The Female Imagery of Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta

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Two major contributors to the invention of a feminine iconography in the 1970's are Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta. Edelson's method of inventing and defining female imagery concerns psychological and historical concepts. Mendieta's use of body art is seen in the form of regeneration symbols, silhouettes, and animal symbols that relate to primitive cultures which are part of her Cuban heritage.
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INTRODUCTION

FEMALE IMAGERY

Figure 1: Judy Chicago, Female Rejection Drawing, 1974. Mixed media.
Less than a decade has passed since the earliest feminist artists like Judy Chicago were exhibiting gigantic pictures of female genitalia, (Figure 1). The impulse which activated these displays of sexual imagery originated within the women's movement for equal rights. Suddenly, the self-consciousness of femaleness was openly shown to the public through paintings and sculpture. The aesthetic value of early feminist art was dubious and its main validity lay in its social content, establishing the notion that a feminine viewpoint can exist in the visual arts, and that in some way, this view might produce a distinct and unique type of imagery.

The notion of female imagery is sometimes used as if it had no distinct meaning, and sometimes as if it encompassed a list of specific characteristics. Both usages will be found in women's art today. Critics such as Lucy R. Lippard and Linda Nochlin are in the process of attempting to define the term. If the definition consisted of categories of visual characteristics which would be common to women's art in general, the idea of female imagery would be clear. But as a whole, the images found in women's art are not so easily categorized.

In October, 1973, in New York, female imagery was the topic of a panel discussion including women artists, critics and historians. Lippard defined the term as female sexual imagery. She said circles, domes, eggs, boxes, biomorphic shapes and layering or striation indicated female sexual imagery, with indirect suggestions of female sexuality including networks, fragments and antilogical and antilinear
approaches. Painter Joan Snyder spoke of the autobiographical or narrative nature of women's imagery, giving examples of her own work.¹ Jack Burnham, in defining feminine aspects of creativity, mentions qualities of balance, psychological and social integration, and a more profound appreciation of the organic processes.²

The listing of "female" art qualities is probably an exercise in futility, since women's imagery is currently in a formative infant stage. Its gestation originated in the social and cultural climate of the 1950's and 1960's, in a period of changing social roles and cultural arrangements when there was considerable dissatisfaction with what then seemed to be an oppressive structuring in all fields. Udo Kultermann notes this discontent and the consequent attempts to destroy barriers imposed by structure. In his study entitled Art and Life he attributes the changes in art to these new sociological and cultural ideas: "Our discussion of the architecture, sculpture, and painting of the 1960's has revealed that boundaries between fields are being progressively disregarded, and that new forms have arisen in the interstices between disciplines (montage, assemblage, environmental art). This can also be seen in the sciences, where such interdisciplinary fields as biochemistry and astrophysics have proven their importance because they have led to completely new and often unexpected findings."³

The removal of barriers that traditionally separated the visual and performing arts resulted in completely new categories. Painting, sculpture, music and drama ceased to exist only as closed disciplines.
Happenings, environments, dance and ritual, and conceptual art became the avant garde of the 1960's. These new disciplines shifted the emphasis from structural form to a continuously changing content drawn directly from life experiences. Participation in the act of making formed the goal while the concrete image served only as residual evidence of the action. According to Kultermann the directions of these enactments were governed by subconscious impulse. He compares the artists concerned with these movements to the artist-shaman of primitive societies in their dependence on ritual action produced in a state of trance, for the benefit of the group. He says, "The result or effect of their engagement is never completely clear; the process itself is the important thing."

At the same time the subsequent search for new modes of thinking stimulated women artists to become conscious of the possibility of special needs and special capabilities unique to their sex. Many became preoccupied with the destruction of customary barriers that they saw within the art tradition. A few like Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta had already begun a constructive exploration of new formal attitudes. Where others used the human body to produce sensory stimulation, they had already manipulated the body to make statements of broader human implication. Where some produced effort bound to the moment of creation, Edelson and Mendieta concerned themselves with ideas rooted in timeless myths.

This background of the thinking from the 1960's indicates that the women's art movement was one of several commonly motivated attempts
seeking to establish new forms. Linda Nochlin's response to the question of defining female imagery in the 1973 panel discussion was perhaps the most timely. She said it has to be invented, like any iconography. Two major contributors of the invention of these female symbols are Edelson and Mendieta.

Mary Beth Edelson's imagery might be labeled female, because it represents the release of an archetype from the unconscious mind of a woman, or from a female psyche. Many of Edelson's images of the female form depict ancient goddesses connected with mystical powers in matriarchal societies. Some of her forms are intuitively derived and spring from an essentially psychological response to external stimuli, while others are more consciously calculated. Her present attainments may be attributed to an evolving search for meaningful images of woman, past and present.

While Edelson's method of inventing and defining female imagery deals with psychological and historical concepts, body art created by Mendieta gives additional meaning to the term. In two recent articles Lippard documents the use of the female body as the subject in artworks, with referral to that body as form, and speaks of the ritual performance used to relate this form to nature. Art that focuses on the body or body parts, which has come to be called Body Art, became an important aspect of conceptual art in the 1960's, especially in the performances of Vito Acconci and others. By 1970 many women artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, and Verita Monselles worked with Body Art as a medium, breaking new ground within
its framework. The culmination of this creative use of the body is perhaps best seen in the work of Ana Mendieta. She uses her body as a symbol of regeneration, traces her silhouette in different forms, and transforms herself into animal symbols that relate to primitive cultures which are part of her Cuban heritage.
CHAPTER I. MARY BETH EDELSON
A. BACKGROUND

Figure 2. Mary Beth Edelson, Navaho, 1962. Oil on canvas.
Mary Beth Edelson's development as an artist began with traditional training. As the oldest child of a dentist in East Chicago, Indiana, she received cultural advantages at an early age. She was supported in her urge toward self-expression with art courses at the Art Institute of Chicago. These classes for children centered on the figure, and made use of live models. Encouraged to have her own studio at home, she continued to paint the figure during high school.

