

**Body, site and material as metaphoric determinants in the  
representation of identity in Ana Mendieta's "Siluetta" series.**

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Dissertation: B. Tech. Fine Art

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September 2002



## **Acknowledgements.**

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A. Beukes

G. McPherson

V. Fourie

“Mother Earth” for her great inspiration.

## **INDEX.**

<b>1. Introduction.</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Identity in the work of Ana Mendieta.</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1. Cultural identity.	10
2.2. Sexual identity.	12
<b>3. “Body” as metaphoric determinant.</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. Body and/or disappearance.	17
<b>4. Site and material as metaphoric determinants.</b>	<b>20</b>
4.1. Mendieta’s choice of site.	20
4.2. Mendieta’s use of materials.	22
<b>5. Analysis of “Silueta” series.</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>6. Conclusion.</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7. Analysis of practical work.</b>	<b>35</b>
7.1. Fragile Object	36
7.2. Colony	37
7.3. Abstract Life	38
7.4. Dissection	39
7.5. Breakthrough	40
7.6. Imprint	41
<b>8. Bibliography.</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>9. Bibliography of illustrations.</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>10. List of illustrations.</b>	<b>47</b>
10.1. Additional Mendieta works.	47
10.2. “Silueta” series.	49

10.3. Practical component.

56



## 1. Introduction.

In an interview with writer Jane Blocker (Blocker 1999: 5) Ana Mendieta had been quoted describing her art as follows:

*“Through my art, I want to express the immediacy of life and the eternity of nature. It overflows my sensation of having been separated from the maternal stomach (nature). My art is the form of re-establishing the bonds that unite me with the universe. It is a return to the maternal fountain. By means of my earth/body sculptures, I am united completely to the earth... I am converted into an extension of nature and nature is converted into an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reaffirming my bonds with the earth is really the reactivation of primitive beliefs...(in) a feminine omnipresent force, the image that remains after having been enclosed by the maternal stomach, it is a manifestation of my thirst of being.”*

Ana Mendieta was born in nineteen forty eight in Havana Cuba during the rise of Fidel Castro’s regime, which later led to the exile of her and her sisters to the United States of America. Mendieta obtained her Masters Degree in Fine Art from the University of Iowa. During her studies, performance artworks and site-specific installations featured predominantly. Ana Mendieta’s early sculptural and performance works were significant, due to the profound impact they had on the representation of women in art, during the seventies. Mendieta’s works mostly focused on the oppression of women and the exploration of her relationship with the immediate environment. The search for identity was thematically pursued in a way that transformed her works into autobiographical representations using her own body as a medium. She achieved this by the varying ways in which the “body” was manipulated in select site-specific works. The varying manipulation of body constantly referred to the themes of culture and identity loss. This loss in Mendieta’s work is represented through the exploration of transformative issues such as life, death and rebirth.

Blocker identified that a unique synthesis arose in the manner in which Mendieta presents and positions the body in the environment in relation to typical esoteric symbols found in primitive Cuban rituals (cf. Blocker 1999: 5). This research therefore proposes



to investigate the way in which Ana Mendieta's selection of site, together with the manipulation of body and material, assist in creating visual metaphors that explore her culture and identity as an exiled Cuban woman.

Throughout Mendieta's work concepts of culture and gender displacement are referenced to by images extracted from her immediate surroundings, allowing the viewer to visually access the loss of identity.

Body as a metaphoric determinant is discussed in chapter three to investigate ways in which Mendieta manipulates "body" to represent identity. The disappearance of body is explored through Mendieta's manipulation of; the physical body or the building up or embedding of formed silhouettes that represent "body". Time and the erosive effects of nature's elements on embedded or formed silhouettes are used to depict the disappearance of the body in an attempt to explore "loss" as a concept.

Art critic and lecturer Collette Chattopadhyay wrote that Ana Mendieta's work has been interpreted as being both conceptually strong as well as fragile in form. She also suggests that Mendieta's site-specific sculptures, installations, and performative works appropriately mingle concepts of timeliness with timelessness, emphasizing tensions of hope and despair, which become critical elements in discussing Mendieta's work (cf. Chattopadhyay 1999: 35). The weathering of site-specific works by the elements: wind, fire and water illustrate the effects of the above-mentioned timeliness and timelessness as metaphors for issues surrounding life, death and rebirth.

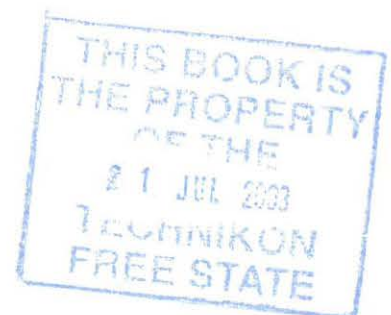
Mendieta, like the land artist Robert Smithson, studied the art-object relationship to mass media and its dissemination. To enable Mendieta's art to be exposed to a larger audience she too relied on the photographic documentation as final product. The documentation of her site-specific works becomes as much an integral part of the creative process, as the manipulation of site, material and the rendering of form. The further compositional manipulation of visual elements such as surface organization, size, light and colour allow the photographs to become extensions of the initial site-works. The manipulation of the visual elements within the image and how they interrelate denote associative connotations, which aid metaphors. An example of this type of association can be seen with Mendieta's recurring use of the colour red and its association with



blood or passion, to represent life, death and rebirth (see fig. 1.5 and 1.6). The analysis of site and materials as metaphoric determinants in chapter four will further explore ways in which Mendieta manipulated the visual elements within her site-works.

Various theoretical perspectives on the formation of visual metaphors are briefly outlined to understand how metaphors are formed, thereby establishing a basis by which Mendieta's site-specific works with regard to body and material can be analyzed. Author and theorist George Lakoff's writings on metaphors explain that the primary importance of metaphor lies in associations. He also states that these associations are a conventional way of conceptualizing our immediate surroundings (cf. Lakoff 1992: 1). This statement is reflected in Mendieta's works, as the content of her work refers specifically to the visual conceptualization of personal experiences. The metaphors created in her works reflect on her cultural and sexual understanding of her immediate surroundings.

Author Charles Merewether claims that Mendieta's 'Silueta' series produced during the nineteen seventies simultaneously deals with issues of difference, identity, culture and prejudice. With this, Mendieta's Cuban past is reflected through the representation of Afro-Cuban rituals, spirituality, mysticism and Latin American history. Exploring aspects of these themes resulted in an ongoing exploration of 'self', which fulfilled the inner desire to re-connect with the lost links of her Cuban origin (cf. Merewether 1999: 1-5). Mendieta's best-known works, that include the visual interplay of site, body and material, are reflected in the 'Silueta' series produced from 1973 – 1977. Works from this series will be analyzed to illustrate the proposed exploration of identity.



## 2. Identity in the work of Ana Mendieta.

*"My art is grounded in the belief in universal energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of the universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world. There is no original past to redeem, there is the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us. There is above all the search for origin" (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 34).*

Jane Blocker discusses the brief artistic period of Ana Mendieta's career, where it coincides directly with the era surrounding feminist arguments and issues of essentialism and critiques of identity. Blocker argues that:

*"Ana Mendieta limits the significance of her expression to her experience alone. By saying this Blocker indicates that the meaning of her art is contained by the particularities of her own life rather than by larger political and cultural contexts and questions. This approach relies on the depoliticized notion of the 'personal', according to which both the artist and her works are presumed to be in some ways unknowable. The critical importance of the work is limited and the identity of its creator is self-evident" (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 12-14).*

Like Mendieta many feminist artists of the nineteen seventies followed an approach of personal discovery in their works. The use of their own bodies and drawing from individual experiences made the content of their work personal. This allowed the female artists of the seventies to explore individual ways in which the female form was perceived. A modern version of the female body was represented, which depicted the body of women as being sacred, intellectual and individual, as opposed to the idea of a sex object to be gazed upon by the male viewer (cf. Broude 1996: 26)

Mendieta's works reflect personal as well as universal experiences pertaining to issues of identity through enactments of the self and by visually manipulating the impact of nature's elements as performative processes in her site-works. Mendieta's enactment of



the self can be seen in an early work such as the 'Tree of Life' series where she uses her own body (see fig. 1.4). Here Mendieta's body refers to personal identity reflected in the manner in which her body forms part of the tree, the roots of the tree metaphorically suggest the return to her origin. In an earlier protest work, rape a universal issue of violence against women was thematically dealt with; the performance process was used as a means of direct interaction with a live audience to protest the violation and invasion of privacy (see fig. 1.2). The performative qualities that exist in her 'Siluetta' series involve the interplay of natural elements with that of form sculpted in the landscape.

