



A means to equality? A look at the Ecofeminist art of Jackie Brookner and Ana Mendieta

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“When I write, it’s everything that we don’t know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation...In one another we will never be lacking.”

-Helene Cixous, Laugh of the Medusa

I would like to thank Jim, Debra, Garrick, my Dad and Mom, Edie and Maz, and my friends for all of their support. Also Jill, for showing me Cixous.

Abstract

Although the power of art is often underestimated, it works as a powerful medium to communicate ideas and promote change. Many environmental problems result from oppression of less powerful actors in systems of inequality. Ecofeminism challenges logic of domination through promotion of diverse, synergetic, co-habitable communities. While, ecofeminism is traditionally rooted in gender and environmental equality, it can be applied to subvert any oppressive system. I looked at two ecofeminist artists: Jackie Brookner and Ana Mendieta, to explore how their use (or lack thereof) of essentialist ideas in their artwork affected how well their art advocated subaltern rights. Though Ana Mendieta's work is more famous than Jackie Brookner's, her strategic use of essentialism ultimately contradicts the ecofeminist movement she supports. Brookner's community-based art focused on diversity, inclusiveness and individuality of actors. Jackie Brookner's non-essentialist approach more successfully creates positive social change while adhering to the equality endorsing principles it is based upon.

Part I: A broad look at Ecofeminism

In a tangled world of perpetual discord, actors' conflicting interests make solutions often unattainable and compromises difficult to reach. Situations where actors' needs contradict one another or require unequal sacrifices make accomplishing equality and justice especially difficult. Problems arise in circumstances of unequal power distribution where dominant groups are most demanding and able to attain their goals without much resistance from oppressed groups.

Problems involving unequal power dynamics are caused by mutual misunderstanding, ignorance, and disregard of the validity of both sides of the arguments' rights and needs. Ecofeminist theory validates oppressed groups' rights, through the disruption of imbalanced power distributions. By dismantling hierarchies, ecofeminists create an avenue to rework social frameworks so that problems can be more effectively addressed in unconventional, new, and creative ways.



Fig. 1. Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987. Flank steak on wire mesh, Dimensions vary daily. No longer held by an institution.

There are many ways to enact change through an ecofeminist lens and art is an especially helpful media to use because it allows actors to communicate relatively easily to large, diverse groups of people. When people create easily understood art, ideas are communicated non-literally, effectively, and concisely. Although knowledge of art history, materiality, and process enrich artistic experience, much art is grounded in emotionality and feeling. Viewers do not need an extensive

scholarly background nor be literate to respond to basic sensory interaction with artwork.

Human emotions and actions are biologically based- hormonal responses triggered by sensory understanding of surrounding environment. Dr. Robert Sapolsky, a professor of biology at Stanford explains that, "Feeling is perception in your body" of the split second before humans can consciously reason out why they feel an emotion.

Perceptions of stimuli in the environment trigger the part of the brain called the amygdala. In turn, the amygdala stimulates physical reactions to stimuli (heart rate increases, certain hormones are produced, muscle tension).¹ Human brains process the amygdala created, bodily signals. By realizing physical reactions, humans begin consciously understanding their physical reaction to stimuli and thus perceive emotion. Artists tap into biologically based senses, thus easily communicate, affect, and evoke feeling. Although art is most commonly associated with visual perception, artists also communicate through split-second non-visual interactions with viewers' other senses. One infamous example of the use of a non-visual sense is in Jana Sterbak's 'Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic' (fig. 1)²; in which she created and displayed a dress made out of raw meat unrefrigerated for 6 weeks.³ Even looking at a picture of the piece educes mild nausea from the imagined smell. The high shock value (that a viewer encounters in the initial split seconds with the piece) that Sterbak created through a grotesque, brazen, sensory twist to a dress (a signifier normally associated with the objection of women) efficiently communicates a feminist message.⁴



Fig. 2 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Rocks, earth, algae, & salt, 1550 square feet. Great Salt Lake, Utah, United States.

These viewers' visceral reactions are a gauge that many artists use to judge how effectively they communicate meaning in their work. Ecofeminists use art to demonstrate their theories of reorienting power dynamics precisely because of the communication that their art elicits.

¹ Robert Krulwich & Jad Abumrad *Where am I?*(WNYC, NPR Apr 21, 2009) Radiolab Podcast, Begins at 4:55 of 60 minutes total, <http://www.radiolab.org/2006/may/05/>.

² Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, Flank steak on wire mesh, No longer held by an institution. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed February 16, 2012).

³ Jennifer McLerran, "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak," *Feminist Studies*. 24 no. 3 (1998): 535-552.

⁴Sue Thornham, *Feminist film theory: a reader*. (New York: New York University Press, 1999)

The first ecofeminist artists grew from the coinciding feminist art movement and Earth art movements of the 1960's and 70's. Many Earth artists were interested in significantly, physically altering natural landscapes. A couple of the most influential early earth art pieces include Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*⁵ (fig. 2), or James Turrell's *Roden Crater*⁶ (fig. 3). Although many early Earth artists were interested in time and space, most remained uninterested in the ecological effects of their art. Being more conscious of the ecological impacts of their work, Ecofeminists branched away from the Earth art movement and instead found ways to create art that challenged hierarchical thinking and promoted gender and environmental equality.

Before I delve too deep into my argument, it is important distinguish that the words masculine and feminine do not solely refer to characteristics portrayed by, or associated



Fig. 3 James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, 20th century. Earth and artifacts, Flagstaff, Arizona, United States.

with, the respective genders. The word feminine has many meanings, and there are multiple feminist theories. The act of characterizing individuals or groups of people as feminine based on biological or social qualities is the product of the patriarchal system that the

feminist movement looks to discredit.⁷ Although feminism grew out of women's struggles to end gender

inequality, it grew to stand in as a broad adjective for the promotion of the rights of all oppressed actors, as it is unreasonable to argue that the oppression of one group of actors is justified when another is not. One cannot argue for gender equality without extending

⁵ Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Rocks, earth, algae, & salt. Great Salt Lake, Utah, United States, Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed February 16, 2012).

⁶ James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, 20th century, Earth and artifacts, Flagstaff, Arizona, United States, Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed February 16, 2012).

⁷ Victoria Davion, "Is Ecofeminism Feminist?" in *Environmental ethics: divergence and convergence*, ed by Susan J Armstrong and Richard George Botzler, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993) 499.

that same rationale to the empowerment of other oppressed social groups. Feminist theories would be easily debunked if they could not be applied to advocating for the rights of other marginalized groups. Therefore, to understand the rationale behind feminist theory, one must look beyond its application in the fight for gender equality, and apply its arguments to ending the subjugation of all oppressed actors whether they be racial minorities, marginalized genders, or exploited ecosystems.⁸

Although rhetorical feminist author Helene Cixous's work deals with gender differences and inequalities in writing, her theories can be applied to communication through art making. Cixous describes how communication is engendered through writing,

“There is such a thing as *marked* writing...writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine- economy; that this is the locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated...where woman has never had *her* turn to speak.”⁹

If what Cixous implies about libidinal domination of writing is true, communication has historically been conducted in a way that favors the voice of what is biologically distinguished as male. Without a more inclusive way to communicate, voices are lost and problems arise from the gaps disconnecting participants from one another. Embracing and combining a more ‘feminine’ communication style and combining it with the predominant masculine perspective can bring about more socially just articulation.

Some examples of ecofeminist artwork demonstrates this socially just way of communication in sensory representation. Ecofeminist artworks range from Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Touch-Sanitation Performance in which she focused on the community and organizations that handle New York City's trash by personally thanking every sanitation worker, to Aviva Rahmani's communal restoration of wetlands in ‘Ghostnets’ to the water collecting glyphs that Lynne Hull carves into rocks for animals

⁸ Karen J. Warren, “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism.” in *Environmental ethics: readings in theory and application*, by Louis P. Pojman, (Boston: Jones and Bartlett. 1994) 191.