Edelson spent her first year of college in 1959 at Depaul University, in Greencastle, Indiana, studying philosophy. By the second year, she was studying painting at the undergraduate level, and continued until the fourth year when she married. During the next three years she attended graduate school at New York University, receiving an M. F. A. in painting in 1967. She describes her work at this time as a form of abstract expressionism.

The years following her graduate studies were spent in Indianapolis, Indiana, and later in Washington, D. C., where she began to exhibit frequently. Here Edelson came in contact with the women's movement which profoundly affected her life and work. As a result of this experience, she began to deal specifically with women's experiences in her paintings of the early 1960's.

Edelson's involvement in a 1969 seminar dealing with Jungian psychological theory and symbolism, stimulated her interest in the workings of the unconscious mind. She began to use Jungian theory as a means to explain images in her work. This special reference to
Jungian psychology includes the concept of the "collective unconscious" and the "archetype."^{12} Carl G. Jung defines archetype as an archaic remnant or primordial image of the human psyche.^{13} Erich Neumann, a student of Jung, adds that an archetype is "an inward image at work in the human psyche; and not a concrete image existing in time and space." As a symbolic expression of the unconscious, the archetype may manifest itself spontaneously, or it may stand in "compensatory relation" to the consciousness of the person in whom it appears.^{14} Jung says that what we call instincts are psychological urges, and are perceived by the senses. These instincts often show themselves in fantasies, revealing their presence only by a symbolic image. They have no known origin and reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world. Unlike Freud, who believed the unconscious consisted only of an individual's repressions, Jung believed a person participates in a collective unconscious—in addition to his particular unconscious formed from his own unique experience.^{15} If that person is a woman artist, she may use visual images to make conscious her sensed awareness of this collective unconscious shared with all women, as well as those experiences of a uniquely personal nature.^{16}

The collective unconscious is knowledge possessed by the whole human race, and buried in the unconscious. It is not transmitted biologically or genetically, as physical characteristics are. Rather, this collective unconscious knowledge is the psychical equivalent of inherited traits.^{17}

These concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious are crucial in understanding Edelson's creative goals. She says: "My
search for developing a symbolic resource of communication incorporating symbol/ritual/myth led me again to the collective unconscious. The archetypal symbols that we all share, infinite in variation and infinite in levels of revelation, broaden our understanding of the profound and moving mysteries of our universe."^{18}

Her realization of these symbols through technique, material and process was expressed in an interview with Jack Burnham in 1975: "rather then the manipulation of forms and materials for form's sake, Edelson believes that the new frontiers are of the mind. She insists that there are no more mechanical formulas for success in the art world, that our direction has to be mental and spiritual at this point, and that the artist must regain the use of all of the senses..."^{19}
B. GODDESS ICONOGRAPHY

Figure 3. Mary Beth Edelson, Great Goddesses, 1975. Painted wood.
The definition of contemporary woman through the use of Jungian symbol is the central subject of Edelson's work. A wide range of factors are involved in her attempts to find and give form to a feminine iconography. These factors are Jungian symbols, social and political concerns, aesthetic and visual choices. All of these factors relate to her recurring usage of woman image as goddess.

The goddess iconography occurs in different forms throughout her work. In the early 1960's symbolic figures began to appear in her abstract paintings. The first of these was a ball-like shape, (Figure 4). When isolated, this organic shape began to resemble a bouquet of flowers with enlarged dripping stems, (Figure 5). Soon the image began to resemble a simplified human figure with suggestions of breast and hand forms. At this point the emphasis centered on placing this figure in a nature-related environment. Then the definition of the figure's environment became the main focus, and the structure of the environment superceded the figure itself. As the figures disappeared, the interior space became a noticeable psychological symbol that of a watery, mysterious passage, (Figure 6). In Jungian psychology, the depths of a body of water as a symbol are equated with the unconscious mind.

Returning to the figures, she produced paintings depicting mother and child. With these works the first sign of her goddess iconography appeared. In the painting, Godhead, 1961, (Figure 7), mother and child have become madonna and Christ figures, with concentric circles replacing the madonna's head. According to Jung, the dominant circular motif symbolizes wholeness or completeness. Edelson extends this
Figure 4. Mary Beth Edelson, *Abstract painting with ball-like shape*, 1959. Oil on canvas.
Mary Beth Edelson, Dripping Bouquet, 1961. Oil on canvas.
symbol to represent the unity of a universal mother-child relationship. The circles then become the manifestation of a feminine archetype.

These archetypal feminine symbols are evident in the imagery of Edelson's photo-collages from the early seventies. In *Calling/Goddesshead*, 1975, (Figure 8), the nude torso of a woman with upraised arms hovers by an oversized spiralling sea shell. For Edelson the shell and the spiral have multiple meanings, including power over life and death, protectiveness and rebirth. Erich Neumann emphasizes the dual nature of the spiral as a psychological symbol in his book, *The Great Mother*, finding similar spiral motifs decorating the female figures in a group of neolithic ceramics. Produced within a matriarchal society, these figures indicate both life and death. In his words: "A goddess represented in this way is never a goddess only of fertility but is always at the same time a goddess of death and the dead." In *Calling/Goddesshead* Edelson again extends an archetypal symbol to represent aspects of contemporary woman. She fuses the neolithic spiral symbol, denoting both power and protectiveness, with modern Everywoman.

The spiral symbol represents both the positive and negative character of the feminine archetype. In another photo-collage, *Whale*, 1975, (Figure 9), only the negative side of the archetype is visible. As Neumann explains, the positive feminine character is generally equated with light and life, while the negative side is associated with darkness and death. The large fish is poised in mid-air above a body of rough water in the center of the photograph. In the distance, an anonymous female figure stands like a goddess with upraised arms.
Figure 7. Mary Beth Edelson, *Godhead*, 1961. Painted wooden panel.
Figure 8. Mary Beth Edelson, *Calling/Goddesshead*, 1975. Photo-collage.
Figure 9. Mary Beth Edelson, *Whale*, 1975. Photo-collage.
The whale has surfaced, springs from the water, and has almost completed a circular sweep in the foreground of the picture. Edelson uses the whale as a poetic image: it represents the knowledge that comes from the unconscious mind. She sees the depth of water as a symbol of the unconscious. In this photograph the whale not only symbolizes the knowledge found deep within the unconscious, but subtly signifies the fleeting moment when this unconscious knowledge becomes part of conscious knowledge. As Edelson explains: "It is a symbol of a creature coming from the depths of the sea, which symbolizes the unconscious, and I've pulled it out of the water and let it surface momentarily. It's like a flash of insight."  

