National College of Art & Design,

Department of Communication Design, School of Design.

# You Ain’t My Mother, Earth: The Impact of Artistic Representations of Women and Nature.

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Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelors in Graphic Design With Critical Cultures, 2022.

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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**Date:** 1/2/22

**Table of Contents**

**List of Illustrations**

Figure 6: Ana Mendieta (1977) *Untitled (Tree of Life series)* [Photograph]. Galerie Lelong, New York. Available at: https://wsimag.com/southbank-centre/artworks/19697 (Accessed: 29 January 2022).

Figure 7: Lee Bul (1998) *Cyborg W1.* [Cast silicone, polyurethane filling, paint pigment] Available at: https://ropac.net/artists/31-lee-bul/works/11870-lee-bul-cyborg-w1-1998/ (Accessed 27 January 2022).

Figure 8: LaToya Ruby Frazier (2016) *Flint is Family.* [Photograph] Available at: https://latoyarubyfrazier.com/work/flint-is-family/ (Accessed 29 January 2022).

## Introduction

> All human beings are natural beings. That may seem like an obvious fact, yet we live in a culture that is founded on the repudiation and domination of nature. This has a special significance for women because, in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be closer to nature than men. This gives women a particular stake in ending the domination of nature — in healing the alienation between human and nonhuman.
>
> (King, 1989, p.18)

In shaping our current understanding of 'Mother Nature', what role has art played in this process? Is an ecofeminist perspective relevant and useful for contemporary art practice? It is the intention of this research to examine the connection between women and nature as presented by dominant Western cultures. The implications of this connection will be discussed with particular reference to a number of artworks illustrated throughout the paper. Ecofeminism and its critiques will be discussed through the body/land art of Ana Mendieta and her contemporaries. This will be followed by a discussion of posthumanist, ecological and intersectional ideas and practises which will be explored through an ecofeminist perspective in relation to contemporary artists and theorists.

## Chapter 1: Mother Nature and Other Representations of Women in Art History.

From early civilisations through to the present day, women have been directly associated with nature and the idea of Mother Earth persists. What are the implications of this association and where did it evolve from? How have our ideas of feminine nature changed over time? In her book *The Death of Nature*, the ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant argues that historically Western society has identified women in literature, philosophy and art with nature, the body and the physical whereas men have been identified with culture, reason and the mind. Prior to the development of the Western world, many early agricultural societies worshipped the great goddess figure who embodied nature's cycles of birth and death. The great goddess symbolised the female power to advance the species. Therefore, the earth came to symbolise and be understood as a mother figure. Merchant argues that this representation restricted the action of humans on the earth: "One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body" (1980, p.4). It was considered sacrilegious to carry out acts of destruction against nature. The land became synonymous with and symbolic of the womb, minerals and metals grew in the uterus, mines were compared to the vagina and metalworking was "the human hastening of the birth of the living metal in the artificial womb of the furnace". Miners offered sacrifices, practised abstinence and fasting before "violating the sacredness of the living earth." Smiths, who were responsible for the "birth" of the metal through metallurgy, were granted the role of the shaman in rituals and their tools were believed to hold magical powers. (Merchant, 1980, p.4).

This great goddess figure can be seen in artworks such as the Minoan Serpent Goddess (ca.1600 B.C.) found in  Crete (Figure 1). This sculpture depicts either a goddess or priestess, her breasts are exposed and her arms are raised in a commanding gesture as she holds two snakes. The snakes suggest regeneration as they cyclically shed and grow new skin. They also indicate the presence of water and therefore can be seen as a "life-generating force", (Matlitsky, 1992).

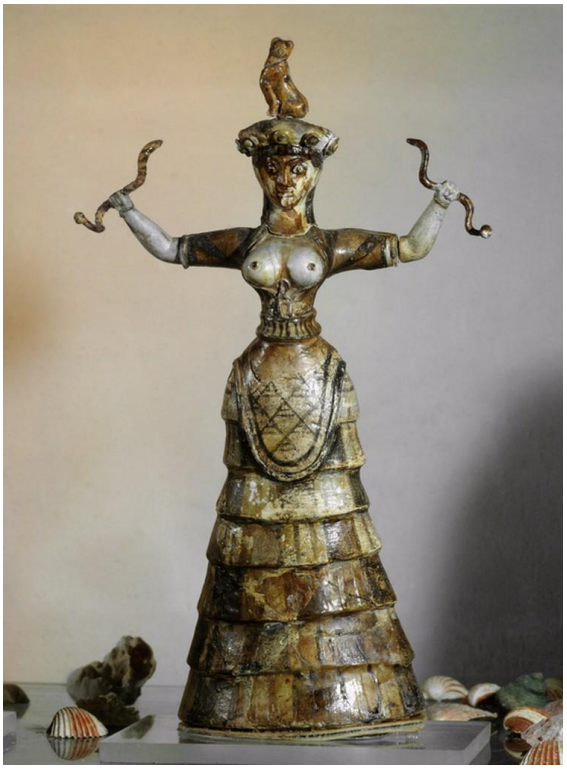

Figure 1: (1700-1400 BCE), *Figure of snake goddess*.