⁹ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, 1 no. 4 (1976): 875-893.

to drink from.¹⁰ Embedded in these artistic expressions lie the many branches of ecofeminism that entail differing ways to promote subaltern rights.

Despite the benefits of ecofeminism as a theory through which more unbiased and fair discussion can be held, the meaning of ecofeminism is difficult to pin down, and has varied greatly throughout different times, places, and contexts. Although ecofeminist theory varies greatly, its focus to 1) challenge logic of domination and its 2) focus on the importance of relationships and community, are central to its effectiveness in producing social change.

Firstly, a common thread that I have found in all ecofeminism is that it challenges logic of domination that proliferates societal values. Logic of domination rationalizes oppression through a faulty logical structure based hierarchical value systems. The hierarchy of a value system is oftentimes based upon an unjustified assertion of certain characteristics of an actor as being less desirable than those possessed by more powerful actors.¹¹ These rulings on value of various traits are based on unfounded assumptions of how superiority and subordination are conceived through observation of differences. Ecofeminist scholar, Karen Warren gives the example of how a logic of domination justify humans' superiority over rocks and plants,

“(A1) Humans do, and plants and rocks do not, have the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which they live.

(A2) Whatever has the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which it lives is morally superior to whatever lacks this capacity.

(A3) Thus humans are morally superior to plants and rocks.

(A4) For any X and Y, if X is morally superior to Y, then X is morally justified in subordinating Y.

¹⁰ Gloria Feman Orenstein, "The Greening of Gaia: Ecofeminist Artists Revisit the Garden" 2003, *Ethics & the Environment*. 8 (1): 103-111.

¹¹ Warren, "The Power and Promise" 191.

(A5) Thus humans are morally justified in subordinating plants and rocks.”¹²

This argument is flawed because it is based on three unsound, authority based assumptions.

Firstly, (A1)’s perception of how radically plants and rocks change their communities is derived from higher powers’ point of view. This point of view disregards plants’ and rocks’ intense weathering and that geological forces have greatly shaped the Earth’s physicality, weather patterns, and hydrology. But this blatant disregard makes sense because humans in high power positions infrequently acknowledge the possibility of powerlessness. Moreover, consciousness is relative and not fully understood; a human in a vegetative state may be just as conscious as plants and rocks, and depending on the situation, that human has less ability to radically affect their community.

Secondly, (A2) assumes that actors that can radically and consciously change their community are morally superior. There is no logic that supports this claim- for example, compare the moral superiority of a robot used in heart surgery to save lives to a homicidal human being. Although the robot is not considered conscious, it produces more moral good than the conscious human, thus demonstrates the complexity of understanding moral superiority and consciousness.

Thirdly, (A4)’s assumption is also unfounded logic. There is no proof that morally superior actors have the right to subordinate morally lesser groups, there is only the assumption that it is easier to do so without serious repercussion. If what (A4) assumes is true, then highly developed robots should be justified in subordination over lower “functioning” human beings, but I don’t think that this is an argument many humans would feel comfortable with.

Although the above argument clearly does not make sense, it exemplifies the assumptions that legitimize logics of domination. Ecofeminism shows how the flawed value system

¹² Ibid.

that justifies gender-based subjugation is used to rationalize all oppression.¹³ In ‘Making the Links: Why Bioregionalism Needs Ecofeminism’, Michelle Fike and Sarah Kerr explain the way that ecofeminism works against justification of all types of oppression of marginalized players,

“Oppressions of women, nature, and others are seen by ecofeminists as stemming from the same cluster of ideological assumptions, and when we question and challenge such concepts as patriarchy, capitalism, rationalism, militarism, colonialism, and other “power-over” relationships, we are working against oppression of all types”¹⁴

In debunking all logic of domination, Ecofeminism disproves the legitimacy of logic that perpetuates patriarchal-founded gender assignments. Ecofeminism asserts that traditional gender roles are the unfounded product of a flawed, power based social system.

Philosophy professor at the University of Wisconsin, Victoria Davion explains how the use of gender terms (‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’) in reference to characteristics that they supposedly represent, is problematic.¹⁵ If these essentialist gender roles are perpetuated, so is the validity of the societal hierarchy from which they came. By rejecting dominant value systems ecofeminism provides a less hierarchical and more inclusive means of communication that gives voice to marginalized members of society.

Secondly, ecofeminism asserts the importance of relationships, reliance, and interconnectedness in the world system by challenging dualistic and hierarchical structures of the majority of present day societies. Instead of placing disproportionate significance on actors according to their biological and stereotypical traits, or their essence, ecofeminism values a wide range of characteristics, needs, and contributions.

¹³ King, Ynestra, “Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology” In *Radical environmentalism: philosophy and tactics*, ed Peter C. List (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Pub. Co. 1993), 71.

¹⁴ Michelle Summer Fike and Sarah Kerr, 1995, "Making the Links. Why Bioregionalism Needs Ecofeminism", *Alternative*, 21 (2): 22-27.

¹⁵ Davion, “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?” 503.

The ideas of interconnectedness and community are present in ecofeminist theory in two similar ways. Firstly, because the word ‘community’ can become too abstract, ecofeminism focuses on the idea of co-habitability. Co-habitability is a preferable term than ‘community’ because it applies and emphasizes the idea that communities extend beyond understood boundaries. Co-habitability embraces complexity and realistically acknowledges that realizes that sacrifices must be made in order to achieve equality and justice.

Furthermore, ecofeminism sees communities as places of opportunity for a concentrated effort of individuals to come together to work towards a common goal. These types of communities that bring people together are particularly important in promoting marginalized individuals’ rights. A lower income neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles showed the power of community when they came together to protest the building of a power plant that would have negatively affected air quality and residents’ health. The planners specifically targeted this neighborhood to build the power plant because they predicted low levels of protest due to lower incomes and education levels of the community’s residents, “Members of middle or higher socioeconomic strata...are more likely to organize into effective groups to express their political interest and views...Middle and higher socioeconomic strata neighborhoods should not fall at least within a mile and five mile radii of the proposed site”.¹⁶ Although the individual members of the community may not have been able to stop the plant from being built, once awareness about pollution the plant would create in the neighborhood, the community’s concentrated protest power had enough impact to prevent it from being built.

Although ecofeminism believes in the power of cooperatives, the theory does not neglect the importance of acknowledging the specificities of individuals. Ecofeminism maintains the importance of respecting difference to uphold the type of non-hierarchical frameworks it looks to disrupt. Moreover, differences between the individuals that make

¹⁶ Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, 1990, *Reweaving the world: the emergence of ecofeminism*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books: 215-219

up the movement repeatedly challenge former presumptions of the movement so that ideas behind the theory remain dynamic and inclusive.

Not only are the differences between actors valued for their own sake, but so are the types of relationships that result from interaction between varied actors. In Heidi E Grasswick's explanation of Lorraine Code's *Ecological Thinking*, she refers the importance placed on, "The need to attend to the particularity and specific situated-ness of knowing subjects and knowing practices in order to both reveal the inner workings of power/knowledge relations and to create environments where certain forms of knowing become possible."¹⁷ Through the acknowledgement of individuality of actors, an ecofeminist approach benefits from input of various voices, in differing spaces and times.¹⁸ It embraces dynamism and synergy among actors in a contextual viewpoint- a perspective that is shaped from the very actors it affects. Ecofeminism attempts to address conflict more completely by understanding the individual characteristics of actors along differing levels of power.¹⁹

Ecofeminism's embrace of diversity means that the movement itself varies greatly; I'll discuss four kinds of ecofeminism here: Radical ecofeminism, Socialist ecofeminism, Liberal ecofeminism, and Social ecofeminism.