*Mendieta has been quoted as implying that: "she treated the landscape as a sacred space where she could perform and at the same time become one with 'Mother Earth'" (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 77).*

Works in this series incorporate Mendieta's choice of site with the use of surrounding natural materials and the erosive effects of nature's elements to carry out her symbolic performance ritual of uniting with 'Mother Earth'. In one of the many 'Untitled' works from the Siluetta series, she metaphorically explores the interplay of water with that of the built-up silhouette. Here the work's performative quality is witnessed in the way that the tide erodes the form. Traces of the formed silhouette are slowly eradicated by the eroding action of the tide; which metaphorically refers to the ceased existence of Mendieta's 'self' (see fig. 1.11).

Blocker states that according to Mendieta, identity is not something that we have or that we can buy, but rather something that we live and gain through our experiences. Mendieta sees identity as being influenced by our immediate surroundings and by processes and actions that we perceive and commit; for example, her cultural oppression had a direct influence on forming her identity as an exiled Cuban woman (cf. Blocker 1999: 22).

A universal perspective on female identity is represented in Mendieta's work, enabling the viewer to associate more freely with the subject of identity. The subject of identity is explored through themes associated with sex and culture. These themes are represented by the use of the silhouette, which as image forms a metaphorical border within the chosen site (see fig. 1.2, 1.9). In order for the viewer to read the

representation of a metaphorical border, the performance process must be perceived as part of the works' identity. The performances that Mendieta enacts in the site-works deal with identity issues of gender, colour, nationality and ethnicity.

Collette Chattopadhyay noted in an article that, during the seventies, Ana Mendieta was among the first female artists to significantly explore concepts of identity in her work. The documentary approach to the photographing of her works metaphorically represented her own traces of identity that she experienced in a complex contemporary life (cf. Chattopadhyay 1999: 36). By manipulating the visual structure when documenting the artwork Mendieta was able to introduce a sense of spectator involvement. Upon viewing the image the spectator participates as a witness to the performances, through the planning of the artworks visual structure.

Mendieta was haunted by her early experiences of being torn from her Cuban homeland. These memories influenced her while growing up. She represents these experiences in her works by choosing specific sites, which she compared to memories of the Cuban landscape. Familiar representations of ancient burial grounds or womb-like formations were significant to Mendieta when selecting sites for the exploration of identity.

## **2.1. Cultural identity.**

Mendieta's feeling of displacement is seen in her works as the expression of her political fight against racism and oppression, which is displayed in the "Silueta Series". The "Silueta Series" is a complex series of works, with the main object and subject of these works being that of Mendieta's own body. The series reflects a search for her place in the world on the one hand but also serves as an expression of her elementary relationship with nature and the female form. Whether it was by burning contours into the earth, or by the of covering her body with clay and feathers, or by laying her body in plant growth, each attempt was to demonstrate her marginal fate as a woman, an artist and her Cuban heritage (see fig. 1.3, 1.9). Blocker explains that, simultaneously, her attachment to the earth/natural environment and the temporality of her body integrates the viewer in the cycle of nature and cultivates awareness of these elementary processes. Through this Mendieta achieved a synthesis that related her actions to the form (silhouette) of her body, to land art and to the typical esoteric symbols of



syncretistic religions and primitive rituals (cf. Blocker 1999: 16). The metaphorical border formations formed by the silhouette outlines, relate to a feeling of displacement stemming from Mendieta's exile from Cuban and relocation to America.

According to Blocker (1999: 34) Ana Mendieta claimed:

*"Identity, which is always approached only through the mechanism of separation and difference, is itself a form of exile. The exile qualities of identity require that one is always tied to, yet separated from these origins, group names and categories of existence by which one is forced to define oneself". Blocker confirms this by saying that for Mendieta to define herself meant that she was working with the earth to find something she had lost; digging to plant her own roots, in order to maintain her heritage. Mendieta herself confirmed this notion: "I work with the earth, I make my sculptures in the landscape because I have no motherland, I feel a need to join with the earth, to return to her womb"(Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 77).*

Mendieta identifying with the earth as a maternal source meant to solve two concerns, one personal and the other social. The first being the feeling of abandonment, which was experienced as a child in exile; the other concern being a woman who did not wish to define herself through relationships with men; a woman who would be sacred to herself, rather than be profaned by male desire. These concerns relating to the loss of identity were explored by the making of bodily imprints in nature in an attempt to symbolically reclaim lost identity by returning to her roots.

Author and art critic Donald Kuspit elaborates on Mendieta's bond with nature by saying that the return to the earth represents both a return to the womb of birth and the grave of death. It is a release from life as well as regeneration, and in this sense, a form of freedom. Mendieta explains that the making of her silhouettes in nature keeps or renews the transition between her homeland and her new home. This process was a way of reclaiming her roots and becoming one with nature (cf. Kuspit: 1996: 125).

## 2.2. Sexual identity.

Sexual identity forms an integral part of Mendieta's work, which has been represented throughout her career. Earlier protest works dealt with concepts of violence and inequalities against women, with the blatant exposure of female anatomy and the androgynous manipulation of facial hair, these performances challenged the image of the female form. Ana Mendieta's gender examinations established her struggle with identity as an artist and a woman. In the performance, entitled "Facial Hair Transplants", Mendieta used props, costumes and facial expressions to alter her physical appearance. She commented on female identity as well as the typical modes of appearance, such as hairstyles and make-up, which were socially and politically significant at the time. This specific work challenged themes of sexuality, whereby Mendieta transformed herself into the so-called image of a man. This work created a confusion of the sexes, and an identity issue around men and woman in the modern world (see fig. 1.1).

The effect of time and nature's elements often results in the disappearance of the body in her site works, which directly relates to issues surrounding identity. Disappearance of the body was first reflected in an earlier work where Mendieta formed a white sheet as a silhouette, eliminating the representation of body by burning it and leaving only a scorched imprint of the silhouette. The trace of smoldering ashes that remained in the hollowed-out silhouette metaphorically reflected her loss of identity (see fig. 1.9). The introduction of the silhouette in this work enabled Mendieta to literally remove herself from the work by providing the imprint as a surrogate figure. The physical body was now absent, and the viewers' gaze focused on an outline that traced Mendieta's unseen body.

According to author R. Betterton (1996: 18), the representation of the female body in art can be seen as part of an attempt to visualize the repressed, corporeal and unregulated aspects of ourselves. The representation of the female body is to acknowledge and recognize the social, sexual, maternal and psychic body, which should be celebrated. Mendieta has made use of the absence and presence of the body in her work, to reflect on aspects of repressed social and cultural identities of women.



Betterton argues that within the contemporary arts there is an ever-changing relationship between women, their bodies and their representations. The concepts of pain, pleasure and desire remain evident in women artist's works (cf. Betterton 1996: 2). Mendieta explored the concepts of pain and belonging in her works and the issue of violence against women. These concepts form part of her exploration and search for identity. By substantiating this claim, Betterton further denotes that Mendieta explored issues of social taboo and transgression, focusing on the subject of sacrifice and violence against women. The theme of violence against women was explored in a work where students were invited to Mendieta's apartment. When her spectators walked in they encountered a horrific site. In front of them was a staged rape scene of a woman (Mendieta). Mendieta's spectators found themselves as witnesses to the staged rape scene. This performance work was done in response to one of Mendieta's friends being raped on campus (cf. Betterton 1996: 2). Site and materials contributed to Mendieta's representation of oppression and the confined treatment of the female body. Sexual identity and personal privacy is represented in this early performance work, whereby she searches and explores these aspects of women and that of her personal life (see fig. 1.2).

Betterton stated that the body was regarded as a crucial site for feminist intervention within art, because it represented all that was perceived to be degrading in the erotic tradition of western art, and yet at the same time, it offered a means of articulating a specifically female experience (cf. Betterton 1996: 9). Mendieta and other female artists of the seventies protested against the pornographic use and representation of the female body. They therefore explored alternate ways of representing the female body within the arts. According to Betterton (1996: 8-9) during the sixties and seventies feminist politics was centered on women's bodies, reproduction and health. Issues that dealt with women having the right to control and protect their bodies against sexual abuse and violence were strongly emphasized. Performance art throughout the seventies presented a new platform for representation of women in the arts.

According to Betterton (1996: 10) women artists started to reconstruct the concept of what female bodies mean in our culture. The female body has been re-imagined by artists like Mendieta through mediums such as: painting, sculpture, writing, dance, performance, site-specific works, video and film.

In contemporary western art and in the tradition of culture, science and religion, women have always been aligned with nature. A bond between the female body and nature has historically been represented. This bond features prominently within Mendieta's work. This can be seen in the nineteen seventies where the representation of the female body as being aligned with nature also evidences the power to change, transform and to progress within history. The female body inhabits the sphere of culture within nature where the body signifies the realm of timeliness and timelessness (cf. Betterton 1996: 13-14).