Separated by content from the psychological imagery of Calling/Goddesshead and Whale is one photo-collage from an earlier exhibition at the Henri 2 Gallery in Washington, D. C. Prior to the show, Edelson contacted twenty-two people from the area, asking each to see her works, and then to suggest a piece that she should execute and include in the exhibition. Some Living American Women Artists, 1973, (Figure 10), was created by the artist in response to a request by Ed McGowan. "Make a piece of art, the style, technique, scale, etc., to be determined by you. I would like you to use organized religion as a point of departure. I specifically want you to use your art to expose whatever negative aspects of organized religion that might occur to you. I would like this work to be literal, allegorical, with obvious political, philosophical, and social implications." 

In Some Living American Women Artists, Edelson attempts to combine the psychological aspects of Leonardo da Vinci's
The Last Supper with a contemporary political view in favor of women. She tries to achieve this by blotting out the faces, which to her symbolize the negativism of male domination in Christian religion.26 By replacing these faces with photographs of contemporary women artists, she answers McGowan's proposal. In a 1975 monograph on Edelson, Jack Burnham evaluates the photo-collage. "In a sense Leonardo da Vinci's androgyny is restated again, going a step beyond Duchamp's Mona Lisa, L. H. O. O. Q."27

Also in 1975 at the Henri 2 Gallery in Washington, D. C., Edelson exhibited a series of totemic figures, (Figure 3), which indicate a change in perspective in her definition of woman. The use of Jungian psychology as a search for the artist's self, which was the former basis of her images, has been broadened and expanded. No longer limited to inner searches, she begins to explore the feminine archetype historically.

The Great Goddesses demonstrate a transformation in the transition from ancient to modern culture; the goddesses Great Maya, Bird Tara, Red Sophia, Celtic, Bird Isis, Ishtar, Inanna, Iatik, Venus, Sun Gloria, Louise, Georgia, and Passage bear a new relationship to each other, that of cumulative attributes of femininity. The painted wooden goddesses encompass a range of idealizations of the essential feminine from remote times to the present day. Taken individually each goddess embodies various characteristics of femaleness which then support the interaction of the tribe.

Edelson chose free-standing wooden panels which are rigid and upright, producing a concrete and decisive image. The physical
Figure 10. Mary Beth Edelson, Some Living American Women Artists, 1973. Photo-collage.
immediacy of three dimensions is less illusionary than the two-dimensional painted canvas surface, resulting in more self-sufficiency, independence and monumentality.

The first nine female deities, Great Maya, Bird Tara, Red Sophia, Celtic, Bird Isis, Ishtar, Inanna, Iatik, and Venus, refer to early and prehistoric goddesses who figured prominently in the mythology of past cultures. The next three, Sun Gloria, Louise, and Georgia, refer to Edelson's contemporaries, and represent an attempt to connect prehistoric deities to well-known contemporary women, Gloria Steinham, Louise Nevelson, and Georgia O'Keefe. The figure, Passage, suggests traditional "rites of passage," which are a form of acceptance in closed societies.

Edelson makes reference to early goddess mythology through nine of the figures. Since the Great Goddesses are meant to be seen as an integral unit or a tribe, the individual figures of Bird Tara, Celtic, and Red Sophia suffice to illustrate the historical connections with ancient mythology. The early goddesses that correspond to Edelson's divinities are Tara, Celtic and Sophia. It seems likely that the aspects of the feminine that they represent in antiquity define the role of woman in the different cultures that created them in those early times. In those societies, many of which were matriarchal or female-dominated, the goddess cults probably provided an explanation of human life-cycles. They also represented basic human instincts, both negative and positive. Neumann defines these instincts in relation to the Feminine. He says: "Body-vessel and mother-child situation—the positive elementary character of the Feminine--spring
from the most intimate personal experience, from an experience that is eternally human; . . . The negative side of the elementary character originates rather in inner experience, (unlike that of the visible mother-child relationship) and the anguish, horror, and fear of danger that the Archetypal Feminine signifies cannot be derived from any actual and evident attributes of woman."

In other words, positive and negative human instincts grow out of common human experience. Individual experiences, collectively absorbed, become cumulative and result in group subconscious attitudes. Then the positive instincts become search for knowledge and wisdom, salvation and afterlife, and related goals. The negative instincts become fear of the unknown or underworld, natural and physical drives, and other similar tendencies.

The repetition of collective positive and negative elements of human experience combine and form myths. Mythological characters then exemplify the opposing good and bad characteristics, which inevitably occur in life. Feminine elements possess this negative or positive nature and have manifested themselves in the form of ancient goddesses. Tara, the Great Good Goddess, is recorded in East Indian mythology as the mistress of boats, and a symbol of salvation from floods. Edelson's Bird Tara transfigures the mythological Tara: the winged wooden figure soars upward, like a sea bird in flight.

Edelson's goddess Celtic refers to Morrigan, a form of the Celtic enchantress-goddess. In northern mythology, Morrigan is a negative force and the goddess of death. She is associated with symbols of the vulture, raven and crow, which continue to be signs of death and
dying even today. Edelson's Celtic indicates this negative power by its uniform dark color, lack of decorative surface and stark angular form. These devices produce a formidable figure standing like an opaque barrier.

In contrast, Red Sophia is a more positive image employing an open circle and decorative equilateral triangle. The geometric combination of circle and triangle refer to mythological concepts of the Hellenistic-Jewish-Christian tradition and to spiritual transformation. The good mother, Sophia, originated as a life-giving plant symbol. Neumann relates Sophia to Christian theology. "...tree of life, cross, and gallows tree are ambivalent forms of the maternal tree. What hangs on the tree the child of the tree mother, suffers death, but receives immortality from her, who causes him to rise to her immortal heaven, where he partakes in her essence as giver of wisdom, as Sophia." Red Sophia is composed of a circle, indicating the Great Round, or Great Mother interlocking with the triangle, which possibly refers to the Christian trinity, or the Egyptian sun symbol of the pyramid.

