first time came with the use of a studio), that she began to reflect on the problem of producing works indoors, on how to find a procedure that would not betray the free spirit of the natural landscape.

“I work indoors now. I’ve always had problems with this, because I believe that you can’t copy, or emulate nature. An installation is false art”¹⁰.

In Rome, she produced large grounded sculptures, which she presented in an exhibition in the spring of 1984 in the Roman Primo Piano gallery. The works were made with a mix of sand and earth from different places (earth from Havana, sand from Varadero and Cairo, mud from near Rome), bound together in “Vinavil” glue – which she discovered after many failed attempts at attaining a certain density and firmness of the material – and placed on wooden bases.

There are some childhood memories associated with the beach of Varadero, overlooked by her grandmother Elvira’s house, which have nourished the birth of these works. She remembered long mornings on the beach from when she was very small, as the experience and place in which she came into contact with her body, with nature. It was there that she learned to use herself to communicate with the world, she once said. In the Roman sculptures, one has the feeling of seeing the transfigured bodies of those children who used to play at covering themselves in sand.

During this Italian period, she also embarked on another series of indoor sculptures, using tree-trunks presented vertically, like totems, on which she would draw leaves, branches, figures, by burning gunpowder. These trunks were thus transformed into bodies that are sylvan presences, on which the *silhouettes* appear like an anthropomorphic arrangement of large leaves, petals, drops. The same modules are used to create many of the grounded sculptures, able to evoke the breath of nature indoors, with a physical presence that is, however, dematerialized in the perception of their formal fragility, in the midst of cracks and powder on the surfaces.

Mendieta’s dedication to Land Art, therefore, was a personal relationship, contrary to any sense of monumentality, with the human figure, the anthropomorphic depiction always at the centre of the landscape. She always sought the symbolic significance enclosed within nature, entering it on tiptoe, listening, trying to insert herself while respecting harmony. She used to maintain that she felt close to the tradition of Neolithic artists and hardly at all to that of Land Art, because she was not interested in the formal qualities of the materials used, and also because “Men artists working with nature have imposed themselves on it. Definitely my work has that feminine sensibility”¹¹.

After her years at the college, where she worked both indoors and outdoors, with the start of the *Siluetas* series in 1973, she chose a manner of working that was completely *en plein air*, in close contact with the landscape. She explained the genesis of the *Siluetas* as a manifestation of her striving to find her place, her context within nature. She would tell how she would work directly *in situ*, in the simplest manner possible, alone if she could, fulfilling a series of ritual actions. “The location, the site, is crucial. There are many places that I’ve gone to time and time again just because and return because I feel connected to them”¹².

A sort of priestess, a *santera* who fulfills her own magical ritual. Hers is a Land Art that declares many points of contact with Arte Povera too. The use of “poor” materials found in nature and used in their rough, original form, from stones to branches. The idea of a circular and eternal energy that manifests itself in visible and non-visible forms.

The identification of man with nature, which has consonances above all with the work of Giuseppe Penone, both in the human trace that permeates the landscape (assuming a vegetal identity expressing her belonging to a higher biological and cosmic order) both in the attention to the skin of her hand (a map in which the cosmos is reflected in the individual and is the mark of a great universal project regulating the world). Lines and folds in the palms and fingerprints are veins

through which flows blood, sap, water, lava, air. They are roots and branches, trajectories in which the unstopability of a simultaneously cyclical, rational and mythological time expands. They are galaxies. Thus the human condition becomes a moment of passage between an organic state and another, in which the mineral element is only a further mutation in indestructible matter.

The prolific series of the *Siluetas* developed above all in the years spent in Iowa (1973-1980), dotted with frequent voyages, before she moved to New York in 1978. From the stimuli of a period of residence, together with her college class, in Mexico in contact with pre-Columbian culture emerged her first *silueta*, *Imagen de Yagul (Image from Yagul)*: her naked body appears covered in grass and flowers within an Aztec tomb. “The analogy was that I was covered by time and history”¹³.

She explained that this long series of works recalled the prehistoric beliefs in an omnipresent female force, which took form as though everything in creation were a portion of a woman’s body, thus rendering the earth a living being.

From the outset, her body became the laboratory for all her work, the medium as well as the material. An artistic space but also, absolutely, a cultural and social one too. A political body. Where am I, who am I, where do I come from: these the questions from which her exploration of herself begins, in a search for her origins and universal roots. There is always a strong sense of responsibility in her actions, a moral solidity that renders her lucid and rational as well as instinctive.

Woman, artist and only then immigrant. These three conditions are inseparable from her work, with which she would always maintain a tie. The *siluetas* acquire form through various procedures: her body is presence and absence, addition and subtraction, accumulation, circumscription.

A body in flesh and blood and an evoked body. The artist appears in person or is a simulacrum, in form recalling the absent body in the form of an incised line or one dug into the earth, like a line drawing the form, like an accumulation of materials reproducing the physical volume.

Over time, spirals and labyrinths began to appear within the *siluetas*; designs with a different line, in which ancient graffiti, the marks of other cultures, are abstracted, together with the structure and veins of leaves and bark, the internal organic ramifications of the human body.