A further example of the connection between nature and women which developed from the earth-mother image was what Merchant calls the Arcadian image. Pastoral poetry and art from the Renaissance saw nature as a refuge from urban life. Art from this time expressed a desire to return to the golden age of the uncorrupted Garden of Eden. Often depicted as a peaceful garden or rural landscape, nature was a beautiful, passive mother who was nurturing and providing.

The Arcadian image meditated on the beauty of nature away from the violence of the city, it was an idyllic portrayal of nature: “wild animals, thorns, snakes, and vultures were nowhere to be found” (Merchant, 1980, p.7). This virginal nature is personified in paintings such as Lucas Cranach’s, *The Nymph of the Spring*. Here the nymph is represented in the woods and meadows that surround her, her bow and arrows borrowed from the goddess Diana have been passively laid aside and she herself lies invitingly in a flower bed while doves and other animals feed on the edge of her stream. Sandro Botticelli’s, *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* also depict this virgin earth mother, dressed in flowers to symbolise fertility. Merchant argues that this sort of imagery contains the implication that nature when cultivated can be used as a commodity and resource:

> Nature, tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of the men distraught by the demands of the urban world and the stresses of the marketplace. It depended on a masculine perception of nature as a mother and a bride whose primary function was to comfort, nurture and provide for the wellbeing of the male. In pastoral imagery, both women and nature are subordinate and essentially passive.
>
> (Merchant, 1980, p.9)

The pastoral image of nature was created as an antidote to the pressures of urban society. It represents the human need for nature but by depicting nature as passive and manageable it also highlights the possibility of its use and manipulation.

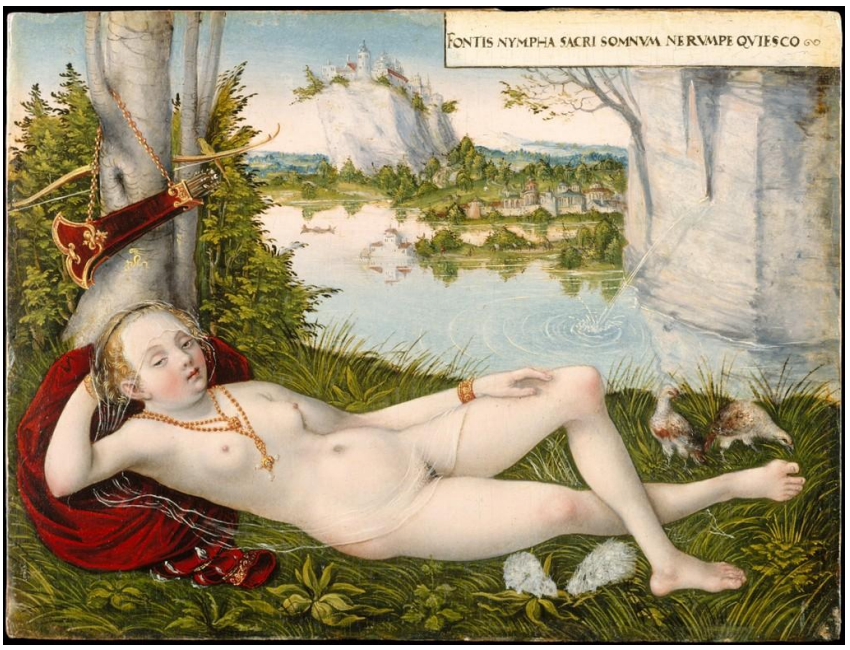


Figure 2: Lucas Cranach (ca. 1545-50) *Nymph of the Spring*.

The organic theory saw nature and the earth as a nurturing mother who provides the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. A contrasting depiction of nature as female was also present. This image was chaotic and uncontrollable**:** "Nature that could render violence, storms, droughts and general chaos. " (Merchant, 1980, p.2).

Feminist philosopher Alicia H. Puleo also points to this portrayal of the feminine natural world as the archetype of the woman as fallen nature. The monotheistic religions saw man as the model of the proper human. The woman was seen as "an inferior, subservient being, a defective copy of the original intended by God. Whether she belonged to our species was even questioned." (Puleo, 2012, p.351) The idea that it was a woman that introduced evil into the world is shared by many cultures, from Greek mythology to Amazonian traditions. This image is seen in particular with the birth of Western civilisation in the figures of Pandora, whose curiosity led her to open the box that contained all the evil of the world, and of Eve who had a similar story. Religious men in the Middle Ages argued that because Eve, the first woman, "had had sexual rapports with the Devil, and thus made Adam a sinner" women for

that reason deserved to endure suffering and be entirely submissive. (Puleo, 2012, p.351) The woman as fallen nature can also be seen in the subject of the femme fatale, whether this was Lilith, Eve, Delilah, Judith, Jezebel, Herodias, Salome, mermaids, sphinxes or vampires, who were all equally as beautiful as they were evil. Gustave Moreau's painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (Figure 3) depicts more than just a "female slaughtering centuries of males", the sphinx represents feminine nature at odds with the masculine embodiment of reason/culture, it depicts "nature at enmity with human intellect." (Woodring, 1989, p.252-253)