The themes of exile, separation and return expressed in Mendieta's work provide a powerful means of exploring the self. (cf. Betterton 1996: 162).

### 3. The “Body” as metaphoric determinant.

In an article written by Heidi Rauch, an expert in Latin Studies, titled “Ana Mendieta’s Primal Scream” she states that like other artists of the seventies, Mendieta focussed on the personal process, distinguishing herself by pushing the concept of body and performance art to the extreme. By repeatedly turning her own body into an art object, Mendieta took part in the 1970’s trend in which the artists’ physical self became both image and medium (cf. Rauch 1992: 5). This can be seen in the ‘Siluetta Series’ and also in the building, carving and inscribing of vulvas at select sites, thereby signifying bonding and an emphasis on feminine power (see fig. 1.7).

George Lakoff has stated that we deal with abstract concepts in art and everyday life by using metaphors as visual vehicles to comprehend abstract ideas. Metaphors being conceptual by nature allow us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter (cf. Lakoff 1980: 34). Mendieta used metaphors in her art, thereby giving greater structure and meaning to understand the work. The function of a metaphor in the visual arts is to facilitate an understanding of the artist’s experiences and our own experiences, and the way we act on those understandings. Author Michel Lissack in his article: “Metaphor and Art”, suggests;

*“To identify an appropriate metaphor for an artwork one must make the decision to resolve the uncertainties within the work. The artist and the viewer decide and act on the given information of the artwork, all which is based on metaphors, social and personal statements; and this is stylized to be appropriate according to the subject matter”*  
(cf. Lissack 1997: 6).

Lissack also states that:

*“Metaphors provide helpful interpretive schemes to aid in the reduction of equivocality. Moreover, metaphors are useful in coping with ambiguity and in interpreting of ideas and subject matters. More importantly, perhaps, metaphors are an effective and evocative means of articulation and premise setting within an art spectrum”* (cf. Lissack 1997: 8).





Mendieta's use of body as a visual metaphor creates and interprets ideas, which allow interpretation by the viewer to be channeled, thereby reducing ambiguity. This assists the viewer to read Mendieta's issues on female identity.

Representation in Mendieta's work is discussed in Gloria Moure's book titled 'Ana Mendieta'. Moure states that: Mendieta made use of matter and spirit for cultural and personal healing, using her own body and Mother Earth as medium. (cf. Moure 1996: 3).

Lissack indicates that a metaphor is a surface object with which to think. He noted the generative and emergent possibilities inherent in metaphors.

*"Metaphor is an invitation to see an object as if it were something else, focusing on seemingly unrelated characteristics and enriching, the perception of the object, and an interaction between systems of thoughts that produces a meaning larger than either of its subjects, through the resonance of possible connotations, a new contextual meaning is created" (cf. Lissack 1997: 5).*

In Mendieta's works the body and nature's elements are used to generate a new contextual meaning through implied connotations. Jane Blocker explains that: Mendieta's use of body is only female; she presents a limited view of the form and experience of femininity out of the limitless possibilities of femaleness.

*"Through its metaphorical layering with the female body, the earth is as much a culturally constructed, ideologically determined and hegemonically controlled concept as femininity itself" (cf. Blocker 1999: 46).*

Blocker indicates that Mendieta's work deals with the body and authorship, the self, life and death cycle, exile and her connection to the earth. The authorship of the body refers to Mendieta's notion of her body and sexuality. It becomes a tale that is autobiographical. She deals with issues that surround the body of a woman and which relate to herself as a person. Her sculptural work metaphorically links the female body to the earth and its fecundity (cf. Blocker 1999: 38). Art critic and writer Michael Duncan explains that Mendieta sought to establish a dialogue between the landscape and the female body's return to the maternal source. Ana Mendieta envisioned the female body

as a primal source of life and sexuality, as a metaphor of the ancient Paleolithic goddesses (cf. Duncan 1999: 23). She creates the metaphor for goddess the way she positions her body or places a silhouette in nature. This is related to her thoughts on the female body returning to the womb and becoming one with nature. In some of Ana Mendieta's works her use of the female body is particular to the extent that associations of death mark it. Mendieta's use of the female body is universal, to the extent that the ancient association between the female body and the earth is inscribed on it. Blocker states that Mendieta repeats the earth/woman metaphor while relying on the discursive power and inheritance from the past. At the same time, she turns against this inheritance. Her retelling of the metaphor is a repetition with a difference (cf. Blocker 1999: 66).

Blocker expands on this relationship by saying:

*"For Ana Mendieta, the earth is fundamentally defined as a primeval origin, which explains this bond with nature. A temporal relation with the body in which the earth is an eternal force prior to history constitutes it and the mortal body is bound to and time clocked by the earth's movements" (cf. Blocker, 1999: 55).*

Evoking death as a metaphor results in the body being presented in ways that evoke thoughts on violence and oppression. The cycles of life and death are explorative elements within Mendieta's work. In the 'Silueta' series the outline of the body silhouette forms a metaphorical border, which represents the border of a country or that of a territorial boundary.

The metaphorical use of the female body is a representation of the search for identity. The representations draw upon her own life experiences, making her works autobiographical in content.

### **3.1. Body and/or disappearance.**

As previously mentioned, Mendieta's performance processes of exploring "body" and its return to nature, allowed the artist to become one with nature. Moure indicates that the processes of erasure and irrigation almost always affect Mendieta's manipulation of

body; body images or objects are constantly disappearing. Ana Mendieta's work presents the female body to the viewer, but also takes it back. With the representation of the disappearance of body Mendieta is able to explore lost identity. Burning silhouettes, erosion, the manipulation of the ocean tides and the effect of time were used to create images of disappearance. A Silueta Fireworks series was produced, comprised of stages of a burnt silhouette that brought a scene of transformation to the eroticism of the body and the return of the body to the earth. A narrow hollowed out recess in the earth's surface forms this silhouette. The return is reflected in the performative process of Mendieta's igniting of the form, and leaving a scorched imprint on the earth's surface (see fig. 1.8).

Disappearance of the body through the manipulation of nature's elements is the way Mendieta manipulated the female form as a visual metaphor to explore identity. This disappearing action of the body is extremely important in her work. She achieved this effect by using the elements wind, fire, water and time. Each of these will be discussed separately in order to show the visual impact of the elements on Mendieta's site works, which metaphorically refer to 'body and disappearance' and their implied association with life, death and rebirth. Works that best illustrate the effect of time and nature's elements on Mendieta's site-works have been used as examples in the discussion to follow.

### **Earth.**

Earth is a pervasive element in all of Mendieta's works. The earth's surface plays an important role because it is the context that the body throughout the Silueta series is mostly incorporated into. The placing of the body within the context of the earth's surface refers to a place of both birth and death. The disappearance of the body as form from the earth's surface can be read as an imprint of Mendieta's identity upon the earth. The artist carves, forms figures or silhouettes using the earth's surface upon which the existence of time and the elements take their toll, causing the form to disappear (erode) after a period of time (see fig.1.18).

### **Fire.**

By setting alight the form or igniting gunpowder, Mendieta achieved a scorched imprint on the earth's surface where a form once was. The viewer's question remains: to whom



did this silhouette belong and why has it disappeared. Fire represents life and when it extinguishes it leaves a scorched imprint of what once was. In Mendieta's work the extinguished fire refers to lost identity. By setting alight the form the body disappears and only a burnt impression remains on the earth's surface. Mendieta's search for identity can be compared to fire burning in the wind. The extinguished flame is likened to a perished soul, leaving an imprint of self (see fig.1.8, 1.9, and 1.16.).

### **Water.**

With the use of water Mendieta mostly left the image (silhouette) to erode over a period of time. The body form made by silhouette imprint in the sand would erase as the tide flowed in. The way in which water erased the form imbued the work with a performative quality that leads the viewer to read issues of identity loss. Further metaphorical use of water can be seen in a work produced in Iowa (U.S.A) in 1978, where a silhouette was formed from mud and left for the water to erode, erasing the figure to the state of disappearance, thereby creating the metaphoric representation of identity loss combined with associations of death through disappearance (see fig.1.14).

The manipulation of water in the form of ice or snow, achieved the same metaphoric meaning as above. Silhouettes of a body would be formed out of ice or snow and left to melt in the sunlight, erasing their existence. Life is then metaphorically represented when the growth of grass and flowers reappear from underneath the melting figure (see fig.1.10).

### **Time.**

Time, combined with nature's elements, contributes to the role of disappearance in Mendieta's works. The effect of time combined with processes of erasure or irrigation are used to create associations of identity loss.