Radical ecofeminism stems from second wave feminism. It focuses on the spiritual connection of humans to nature. Similarly, Cultural ecofeminism relates to radical ecofeminism in that it states that oppression is biologically based, and because of this biologically based oppression, the 'feminine' can relate more to nature.²⁰

Socialist ecofeminism see the oppression of both women and the environment as being grounded in the structure of capitalist patriarchy. This branch of ecofeminism sees

¹⁷Heidi E. Grasswick 2007, "From Feminist Thinking to Ecological Thinking: Determining the Bounds of Community", *Hypatia*, 23 (1): 150-160.

¹⁸ King, "Toward Ecological Feminism", 71.

¹⁹ Jessica Fain, "Remediation by inspiration: artist driven models for environmental clean-up", (Thesis (M.C.P.)—Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept of Urban Studies and Planning, 2011).

²⁰ Manion, H.K. (2001). "Ecofeminism within gender and Development", *Journal of Ecofeminism* [online], <http://www.ecofem.org/journal>, accessed March 30, 2012, 6.

materialism that drives capitalist society as a major force behind overall inequality. This anti-capitalist approach sees the solution to inequality through crafting a fairer and more egalitarian society.

Liberal ecofeminism is based in historic feminism- that from the 17th century until the 1960's.²¹ This kind of ecofeminism is based on the argument that both women and men are rational agents, and that solutions to gender and environmental inequality include women in the creation of regulation and policy change that bring about more equal rights.

Social ecofeminism is similar to liberal ecofeminism in that it is based in historical rhetoric. It avoids romantic or feminine overtones in its understanding of an equality solution. Although social ecofeminists see women as being historically subjugated, they underplay masculine oppressor/feminine oppressed dualism so that they can better apply their theories to advocating other subaltern rights.

Although ecofeminist theory is clearly made up of multiple strands of thought, the way that different approaches are essentialist is an important divergence. Essentialism is thought based on assumptions about subjects being constructed through pre-social, innate, and unchanging qualities, or essences. The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences defines the principle of essentialism as, “The idea that members of certain categories have an underlying, unchanging property or attribute (essence) that determines identity and causes outward behavior and appearance”²². For example, it is not fair (or correct) to assume that all girls wear pink because of their physical attributes that make them female. Seemingly contrastingly, social constructivism sees individuals as being shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts.²³ To use the same example as above, girls often wear pink because society expects and encourages this kind of behavior

²¹ King, “Toward Ecological Feminism”, 70.

²² William A. Darity, *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*. (Detroit, Mich: Macmillan Reference USA. 2008)
<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/infomark.do?action=interpret&id=GALE%7C1RIY&v=2.1&it=aboutBook&source=null&p=GVRL&authCount=1>. 630.

²³ Elizabeth Carlassare, (1994). Essentialism in ecofeminist discourse, In C. Merchant (Ed.), *Ecology*, 222.
(pp. 220-234). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press

from them.²⁴ But Social Constructivists can also be essentialists if they believe that particular patterns of social construction can be universally applied to all women.²⁵ Some ecofeminist theories rely greatly upon essentialist ideas; many argue that by essentializing marginalized actors and owning the traits that are conventionally seen as lesser, they revalue and regain the value of the marginalized individuals. However, anti-essentialist ecofeminists and critics of essentialism argue that essentialists reinforce the patriarchal stereotypes that subaltern movements look to correct and dispel. These ecofeminists believe that women and nature cannot be categorized as having an unchanging essence. Janet Biehl critiques essentialist associations as being created by the patriarchal societies in order to hinder equality and uphold prevailing oppression. (footnote 55) Critics maintain that there is no biological, social, or essential evidence that legitimizes the oppression of others. Dominant powers have tried repeatedly to find justifiable evidence to validate exploitation of marginalized actors. Majority actors have especially attempted to justify oppression through false claims that lesser power actors are incapable of acting as conscious agents. Ecofeminist writer, Elizabeth Carlassare relays an experiment done in the early 1900's that looked to demean women's mental capability citing the fact that their brains weigh 5 ounces less than males'. The heavy brains of whales and elephants quickly disproved that claim once it proposed that human men were less intelligent than these large animals. Fortunately the argument was easily dismantled, but the experiment is just one instance of how higher powers attempt to prove legitimacy of their logics of dominance through essentialism.

Furthermore, critics of essentialism claim that if women and nature do in fact contain an innate wisdom, then there is beneficial reason to maintain the oppressive hierarchical structure that maintains their "women-ness" or "nature-ness". For this reason, critics of essentialism like Biehl believe that essentializing, "renders the movement contradictory, incoherent, and ineffective."²⁶

²⁴ Ibid 578.

²⁵ Stone, Alison page 6

²⁶ Janet Biehl, 1991. *Rethinking ecofeminist politics*, Boston: South End Press: 41.

In my next section I will explore how two artists (Ana Mendieta and Jackie Brookner) who are well known for the way they demonstrate ecofeminist theory in their art. Specifically, I will examine through primary analysis and an art historical perspective the way that they use essentialism to present ecofeminist in their art.

Part II: Analyzing essentialisms and ecofeminism in Ana Mendieta and Jackie Brookner's Art

To explore how ecofeminist art employs essentialism, I analyzed collections of art from two artists who are considered to quintessentially ecofeminist. Although I would ideally like to analyze the entire collection of their work, in the constricted time and resources available to me I chose to look at the specific works or collections of theirs that most accurately and broadly encompass the main ideas behind their oeuvre of artwork. The first artist that I analyzed is Ana Mendieta, a founding ecofeminist artist who is best known for her work in the 1970's and 80's. I compared Mendieta's work to that of Jackie Brookner. Brookner is a contemporary artist who primarily works in the public arena and focuses her work on community needs and through the lenses of biologically processes.

Ana Mendieta

Ana Mendieta is considered one of the great founding ecofeminist artists. So much of her personal history is bound up and reflected in her artwork; understanding her background is necessary to fully understand her artwork. Mendieta was born in 1948, in Cuba.²⁷ In 1961, For fear of political instability in Cuba, Ana's parents sent her and her sister to Iowa where they lived in orphanages and foster homes until 1966 when they were reunited with their mother and brother.²⁸

Mendieta showed an interest in painting early in her career, but changed her artistic focus to experimental, multimedia, and performance soon after enrolling in the University of Iowa's newly established multimedia graduate program. She began creating performance art that focused on direct presence of her body, but in 1973 shifted focus to her extensive Silueta Series. The Silueta Series, made from 1973 until 1980, consists of over 200

²⁷ Her family originally supported Fidel Castro until he established Communist policies, at which point Ana's father was sent to prison for 18 years for engaging in counter revolutionary activities.

²⁸ Olga M. Viso and Ana Mendieta, 2004, *Ana Mendieta: earth body : sculpture and performance, 1972-1985*, Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

photographs, films, and slides that portray outlines or shapes of the female figure in different environments and contexts.²⁹ Tragically, Ana Mendieta's life and work were cut short when she fell out of the 34th window of her apartment in 1985.³⁰ Mendieta's Silueta Series is her most extensive collection of work: it spans the longest period of time, is the most widely known collection, and is has been written about most extensively. For this paper I will narrow my analysis of her entire body of work down to this series that most accurately encompasses the genders and environmental themes she portrays.

Mendieta's work is oftentimes seen as exemplarily ecofeminist; it is easily understood through the expression of women's connection to nature and the use of Neolithic figures in differing spatial and temporal contexts. Because her work is so easily understood it enlivens discussion of Human-Earth relations and inspires many to work towards environmental and gender equality.