Figure 3: Gustave Moreau (1864) *Oedipus and the Sphinx.*

Both of these images, the nurturing mother and the fallen woman, are reliant on the construction of and connection of nature with the female sex and are therefore human projections onto the external world. These ideas would be replaced by those of mechanism, domination and mastery over nature which have become core concepts of the modern Western world. This organic way of viewing nature, of seeing it as a living mother, was replaced by the mechanical way of viewing nature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during the Scientific Revolution. Nature was reconstructed as a dead and passive object to be dominated and controlled by humans. Although the image of the earth mother did not entirely vanish it was substituted by new controlling imagery of a woman. Human domination over nature was to be achieved by using science to reveal nature's secrets. Scientists like Francis Bacon spoke out in favour of mastering and managing the earth. Nature, personified as female, is represented in Louis-Ernest Barrias's statue *Nature Unveiling Herself Before Science* as coyly taking off her clothing and 'exposing' herself to science. (Figure 4) This view of dominating nature in order to discover its secrets is seen through an undeniably sexual metaphor. Nature, once seen as an "active teacher" and parental figure, becomes a mindless, submissive body. (Merchant, p.189-190, 1980).

Figure 4: Louis-Ernest Barrias (1899), *Nature Unveiling Herself Before Science.*

This scientific and mechanistic viewpoint sees nature as “neutral, indifferent and meaningless”. Instead of the sum of many parts, of “independent others" whose differences and power should be respected, it is seen as a “homogeneous nullity” that is missing “the superiority of human consciousness, human rationality, human creativity and freedom”. (Plumwood, 1993, p.110) Nature under the mechanistic view lacks its own agency and autonomy, which therefore allows humans to use it for their own purposes; “If it lacks its own goals and direction, it can impose no constraints on our treatment of it”. (Plumwood, 1993, p.110) It is not a surprise that this perception of nature took hold and continues to dominate with the rise of capitalism, which has turned nature into a commodity without any moral or social restraint on available resources.

Feminist and activist Vanda Shiva argues that modern science is a patriarchal activity that has been consciously gendered. As science came to see nature as a “woman to be raped”, ideologies of gender were recreated. Science, which was seen as an exclusively male venture, provided the support for the division of gender as it was based on the domination of both ‘female’ nature and the female sex. With the emergence of industrial capitalism, patriarchy was a political need that acted as the new scientific and technological power. As the ideology of science allowed for the exploitation of nature, it also legitimised men’s authority and women’s dependency. The ideologies of science and gender reinforced each other as science and masculinity were associated with domination over nature and femininity. (Shiva, 1988, p.17) Science not only allowed for the exploitation of nature, it also reinforced the patriarchy as a scientific and technological power to dominate both women and nature.

## Chapter 2: Feminism and Nature in the 20th Century

Feminism has always been concerned with how women have historically been related to nature. This relation has been seen as oppressive by feminists, wherein patriarchal society, women are deemed closer to nature and biologically inferior to men with male superiority being seen as ‘natural’. The concept of nature has for centuries been used to enforce gender and describe sex – Western feminism attempts to deconstruct and transcend this connection, argue the difference between gender and sex, as well as advance women’s agency, autonomy and claims to culture which has ‘naturally’ been reserved for men. (Longenecker, 1997, p.1)

In her book, *The Second Sex*, feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir establishes gender as a social construction; “One is not born, but rather one becomes, a woman.” (1997, p. 283) With this phrase, de Beauvoir articulates the distinction between biological sex and the social and historical construction of gender, establishing that it is not nature but society that makes a woman. The long-held association of women with nature was seen to be the main source of misogyny, with de Beauvoir suggesting that one of the reasons women are considered inferior to men is that they are a part of the natural world: "woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the sap, the material beauty and soul of the world." (1997, p.278). Where men can separate themselves from the natural world to become subjective and transcendental, women, as they are the embodiment of nature, must be immanent and othered. (Alamio, 2000, p.3). From the 1950s and onwards, de Beauvoir’s writings inspired feminists to fight for the conceptual liberation of women from nature and of the feminine from the natural. They believed that this was a necessary political and theoretical step in the process of freeing women from their oppressed economic and social positions in patriarchal society. (Gersdorf, 2006, p.212)