The performative processes enacted by time and the erosive effects of nature's elements are used to explore issues of life and death and the return to Mother Earth as a womb, hence exploring the concept of rebirth, life and death as a cycle.

## 4. Site and material as metaphoric determinants.

Mendieta had been quoted as saying:

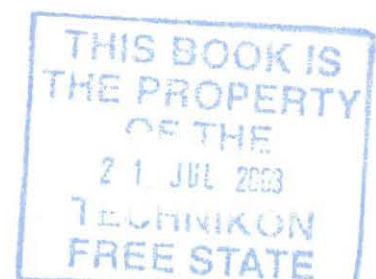
*"I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools". (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 4).*

### 4.1. Mendieta's choice of site.

Art journalist Heidi Rauch in a magazine article on Mendieta wrote that associations of power and magnificence are what Ana Mendieta strove for with her choice of site wherein she created ephemeral site sculptures (cf. Rauch 1992: 41). Mendieta spiritually identified with the chosen sites and developed a sacred space in which she could communicate freely. For Ana Mendieta making art and the art process was considered a spiritual act. In creating her earth-body sculptures, Mendieta claimed her sites intuitively, where she worked alone preparing the land to deem it as sacred. Ana Mendieta's earth-works were often private rituals and ceremonies in which she sketched the outline of her body, thereby creating a sacred bond between herself and the specific site. The outline of her body is also referred to as a metaphorical territorial boundary when discussing cultural identity.

One can compare the process used to choose a site, to a purification ritual where she metaphorically bathes herself in the purity of the elements. Being unclaimed and without emotion, the earth becomes an object of intense desire for Ana Mendieta because of its freedom, eternal force and the power it circulates. Mendieta's works always cast the issue of identity, as something lost that must be regained:

*"My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unites me to the Universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through the making of earth/body works I become one with the earth. It is like being encompassed by nature, an after-*





*image of the original shelter in the womb” quoted from an interview (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 57).*

Ana Mendieta's choices of different sites become metaphors for different cultural and personal statuses. E. H. Gombrich, a noted art historian, argues that images and symbols have meaning and appear in different forms. They function as visual codes or emblems that evoke a sense of artistic and cultural value. Such visual metaphors require a cultural context for interpretation (cf. E.H. Gombrich 1963: 24). Mendieta wants the viewer to look at the cultural context of her work. She informs the viewer of her loss of identity through reference to her cultural background. Mendieta's cultural context evolves around the exile from her homeland, Cuba. Mendieta's specific choice of site and materials are to be viewed as visual clues to the metaphorical representation of a tomb, a deceased body or the outline of the silhouette representing a metaphorical border of a country.

The earth's surface metaphorically associates with a womb; Blocker explains this where she claims that within Ana Mendieta's art, the earth is fundamentally defined as being of a primeval origin. By working with the aspect of time, a temporal relation constitutes itself with the body. Here the earth is an eternal force prior to history; the mortal body is bound to and time clocked by the earth's movements (cf. Blocker 1999: 55). With regard to choice of site, Mendieta stated in a 1977 interview that:

*“ to anthropomorphize the earth is to endow it with sentience, desire and identity. It is to think of the earth as more than merely a sculptural material”  
(Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 18).*

To Mendieta it was a journey to return to her roots and by laying in the earth, she experienced the godlike power she attributed to it. Blocker states that this metaphorical representation of the earth to Ana Mendieta is both sexual and maternal, the fundamental source of life, a homeland, a prehistoric origin, nation, nature, a landscape, a link to ancestry, a burial site, and a sentient being (cf. Blocker 1999: 46).

Mendieta analyzed her choice of site and materials according to the inherent metaphorical content. Art critic Linda Nochlin said:

*" I would insist on differentiating the metaphor in its ritualistic or psychosexual manifestations - as sacrifice of fetish - from its rhetorical role as metonymy or synecdoche in the work of realist artists." (cf. Nochlin 1994: 56).*

Mendieta's works relied on metaphors; they served as a creation on their own. The choice of site for Ana Mendieta was a ritualistic exploration in order to find the appropriate piece of land in which to sculpt her art to explore female identity.

Site for Mendieta is grounded in the choice of an appropriate visual space, which is discussed in the concept of metaphors by author Robert N. St. Clair. St. Clair states that one can organize the knowledge of visual space around the concept of visual literacy by addressing the internal structure of the visual metaphor, with this the significance of the individual elements such as tone, colour, line, texture, and proportion and how these are manipulated within a visual space to create either tension or harmony within the confines of visual syntax are related to. The organization of the visual space provides guidelines for the construction of visual art. Therefore insight is gained on how visual structures are used to create and to convey visual messages, which together form visual metaphors (cf. St. Clair 2000: 3-4). Mendieta created a structured visual image, which assisted in conveying the visual message. This she achieved by working with the selected site and the surrounding materials. Mendieta studied each site she used intensively so that her works portrayed her thoughts on identity with the function of the site being a metaphorical determinant when reading the work.

## **4.2. Mendieta's use of materials.**

Mendieta's works included the use of nature's elements, colour, and texture to assist with creating metaphorical representations. For example, rock against the fragile and soft skin of the body, as well as emphasizing the positioning of the body (see fig. 1.3). Central to her use of the earth's surface are the associations that she draws between the land and the body. To achieve this the female body is represented differently throughout the various 'Silhueta' works. This is reflected in the way materials such as mud, water and fire were used to form the body. In all of Mendieta's works there is an attempt to create a visual structure using materials, which assist to convey the visual message.



Archetypal images were worked with in the 'Siluetta' Series. To achieve these elementary materials such as flowers, raw pigment, fire, blood, water, sand and rock were included. Mendieta used the earth's surface as a sculptural medium with which she could explore a sacred ritualistic bond. More than an inanimate object, the earth was a living process, which at the hands of Mendieta froze and melted, flooded and dried, eroded and deposited itself, and fostered growth and decay (see fig. 1.10, 1.11).

Collette Chattopadhyay states that Ana Mendieta used the earth as her own personal canvas, making it into a live painting. She used the earth as a medium, bonding with the very elements that produced her. She sculpted, carved and etched female silhouettes in nature, constructing metaphoric images that conversed with the mythic goddess and representations of prehistory, while simultaneously addressing issues of cultural origin, difference, identity and prejudice (cf. Chattopadhyay 1999: 35). Together with Mendieta's choice of site and the use of materials as metaphoric representations, she is able to explore the presence of the female body through a ritualistic bond formed with nature. This all contributes to the search for identity, whereby Mendieta explores herself and the experience of women as a whole.

Feminist writer Whitney Chadwick in her book: 'Women, art and society' states that a specific site and the materials used related to the way Mendieta represented the female body. She explains how Ana Mendieta traced her five-foot tall body on fields, sand, earth, mud and tree stumps. Sometimes she used gunpowder and fireworks (the point always being the use of the elements: earth, air, fire and water) in alchemy of erosion, explosion, or dissolution that would reveal elemental connections between the earth, body and soul (cf. Chadwick 1996: 373-374). Mendieta saw both water and fire as sources of energy, as well as metaphoric mediums of consecration, baptism and the passage of the soul from death to rebirth (see fig. 1.11, 1.16).

With fire, Norma Broude, feminist art writer, explains how Mendieta exploded gunpowder in the earthen sketch of the body outline, creating a flaming image of a sacred site in which one woman reclaimed her passionate link to the great Mother Earth (see fig. 1.8). By using fire and ashes, Ana Mendieta was able to create the idea of separation and death as the foundation of her art. As an artist, she showed a desire to challenge a metaphorical order, built on the exclusion of women and at the same time, to go beyond

exile. Exile became an important part of her work, but she transformed the content of her work to issues of identity, which went beyond the issue of exile. Identity became a universal key in which to read her work. Her work appeals to an essentialist model, a return to the earth, and a re-uniting of woman and nature. In this sense Mendieta's performances and earth/body sculptures became necessary rituals of renewal (cf. Broude 1996: 184-5, 201). As previously discussed, Mendieta's work was nourished by experiences in her own life.

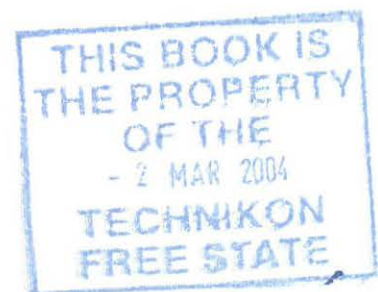
Mendieta's use of blood as a medium, implied a dramatic feel to her works. Michael Duncan explains that she used blood as a metaphorical representation of purification through sacrifice in her earth/body sculptures (cf. Duncan 1999: 4). Michael Duncan quotes Mendieta where she explains that, "I started immediately using blood, I guess because I think it's a very powerful and magical thing, I don't see it as a negative force" (Duncan 1999: 3). It was with her 1982 'Body Tracks' series, in which she dipped her arms in blood and slid them down a white wall, which resulted in her receiving recognition as a performance artist. The marks on the pristine wall were both a dramatic documentation of an action as well as an intriguing concretization of her presence. She completely subjectified herself, using her entire body as a medium, yet maintaining an objective eye as she investigated how video and photography could be used to document these ephemeral works (see fig. 1.5).