These examples show a connection between prehistoric deities and Edelson's Great Goddesses. The ancient goddesses along with the contemporary ones are collectively a definition of woman in her environment, the record of which interprets the notion of "feminine." The imagery of visual works of any time period that define woman naturally changes, because the religious, social, and political or economic focus of its age is different. Therefore, Edelson's Great Goddesses are unlike past goddess depictions because the combination and focus of the visual symbol is altered.
C. CONTEMPORARY MYTHOLOGY

Figure 11. Mary Beth Edelson, Book of Rituals, 1977. Mixed-media.
"I am searching for meaningful rituals, meaningful symbols, and the answer to the question, 'What are our stories, what are the myths of our time?'" Edelson

Edelson's goddess iconography resulted mostly from her continuing search for a definition of woman through visual symbol. All the Great Goddesses are prime examples of her attempt to discover a twentieth century image of woman. They are products of their own era, yet they are reminiscent of their own heritage at the same time. These symbols of woman as a modern goddess are also isolated by Edelson from their environment of present-day reality. Attempts to find a meaningful context for these modern icons are the focus of two of the artist's major exhibitions. The first of these shows, in 1973, at A. I. R. Gallery, in New York, included two tableaux Old Myths/New Myths, and Sexual Fantasies, (Figures 12 and 13). Both pieces present wooden boxes filled with drawings, readings and stories written by friends. Edelson says: "These collections of stories, I hope, in some way will help us to re-focus on our need for myths and will aid in our search for our own mythology. For our myths originate in the unconscious. These mythical stories come from collective legends with deep and prevailing meaning to a people. Symbols and rituals that enriched the lives of people in more stable times are absent from much of our civilization." Edelson is apparently trying to fill the void which she believes exists in our time, through the collection of these stories. She obviously believes that in making statements for the boxes people will
become conscious of experiences that up until now existed at an unconscious level.

The second exhibition at A. I. R., in 1977, was an outgrowth of the tableaux. **Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era** developed into a large installation which included an entranceway, a defined interior space with photographs and books, and a memorial performance. This recent installation contained a number of two and three-dimensional images originating in the tableau, **Old Myths/New Myths, 1973**, (Figure 12). Each side of the tableau is composed of a white table and stool, a partitioned wooden box containing small works, and an array of drawings, photographs and written messages displayed on the wall behind the three-dimensional objects. Through the imagery of this mixed-media construction, Edelson presents two different mythologies, one established historically, and one established as her viewpoint of the newly forming mythology. The left section as a unit symbolizes a patriarchal society; its title, **Old Myths**, signifying the potential obsolescence of a male-dominated society. The right section as a unit records the participation of viewers at the exhibition. This interaction with others takes place when Edelson asks viewers to write their own stories (or mythology) on cards in the wooden boxes displayed in the tableau. The stories are arranged in the following order categorically:

- Mother stories
- Father stories
- Story of your life
- Philosophy of your life
- Menstruation stories
- Menopause stories
- Birth Stories
- Blood power stories
- Mother stories
- Self stories
- Womankind stories
- Hera stories (heroine)
- Dreams
- Sexual Fantasies

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Figure 12. Mary Beth Edelson, Old Myths/New Myths 1973. Mixed-media.
The two arrangements of tables and boxes are connected by a central panel of an equal-sided cross, used in this case as a feminine symbol of transition and passage. The cross floats over a rectangular panel depicting a large body of water. Edelson's presentation of cross and water mass as a feminine symbol relates to pre-Christian Germanic sagas. According to myth, the king-hero, Odin, was sacrificed as a hanged god on Yggdrasill, world tree of fate and destiny, and an old symbol of universal feminine power of birth and life. Rooted in a spring, Yggdrasill was considered to be the primordially sacred water of destiny. This matriarchal myth of hanged god on the female tree of fate facilitated the Germanic tribes' conversion to Christianity. Through the ages, the cross symbol has lost its feminine connotation as the result of its role in Christian theology. By using the cross symbol, Edelson wishes to correlate it again with its original mythological meaning, the universal Feminine.

The three forms on the vertical axis of the cross are labeled as microcosm, macrocosm and mesocosm. According to the artist, the lowest section, the microcosm, is conceived as an activated energy mass. In the central section, or macrocosm, the older energy mass is superimposed by a pattern of galaxies. She says the female mesocosm, ascending to float at the top of the cross, is symbolic of an earthy rising mountain.

Old Myths/New Myths was accompanied by another tableau entitled Sexual Fantasies, (Figure 13), in the 1973 A. I. R. exhibition. Like the double tableaux, this work presents a table, stool and partitioned
wooden box, with two-dimensional images displayed on the wall behind them. Here the main content is concerned with a collection of erotic reveries of living American artists, collected by Edelson. Similarly, Sexual Fantasies attempts to give form to a contemporary unwritten mythology. The particular choice of artists' sexual fantasies points to Edelson's interest in universal psychological themes, common to all people of all ages.

Old Myths/New Myths and Sexual Fantasies constitute the background of research for one of Edelson's most recent works, the large-scale installation and performance: Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era. The show was conceived as a commemorative space documenting the witch hunts and burnings which took place throughout Europe from the 12th through the 18th centuries. The physical divisions of the installation are comprised of numerous images executed in various media referring to this particular phase of women's history.

One enters the exhibit through a wooden portal covered with photographs of women's hands in symbolic gestures. This entrance is topped by a clay sculpture of bull's horns. The space houses a partially ignited ladder, surrounded by a low circular table. Handmade books with fired-clay coverings are displayed on the surface. An indented compartment contains cards which provide an opportunity for written participation by viewers in the memorial. Photographs on the walls depict the artist's pilgrimage to a neolithic cave in Yugoslavia, which was once a site held sacred by matriarchal cults. These images together form the setting for the memorial performance at
Figure 13. Mary Beth Edelson, Sexual Fantasies, 1973. Mixed-media.
A. I. R. Gallery in October, 1977. The static installation of objects combined with the active participation was intended to be a dramatic re-enactment of selected historical and mythological experiences.  