As gender is a social construction, we must also recognise nature as a construction. To understand the construction of one, feminist philosopher Susan Griffin states that we must look at the construction of the other, as nature is often used to justify the fictions of gender and vice versa: "The equation is not that women equal nature, but that by understanding how and why women is associated with nature, one can decode many structures of injustice in Western society." (1997, p.220) In *Capitalism and the Web of Life*, Jason W. Moore writes that two natures exist. He states that the true nature which he refers to as 'the web of life' is "nature as us, as inside us, as around us. It is nature as a flow of flows. Put simply, humans make environments and environments make humans-and human organisation." Nature with a capital 'N' however, is the creation of capital, empire and science, it is "external, controllable, reducible". (2015, p.14) Moore traces all the dualisms of today; race, gender, sexuality, to the source of them all: the Nature/Society binary. He argues that this original dualism is "complicit in the violence of modernity at its core" (2015, p.16). Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood also traces these dualisms to the assumption that nature and reason/society/culture are distinct and mutually exclusive:

> The line of fracture between reason and nature runs deeply through the key concepts of western culture. In the contrast set, virtually everything on the 'superior' side can be represented as forms of reason, and virtually everything on the underside can be represented as forms of nature. A gendered reason/nature contrast appears as the overarching, most general, basic and connecting form of these dualisms, capable of new nuances and inflections and a great variety of elaboration and development.
>
> (1993, p.44)

Ecofeminism argues that the environmental issues we face today are both an ecological and feminist task because the exploitation and destruction of the earth which has led to ecological problems are due to "a patriarchal environmental ethic" that views land as woman. This patriarchal land ethic has resulted from "the ways in which gender, race, and class come into place in the definition of nature and what is natural." Ecofeminists also state that the image of

nature as a motherly/virginal female is essential to maintaining the hierarchical reasoning that justifies the oppression of a variety of 'others' in patriarchal culture by ranking them closer to nature or by calling their way of life either natural or unnatural. (Legler, 1997, p.288)

The term ecofeminism finds its origin in a 1974 essay by french feminist activist Francoise d'Eaubonne titled *Le Temps de L'Ecofeminisme*. Where de Beauvoir suggested that women's liberation came through separation from nature, d'Eaubonne defined the liberation of nature from Western society's mechanistic control as the key to women's "autonomy and control of her destiny" (cited in Gersdorf, 2006, p.212). Ecofeminism today exists within three main discourses: politics, spirituality and philosophy.

The spirituality position on ecofeminism, sometimes called spiritual or cultural feminism, focused on embracing women's connection to nature as a source of celebration and power. The connection, whether it was social, biological or spiritual, was seen as a sign of women's greater ability to care for nature and as a moral call to steward and protect the earth. (Longenecker, 1997, p.2) An aspect of cultural feminism was the Goddess worship movement that arose in the mid to late 1970s inspired by texts including Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and Merlin Stone's *When God Was A Woman* among others. Text like these introduced the belief that the worship of Goddesses dates back to Paleolithic times, predating world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. with closer associations to what would be considered the 'primal' religions such as shamanism. (Rountree, 1999, p.140). Spiritual feminists claim that this replacement of goddesses with a father/transcendental god marked the rise of patriarchy, male domination, war and the devaluation and destruction of nature. (Taylor, 1997, p.228).

The Goddess Movement appealed to visual artists in particular as a collection of non-patriarchal imagery existed in the perceived feminine forms of prehistoric sculptures,

cave paintings and stone monuments which were assumed to be priestesses and Goddesses. These artefacts became evidence of the existence of matriarchal ancient societies that served as inspiration for the artists. The belief in immanence was another aspect that made the movement appealing to artists as it meant recognising the divine in all life forms as well as honouring nature and the body. Artists often used nudity to suggest this divinity. Cultural feminism embraced ritual and performance which also appealed to artists who were interested in bringing new meaning and significance to avant-garde performance beyond that of the art world. (Klein, 2009, p.580-581). As performance art was a relatively new medium and as it came without the long history of male-dominated traditions of other art forms like painting or sculpture, it became a tool to reclaim the body from "patriarchal ontological constriction" (Ferrando, 2016, p.6)

Artist Mary Beth Edelson's 1974 performance *Woman Rising/Spirit* embodies the ideas of cultural feminism and the Goddess movement. Edelson took several photographs to document the performance which took place in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The photographs depict the artist partially naked, standing with her arms raised. The ritualistic pose is reminiscent of that of ancient statues (Figure 1) and is meant to invoke the power of the Great Goddess. She has painted concentric circles around her nipples and stomach and a third eye on her forehead. She has also inscribed radial lines on the photographic negative itself. (Figure 5) Describing the images, Edelson writes:

> These photographic images were defining images – not who I am but who we are. These images were presented aggressively as sexuality, mind and spirit in one body. I was summoning the Goddess to make house calls, talking to Goddess with the body, and ending the dialogue with being. These rituals were photographic evidence of the manifestations and recognition of a powerful feminine force: Everywoman.
>
> (1980, cited in Blocker, 1999, p.59).