However, throughout much of her works Mendieta asserts traditional womens' role through her essentialist understanding of the feminine. Through the female body's indistinguishability from nature, and by the use of Neolithic earth goddess figures Mendieta work demonstrates essentialism.

Although many art historians push away the validity of essentialism, some scholars argue that essentialism is inescapable in feminist theory. Art historian, Susan Best agrees with the notion that essentialism is inescapable, argueing;

“If essentialism is inescapable, as many argue, then one of the challenges for feminist theory is to distinguish between the varieties of essentialism and their efficacy

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ana Mendieta's death is highly controversial. Her husband at the time, Carl Andre, was known for having a hot temper and was the only person home at the time of her death. Although she was notoriously afraid of heights and would not go near windows, she fell the 34 stories naked, or "went out of the window" (as Andre notoriously explained during his emergency call to 911). When police arrived at the scene the bedroom was in disarray and a doorman apparently hear a woman scream "No, no, no, no, no!" before the thud of Mendieta's body as she hit the ground. Andre went was charged with murder, but in was tried without a jury and was acquitted.

for feminist ends...[Mendieta] uses an essentialist notion (that women and nature are aligned), and an essentialist position (that there is a fundamental difference between the sexes) in a highly generative way.”³¹

The promotion of essentialist ideals in order to accomplish means exemplifies strategic essentialism. The idea of strategic essentialism was generated by subaltern rights scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is a hotly contested and often misunderstood idea (its misuse has caused Spivak, its creator to claim to have given up on the phrase). Roughly, strategic essentialism is the idea that groups of oppressed actors should temporarily associate with a shared simplified identity in order to gain power.³² While essentializing oftentimes plays into patriarchal understandings of actors, it can be especially helpful to furthering movements, as it simplifies complex ideas to be more easily understood. It makes issues that are difficult for human beings to wrap their heads around more accessible. Through this simplification strategic essentialism can be used as an instrument for change.

Ana Mendieta essentializes what is considered to be the traditional feminine role, in how she explicitly associates the female sex, body, and figure with feminine characteristics, as well as with the planet Earth and with soil-earth.

Devaluing the Masculine

A clear essentialist notion in Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series is the way she denies the validity of the entire male sex and gender to claim a space for the feminine voice. She speaks of the way men make art, “men [sic] artists working with nature have imposed themselves on it. Definitely my work has that feminine sensibility”³³ Furthermore,

³¹ Susan Best, 2007, "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta ", *Art History*. 30 (1): 57.

³² Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, 1996, *The Spivak Reader*, New York and London: Routledge.

³³ Jane Blocker and Ana Mendieta, 1999, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: identity, performativity, and exile*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press: 18.

Mendieta never once uses a masculine figure or signifier in her work; over and over again she sculpts with the feminine figure.

Mendieta insinuates that there is a sensibility about the female figure that separates it from “masculine” ways of art making and the “masculine” figure. She deliberately simplifies and separates feminine art making to create a sense of interconnectedness between all of those who associate with the “feminine”. By separating the feminine (the oppressed) from the “masculine” (the oppressors) Mendieta creates a space for those who associate with the “feminine” to regain power through owning their identity.

Furthermore, other actors oppressed for non-gender related reasons can relate to and rally behind this separation from the “oppressor”. Theoretically, this kind of strategic essentialist separation from the oppressor empowers oppressed actors and works to serve subaltern rights and promote equality.

The artist’s body as material; beyond seriality towards essentializing nature and Femininity

Susan Best argues that when the Siluetas lack a body in the picture, the viewer’s focus is lifted from the feminine actor who creates it, and shifted to the action of its creation.³⁴ That by shifting focus to the making of the art, instead of who made it, Ana Mendieta demonstrates performance and lifts viewers’ associations from the creator of her work.³⁵ I disagree with Best’s argument that Mendieta’s Siluetas are serial (that they were made in an almost quasi-scientific, method based approach with a focus on the process of completing the art rather than the finished aesthetics of a piece).³⁶ Rather than lift her identity, Mendieta’s silhouettes especially establish her presence in her work. Her silhouettes are actual imprints of her physical self, and clear indications of her emotional and mental person (Fig 3).³⁷ Moreover, because much of her work actually uses her body Best argues that withdrawing the figure side steps the ideas associated with feminine

³⁴ Susan Best. "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta." *Art History* 30 (2007) no. 1: 57-82.

³⁵ Judith Butler. "Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity." (New York: Routledge. 1990)

³⁶ brockner footnote 7 in susan best serial spaces

³⁷ Eleanor Heartney, "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta". *ART IN AMERICA*. 92 (2004) 138-143.



Fig. 4. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, from the series *Silueta Works in Mexico, 1973–1977*, 1973. Artist’s body, flowers, earth. .5 x 5 x 1 ft.

body. Many of Mendieta’s works demonstrate that her body is present and used as a crucial material in each piece. (fig. 4)³⁸

Though Ana referred to the way that she tries to reconnect to the environment through her work as an “obsessive act”, her³⁹ work goes beyond seriality. Ana’s work aims to portray a shared corporeality with the earth through a distinctly female figure sculpted into natural settings.⁴⁰ Her work portrays the traditional viewpoint of feminine connection and entrenchment with and in the Earth, thus implies that there lies an intrinsic womanly connection to nature.

Moreover, the use of distinctly feminine figures shows how Mendieta intentionally created a solely feminine space, a space for “feminism of difference” entrenched in “natural” space⁴¹. She argues that if

essentialism can be used to positively promote gender rights, then through sexually differentiated space, ‘feminine’ can be properly valued and attitudes towards the feminine can be reshaped.⁴² Furthermore, if gender rights are asserted because no oppression can be legitimized if another is disproved then environmental rights are asserted as well. By emphasizing this essentialist connection between women and nature, Mendieta uses essentialism as a tool to unite feminine and environmental actors and inspire them to fight for equality.

³⁸ Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, from the series *Silueta Works in Mexico, 1973–1977*, 1973, Artist’s body, flowers, earth. .5 x 5 x 1 ft. Reproduced from the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/9152#ixzz1piq7tORH> *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* (accessed March 10, 2012).

³⁹ Ana Mendieta, “Ana Mendieta: A Selection of Statements and Notes,” *Sulfur* 22 (Spring 1988): 71.

⁴⁰ Amanda Boetzkes, 2007, “Contemporary Art Facing the Earth’s Irreducibility”, *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 7.2, 4

⁴¹ Best “The Serial Spaces” 65

⁴² Elizabeth Grosz in Sneja Marina Gunew, 1990, *Feminist knowledge: critique and construct*, London: Routledge: 332-344.

Women indistinguishable from Nature

Mendieta's application of the indistinguishability between the female figure from the Earth and earth demonstrates her essentialist assumptions that women and feminine characteristics are more related to nature. Mendieta describes the *siluetas*



Fig. 5, Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Siluetas* series, 1980. Earth, dirt, Unknown dimensions.



Fig. 5, Gravettian culture; Palaeolithic, *Venus of Willendorf* circa 30,000-25,000 BCE. limestone, 11 cm high, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria

as “visualizing the body as an extension of nature and nature as an extension of the body.” Also, Mendieta is quoted as having said, “Through the making of earth/body works I become one with the earth. It is like being encompassed by nature, an afterimage of the original shelter of the womb.”⁴³

Neolithic Earth goddess Figures

Many of Mendieta's *Siluetas* portray a Neolithic feminine figure, or draw upon ancient rituals and spiritual beings. By portraying the archetype of the “great earth goddess” (fig. 5)⁴⁴ draw obvious connections to the ancient supposed goddess stone statue, the *Venus of Willendorf* (fig. 6)⁴⁵, while other figures (fig. 7)⁴⁶ demonstrate the connection to earth goddess spirituality are described through their simple, quintessential, and fertile female shape.