Among these patterns, a central fissure began to appear, a line with raised edges following the *silueta* vertically. From a morphological observation of volcanoes, Mendieta developed a stylized drawing. The crater is the eruptive hole, the contact between the bowels of the earth and the surface, between the conscious and unconscious, the past and the present, the archetype and the contingent. Mendieta’s line is thus a mouth, a wound, a vagina, transforming her *silhouettes* into explosive, metaphorical volcanoes, craters she fills with fire, with glowing, smoking embers. These works she called *Volcanos*. This crack also represents sex, the vital and fertile power of generation and regeneration that the female body possesses – linked also to the menstrual cycle and the blood expelled with the placenta during childbirth. The volcano and lava as symbol of mother earth, generous and ungenerous, whose primitive energy can at the same time give and destroy.

Fire becomes an artistic material, a luminous, chromatic mass, a scenographic instrument, while maintaining all of its natural physicality.

Fire as light and heat, with a value of regenerating purification, of sacred evocation, of cathartic violence. Fire from candles, fireworks and gunpowder, taking the form of many effigies that burn until they go out, becoming embers, smoke. Flames that are consumed in the earth, in the air, in the snow, in the sand, in a meadow, between the rocks. Images of a blurred line suggesting a visionary nature, intangible apparitions than burn, full of life. Always life and death, because “I don’t think

that you can separate death and life. All of my works is about those two things - it's about eros and death and life"¹⁴.

She often returned to the idea of complementary opposites, fire alternating with water. In many works, water is the protagonist as ancestral, magical environment, amniotic liquid, a primitive soup that becomes sea, river, swamp, pond, snow, wave. Waters from which often emerges the solitary outline of a body that closely resembles an island, made of mud, that the artist herself called *Isla (Island)*, the mythical vision of her Cuba.

Death, therefore, as a regenerating, non-terminal moment. A shift in the state of energy. It is with this firmly in mind that we should view the common presence of iconographic references to wakes and funerals, to the cult of the dead in various cultures, in the works in which appear corpses, candles, tombs, inhumations. In the *Ix-chell* series – the name of a Mayan divinity – there is a wrapped body, a mummy which, however breathes imperceptibly, from which she will arise in another form and appearance. Death as the condition of mutation of the chrysalis. In the interventions for the *Tumbas (Tombs)* series of 1977, Mendieta created large and thick rectangular tombstones of mud on the ground, decorated with hands and arms, the symbols of the ancient pre-Columbian Milagro-Quevedo culture.

In the *Ñañigo Burial* installation of 1977, the *silueta* defined by lit black candles melts slowly into a drawing on the ground, a shadow that is the trace of a life, of a body. In *On Giving Life* of 1975, she lies naked on a skeleton, a union as metaphor of the cohabitation and natural passage between conditions of state between spirit and matter within a cosmic existence.

This compensation between life and death plays down and provides reassurance even as regards the presence of blood, which is one of the principal symbolic elements used by Mendieta. Blood that becomes an artistic and ritual material, an organic matter used in its double value as vital element and mortal deposit.

Blood that trickles down her face (*Sweating Blood* video, 1973 and the *Self-portrait with Blood* photographic series, 1973), with which she covers her body, which she pours on to the ground to nourish it and offer a sacrifice, to draw *siluetas* (*Labyrinth Blood Imprint* of 1974 in the "Palace of the six patios" within the archaeological site of Yagul in Mexico) which stains the pavement in (*People Looking at Blood*, Moffitt of 1973), which bears witness to murder (images of an evident crime scene, with mattresses and floor splashed with blood in *Bloody Mattresses*, 1973). Blood with which she leaves a trace on canvases, on walls (the various series of *Body Tracks* and *Rastros corporales*, streaks in which the hands and arms become brushes and the walls, canvases, sheets, transforming her production of art into an anthropometric painting). Blood with which she writes *There is a devil inside me* and *She got love* (respectively in the *Blood Sign #1* and *Blood Writing* videos). The last phrase above all becomes the expression of an ideal poetry enveloping the figure of Ana Mendieta: *She got love*. This is Ana, this is the Earth.

Ana, your work is unforgettable!
Guerrilla Girls

¹ Ana Mendieta, "A Selection of Statements and Notes", in *Sulfur*, 22, Ypsilanti 1988.

² Blocker J., *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, Duke University Press, Durham; London 1999.

³ Viso O.M., *Unseen Mendieta. The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta*, Prestel, München 2008.

⁴ Ana Mendieta, speech *Art and Politics*, New School and New Museum, 1982.

⁵ Viso O.M. (ed.), *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington 2004.

⁶ Farris P. (ed.), *Women Artist of Color*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1999.

⁷ Grosenick U. (ed.), *Woman Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, Taschen, Köln 2001.

⁸ Ana Mendieta, speech cit.

⁹ Viso O.M., *Unseen Mendieta*, cit.

¹⁰ Montano L.M., *Interview with Ana Mendieta* (1984), in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 2000.

¹¹ Best S. (ed.), *Visualizing feeling*, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, London 2011.

¹² Blocker J., *Where is Ana Mendieta?* cit.

¹³ Viso O.M. (ed.), *Ana Mendieta...*, cit.

¹⁴ Montano L.M., *Interview...*, cit.