In the performance, Edelson embodies a personification of female power in the form of the goddess,  writer Jane Blocker identifies the photograph as “evidence of a spectre, of a waver and insubstantial presence, an untenable unity called *Everywoman*.” (Blocker, 1999, p.59).

Edelson’s Everywoman character represents both an individual and a group, when Edelson represents herself as Everywoman she presents Woman as a single unified essence but also as a diverse group. The power of the character of Everywoman lies in Edelson’s representation of Woman as both an individual and as a group. She performs the character of Everywoman as a theatrical, fictional role; the character is costumed by the artificial lines radiating from her head and painted on her body. The lines both draw our attention to the power of the character that they mean to represent and away from the identity of the performer herself. (Blocker, 1999, p.61)

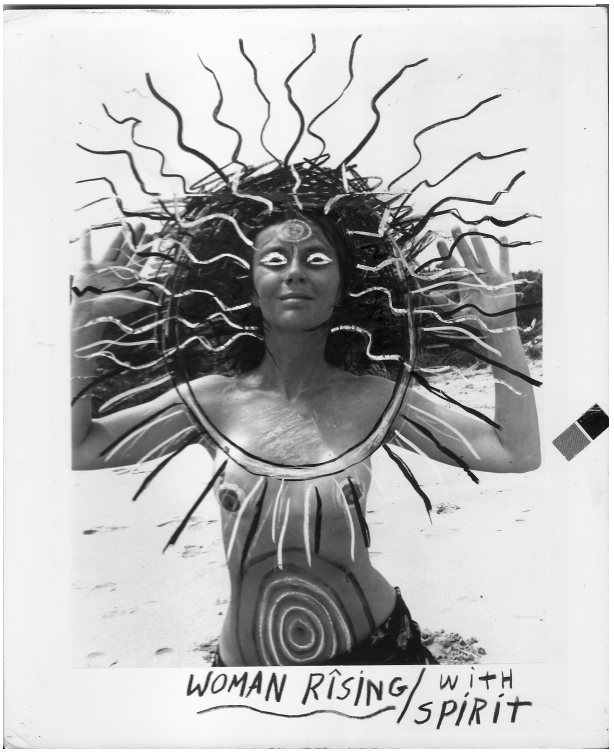


Figure 5: Mary Beth Edelson (1974) *Woman Rising/Spirit.*

This image is very similar to that produced by Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-born artist exiled to the United States in her youth, in her 1997 *Tree of Life* series (Figure 6). Like Edelson, Mendieta also stands naked in a frontal pose with raised-up arms as she represents a goddess, this image may however represent nature even more directly than Edelson's as she has covered her body in mud and stands against the wide trunk of a large tree. Unlike Edelson's 'artificial' drawn lines which indicate radiating lines of power, the power of Mendieta's image comes from the enormity of the tree behind her and her near-disappearance into nature. Mendieta also presents a unified image of woman, and similar to Edelson's costume of drawn lines, Mendieta is costumed in mud but the way she is staged does not revive a particular role as Edelson has. As Mendieta was strongly critical of those who imagined Everywoman as white, by colouring herself with mud, Mendieta insists "that her audience see a color and an identity whose threatening potential it would otherwise like to forget." (Blocker, 1999, p.62). While Mendieta, like Edelson, performs an essentialist image of a woman, the former's representation of essence is a rejection of white femininity.

Both works contain elements of essentialism – something that has been heavily critiqued. Essentialism is the belief that "certain of an object's properties are necessary to it", for gender essentialism this might mean that there are certain properties or 'essences' that make up a woman. For example, these essences might be; being nurturing, having a uterus or being closer to nature. "Generic gender essentialism holds that there is a commonality of experience or a characteristic that unites all women, a core of properties that constitutes the generic Woman and that must be satisfied if something is to count as a woman." (Witt, 1995, p.322). Critics after seeing goddess worship and cultural feminism dismissed ecofeminism as a whole as an exclusively essentialist equation of women and nature despite the diversity of arguments and non-essentialist standpoints within ecofeminism. (Gaard, 2011, p.31). For example, ecofeminism from a political philosophy perspective explicitly recognises that the

oppression of women and nature are linked “conceptually, historically, materially but not essentially” (Mallory 2010, p. 309), yet all ecofeminism is still associated with the essentialism of spiritual feminism.

Ecofeminism in Edelson’s representation of Everywoman (and the practice of spiritual/cultural feminism), however, is an example of essentialism as she uses her individual identity to perform a “collectivity that is achieved in spite of difference.” (Blocker, 1999, p.61) By comparing Edelson’s work with Mendieta’s, we question the essentialism at play:

> In looking at Edelson’s performance after having seen Mendieta’s work, we are more likely to ask, “What does it mean for Mary Beth Edelson to perform Everywoman?” And we are more likely to answer that it makes whiteness universal, that it allows us to avoid the racial assumptions that are made up in the name of woman.
>
> (Blocker, 1999, p. 63)

Figure 6: Ana Mendieta (1977) Untitled (*Tree of Life* series).