⁴³ Ana Mendieta, *A Selection of Statements*, 71.

⁴⁴ Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Siluetas* series, 1980. Earth, dirt, Unknown dimensions. Reproduced from *Artstor*: artstor.org (accessed March 12, 2012)

⁴⁵ Gravettian culture; Palaeolithic, *Venus of Willendorf* circa 30,000-25,000 BCE. limestone, 11 cm high, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria Reproduced from *Artstor*: artstor.org (accessed March 12, 2012)

⁴⁶ Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, film still from *Siluetas* series, 1973-78. Sand, ocean, pigment Unknown dimensions. Reproduced from *Virginia Miller Galleries*: <http://www.virginiamiller.com/exhibitions/1990s/AnaMendieta.html> (accessed March 12, 2012)

Mendieta's methods mimicked ritualistic practices, and her repeated imprints on the land that made up her *Siluetas* series reflect a ritualistic, almost obsessive practice that focused on the relationship between earth and stereotypical fertile goddess figures. All of these Stone Age worship practices in Mendieta's work imply the essentialist existence of vital, female earth goddess energy, lying at the center of all nature and women.

Mendieta spoke of the Earth-female connection represented in her *Siluetas* series,

“The work recalls prehistoric beliefs of an omnipresent female force whose body parts made the earth a living creature. In essence my works are the reactivation of the primeval beliefs at work in the human psyche.”⁴⁷



Unueta, jum stuu from *Siluetas* series, 1973-78.
Sand, ocean, pigment
Unknown dimensions.

The essentialist Earth goddesses present in Mendieta's work draw upon a deep ecological spirituality. Mendieta's *siluetas* imply the essentialist idea that an intrinsic, spiritual knowledge connects women to one another, as well as to nature. Despite the hard logic that spirituality lacks, it is a powerful instrument to use towards inspiring and uniting individuals. Religion and belief in a higher power are highly persuasive tools; religion and religious beliefs have unalterably shaped the face of human history. In Mendieta's case, interpretations of her earth goddess figures inspire environmental and gender rights activism.

Ecofeminist author, Gloria Orenstein interprets Mendieta's work,

“ [Mendieta's] art concretizes that process of Earth Alchemy, using prime matter itself as the alchemistic vessel through which spirit will be made to reenter matter

⁴⁷ Ana Mendieta, “Personal Writings”, *Ana Mendieta* ed. Moure: 186.

and transform woman into the vital incarnation of the Earth Goddess once more.⁴⁸

Orenstein sees the Earth goddess of Mendieta's *siluetas* as a tool through which the empowerment of women can be channeled and accomplished. By essentializing the feminine down to an Earth goddess, spiritual figurehead Mendieta provides a way through which both oppressed gendered and ecological actors can gain equality.

Jackie Brookner

Jackie Brookner is renowned for her ecofeminist papers and community artwork. Although she lives in New York City, she travels to many different countries and cities where she completes large scale, environmentally (inclusive of humans as “natural” and necessary presence in the environment) and biologically based sculptures and land art projects. Her work often emphasizes the importance of community, water, words and meaning, and the way that humans are connected to and dependent upon Earthly resources. Although Brookner is considered an ecofeminist artist, she avoids essentialisms of women and nature in her work by acknowledging the complexity of boundaries.

The Urban Rain Project: San Jose, California



Fig. 6, Jackie Brookner, *Coyote Creek Filter*, 2008 Steel, pumice stone, sand, amber glass, 10.4 x 27 x 4.5 ft, Roosevelt Community Center

⁴⁸ Gloria Orenstein, “The reemergence of the archetype of the Great Goddess in art by contemporary women”, *Heresies* (Spring 1978): 78.

From 2005-2008 Jackie Brookner worked with the San Jose, California City Stormwater Program to create two functional art pieces for the Roosevelt Community Center. The San Jose project was called “Urban Rain” and was created to deal with the problems related to increased amounts of polluted runoff water in an urban environment. “Urban Rain” looked to address urban water runoff related problems in two ways. Firstly, the piece was built to mitigate negative biological impacts of polluted water runoff into the adjacent watershed and tributary (Coyote Creek) from impermeable surfaces at the Roosevelt Community Center. Secondly, the program aimed to inform local residents about tributary and runoff behavior. The project aimed to educate and empower locals to lessen their effect on runoff related environmental problems.⁴⁹

In addition to demonstrating ecofeminist ideas, Brookner’s Urban Rain project is highly ecologically and architecturally innovative. Franco Montalto, a professor of “Sustainable Engineering” at Drexel University was incredibly attracted to how revolutionary Brookner’s Urban Rain project was in providing hope and inspiration for infrastructure planners.⁵⁰ In the past, water management has been a hotly contested issue that more often than not has been handled in disregard to the environment. Although there is great evidence of environmental inefficiency in current planning methods, not much has been done to change policy. The Urban Rain project shows that a few small, elegant transformations in the way designers plan can have positive social, environmental, and biological impacts. With the help of engineers, biologists, environmental educators, and graphic designers, Brookner designed two art pieces that funneled rainfall off of the Community Center building through a filtration system into nearby Coyote Creek.

⁴⁹ Jackie Brookner, 2009. *Urban rain: stormwater as resource : a city of San Jose public art project at Roosevelt Community Center*, Pt. Reyes Station, CA: ORO Editions.

⁵⁰ Franco Montalto in commentary on the Urban Rain Project, 2009, *Urban rain: stormwater as resource : a city of San Jose public art project at Roosevelt Community Center*. Pt. Reyes Station, CA: ORO Editions. 60-61

The first piece consists of a drain from the roof into a collection of pebbles (covered with microbes which filter out toxins) that fill between two pieces of glass imprinted with the



Fig. 7, Jackie Brookner, *Chutes and Thumbprint Filter*, 2008 Steel, pumice stone, rocks, sand, plants, wood chips, 16 x 13 x 6 ft, Roosevelt Community Center

outline of the Coyote Creek tributary network (fig 6)⁵¹. The other piece is made up of a steel half tunnel built on stilts that drains water off of the room onto a large thumbprint shaped piece of metal that sits on top of a bed of pebbles (fig 7)⁵². Once the water is distributed onto the pebble beds, it is filtered and slowly released into the water table which drains into Coyote Creek. These two pieces follow suit with the majority of Brookner's art works

in that they serve a biologically functional purpose; they alleviate an environmental problem, while also demonstrating an ecofeminist message.

Although Brookner makes a concerted effort to take individuals' qualities (biological, social, relational, etc) into account when making ecofeminist art, her ground level approach to understanding them avoids essentialism. It is her intense attention to understanding the specific identity of individuals in the community where she makes art that helps her avoid broad, false generalizations. Brookner's work demonstrates anti-essentialist ecofeminist principles in two ways: 1) She avoids human-environmental and

⁵¹ Jackie Brookner, *Coyote Creek Filter*, 2008 Steel, pumice stone, sand, amber glass, 10.4 x 27 x 4.5 ft, Roosevelt Community Center. Reproduced from: jackiebrookner.net (accessed March 10, 2012).

⁵² Jackie Brookner, *Chutes and Thumbprint Filter*, 2008 Steel, pumice stone, rocks, sand, plants, wood chips, 16 x 13 x 6 ft, Roosevelt Community Center. Reproduced from: jackiebrookner.net (accessed March 10, 2012).

gender dualisms while not overemphasizing that they are the same 2) She makes a great effort to understand characters' and communities' identity on an individual basis.