Author Gloria Moure suggests that Ana Mendieta's extraordinary work locates us to the concept of origin, and to the unification with creation. It is said that every time we approach Mendieta's work we feel as if the elements were converted into an extension of her sensibility and her inquiring attitude. They seem to subvert any preconceived order (cf. Moure 1996: 1). The earth, fire, water, pens, ink and tree bark are all accomplices in her rituals, and they coincide with the mystery of her questions, her absences and her permanent and untiring search. Her 'Siluetta Series' creates emphasis, as well as creating metaphors from the same landscape that they protect. The force of arrangements such as fetishes and tombs are a permanent testimony to her convictions, her vision of the human condition and the search for primordial spirit (cf. Moure 1996: 1).



This view on the human condition is evident in a work titled "The Burial of Nanigo". In this work a silhouette of herself was made from 47 black-lit candles and presented in a darkened room. In this work Mendieta continued to draw upon Afro-Caribbean culture. The burning candles represent an existence of a person, which questions the identity of the person of whom the silhouette is formed. The human condition is also reflected through the experiences gained by the person represented, it becomes a life story of the artist who presents it to the viewer. On the wall beside "The Burial of Nanigo", Mendieta projected a slide of her 1975 work "Siluetta de Cenizas". However, rather than choosing an image of the burnt-out silhouette, she projected an image of the work in flames and turned it upright so that the figure appeared to be standing (see fig. 1.20). This transformation of "Siluetta de Cenizas", led to the evolving process of fire creating a metaphor for life, and this later led to the production of her "Anima" works that same year.

The performance work entitled "Anima" from the firework silhouette series of 1976, shows a sculpted bamboo female silhouette rose like a crucifix and set alight (see fig. 1.16). Interweaving a cremation ceremony with the Christian iconography of death and redemption, the bamboo sculpture is dramatically consumed in flames until nothing is left but ashes and darkness. The strong qualities of these sculptural works are counterbalanced by Mendieta's documentary images of the pieces, which immortalize the idea of the artwork. Preserving the traces of extinct objects, the filmed images function to make the absent present. Conceived as crucial components of the works totality, these images compound the metaphorical significance of the work, insisting that the sculptures be read as more than primal, physical entities (cf. Chattopadhyay 1999: 36).



## 5. Analysis of “Siluetta” series.

The Siluetta series will be discussed under the following headings namely: Cultural identity, Sexual identity, Disappearance of body, Site and Materials.

**Ana Mendieta’s first Silueta, 1973. (See fig 1.3).**

### Cultural identity

In this work Mendieta associates herself with ancient burial ground rituals rooted in the Cuban culture. For Mendieta associations with death represent the loss of both culture and the identity of woman. The process of excavating the earth within the work as well as the way in which performance activities are ritualistically executed begin to suggest the search to reconnect with her Cuban roots. The performative process of this work collectively allows Mendieta to deal with issues surrounding life, death and identity.

### Sexual identity

Mendieta used her own body to explore and represent sexual identity. The strategic contrasted placing of her fragile naked body within the rocky recess reflects an ageless female form. The concepts of timeliness and timelessness and their relation to the represented ageless form (body) are explored, with Mendieta being seen as a person both bound to and free from time in her representation of identity. Ana Mendieta supports this by saying:

*“ the earth is fundamentally defined as a primeval origin, which explains this bond with nature. A temporal relation with the body in which the earth is an eternal force prior to history constitutes it, and the mortal body is bound to and time clocked by the earth’s movements” (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker, 1999: 55).*

Time as an element in this work is presented from both a universal as well personal perspective. From both perspectives aspects of life and death are referred to. Her body represents the ‘real’, which specifically relates to Mendieta on a level of personal exploration, yet the overall representation of sexual identity can also be identified with as a universal issue. In this work Mendieta’s body lies in a rocky tomb where the positioning

of the body represents a corps, marking death. The atmosphere of death is further emphasized by the photographic documentation of the work, where compositionally the direction of the light source floods the figure, illuminating a focal area.

Mendieta's body is universal to the extent that the ancient association between female and earth are inscribed on it. By climbing down and lying on the cold rocky floor of this miniature stage and covering her body with freshly cut flowers, Mendieta works on the viewers understanding of the woman as sensual earth metaphor. Mendieta presents life and death; she is both natural and eternal, and yet still needs to be nurtured. The earth for Mendieta represents the nurturing mother of all beings.

#### Body and/or Disappearance

"Mother Earth" is regarded as the womb from where we are born and the sacred place to where we return after our death. She reconnects with the earth in this work, by lying in an excavated womb-like tomb surrounding of rocks; these directly contrast with the softness and soft contours of her body. With this contrast Mendieta creates a dialogue between her body and the earth (womb), which refers to the sacred bond between her and the earth.

#### Site

The select site and the positioning of the body within it can metaphorically be read as a womb. Mendieta specifically selected this sacred earth place as part of a spiritual ritual, which freed her within nature.

The womb-like tomb becomes a ritualistic stage where life and death are represented. Mendieta's cultural affiliations are reflected in her selection of site, however both performance and site seem to be universally eternal thereby inviting the viewer to join in on this sacred ritual. The viewer is drawn in by the representation of a universal concept of life and death. Mendieta physically lies within the confines of the rectangular tomb area, thereby personally confronting the issue of life and death. The site becomes Mendieta's canvas by compositionally using natural materials and her body as tools to portray her message.



### Material

Mendieta's vulnerable naked body lays covered in long stemmed fragile white flowers surrounded by the rocky recess. The flowers represent a sense of her fragile being, and the womb-like tomb recess a possible life after death. Stones and dirt surround the body; their ancient properties can be associated with a lifetime. Therefore stone as a material denotes timelessness within the work. The natural stone and its colour strongly contrasts with the paleness of her skin, and its roughness with the fragile green and white-stemmed flowers. The viewer visually empathizes with the cold roughness of the floor, and the pain implied by tender flesh lying on gravel. Representing nature as female, Mendieta's body has but a fragile, brief existence. Mendieta writes,

*"I bought flowers at the market, lay in the tomb and was covered with white flowers. The analogy was that I was covered by time and history" (Ana Mendieta quoted by Blocker 1999: 55).*

In addition the image is photographed viewed from above, at the foot end of the rocky tomb, leaving the viewer positioned as a participant at her so-called burial.

**Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Silueta Series), 1977. (See fig. 1.9).**

### Cultural identity

The outlines of the silhouettes in this series become metaphorical representation of a territorial boundary relating to her need for a cultural belonging. The uses of strong figurative shapes can be interpreted as physical boundaries or demarcated areas within the landscape that mark the land with her sense of cultural and feminine identity.

### Sexual identity

Sexual identity can be seen represented throughout the four stages in which the photos were taken. Initially a silhouette of a body was built up from white cloth. Following this the material is ignited to witness how the various stages of fire devour the form until only a scorched imprint is left on the earth's surface. The performance of a built up female silhouette being consumed by the flames metaphorically relates to a personal loss of identity. From this work the loss of identity or disappearance of a presence or person to whom this body once belonged is can be read. The viewer is faced with questions of





identity, such as: Who was this person? Why the disappearance and where have they gone?

### Body and/or disappearance

The element of fire and the effect of disappearance in this work are used to represent Mendieta's loss of identity. The body once again appears to be fragile and gentle in form. Mendieta then drenches the body in petrol and sets it alight. Burning in the wind the body starts disappearing, only to leave a scorched imprint in the earth surface denoting "disappearance". The angle, from which Mendieta took the photograph, emphasizes the effect of the wind on the flames. The flames are seen dancing in the wind, with their direction away from the viewer, suggesting disappearance.

### Site

The site was selected for its contrasting colour and organic materials; leaves, rock and sand. The placing of the white cloth silhouette is emphasized by the darkness of the soil. The performative igniting of the cloth on this chosen site can be compared to that of sacred rituals rooted in the ancient traditions of Paleolithic goddesses.

### Material

The whiteness of the cloth that Mendieta used to form the silhouette is symbolic of purity, innocence and virginity. The symbolic figure becomes innocently naked in the presence of the earth, as with the cold and hard surface on which the silhouette is placed, this interplay of materials becomes a metaphoric representation of the hardships Mendieta had to face as an exile during her youth and adulthood. The fire can be seen as representative of the life and passion that burnt within Mendieta to return to her roots and to reclaim her lost identity. Through this performative fiery blaze "body" and earth connect as one.

**Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Silueta Series), 1977. (See fig. 1.10).**

### Cultural identity

In this series the presence of a female form built up from snow, again forms the same type of metaphorical representation of a territorial boundary as previously referred to, indicating the search for cultural identity. In this work Blocker states that:

*“Mendieta uses the natural process of melting and condensation to mark the ways in which the earth is subject to racial and national authority, but she also uses it to reveal the vulnerability of that authority. Race, ethnicity and gender are unstable categories, trying to grasp them is like trying to catch snowflakes. They melt as soon as they touch the warmth of the body and the heat retained by the earth” (cf. Blocker 1999: 66).*

### Sexual identity

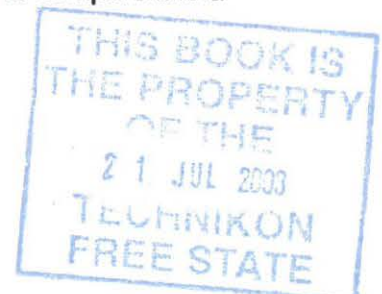
Sexuality in Mendieta’s fragile snow silhouette is reflected in the soft curvaceous contours of the formed snow. The initial stage of this silhouette series shows the female form subtly imprinted in the snow yet still significantly integrated with the carpet of fallen snow in the background. The integration of the imprinted silhouette with the snow fallen earth’s surface, appears to display Mendieta’s constant search of self and symbolic attempt at becoming one with nature.

### Body and/or disappearance

As this series progresses the disappearance of the body is explored through the natural process of melting snow. Life and death are once again metaphorically represented by the disappearance of the imprinted snow silhouette, as well as a sense of timeliness, which appears to have being taken into account when documenting the two stages of the series. As time elapsed the figurative imprint dissolved quicker than the snow surrounding it. Initially the melted and the figural depression remained visible by the pale blue shadow cast by the outline of the imprinted recess. After a period of time the snow silhouette disappeared completely revealing a silhouette of soil and new growth outlined by snow that had not yet melted. This new growth for Mendieta represents rebirth where a body once was, and with that connotation the concept of returning to the womb is implied.

### Site

The site was timely chosen by Mendieta in order to capture the change over of season, as this change in season from winter to spring was equipped with what she needed to communicate the representation of life, death and rebirth. With the powerful effects of the seasonal changeover explored on the site, Mendieta was able to compare it to a sacred place in nature where she could too free herself.



### Material

This work explores the processes by which the seasons are arranged and by which water circulates through from condensation to freezing and then evaporation. Initially Mendieta used a plywood silhouette to make a shallow impression in the snow. It first appears as if the silhouette is embossed on white paper before melting of the form begins. Mendieta uses the snow as metaphor for life, death and rebirth by observing the melting process of snow and the seasonal change that occurs around this. Colour is taken into consideration to enable the viewer to read the seasonal (white/brown) and temperature (blues/purples) changes which are used to signify the life/death/rebirth transformation of "body" in this work. The work is not just about the seasons or the land but also about the ways in which both are invested with racial, ethnic and hemispheric associations.

**Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Silueta Series), 1976. (See fig. 1.11).**

### Cultural identity

Mendieta draws the viewer to the waters edge, which is then forced to confront an outline in order to see the trace of a body that appears and disappears as the tide ebbs and flows. As previously mentioned the outlined silhouette represents a metaphor for a territorial boundary or border that signifies the oppression of cultural and personal identity.

### Sexual identity

Mendieta's sexual identity is highlighted by the way she carves the outline of the silhouette into the sand. The body is clearly female with its soft contours and addition of red colorant to emphasize her femininity (passion).

### Body and/or disappearance

Again the representation of body is curvaceous and feminine. The soft contours of body with arms lifted in flight represent an ancient goddess-like image. Mendieta filmed the successive stages in which the tide reclaimed the figure by taking it out to sea. Red colorant was used to emphasize the outline of this reclaiming process, as the carved silhouette slowly disappeared from the flowing in and out of the tide causing the "territorial boundary" to erode away.



### Site

Mendieta specifically chose this site, as sand and water predominantly exist on it. The ocean and its tidal cycle are used extensively by Mendieta to portray images of life/death. The sand becomes a playground for Mendieta's carved and built-up silhouettes. The sand as mentioned also gives Mendieta's figurative forms a soft and gentle appearance. Mendieta has performed an additional piece focussing on similar aspects using the same beach location with the introduction of red flowers to represent passion (see fig.1.21).

### Material

This carved silhouette at the waters edge on a beach in Mexico is representative of the greater theme of female identity, under investigation in Mendieta's work. The process of creating this work involved Mendieta adding red pigment to the shoal water within the carved outline. The red pigment is used to symbolize passion. In addition to this, by making use of the incoming tide, the body and its colour are systematically washed away over a period of time. By reading the interplay of colour, form and performance in this work the viewer is able to make the intended association about female emotions and their exploration of both cultural and sexual identity.

**Ana Mendieta, Isla (Silueta Series), 1977. (See fig. 1.14).**

### Cultural identity

The silhouette of a female body formed out of mud and surrounded by water, again represents the metaphor for a territorial boundary/border as well as one of isolation. This work serves as one of the clearest examples of Mendieta's awareness, and engagement with issues surrounding her nationality. The notion of nation is communicated through the formation of an island, because of its direct visible access; the viewer is able to form the cultural and political concepts intended in this work.

Through the representation of an island, one is able to read an image that resembles an example of a unified and independent space that becomes a nation. This work produced from mud in Iowa can also be interpreted as a symbolic map of her homeland (Cuba). The visual conclusion being that the island is neither here (Iowa) nor there (Cuba), therefore it metaphorically translates to a body (Mendieta) in exile.

### Sexual identity

In this work the water that surrounds the formed silhouette island can be viewed as a representation of life. With this Mendieta universally refers to femininity's exile from the previously disenfranchised position held by women. Mendieta suggests a unique inherent power within women, especially mothers. The water surrounding the silhouette could also represent the placenta in a womb. The central placement of the female silhouette in water implies that woman have become part of the earth's universal fluid (water) by defining their identity and position in a male dominated society.

### Body and/or disappearance

The formed female figure is located in a shallow creek in Iowa. The delicate texture of mud is used to explore the soft contours of the feminine form. Over time the mud form would predictably disintegrate in the water, representing the return to Mother Earth, a concept Mendieta explores in her work.

### Site

Mendieta chose this site knowingly that over a period of time the formed body would disintegrate and disappear within the murky water, once again to become part of the initial muddy creek.

### Material

The texture of the mud formation and the integrated placing of it within murky water, shows how Mendieta used natural materials, to create visual metaphors that explore issues of identity. The choice of murky water also refers to a need to explore and search within the unknown, concepts Mendieta addresses throughout this series.

The discussion on the "Silueta Series" can therefore be concluded by saying that Mendieta's juxtaposed use of materials, body and site aid in creating visual metaphors that explore issues surrounding life, death and rebirth. These issues are further manifested in Mendieta's cultural and sexual understanding of her identity as a woman from both a personal and universal perspective.

## **6. Conclusion.**

In Ana Mendieta's works investigate a visual structure that assists in conveying the intended message of female identity. Through this process Mendieta used metaphors as an effective and evocative means of articulation and premise setting within her art. By using her body, or the presence of a body, Mendieta helps the viewer to clearly read issues of female identity.

Within the contemporary arts there is an ever-changing relationship between women, their bodies and their representation. Through the use of Mendieta's body, site and materials, she succeeded in representing both personal and universal issues of identity.

The dismantling of Mendieta's site-specific works clearly illustrates that Ana Mendieta used her body, the selection of site and materials as metaphoric determinants in the representation of female identity.