By providing access to the installation through the wooden portal, (Figure 15), Edelson establishes a beginning for the viewers' mythic journey, and presents it as an individual set of symbols. The post and lintel construction of the door itself is symbolic. According to Nuemann: "Along with the cave and the body-vessel, the gate as entrance and womb is a primordial symbol of the Great Mother. The two pillars...covered with the transverse stone, are one of the earliest representations of the threefold Feminine." In this work, the wooden portal marks the entrance to an interior which is symbolic of the cave.

Covering the portal are photographs of hands in the gesture of the mano fica, or sign of the bull. The selection of such a posture for these hand images seems to result from a translation of the old symbol. She takes "mano" or "mana" to mean the power of the elemental forces in nature in an object, and fica to represent the fig, symbolic of the vulva or womb. It seems likely that the hand images in these photographs refer to the ancient symbol of feminine power through fertility, the womb.

The clay sculpture of bull's horns above the portal indicates the presence of the Masculine at the gate-womb, and stresses the fertility-power idea. G. Rachel Levy describes this combination of symbols in The Gate of Horn, and refers to the collective image as entrance to the underworld and sacrificial altar. This idea of death by
Figure 14. Mary Beth Edelson, View of installation, (Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era), 1977. Mixed-media.
Figure 15. Mary Beth Edelson, Wooden Portal, (Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era), 1977. Mixed media.
sacrifice relates to the overall theme of the installation as a memorial.

The main focus of the interior is the grouping of handmade books with fired-clay bindings, which contain text and drawings concerning witchcraft and Edelson's pilgrimage to the caves in Yugoslavia. Two of these books are dedicated to specifically named women who were burned as witches, one in Holland, and the other in France, (Figures 16 and 17).
Figure 16. Mary Beth Edelson, Memorial book with text and drawing, (Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era), 1977. Mixed-media.
Figure 17. Mary Beth Edelson, Memorial book with text and drawing, (Proposals for: 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era), 1977. Mixed-media.
D. SUMMARY

From the early sixties to the present, Edelson's imagery steadily evolved from a form of traditional abstract painting to a ritualistic use of the figure in mixed-media and installation. In her early Abstract Expressionist imagery she discovered a recurring figurative symbol which she began to interpret and manipulate in a two-dimensional environment. Gradually the focus moved from the symbolic abstracted figures to the environment itself for a period of time, then eventually returned to the figures again. For several years, Edelson retained a realistic approach in her painting, and dealt with mother-child themes. Upon exposure to the Women's Movement and Jungian psychology in the sixties, she began to re-interpret the imagery of her earlier works, and developed a psychological basis from which she produced a series of photo-collages in the early seventies, which had themes of women's experiences.

Stimulated by Jungian psychological concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious combined with concern for the women's movement in art, she then produced a series of icons which glorified both ancient and modern women as goddesses. With this group of Great Goddesses Edelson attempted to explore a feminine iconography, by adding historical and mythological example to the earlier more limited psychological statements of self. Recently she has attempted to extend the glorification of the feminine with ritual through active group participation in her image-making.
CHAPTER II: ANA MENDIETA
The idea of body art as it is used by Ana Mendieta in the 1970's originated in Europe with the work of Yves Klein in the late 1950's. Lucy Lippard sees the earliest body works in the U. S. as "offshoots of Minimalism, Conceptualism, film, video and performance in the late 1960's in New York. Yves Klein used nude women as living brushes in Europe, and Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bruce Nauman manipulated their own bodies in performances in America. Around 1970, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis began dealing with body art specifically as female and feminist imagery. At the same time on the West Coast Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro emphasized the female body as imagery and the subject of paintings and sculpture.

Lippard and another leading critic, Catherine Francblin, disagree on the meaning of body art. Lippard offers the explanation that "body art reflects the 'role crisis' in contemporary life... When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves: a significant psychological factor converts these bodies and faces from object to subject." Lippard then sees these living images as a positive vehicle for visual content. In contrast, Francblin's criticism of body art is negative, placing it in a non-intellectual and merely physical category of responses. She calls the medium a "... reactivation of primitive autoerotic pleasures... and... a return to infantilism and an inability to separate one's own identity from that of the mother, or subject from object."

Ana Mendieta has added her own unique imagery to women's body art in the 1970's, utilizing the well-known medium expressively by incorporating aspects of her Cuban heritage into it. An important
factor in her imagery is the psychological reaction implicit in
the use of her living human body as medium. The mode of body art
itself depends upon the gesture and acting of the artist, emphasizing
the tactile senses and not the visual ones. This medium is probably
tied to the subconscious need to make tangible form from actual
and pre-existing experiences, whether consciously recognized or
intuitively felt. She says: "By using my self-image in my art, I am
confronting the ever-present art and life dichotomy. It is crucial
for me to be part of all my works. As a result of my participation,
my vision becomes a reality and part of my experiences." Thus
Mendieta believes she is able to rescue her experiences from their
ephemeral nature, and give them more lasting and tangible existence.
However, it should be noted that the emphasis is placed by the artist
on the act of making the image: the slide piece is only a record
of that symbolic act. It is the acting out which is of paramount
importance. The imposition on the viewer is necessary in dealing with
body art, because the translation of experience into an art form in
all such cases is impermanent.

Developments that led to Mendieta's use of body art as a medium
in her performances, transformations and silhouettes began when she
came to the U. S. from Cuba in 1961, at the age of thirteen. Forced
to leave her parents in Cuba, she lived in an orphanage in Iowa until
she entered Briarcliffe College. She mentions a strong interest and
identification with nature in general during this period. This
nebulous affinity for her natural environment was to grow and
influence her later works. After receiving an undergraduate degree in
1969, she attended the University of Iowa, receiving a master's degree in painting in 1971. Her earliest paintings foreshadowed her later body works. Mendieta refers to these two-dimensional pieces as icons, with one centralized image of the human body. She has described this early work as identical in theme, imagery and intention to her better-known later performances. She evidently feels that it was inferior, however, for she has kept no records of the early works at all.