Furthermore, other viewers, like the Art Department chair at Cornell University, Patricia C Phillips see Brookner's art as an example as why art is an effective form of communication between diverse groups of actors, and its role in successful diplomacy and policy change. "Artists often take what is invisible, indiscernible, or overlooked and make it accessible and perceptible", Phillips explains, "Brookner is involved in a revelatory practice that seeks to disclose and show biological processes without simplifying or demystifying their complexity."⁵³ In these ways Brookner maintains the identity of the communities in which she works, while working to reintegrate them with the biological environment.

Humans as distinct actors entrenched in a natural Environment

Brookner writes that human beings' alienation from the natural world (the kind of thinking that created the very concept of a natural world as being separated from humans), as being one of the main causes of environmental problems.⁵⁴ She goes on to assert that alienation originates in human beings' fear of death and immortality. Because nature is a constant reminder of our lack of control over the inevitable outcome of death, historically, humans have attempted to assert our division from, and control over, nature. This division has manifested itself in the form of hierarchies and dualism in regard to other aspects of society and biology (sexism, racism, ageism, etc). Brookner describes the way humans have grappled against immortality,

"Dualism, at heart is a war against death...We must control nature, control matter...dismiss its power, as passive and inert--mere matter, something for us to use or, better yet, possess. In frantic glut we have lost our sense, in fury fled our

⁵³ Patricia C. Phillips in commentary on the Urban Rain Project, 2009, *Urban rain: stormwater as resource : a city of San Jose public art project at Roosevelt Community Center*. Pt. Reyes Station, CA: ORO Editions: 56-59

⁵⁴ Jackie Brookner, "Unity, Man, Reality, Nature?", Ludwig Forum fur Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany *Poetry New York*, Winter/Spring 1999: 2.

bodies. Fled into the arms of a consuming Capitalism where what grows is money.”⁵⁵

As well as avoiding dualisms, Brookner doesn't associate women with nature exclusively— she sees both women and nature as part of the greater environment, but emphasizes that they differ from one another, that not all women are the same and not all nature is the same. Furthermore, Brookner avoids strategically essentializing humans and nature as having essences that completely separate them from one another. Instead, Brookner acknowledges that the distinctions and boundaries between the two groups of actors are complicated, that there is no distinct boundary but that there are differences between the two.

In writing about ecofeminism, Brookner repeatedly places high importance on the meaning of how words differ and relate to one another,

“Humble [<L. humilis low, small, slight, akin to humus, soil, earth, (see HUMUS)] 1. having or showing a consciousness of one's defects or shortcomings; not proud, not self assertive, modest

*HUMUS [<L. earth, ground, soil < IE. *ghom-: see HOMAGE] a brown or black substance resulting from partial decay of plant and animal matter; organic part of the soil*

*Homage [<L. homo, a man <IE. *ghom-, <base* gtheim-, earth, ground, whence L. humus, Gr. chthon, earth, OE. guma man] 2. anything given or done to show reverence, honor, or respect: usually with do or pay”⁵⁶*

By demonstrating how the term *homo sapien* is related to the words “soil” and “humble”, Brookner explains why she believes that humans are intimidated by the tension between the extent of, or lack thereof of boundaries between them and what is oftentimes considered to be the natural world. Brookner advocates art as an effective way to

⁵⁵ Ibid: 9.

⁵⁶ Ibid: 7.

communicate meaning because it passes over human beings feared associations with highly loaded words. To explain this concept, she tells the story of how Helen Keller learned the word for water. Keller's teacher, Annie Sullivan taught her the word for water by tracing the word ewateri into Keller's palm over and over again while she exposed her to water in many forms (in a pail, rain, in a glass, etc). Brookner uses this story to demonstrate how words are not the only pathway through which humans can understand symbolic thinking. Humans have the capability to think through feelings, not only through words, nor through purely tactile sense. Furthermore, Brookner's writing stresses how feelings in response to stimuli that resonate on a more unconscious, instinctual, reactionary level are sometimes more easily or fully understood than they would be if the stimuli were communicated through language. Brookner uses art which to communicates through non-literal senses to bridge the gap of miscommunication and act as a solution to human alienation and environmental problems. To reach the senses, Brookner believes that art must interact with and act on multiple levels and scales- biological, social, physical, economical, philosophical, and psychological.⁵⁷

Brookner's intent when she created the Coyote Creek filter was to demonstrate the similarities of the dendritic stream network to anatomy of the human body. Furthermore, she aimed to make the idea of a watershed, a large scale, semi-abstract, idea (it is difficult to visualize all the connections and routes of water traveling down drains, through the ground, in streams, in precipitation, to the ocean etc) tangible. By showing similarities between the human body system and the tributary system, Brookner wanted to communicate how dependent humans are on water, and how water is an integral part of our beings. Through demonstration of our water dependence, and the more easily understood portrayal of watersheds, Brookner hopes to communicate to people in a way that persuades and inspires them to cherish and treat water in an environmentally sound manner.

⁵⁷ Ibid: 3.

Placing value in Community

A theme often portrayed in Brookner's work is the idea of a fiction of wholeness. She writes about the tension between separation and connection of actors from one another, "Our existence is dependent upon our continuously breaking the bounds – exchanging with the world around us, taking in and letting go."⁵⁸ Instead of placing a distinct boundary between humans and nature, Brookner sees humans as a part of the greater ecology. She sees this larger scale ecology as a community unto itself while putting great importance on the specific traits of the particular individuals or aspects that make up that ecological community.

The Chutes and Thumbprint filter of the Urban Rain project was first inspired by the accidental swirl burn mark found on Brookner's toaster pastry, that reminded her of the swirl in a fingerprint. The metal whirl is based off of Brookner's actual thumbprint and represents the unique identities of individuals while at the same time filtering water to benefit the whole community (directly organisms' and ecological biological health, societal wellbeing, greater quality of life for people who use the community center and park). Moreover, the spiral shape relates to Brookner's idea that we should shape our ideas, values, and decisions in a less hierarchical and dualistic way. Brookner describes the movements of the spiral in societal context,

"As the spiral grows its structure shows us where it has been, its particular movements in time and space. What's inside, what's outside are ambiguous, for what's outside not may be within later. And as it keeps on turning, it returns, but never to the same place. A whole, but open ended, dynamic--perhaps it can help us find a way to more differentiated unities and less threatening differences."⁵⁹

Fingerprints are symbolic for each person's individuality, and the diverse benefits we can collectively bring to the table, yet are organic and represent our common humanity. This

⁵⁸ Jackie Brookner, "The Gift of Water," ed. M. Miles and N. Kirkham, Intellect Books, Bristol UK and Portland US, publication date Dec 02 Die Kunst der Zukunftsfähigkeit, "Die Gabe des Wassers," agenda transfer, Local Agenda 21, Bonn, Germany: 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid: 5.

equal value placed upon a commonality that encourages understanding, compassion, and individuality. Brookner uses the fingerprint to demonstrate how unique qualities of all actors can work together to more effectively and inclusively create change away from logic of domination.

Brookner is not interested in passing judgments based on individuals' traits, or categorizing based on broad understanding of individuals as fitting into a certain group. She values differing intelligences and their collective contribution to greater social good. The Public Art Director for the City of San Jose Office of Cultural Affairs, Barbara Goldstein described Brookner's work as, "welcoming, inclusive, integrated into the building and landscape, related to Coyote Creek and neighborhood history, sustainable, and appealing to young people"⁶⁰

Besides demonstrating an ecofeminist message through the multidisciplinary appeal of her artwork, some viewers reached overtly ecofeminist conclusions from Brookner's work. Viewers noticed how Brookner's work demonstrates her long-term commitment to solving an environmental issue with an extended interest in the way that the community will interact with it and the way that individuals in the community interact with one another.⁶¹ Brookner quotes physicist David Bohm, to demonstrate the type of creative, relational intelligence that she values in her work, "intelligence, from the verb intelligere, has the sense of to gather in between, the ability to make new connections and to play with new categories"⁶² She sees value in dynamism in the ever-changing relationships between individuals in the community, and looks to include this way of thinking into her work to further the ecofeminist movement and shape a more fair society.