## **7. Analysis of practical work.**

The dissertation explores the use of body, site and material as visual vehicles that create metaphors in the representation of female identity in Ana Mendieta's works. As a result of this, metaphors began to play an important role in the artists work. When planning or executing a work the artist manipulates her physical body or the presence of a body to act as a possible metaphor to explore personal identity. The artist's work involves exploring aspects of being an individual and a modern woman. The female representation within the works mostly refers to explorations of "self", as opposed to more universal issues surrounding women. The artist's immediate surroundings have impacted on the development of ideas. As with Mendieta's works the female body is represented using linear contours (silhouettes) or the artist's own body. Personal concerns with life, death and fragility, are used to explore the artists identity as a woman. The artist perceives the female form as the "Ideal" in terms of its beauty, sexuality and spiritual power. The choice of site becomes specific in the sense that the artist will pre-explore an area searching for a site that contains a specific presence or suitable type of natural material. The sites generally contain textured hardy materials like gravel, sand and stone, which are representative of the surrounding Free State landscape. The inclusion of various organic and inorganic materials in the works allow for the creation of visual associations surrounding the identity of the artist. The portfolio is mostly comprised of earth/body artworks, which are all performatively staged by the artist at specific locations. As with Mendieta's art works, the performative qualities are built into the process of the work. The performance process in these works includes the direct interaction of the artist with each site. As part of the final process the staged performances are then photographically documented and scanned using an AGFA Snapscan 1212 and then further manipulated with the aid of Photoshop version 6 software. Once the image has been graphically manipulated, enlargements are printed where upon the content of the artwork is further layered through the process of direct drawing. The content within the work becomes autobiographical due to the direct recording and representation of personal experiences within everyday life. The final works when printed to their size becomes a re-investigation of the body, site and materials. The discussion of practical works that follow will be subdivided into similar relevant themes used to analyze Mendieta's site-works. Mendieta's work was selected

for discussion in this dissertation due to the thematic similarities presently explored in the artists work.

### **7.1. “Fragile Object” (fig. 2.1).**

#### **Identity:**

This work focuses on the search for identity, through the juxtaposed use of body, site and materials. The viewer is confronted by a life-size print of a figure; the confrontational scale enables the viewer to relate to the uncomfortable up side down pose the body has been placed in. The soft flesh viewed against the hard rock indicates a physical pain, which could also be interpreted as an emotion when the positioning of body, material and gesture are taken into account. A sense of culture is referred to in this work by the inclusion of graffiti on the rock surface, creating a sense of history. Overall the emotive quality within this work reflects on the artists day to day life.

#### **Body:**

The body is positioned as if it is reaching out to grasp or receive something. Against the rock the body can be viewed as a fragile image. The straining of the body and the endurance of physical discomfort throughout this performance enhances this frailness. Discomfort from straining can further be noted by the veins that begin to show on the neck and head of the figure. Ambiguously the endurance of this act also reveals a personal persistence and determination. The out stretched arms gesturing towards the earth attempt to form a connection between body and earth. Cast shadows within the enclosed site are intended to create a mystical presence. The combination of elements such as gesture and the presence created by the shadows, form a visual relationship between earth and the staged performance.

#### **Site:**

This site was chosen for its privacy. The work was staged at a nature reserve situated in Bloemfontein. The site was selected for the type of natural materials found at the site, as well as the inclusion of graffiti inscribed on the rock face, indicating previous human interference at the site.



**Material:**

The artist's decision to use her body as a prop in this work was done for the purpose of experiencing the site during the staged performance. This enabled the artist to reflect on life and the role one plays in determining an existence. The contrasting light skin tone against the dark rock of the artist's body creates a focal point within the setting. The compositional photographic planning of the large rock in relation to the positioned figure was an attempt at representing life's hardships. The graffiti found on the rock face at the site reflects on man's ability to deface and destroy. The photo was taken at approximately ten in the morning, allowing a natural light source from behind to form figurative shadows across the rock face, bringing to the scene a mystical presence.

## **7.2. "Colony" (fig. 2.2).**

**Identity:**

This work again refers to femininity and the strength of women. When closely inspecting the repetitious crouched forms that are placed on the beach, a colony of women is revealed. This grouping explores the concept of women bonding together and becoming one to defend their rights as individuals. The female bodies are seen positioned close to the earth's surface, as seen with Mendieta's female forms, representing a symbolic return to Mother Nature.

**Body:**

After the artist's body was photographed in a crouched position, the image was then scanned in using the previously mentioned computer and software. The crouched form was then re-worked and graphically duplicated. The closed form of the bodies depicts isolation, and the tinted blue figures represent tranquility. Purposely the crouched bodies ambiguously read as sea turtles until inspected more closely. Sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach in groups and when ready they collectively hatch and return to the sea. The analogy of sea turtles is used because of their natural instinct to group and return to the ocean during a regenerative process like birth.

**Site:**

The stretch of beach selected for this work is situated near Mosselbay. This site was specifically chosen for its seclusion, beauty and tranquility as well as it being a private

space frequently re-visited by the artist. In this work the site becomes a metaphorical place of birth for the female form. The choice of this site for the artist presents intimacy and beauty as being the essence of nature, where the crouching performance on the beach took on the form of a sacred ritual.

**Material:**

Like Mendieta, the juxtaposed materials are used to create visual metaphors that explore concepts surrounding female identity. The sand symbolically represents a womb from which these crouching forms are born. The pebbles placed around the bodies were inserted using a computer. These create the connotation of placenta, nesting or cocoons, which relate to concepts of birth and or rebirth. A visual barricade is formed by the sandbanks to the left of the image, compositionally directing the female forms to the ocean for their symbolic return to life's universal fluid (water).

### **7.3. "Abstract Life" (fig. 2.3).**

**Identity:**

This work deals with the artist's perception of life as a woman. An abstract breast formation was installed at the site to symbolically represent femininity.

**Body:**

In the center of this arrangement rocks are stacked in the formation of breasts, which are associated with the female body. The encircled placing of the tree bark chips leads the viewer's eye to the central nipple/breast formations.

**Site:**

This work was installed in a gravel parking lot. The gravel was used as a contrasting background texture to that of the built form.

**Material:**

Brown and white pebbles, tree bark and gravel were used. The texture and colour of the materials was used to define the form. The brown pebbles were used to represent the nipple area of the breast and white pebbles to represent the fleshiness of the breast. The white colour of the rock was purposefully chosen for its symbolic association with purity.

Tree bark chips were used for their contrasting textured surface. The closed circle of tree bark placed around the breasts, forms a metaphorical border of protection also signifying that nature provides protection.

#### **7.4. “Dissection” (fig. 2.4).**

The arrangement of this work is borrowed from an Entomology display. The work consists of a photograph with an anatomical pinhole diagram of female reproductive system pricked through the image and lit from behind. When viewing this work the viewer is confronted with an image associated with the dissection of an individual. The idea behind the work stems from the way society constantly dissects and exposes individuals.

##### **Identity:**

Performance is used in this work to explore issues surrounding female identity and the bodies of women. A specific culture is referred to by the way in which the figure is clothed. The type of clothing informs the viewer about this individual’s existence and position within society.

##### **Body:**

The pinned down figure is depicted in a stage of undress. The question of privacy is raised when viewing the exposed figure. The pinned down scientific way in which the figure is viewed is explicit, and suggests the invasion of privacy. The dissection-like presentation of the image overlaid with an anatomical diagram directly refers to issues of female identity.

##### **Site:**

An indoor site was selected to create a clinical and scientific environment for staging the performance.

##### **Material:**

Inorganic materials such as: Styrofoam, nails, pins and material strips were used in this performance work. The white Styrofoam was used as a clinical surface on which the



“dissection of body” could be enacted. The nails used to pin down the spread out figure assist in conveying associations of dissection, invasion and a possible crucifixion.

### **7.5. “Breakthrough” (fig. 2.5).**

This installation consists of six documented stages of a performance, framed by a hexagon structure and suspended from the ceiling. Placed directly beneath on the floor are six sewn bubble wrap panels arranged in a circular formation. This bubble wrap floor plan is an attempt to steer the viewer to a specific position for the viewing of the suspended images. In between each panel six walkways are demarcated by the edges of the panels enabling the viewer to enter the center of the formation to view the performance images from the intended angle.

#### **Identity:**

This work deals with the concept of strength and determination. Life’s struggles and the over coming of difficulties are represented by the staging of a performance involving an entrapped figure.

#### **Body:**

The six storyboard stages of the performance represent the artists struggle from a state of entrapment to one of being free. Throughout the performance the artist was affected by a claustrophobic feeling. The smothering bubble plastic trapping the figure emphasized the struggle to be freed from the confined space.

#### **Site:**

For this performance a dark indoor space was selected where the atmosphere within the room was one of confinement.

#### **Material:**

Plastic bubble wrap as a material used in the performance contributed to the feeling of being trapped and claustrophobic. For the final installation the edges of the bubble wrap floor panels were sewn with red thread, to suggest a demarcation or boarder line by which the viewer is guided to the center point of the installation.

## 7.6. "Imprint" (fig. 2.6).

This work is one of the latest works of the artist. It comprises of two images, which are enlarged to A1 size.

### Identity:

The artists' intention was to expose the cycles of life, death and rebirth. As in Mendieta's work identity is explored through the presence of the human figure. The artist suggests the return to her roots through the rebirth of her individuality. This work becomes a portrait of life, death and rebirth by the way the artist transforms the work through the process of layering by drawing directly onto the image.