In 1972, during her graduate study in the multi-media program at the University of Iowa, she began to work in sculpture with the central iconic figures. She wanted to work more directly. The sculptural forms were then incorporated in performances, the first of these taking place in 1972. Finally the objects were discarded for the use of her own body as the main image in her works, which occurred for the first time in 1972

Her body art found preliminary form in a series of tableaux called Rape Pieces. Lippard summarizes these works in an article that emphasizes the importance of the human body as medium in contemporary women's art: "Mendieta has made brutal rape pieces where the unwarned audience enters her room (or wooded area) to discover her bloody, half-naked body."

In Rapepiece I, 1973, (Figure 19), Mendieta not only utilizes her body, but includes the larger setting and props of her performance to suggest universal themes of suffering and sacrifice. The half-naked, bloody figure lies face-down on the ground, nearly concealed by the dense undergrowth of the wooded area. Mendieta says that she
purposely chose an outdoor environment for Rapepiece I, and specifically that of a wooded area so that viewers might suddenly discover the tableau. She also says that her choice of location depended only on the aesthetic possibilities of the natural forms, and that there was no geographic significance to the site. She stresses a one-to-one relationship between the figure and the viewer, adding that the photographs of the performance were taken from the angle from which the arrangement would have been first noticed by the audience. The photographs of her staged works are documentary records only, and are available for exhibit in galleries with this understood limitation. 60

In Rapepiece II, 1975, (Figure 18), Mendieta lies immobile, entirely covered by a blood-stained sheet. The figure, with extended arms and legs, is in a cruciform position. An important facet of the image is its anonymity. As the figure is completely covered by a sheet, which adheres itself to the anatomy of the body, no specific identity or personality emerges. Rather, a female type depicted in a known and understandable context is the subject. The suffering and death of a human being is evident, and there is a cohesive relationship between the figure and its ground.

The significance of this posture may be seen in its solid and dominant presence. Comparing this foreshortened position to other positions, such as twisted or turned, lying on its side, or in the fetal position, the cruciform seems to suggest not only the connotation of devastation, but carries, figuratively, the notion of unjustifiable suffering. The form, then, may also be a referral to religious
imagery, and could indicate either consciously or unconsciously applied symbolism by the artist.

Similarly draped Christ-figures are found in most Catholic churches in Cuba, Mexico and South America. Latin American Catholicism makes consistent use of white plaster or stone statues of Jesus which lie wrapped in a shroud, in a sarcophagus inside each church. These statues are also accented with symbolic blood as is Mendieta's figure.

Mendieta believes that Spanish tradition in Cuba has had a direct influence on her choice of medium and a visual influence on her imagery, and it is worthwhile to discuss Spanish ideas in relation to her Rapepieces and other works. Spending the first part of her life in Cuba, she was influenced by Spanish culture and religion which was the heritage of the Cuban people. In connecting her life to her art, Mendieta refers to these Spanish influences, and mentions what she calls the "Spanish idea of life and death." In the imagery of her transformation, performance and silhouette slide pieces, an underlying and cohesive element of solemnity, melancholy or fatefulness is discernable.

As Cuba remained a colony of Spain for such a long period of time, the country still retains an affinity for Spanish ideas. In his book, The Spaniards, Americo Castro generally defines the Hispanic notion of life and death, referring to it as the "Spanish dwelling place of life." He lists particular Spanish beliefs: "a burning hope of rising to heights and destinies prefigured in a belief; an insecurity about the fulfillment of the promise implied in the belief, the impossibility of
escaping, by one's own impulsion, from the condition of credulity and of thereby inventing new realities; the irrepressible tendency to express the complex in which the individual's vital consciousness and his internal and external circumstances are integrated. He (the Spaniard) believes in honor, in tradition, in an imported ideology, in a Messianic revolution, in the importance of his own person. . ." He gives examples to support his notion of Hispanic life from the writings of Xavier Zubiri, in 1933, who speaks of Spain as a country of light and melancholy; and examples from Jose Gaos, 1941, who sees Spanish-speaking peoples as having more of a capacity for the "other" human things, than for reasoning and the sciences. 64

The viewpoints found in this Spanish literature, such as melancholy and fatalism, balanced with concepts of pride and individualism, have apparently affected Mendieta's images which depict the human form in its relationship to nature. More specifically, her human images are victimized, sacrificed and die. In her most recent works, she suggests the inevitable merging of the individual with greater forces in nature.

Spanish-Cuban culture has also been influenced by African traditions and primitive religions that were transmitted throughout the whole Caribbean culture. During her childhood, Mendieta became interested in primitive art and religion from Africa, the ultimate source from which Cuban beliefs spring, as well as the societies from which they arise. She has written of this influence recently: "It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a
closeness with natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created."65

She emphasizes the fact that her attitude toward art-making was influenced by both Spanish and African ideas.66 This dual nature present in Cuban thought can be seen in the religions of the island. The prevalent religion of Cuba, Roman Catholicism, of Spanish origin, is joined with African cult ideas and takes a unique form in the "santeria." Mendieta describes the santeria as "a cult of African divinities represented by Catholic saints and magical powers." Her interest in this faith seems to play a large role in her works. This sect is defined and discussed by anthropologist William R. Bascom in an article, The Focus of Cuban Santeria. Santeria is defined simply as the worship of African dieties. The African elements of santeria, or Lucumi, as they are called in Cuba, mainly derive from Yoruba, the Nigerian origin of the cult. Bascom enumerates the specific features of santeria: "...the syncretism of African deities with Catholic saints...the African pattern of possession which has attracted interest as a psychological phenomenon; and the retention of animal sacrifices and African drumming, singing and dancing in New World Negro ritual." The deities of santeria, which are equated with Catholic saints, and the men and women who work with them, are called santeros.67

Mendieta's work employs images with reflect her interest in all these phenomena.
B. TRANSFORMATION AND PERFORMANCE

Figure 20. Ana Mendieta, Flower Transformation. 1974. Mixed media.
Mendieta distinguishes between two kinds of body art in her work. Documented body art, like the Rapepieces, have the detailed accuracy of photography and the static presence of a painted still-life. In contrast to these static records, the works that she calls transformations are ritualistic dramatizations of a metamorphosis. Mendieta's use of body transformation as an art process is seen in three specific works: Flower Transformation, 1974, (Figure 20); Bird Transformation, 1972, (Figure 21); and Visible Woman, 1975, (Figure 22). These slidepieces all share common characteristics in form and content. A centralized frontal figure in each piece has been partially obscured by the addition of other objects or paint. As a result, the image of Mendieta's body has been transformed from literal figurative depiction into a figurative depiction, and a figurative vehicle which carries a broader meaning.