⁶⁰ Barbara Goldstein in commentary on the Urban Rain Project, 2009, *Urban rain: stormwater as resource : a city of San Jose public art project at Roosevelt Community Center*. Pt. Reyes Station, CA: ORO Editions: 6.

⁶¹ Jackie Brookner, 2009, *Urban rain: stormwater as resource : a city of San Jose public art project at Roosevelt Community Center*, Pt. Reyes Station, CA: ORO Editions.

⁶² Jackie Brookner "Gift of Water" quoting Bohm, D 1989 Science order and creativity: 2.

Ana Mendieta and Jackie Brookner's approaches to ecofeminist art making differ greatly. The way that their art uses essentialism is a particularly distinct difference and greatly effects the way that their art affects social change. in the way that they use essentialism. In the next section I will discuss the way that essentialism in their ecofeminist art affects the promotion of subaltern rights and social justice.

Part III

Implications of Essentialism

Although both Ana Mendieta and Jackie Brookner conceptualize their art from ecofeminist viewpoints, the difference in their approach significantly impacts interpretation of their art and its effectiveness to demonstrate and affect social change. Jackie Brookner's practice is ecologically sustainable, engages and encourages community, and is based on human interconnectedness with and differentiation from nature. Ana Mendieta's artwork is based on essentialisms of the 'feminine', female body's oneness with nature, Neolithic Earth goddess ideas, and the concept of an intrinsic feminine knowledge. While both artists have explicitly acknowledged artistic feminist and ecological affiliations in the creation of their works, the frameworks that they create their artwork within greatly affects how viewers understand their art, which in turn impacts the social movements that the artists associate with.

Ana Mendieta and Essentialism

In Ana Mendieta's case, some viewer's read her *Siluetas* series as having positive ecofeminist intention, but being essentialist and ultimately framed in a patriarchally created space. Although she is a famous ecofeminist artist, and her artwork inspires people to support and rally behind the ecofeminist movement, her work is inadvertently detrimental to environmental and gender equality. Moreover, because feminism has come to represent a variety of social causes, categorizing her work as ecofeminist has detrimental effects on all subaltern rights movements.

Further investigation of Mendieta's *siluetas* and their basis in devaluing the masculine, using her body in her work, portraying feminine as indistinguishable from nature, and using the Neolithic earth goddess figures reveals her use of strategic essentialism.

Admittedly, avoiding feminine essentialisms poses a great challenge; even the term "feminine" is inescapable in discussion of social rights. Discussion of subaltern rights usually raises some thorny, convoluted issues. It is oftentimes easier to oversimplify and group diverse individuals into trait-based, patriarchally created categories that are already

ingrained in present-day language than to sort out all of their individual qualities and needs. Additionally, it is important to note that essentialisms about actors are not necessarily biologically based, can be and often are socially constructed.⁶³ For example, if one argues that all girls wear pink because of societal pressure to wear pink, they would be making a broad generalization that marginalizes girls who wear blue and discredits the power behind their choice to wear a different color. While this kind of generalization makes some comprehension easier, it is the same reasoning behind logic of domination that creates divides between groups of people and excuses biological or essence based patriarchal oppression. Therefore, because ecofeminism aims to disrupt logic of domination, ecofeminist discussion must avoid essentialism; it is unfair and incorrect to base broad understandings of many individuals on a few shared characteristics.

Essentializing the feminine by juxtaposition to Masculine

Mendieta's strategic essentialist separation of the feminine figure from the masculine and differentiates between the way women and men make art regresses women's and environmental rights. She speaks of a feminine sensibility present in her work that implies that a male insensitivity towards artwork exists.⁶⁴ Additionally, her use of the Neolithic Earth goddess figure implies that an innate, primitive connection to the Earth lies within the feminine.

The femininity of the figures is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, the definition of a feminine figure requires a clear explanation of what exactly is feminine, for which there is no clear biological or social definition outside of the problematic, oppressive stereotypical characteristics assumed by patriarchal society. In selecting what is and is not feminine, there is so much gray area. Even defining by gender what makes a woman, a woman is impossible. For example, how would society define the characteristics of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals? Moreover, how does one

⁶³ Allison Stone 'Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 1: 2 (2004), pp. 140-142.

⁶⁴ Blocker and Mendieta, "Where is Ana?": 18.

reconcile the understanding of the ‘femininity’ of straight women with female reproductive parts that exemplify “masculine” qualities? Clearly, there *are no ‘feminine’ characteristics* that can be applied based on sexual preference or gender, therefore the use of the feminine figure in Mendieta’s figures to claim a space is unreasonable and incorrect.

Secondly, if one does assume that the figures are accurate representations of women and of the socially constructed ‘feminine’, then they affirm the validity of problematic essentialisms. Hoping to promote gender rights through the framework of essentializing the feminine is contradictory, and only further oppresses actors categorized as the socially constructed feminine.

The Neolithic, spiritually female, Earth goddess Essentialism

By establishing a distinct difference between the way that men and women make art and by categorizing the male way as wrong, Mendieta feeds straight into patriarchally established male-female binaries. Furthermore, Mendieta asserts the essentialist assumption that an ecological sensibility is biologically intrinsic in all females by establishing that a primal feminine sensibility even exists. If said great sensibility lies within all females, then there is reason to maintain a feminine perspective through preservation of the gender binaries that justify oppression. From this understanding of her essentialist attitude towards women we can conclude that she believes that society must maintain the patriarchal oppression of women that preserves the existence of a feminine spirituality. Also, by insinuating that this sensibility is primal, Mendieta denies the rationality of feminine thinkers, thus discredits the argument to promote gender and environmental rights.

Additionally, Mendieta essentializes in two ways when she portrays women as indistinguishable from nature through the use of her own body in her work to show how they are more in tune with the Earth than men. These types of portrayals demonstrate the way she uses essentialist traits to demonstrate how each group connects to one another.

Though this essentialism in itself is not detrimental to the ecofeminist movement, the effects of it work against progression toward equality.

Firstly, if we take the association of women and nature to represent a discontinuity of human beings from nature, we present an example of Val Plumwood's indistinguishable self.⁶⁵ Plumwood explains that if we obliterate the line between humanity and nature altogether, we begin to see ourselves as an autonomous organism. Although this view can be helpful in social and environmental justice (we are a part of nature, therefore we should protect nature's wellbeing, to protect our wellbeing), it is ultimately problematic to social and environmental rights (humans are a part of nature, if we destroy nature to help humans, we are ultimately helping nature). Therefore, these nature integrated feminine symbols in Mendieta's *Siluetas* Series are fundamentally ineffective to her expression of feminine and environmental equality.

Secondly, by asserting that women and nature lie on one side of the human-nature binary and that men lie on the other, Mendieta inadvertently asserts traditional, hierarchal, and gender based essentialisms that generalize all women and nature as similar. This presents a larger problem can be divided into three subsections that relate to the way women and nature have historically been connected through their role as the oppressed.

A. Environmental rights are usually considered less important than human needs. When Mendieta's work associates women with nature, she reinforces the unjust, false, traditional idea that women's rights also lie on a lower level than men's and humanity's. This contradicts her argument towards gender equality because no logic of domination towards one minority can be considered unjustified without discrediting all domination of other groups. Also, when Mendieta's *Siluetas* emphasize this connection rooted in oppression, she perpetuates cycles of oppressive connection by ignoring differences between the women and nature and between individuals within the two groups that could otherwise contribute positively to society.