Just as all of ecofeminism was dismissed as essentialist because of the Goddess's Movements association with it, Mendieta's work as a whole was similarly categorised and dismissed. Mendieta's *Silhueta* series became absorbed into the (largely white and US centred) goddess movement despite the fact that Mendieta had been exploring prehistoric art and spirituality prior to her having any knowledge of the movement. Mendieta did not identify herself with it and she distanced herself from the association by removing the raised arms of her later *silhuetas*: "The reason why I had the hands up was because it was like [...] a way of going into the earth. It didn't have any other connotation but what I found happened was that some critics started writing about my work very specifically, in terms of the Great Goddess, and I didn't want my work to be looked at in terms of the Great Goddess, and I didn't want my work to be looked at in such a specific kind of way." (Mendieta, 1981, cited in Rosenthal, 2013, p.208). The goddess represented in Mendieta's work is not the homogenised unity of the Great Goddess as the artist was interested in *specific* goddesses within specific cultures from a number of different histories. (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, p.32) Mendieta aligned herself with the Third World feminist movement which was much more concerned with intersectional issues (decolonisations, immigrant justice, racism, homophobia, poverty, workplace organising, etc.) than it was with the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate of white feminist movements. (Bryan-Wilson, p.34). It could be argued that Mendieta's work falls more into the philosophical side of ecofeminism, which critically analyses the conceptual history of the nature/culture dualism, than the spiritual incarnation. Mendieta's *Silheuta* series were a number of performances where she impressed her own bodily form into the land as part of the practice she called 'earth-body sculpture'. Usually, she would stage and photograph the process of the *silueta* either washing, burning, melting away or otherwise reintegrating back into the land by elemental forces. In *The Ethics of Earth Art*, Amanda

Boethzkes argues against the critique that these performances were essentialist gestures that merely reproduced the patriarchal association of women and nature. Boethzkes states that biological essentialism is in actuality refuted by Mendieta as these performances reveal to us "the unstable signification of the body" which is achieved through as the elementals disrupt the form of the *silhueta:*

> In performing the contingency of the body and the earth, Mendieta neither anthropomorphizes the earth nor naturalizes the body. To the contrary: through their contact, the body becomes alien and points toward the impenetrability of the elemental substance that fills out and reshapes it.
>
> (Boethzkes, 2010, p. 160).

By revealing the interdependence of the body and the environment, Mendieta's work refuses to play into mechanistic views of nature that act, as Plumwood calls, a "hyperseperation of the other".(1993, p.137) Instead the body under influence of the elements becomes an ephemeral and organic concept which is constantly shifting and evolving.

## Chapter 3: Nature and Gender in the Anthropocene

We are now in a new era where science can no longer justify the separation of nature and culture. The earth has been radically changed by human activity: we are currently leaving the geological epoch of the Holocene which has provided human cultures with largely stable climatic conditions to expand and develop over roughly 11,000 years and we are now entering the Anthropocene, a geological epoch fundamentally influenced by human actions. In this new geological era, "humans are no longer acting against the backdrop of an unchangeable natural system, but rather are profoundly intertwined in its structure and impacting both the immediate and distant future." (Renn, 2020, p.20)

The rise of agriculture and deforestation, the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, coral reef loss, soil erosion, rapid rates of extinction of life-forms and the growth of human population are all effects caused by human activities that stratigraphers and geologists are investigating in determining whether or not the Anthropocene qualifies as a new geological epoch. (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p.4)

The beginning of this geological period is widely debated, but there are three main positions on the subject. The first theory is that the Anthropocene began eight thousand years ago with the rise of agriculture and the deforestation which followed would have led to an increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Another theory points to the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which not only irradiated the soil at these sites but also led to the 'Great Acceleration' which was the post WWII spike in population, technological development and consumption. The Dutch chemist Paul J. Crutzen who first popularised the term Anthropocene suggested that it began with the invention of the steam engine in the late-eighteenth century which marked the beginning of the rise of carbon dioxide emissions

that can be seen in ice-core samples. (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p.5) This of course was the beginning of the industrial revolution which evolved from the scientific revolution of the modern era where the nature and culture dualism took hold. It is ironic that in the process of man identifying himself as a subject of reason and distancing himself from the object of nature, he has solidified the connection through geological impact: “the Anthropocene makes the modern gesture of separation between Nature and the historical subject a process inseparable from the erosion of the ground on which it was enacted.” (Normand, 2015, p.65) With the radically damaging impact of human activity on the earth, nature and culture can no longer be separated in the age of the Anthropocene.