The format of Flower Transformation, 1974, (Figure 20), is organized to focus attention on the central female figure, which is portrayed at a point of diffusion into its environment.

Lucy Lippard describes it in her recent publication, From the Center, "...as a symbol of regeneration...she is nude in an ancient stone grave in Mexico, covered by tiny white flowers that seem to be growing from her body..." The flowers partially covering the body, and also surrounding it at the edges of the photograph, leave the viewer to surmise that the form may soon disappear completely into the earth. As a juxtaposition of animate and inanimate forms in the process of changing, Flower Transformation is a spiritual symbol of rebirth for Mendieta.
The plant and flower symbols of regeneration in Mendieta's transformation are replaced, in an earlier performance, with feathers symbolizing the sacrifice of birds in santeria ritual. Specific parallels can be seen here between Mendieta's use of body art as a ritual to transcend her ideas and move them into reality, and the efforts of the Cuban cult ritual. In *Bird Transformation*, 1972, (Figure 21), the artist's body is covered entirely with white feathers, with the exception of the eyes, hands and feet. In this piece, Mendieta says, she has been transformed into the "white cock of voodoo."  

Voodoo rites play an important role in the santeria cults in Cuba. George Eaton Simpson, a noted anthropologist, describes the belief system of the vodunists in an article concerning Caribbean cultures. "A majority of the vodunists are Catholics, but...the old traditions persist, the African gods are still real to them, and they cannot rely solely on the Church." The practitioner of voodoo in santeria cults, or the santeros, syncretize African and Spanish Catholic religion by shifting the focus of attention from images of Catholic saints to sacred stones, believed to contain the real power of the saints. Bascom relates that the power in these stones is conceived by the santeros as "an invisible fluid, whose force at times can be felt." He further explains that the power of the stones is activated in santeria ritual with a form of baptism of herbs and blood of sacrificial animals, usually a white or black rooster cock. These sacrificial birds of the santeria are used with one of two purposes in mind: to ask a favor or gift from the saints or gods, the santero will sacrifice a white cock; and to make a pact or
Figure 21. Ana Mendieta, Bird Transformation, 1972. Mixed media.
agreement, a black bird will be killed. The bird symbol of sacrifice in santeria ritual compares with Mendieta's **Bird Transformation**. As she presents the image of herself as a white sacrificial bird, she indicates a link to her Cuban background. She says: "In my work I am in a sense reliving my heritage. My sources are memories, images, experiences and beliefs that have left their mark on me." She says that her familiarity with santeria and voodoo ritual came from native servants who held these beliefs, and who were employed in her Catholic home in Cuba.

As Mendieta's **Bird Transformation** is linked to Cuban religious sources, her transformation entitled **Visible Woman**, 1975, (Figure 22), is satirically tied to feminist ideas that stress a new understanding of women and their uniquely feminine viewpoints and problems. Specifically she said her motivation for the piece was her memory of an experience, that all women have, the onset of menstruation. In childhood, she reacted with revulsion to the grotesque and stilted explanation of this process given to all American schoolgirls. The diagrams used to describe puberty alarmingly exposed and depersonalized the interior female organs. Now by imposing a diagram of the interior structure of the female anatomy on her skin, she indicates her belief that the workings of female physiology are greatly misunderstood by people in general; and that by illustrating this unique physical character with her living human form, she tries to focus attention on the immediacy of these misconceptions, and the sociological problems they create, by externalizing them. **Visible Woman** then, is Mendieta's only well-known participation in the polemics of the women's movement.
Figure 22. Ana Mendieta, Visible Woman, 1975. Mixed-media.
C. SILUETA SERIES

As an artist, Ana Mendieta sought to challenge the notion of an artist's role and the boundaries of art. Her work often involved her own body as a canvas and the natural world as her medium. The Silueta Series, for example, is a collection of works that explore the relationship between the human body and the landscape. The completion of the Silueta Series in 1975 marked a significant moment in her career, signaling a new direction in her work.

Figure 23. Ana Mendieta, Silueta I, 1975. Fireworks, Bamboo.
In the midst of her transformation and performance pieces in 1975, Mendieta began a group of works entitled, Silueta Series, the Spanish "silueta" translated as silhouette. The completion of Silueta I, 1975, (Figure 23), marked the beginning of an important change in her imagery. At this point she replaced the living human body, used simultaneously as subject and medium in her earlier works, with inanimate objects of nature in the shape of a human form. This figurative form as subject was set aflame, making the natural element of fire the new medium. As a result, the figure's presence was suggested or implied rather than described.

The Implications of Silueta I and Silueta Series are significant for the development of Mendieta's imagery. The shift in subject and medium from her own body to natural objects and nature allows her, as she says, to draw and paint with natural elements. The figurative images she creates in this manner can now be altered and manipulated freely to extend visual meaning through broader associations, in contrast to the earlier living body images, which were limited by their inherent static form and explicit nature. The silueta are also, for the most part, sexless; the limitations of sex and sexuality as art content are removed. However, the imagery of the Silueta Series subtly maintains a reference to the notion of the power of mother-nature, as it is selected and presented by Mendieta from the elements of nature. The figure is now merged with nature in a greater unity.