⁶⁵ Val Plumwood, 1991, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism", *Hypatia*, 6 (1): 3-27: 6.

B. As I have already established, we cannot rightly distinguish male or female. If society presumes that one can actually distinguish between who and what is female and male, and presumes this great insight into global harmony does exist only within a feminine context, society must maintain oppression and binary distinctions that create and uphold the feminine existence separate from the masculine.⁶⁶ Mendieta's use of the Neolithic goddess figure and feminine *silueta* in her artwork actually conveys that women and nature should remain oppressed in order to maintain their insight into global solutions. Although Mendieta maintains that her artwork works toward subaltern rights, her presumption of the female energy undercuts the validity of her artworks' argument.

C. Lastly, by emphasizing women and nature's connection rooted in oppression, Mendieta ignores all of the differences between individuals within the two groups that could positively contribute to lifting their oppression. Thus she limits the possibilities towards social equality through inclusion of the actors it affects most.

Although Mendieta is well known for her supposed ecofeminist art, the way that she essentializes in her art inadvertently affirms patriarchal concepts of the 'feminine' and is detrimental to the legitimacy of women's and environmental rights, the exact causes she intends to support.

Jackie Brookner and a non-essentializing approach towards Co-habitation

In contrast with Mendieta's work, Jackie Brookner creates and executes works that clearly promote non-essentialist ecofeminist values. Although Mendieta's work admittedly has no negative ecological effects of great consequence, Jackie Brookner creates her art with purposeful ecological care, oftentimes with a focus on explicit environmental remediation and biological interaction.⁶⁷ Furthermore, community involvement and collaboration, as well as the understanding of human-nature peripheries

⁶⁶ Victoria Davion, "Is Ecofeminism Feminist?" in *Environmental ethics: divergence and convergence*, edited by Armstrong, Susan J and Richard George Botzler, 497-505, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993: 502-503.

⁶⁷ Jessica Fain, 2011, "Remediation by inspiration: artist-driven models for environmental clean-up", (Thesis (M.C.P.)--Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning, 2011): 28.

are all integral themes in Brookner's work. By accurately portraying these ecofeminist values in her work, Brookner communicates the importance of these values to her audience, thus works to advance the ecofeminist cause.

Instead of assigning essentialisms to groups of actors in her work, Brookner's projects focus on their diversity of actors she works with, and on the dynamism this diversity offers towards progressing subaltern rights. She has found ways of avoiding essentialism by working on and planning her projects with a wide variety of professionals, as well as with less knowledgeable yet equally important community members. She spends significant project planning time with communities to explore the specific needs of their inhabitants (both human and non-human) and places importance on individuality, diversity, and inclusiveness. Moreover, Brookner works on many varying scales and spheres as possible- she attempts to create positive social change art that acts biologically, socially, physically, economically, philosophically, and psychologically. , Brookner approaches problems more wholly by taking into account the varying perspectives along and amongst these different scales and disciplines so that her artwork can foresee and prevent problems that arise from differing actors' conflicting needs.

Broader implications of non-essentialist ecofeminist Art

While ecofeminist theories obviously promote ecological and feminist rights, ecofeminism values can be applied to all subaltern rights (rascism, ageism, classism, and other discriminations against groups of people based on their inherent or stereotypical characteristics). According to Karen Warren, there are two reasons behind the combination of environmentalism and feminism into ecofeminism. First off, Warren explains that,

“the conceptual connections between the dual dominations of women and nature are located in ... a patriarchal conceptual framework, characterized by a logic of domination...made explicit by the following argument C:

(C1) Feminism is a movement to end sexism

(C2) But Sexism is conceptually linked with naturism (through an oppressive conceptual framework-work characterized by a logic of domination).

(C3) Thus, Feminism is (also) a movement to end naturism.”⁶⁸

Secondly, Warren argues that the ideas that promote distinct boundaries that create conceptions of gender and of nature being separate from humans are societally constructed notions. Society must acknowledge that individuals within humankind and within the environmental differ. Additionally, society must realize that the separation between humans and the environment is a blurry boundary. Humans are separate from nature in some ways, but are reliant on natural resources as well. In order challenge discrimination against either group, society must avoid societally constructed essentialisms that perpetuate separation-related hierarchy and domination. Artists can begin to destroy these distinct dualism encouraging boundaries by creating work that not only challenges gender and environmental prejudice, but also subverts every other discriminatory “ism” (racism, sexism, ageism, etc).

Environmental Studies often deals with the differing power levels and spheres that cause imbalance and environmental problems. Therefore the dynamic, inclusive ecofeminist principles that avoid essentialism and promote the rights of all oppressed groups can help work towards greater justice and environmental solutions. Although non-essentialist ecofeminist theory can be used to subvert domination, and its application specifically through art can be especially instrumental in reducing conflict. Art’s ease of accessibility promotes this non-essentialist ecofeminist theory to a multitude of differing actors. Ecofeminist principles easily communicated through art lessen the prevalence of essentialisms, promote understanding, and voice the rights of subjugated actors. Thus ecofeminist art provides one viable pathway to contribute towards environmental and social solutions.

⁶⁸ Warren, “The Power and Promise”: 192.

Questions for further research and Inquiry

At this time, I would like to complete further research on the topic of ecofeminist viewpoints in artwork to strengthen my argument and collect primary data with which I would address a few vague points that I was not able to find enough previous research, or resources on.

Firstly, if I had the time and financial support, it would be beneficial to my understanding of the Ana Mendieta's and Jackie Brookner's work if I could travel to experience their art through shows or permanent installations. Even though I have been able to extensively view their work in pictures, in books, and in film, there is no replacement for seeing a piece of art in person. If I were able to view the artworks in person, I would feel more comfortable analyzing the process and materiality of their work, instead of just analyzing the context in which their art was created. With this more detailed analysis I would gain greater insight to the intimate details of the work, and would feel more comfortable drawing my own aesthetic-content based conclusions.

Furthermore, even though I have plenty of qualitative research that indicates the effects that art has on viewers, it would be interesting to complete my own study. Ideally, I would complete a piece of art based on the aspects of ecofeminist frameworks that I deem most important. I would then present it to viewers and survey and/or interview their reactions to the piece. The survey would give me a more quantitative understanding of reactions to ecofeminist pieces and the interview would give me qualitative data that would convey how well my ecofeminist principles came across to the viewer.

Finally, from here I wonder what the problems with Jackie Brookner's work are. Although Brookner's work is strong in its avoidance of essentialism, what are some of its weaknesses? How can her methods making be combined with other kinds to successfully promote ecofeminism and subaltern rights?

As shown in Ana Mendieta's work, essentialisms in art are an easy way to communicate to viewers through bold, symbolic gestures but ultimately contradict the ecofeminism

movement and all movements to end oppression. Jackie Brookner's more interdisciplinary, synergetic, inclusive, diverse way of art making creates positive social change while adhering to the equality endorsing principles it is based upon.

If ecofeminist art is to be seriously considered as an instrument to promote social justice, it must work within a non-contradictory and non-essentialist framework. Art uses an ecofeminist perspective focused on diversity, dynamism, and interconnectedness to challenge logic of domination. By subverting logic of domination, ecofeminist art promotes the not only environmental and gender rights, but those of all oppressed actors. Ecofeminist art provides a viable form of communication through which problems can be discussed, and inequalities lifted. Through a more just, inclusive, and synergetic discussion, we can approach problems more wholly to effectively bring about positive social and environmental change.

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