Sceptical of the essentialism within spiritual feminism and ecofeminism, postmodernist feminist Donna Haraway declared “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (1991, p.181). Harraway proposed the cyborg as the image of an “ironic political myth” which offers the opportunity of transcending the dualisms of Western culture which are used to justify the domination of women, people of colour, nature and anyone else in the category of ‘other’. The cyborg blurs the boundaries of human/animal which acts towards the larger aim of breaking the nature/culture divide and other dualisms that ground systems of domination. As the cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism, it merges nature with culture into one body “blurring the lines between them and eliminating the validity of essentialist understandings of human nature”, this includes specific roles assigned to the sexes according to differences in biology. Haraway states that women must surrender their “ecofeminist position as comrades with nature” since cyborgs complicate the binaries of male and female. (1991, pp.149-170). As the Anthropocene shows us that nature and culture are undeniably interlinked and can no longer be separated, is the cyborg a useful way of understanding the human connection to nature beyond dualisms of gender?

Korean artist Lee Bul explores these ideas of posthumanism and post-gender in her work. Her series of *Cyborg* sculptures (1997–1998) are faceless and fractured female bodies. (Figure 7) Inspired by the glamorisation of the female body in Japanese manga and Korean anime culture, Bul's cyborgs provoke feelings of uneasiness more than feelings of desire. (Ferrando, 2016, p.8) In her own words, Bul states: "All I've done is push the logic of male fantasy to its darkest extremities" (Wetterwald, 2003, p.179). Contrasting with the clean and sleek white surfaces of these female cyborgs are Bul's monsters; in sculptural form they are fleshy piles that are reminiscent of entrails and in Bul's drawings they are multiplying hybrids of the octopus, insect, chrysalis, nerves endings, plant growth and organs. Bul's works intensify the tension between multiplying abnormality and the utopian promise of future technology through both the monster and the cyborg who have been appropriated by the artist to explore technology and female subjectivity. (Murray, 2008, p.38). These cyborgs and monstrous creatures disrupt the comfort zone between art object and viewer as they cause "messy aesthetic experiences" where the distinctions between nature, the body and technology are broken in the most unsettling fashion. (Murray, 2008, p.45)

Figure 7: Lee Bul (1998), *Cyborg W1*.

Haraway's cyborg, although it successfully resists essentialism, is based on a speculative and philosophical fiction that leaves a disconnect from the reality of the Anthropocene which sees women (particularly those in rural areas of the global South) disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation. Much of environmental and climate research remains ignorant to issues of gender, class, race and sexuality despite research demonstrating the increased vulnerability of women to environmental threats and the economic, social and political barriers that prevent women from being involved in environmental decision-making processes. (Kings, 2017, p.73)

An intersectional ecofeminism addresses essentialism without erasing the lived experiences of women who are currently affected by consequences of the Anthropocene. Intersectionality

can help to highlight the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, age and the effects that these can have on the discrimination, oppression and identity of women and the natural environment. Intersectionality provides ecofeminism with the opportunity to challenge its often exclusionary and essentialist past. (Kings, 2017, p.64)

In 2016, the American artist LaToya Ruby Frazier was commissioned to produce a photographic essay chronicling the water crisis devastating the predominantly black and working-class community of Flint, Michigan which began two years prior in 2014. She photographed three generations of women who dealt with the crisis on a daily basis; Shea Cobb, artist, activist and the local school bus driver, became the central focus of the photo series as well as her mother Ms. Renée and her eight year old daughter Zion. (Figure 8) The industrial pollution and the deadly legionella bacteria-contaminated water of Flint (caused by the corporation General Motors which has been cited as dumping chemicals in the Flint river for decades) were familiar to Frazier who had her own experience of environmental racism in her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock had the highest asthma and infant mortality rates in the country due to chemical emissions released by the United States Steel Corporation. Frazier and her mother both battled cancer and the autoimmune disorder lupus as a result, their 14-year collaboration, *The Notion of Family*, documents this struggle to survive these environmental injustices. (TED, 2019) Dr. Chelsea Mikael Frazier marks the *Flint is Family* photo series as an example of Black Feminist Ecological Thought at work. Coined by Dr. Frazier, Black Feminist Ecological Thought joins ecocriticism and Black feminism together to recognise how “the ecological harms of misogynoir and anti-Indigeneity affect Black women extremely intensely, and those effects also guarantee a despairing destruction for all directly responsible and/or indirectly complicit.” Frazier’s photographs remind us of the motivation behind Shea Cobb’s ecological ethics: a tender focus on

protecting her young daughter from the state-sanctioned ecological violence of the Flint water crisis's poisonous effects. (2020).

Figure 8: LaToya Ruby Frazier (2016) *Flint is Family*

Unlike the majority of the work that has been explored in this text, LaToya Ruby Frazier's work never represents nature as female or the women as nature, rather it addresses the women's experience and the ecological violence perpetrated against them by racist and patriarchal systems that both categorise themselves and the environment as 'other'. Frazier's work also helps us in understanding how the intersections of gender, race, and class can greatly affect who experiences the damaging effects of environmental and climate issues the most. As the crisis was ongoing and justice was not served for the people of Flint, Frazier said that she "could no longer idly stand by and wait for the government to do its job." She took the proceeds from her solo show Flint is Family and invested in the invention of Moses

West, an atmospheric water generator that has been able to provide 120,000 gallons of free, clean water to the Flint community. (TED, 2019) This shows us the political potential of art when it comes to environmental issues.