The first step toward the unification of figure and nature in the Silueta Series was the disappearance of the living body from Silueta I in 1975. In another attempt to bind the human figure to...
its natural environment, Mendieta used a more literal approach to achieve this unity. In Silueta II, 1976, (Figure 24), the figure is visually and physically attached to the trunk of a large tree. The surface texture and color of the body has been modified to simulate its background, producing the effect of one cohesive form. The gesture of the figure with upraised arms implies a religious meaning by the artist. Erich Neumann explains this symbolic posture "The 'specific activity' of the upraised arms is unquestionably religious, whether we interpret it as prayer, invocation, or magical conjuring. Primary in all probability is the 'magical significance' of this posture, which was later retained as an attitude of prayer. And it must be remembered that the original magical intention to move and influence the upper powers is preserved in almost all prayer."79 The identification of this body posture with the tree in Silueta II represents a transition in the imagery of the Silueta Series from the living body as subject to later images of hollow silhouettes.

The Silueta Series was further developed by the artist in 1977 with five additional pieces made of earth materials, and taking the form of burial mounds and graves. She mentions these siluetas in connection with the imagery in her work that deals with death: what happens to the body after death, and the fact that it becomes one with nature again.80

Three of the five burial pieces are sculptured in high relief on the ground. This process helps to generalize the delineation of the image. In Silueta III, 1977, (Figure 25), a large mound of earth forms a natural sarcophagus or tomb. The surface of the knoll is
incised with a simplified image of a human figure, with the head in greater relief than the rest of the body. In *Silueta IV*, 1977, (Figure 26), the earth mound itself becomes a figurative sculpture. In this piece, the entire body is clearly delineated and emphasized with red linear markings extending from the head to the feet. *Silueta V*, 1977, (Figure 27), is constructed of leaves and branches which outline a figure on a mound of sand.

These three images, *Silueta III, IV and V*, exist in positive form above the surface of the ground to which they are attached. The two other burial pieces are carved into the earth and exist in a negative space. The image in *Silueta VI*, 1977, (Figure 28), is stylized to the point of abstraction with heavy concentric lines indicating only the outer perimeter of a reclining figure. The figure in *Silueta VII*, 1977, (Figure 29), is shaped in shallow negative relief in the earth and outlined with one continuous contour.

The five burial siluetas are references made by the artist to the universal theme of rebirth through transformation. The simplicity of the physical process of figure delineation forbids a development of a detailed likeness of a particular individual, and project an amorphous image of the universal human being. The identification of this image with graves and burial mounds result in a union of human and nature, stressing the cycle of life.
Figure 25. Ana Mendieta, Silueta III, 1977. Mixed-media.
Figure 29. Ana Mendieta, Silueta VII, 1977, Mixed-media.
CONCLUSION

Where the rebellious sixties created a cultural, political and social vacuum through destruction of older norms, creative people of the seventies sought replacement values. These searches began to focus simultaneously on group and individual needs in socio-cultural and political fields. One of the major results of this focus in the last two decades is the women's movement. From its radical political beginnings in the early sixties, the movement has broadened in scope to encompass social and cultural ideas, thus fostering the development of women's art. With new freedoms and opportunities provided by the women's art movement, many women began to receive recognition for their efforts in the arts, and found support within the group to pursue personal aims.

The choice of artists to serve in this thesis, as representatives of the mainstream of feminine art consciousness hinged on the multifaceted nature of women's art in the 1970's. While all of the most effective works aim at a definition of the present by means of the past through historical implication, current developments have taken a variety of broad forms: the color field painting of Helen Frankenthaler, the patterned abstractions of Joan Snyder, the photo-realism of Joan Semmel and Audrey Flack, the organic sculpture of Mary Frank, and the conceptual-performance art of Christiane Mobus and Carolee Schneemann.

Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta are closely allied to this major mainstream of contemporary women's art. At the same time, their works serve to represent a natural dichotomy existing in all feminine artworks. One trend places the emphasis on mental concepts stimulated
by timely psychological and socio-political theory, producing images which de-emphasize aesthetic formal values; the second stresses a relationship between content and formal concerns, utilizing new forms to emphasize a universal content.

Edelson and Mendieta are instrumental in the perpetuation of these two trends in women's art, and their works constitute the basis of current developments in this context. Edelson relies on psychology, sociology and history with political overtones to explain her views. Her images of women's position in society are presented as clearly recognizable content, without stress on form for form's sake. In contrast, Mendieta's images are evocative in their static presence, universal theme, and formal presentation, and call for an intuitive and sensory response from the audience.

Although Edelson and Mendieta diverge frequently in their approaches to content, form and methodology, they are equally inventive. Both depend heavily on the use of ritual and myth, both extend their concern beyond the immediate art object, and both provide an effective stimulus for women's art. Brief though their careers have been in a historical sense, both artists have demonstrated continual growth. Their concepts have evolved from simple beginnings through several stages of increasing complexity. Like the women's art movement itself they were first stimulated by ideas and issues which were public, and from their viewpoints, obviously threatening. They have moved steadily from dependence upon a descriptive statement of immediate social causes to a more subtle understanding of the underlying forces directing all of mankind, remaining in the state of flux necessary for the production of new works.
FOOTNOTES


4 Ibid., p. 12.

5 Ibid.

6 Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 81.

7 Stylistic and thematic developments in the works of both artists indicate these new symbols.


10 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, Artist's Studio, New York, New York, 28 January 1978.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


16 The combination of historical awareness with subjective viewpoints has greatly affected contemporary women's art.

64


20 Interview with John Pickering, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, (Subject of psychological symbols according to Jung), 22 January 1978.

21 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January 1978.


23 Ibid., p. 65.

24 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January 1978.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Telephone interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 3 March 1978.


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 258.

33 Ibid., p. 164.

34 Ibid., p. 216.

35 Ibid., p. 252.

36 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January, 1978.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.


42 Ibid.

43 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January, 1978.


46 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January, 1978.


49 Ibid.

50 Interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 28 January 1978.


53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Written correspondence with Ana Mendieta, November 1977.

56 Telephone interview with Ana Mendieta, February 1978.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 137.


61 Interview with Juan Barrosso, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, March, 1978.
63 Ibid.
65 Written correspondence with Ana Mendieta, November, 1977.
67 Ibid.
69 Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 137.
73 Ibid.
74 Interview with Juan Barrosso, March 1978.
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