The intersectional ecofeminist approach in this case also shows us the potential that this perspective can have for political, environmental action. For this reason, one might believe that an ecological feminist approach would be of interest to more artists who are interested in environmental activism. However, after conducting interviews with two female art practitioners whose practises are concerned with ecological issues, I was surprised to find that neither identified themselves with ecofeminism. Cathy Fitzgerald, who describes her art practice as "ecosocial", stated that she considers herself more of an "Earthling" than an ecofeminist, although she does acknowledge that there is a "direct correlation between how nature just treated and women are treated". (McEntee, 2021)

Deirdre O'Mahony stated that she was "weary of the sacred gaze from an ecofeminist perspective" that "objectifies nature as other":

> I think we need to sensitise ourselves to the nonhuman in order to deal with what we're dealing with whether that means that you live with spiders in your house or you don't go spraying your fields with Roundup and in order to produce that sensitisation, I think this is where artists play a really key role. But in casting nature as a kind of feminine powerless other is really problematic. I'd like to think of nature as the non-human friend that we walk with side by side rather than up there on a pedestal somewhere. However, feminism shaped my practise in ways [...] particularly the politics of feminism shaped my practice and I think that the politics of feminism [...] that embrace diversity and difference, where the local is the global, how we live in our everyday is politically important and a powerful tool for change.
>
> (McEntee, 2021)

Here, I believe that O'Mahony's statement aligns itself with ideas of ecofeminism, her recognition of nature as "non-human friend" recalls Plumwood's assertion that we must

“recognise in the myriad forms of nature other beings—earth others—whose needs, goals and purposes must, like our own, be acknowledged and respected”. (1993, p.137). However, because of its associations with cultural feminism and Goddess worship, O’Mahony hesitates to connect her feminist views with her ecology.

Although ecofeminism calls for the liberation from the Western, capitalist systems which see nature as feminine and women as natural, ecofeminists may never overcome accusations of being “essentialist, ethnocentric, anti-intellectual goddess-worshipers” (Gaard, 2011, p.32)

## Conclusion

Art has shown us that the representation of nature and women go beyond just ‘Mother Nature’. Ecological feminism communicates to us that this association has had detrimental impacts on both women and nature. This paper has explored the implications of this connection with reference to a number of historical artworks. The emergence of ecofeminism, and the criticisms of essentialism against it, have been discussed in relation to the artworks of performance artists Ana Mendieta and Mary Beth Edelson. Finally, the future of ecology and feminism in the Anthropocene has been considered in relation to ideas of the cyborg and intersectionality. The nature/culture dualism in which modern Western culture is founded upholds the patriarchal systems in which women are dominated and oppressed. Artists throughout history have upheld, deconstructed and transcended women’s connection to nature.

## Appendices

**Interview 1:** Cathy Fitzgerald, 19 November 2021.

**Profile:** Cathy Fitzgerald is the Founder-Director of the global HAUMEA ONLINE Ecoliteracy Programme. She is also a consultant and international speaker on ecoliteracy, ESD transformational learning for the creative sector, as well as an ecological artist, advisor/mentor and researcher. Cathy's ongoing ecosocial art practice 'The Hollywood Forest Story' (begun 2008) was the basis for her Creative Practice-led PhD 'The Ecological Turn: Living Well with Forests to explain ecosocial art practice using a Guattari ecosophy-action research framework'.

**Interview questions:**

Can you elaborate on your ecosocial practice? How does your art practice exchange knowledge and new understandings of nature?

Do you find the association of women with nature (Mother Earth, Great Goddess, Gaia) limiting to you as a female art practitioner? Or is it something that you embrace/explore?

In your book, you talk about placing nature in the active voice and avoiding narration in your films as it centres the human. In what other ways do you liberate nature from the views of it being separated from culture/humans?

You reference ecofeminist Val Plumwood in your book and you've written about ecopornography, can you expand on how these writings influences/have influenced your art practice?

**Interview 2:** Deirdre O'Mahony, 22 November 2021.

**Profile:** Deirdre O'Mahony is a visual artist whose practice is informed by a deep interest in rural sustainability, farming, food security and rural/urban relationships. For more than two decades she has investigated the political ecology of rural places through public engagement, archival and moving image installation, critical writing and cultural production.

**Interview questions:**

Public engagement seems to be an important part of your practice. Can you explain why this is important to you?

From working in this area, what have you learned about the Irish perception of nature/the land? Does it differ between rural and urban communities?

From what I have observed, it seems like your work explores certain dualism, like nature/culture, rural/urban? What is it about these divides that interests you?

Is the connection between women and nature something you ever consider as a female artist who works with the environment and within the field of sustainability? Do you find this association negative or positive?

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