### Body:

The flesh colour of the hand and flowing contour contrasts against the dark colour of the gravel on which it was placed. The first image consists of a human hand and the second consist of a hand shape built from tree bark. The physical hand suggests life and the hand formed from the natural tree bark material explores the merging states of life, death and rebirth .

### Site:

The site was chosen by the artist for its material properties. This site again being the parking lot situated within a nature reserve in Bloemfontein.

### Material:

The artist used her hand as a prop in this performance as well as the tree bark to form the shape of a hand. The human hand represents the 'living' and the lifeless tree bark formation suggests that life has passed. The gravel background is used to represent the harshness of life. The white mounting board surrounding the image functions as a panel on which the artist can further explore thoughts and processes of the work.

The process of layering by drawing directly over the printed image was introduced to further explore the concept.

Image 1: This image is divided in two by the artist introducing a block of broken lines around the hand and then filling the one half of the image with the colour red to

emphasize the division. The half drawn circles situated on the broken dividing line symbolically represents a bull's eye. The artist has drawn two silhouettes on either side of the hand, symbolically suggesting presence.

Image 2: Death is symbolically represented in this image by the dried tree bar. Once again the image is divided with the one half tinted red. The broken lines form a symbolic cross over the image with the bull's eye drawing attention to the hand. The bulls eye mark is located in the formation of a coffin, which visually leads the viewer to thoughts relating to death.



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1996. *Ana Mendieta*. Eclicioues Poligrafa.



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1992. *Ana Mendieta's Primal Scream.* Americas. Vol. 44: 40-44.



## 9. Bibliography of illustrations.

Fig. 1.1. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 23

Fig. 1.2. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 36

Fig. 1.3. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 53

Fig. 1.4. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 61

Fig. 1.5. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 59

Fig. 1.6. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 46

Fig. 1.7. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 155

Fig. 1.8. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 68

Fig. 1.9. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 69

Fig. 1.10. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 71

Fig. 1.11. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. *Eclicious Poligrafa*. P. 72-73



Fig. 1.12. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 76

Fig. 1.13. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 91

Fig. 1.14. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 95

Fig. 1.15. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 102

Fig. 1.16. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 78

Fig. 1.17. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 116

Fig. 1.18. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 136

Fig. 1.19. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 139

Fig. 1.20. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 80

Fig. 1.21. Moure, G., Kuspit, D., Merewether, C., Sabbatino, M., Mendieta, A., Mendieta, R. 1996. Ana Mendieta. Eclicious Poligrafa. P. 75

## 10. List of illustrations.

### 10.1. Additional Mendieta works.



Fig.1.1.  
Ana Mendieta.  
Facial Hair Transplants.  
Iowa 1972.  
Performance.  
Dimensions unknown.



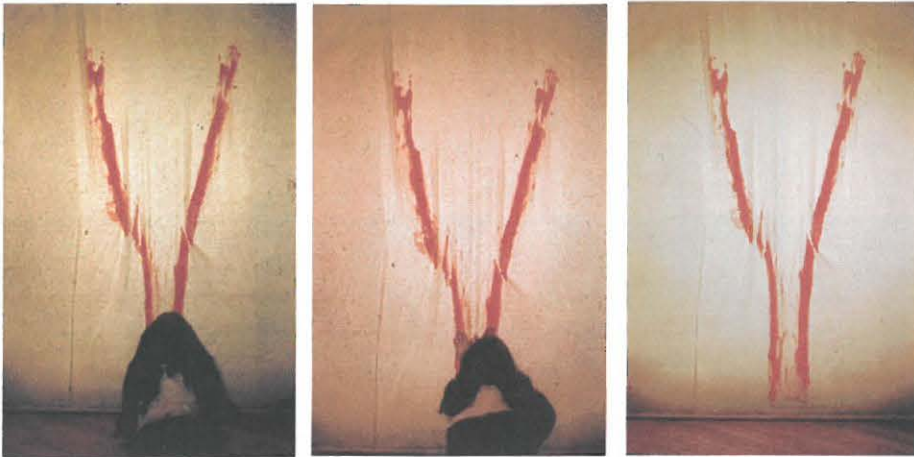
Fig.1.2.  
Ana Mendieta.  
Rape Scene.  
Iowa 1973.  
Performance.  
Dimensions unknown.



Fig.1.3.  
Ana Mendieta.  
Flowers on Body.  
Mexico 1973.  
Performance.  
Dimensions unknown.



Fig.1.4.  
Ana Mendieta.  
Untitled.  
Iowa 1977.  
Performance.  
Dimension unknown.



**Fig. 1.5.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Body Tracks.**  
**Iowa 1974.**  
**Performance.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.6.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Mutilated Body on Landscape.**  
**Mexico 1973.**  
**Performance.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.7.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Maroya (Moon).**  
**Havana 1981.**  
**Sculpted and painted rock wall.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



## 10.2. "Siluetta" series.

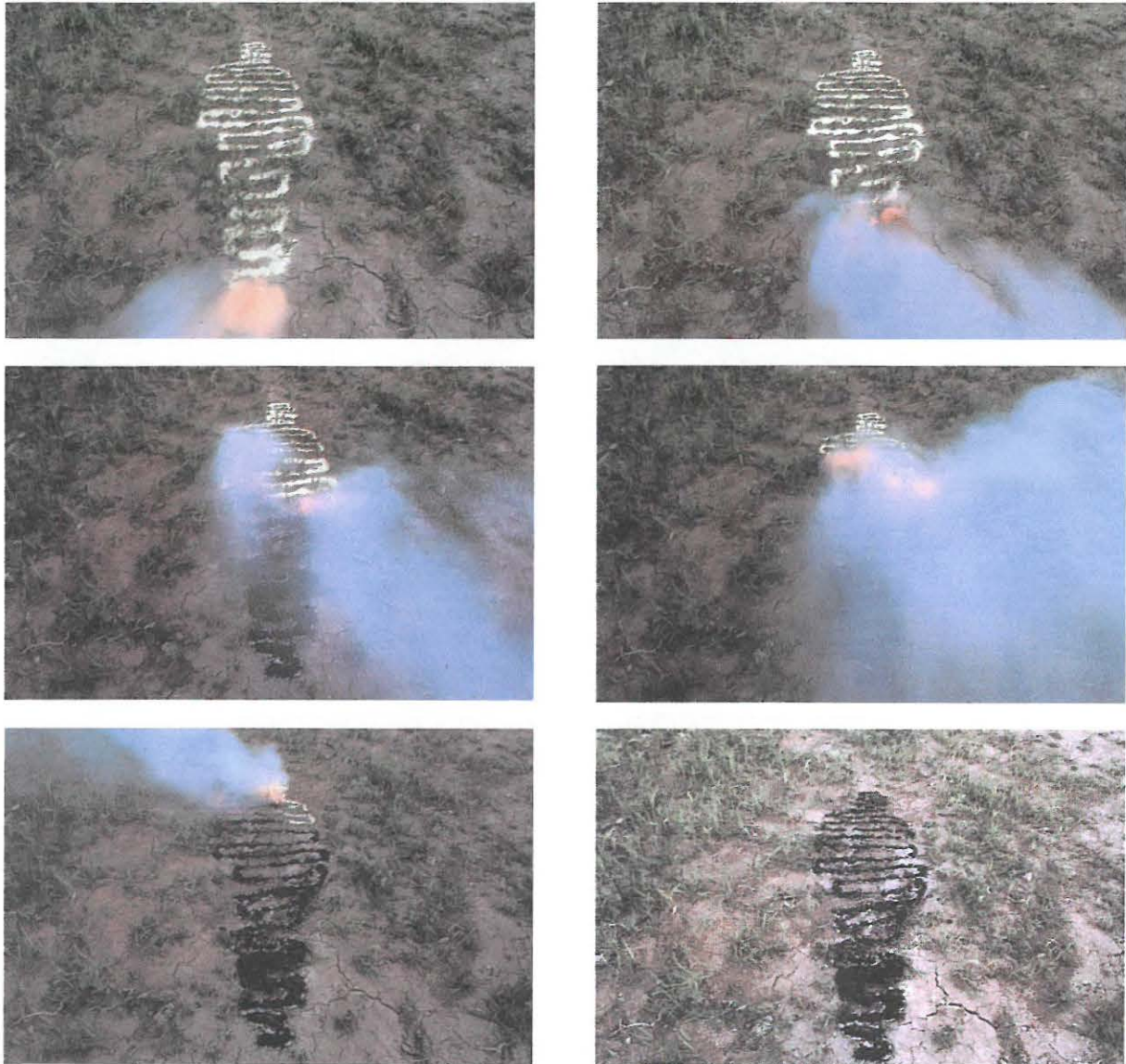
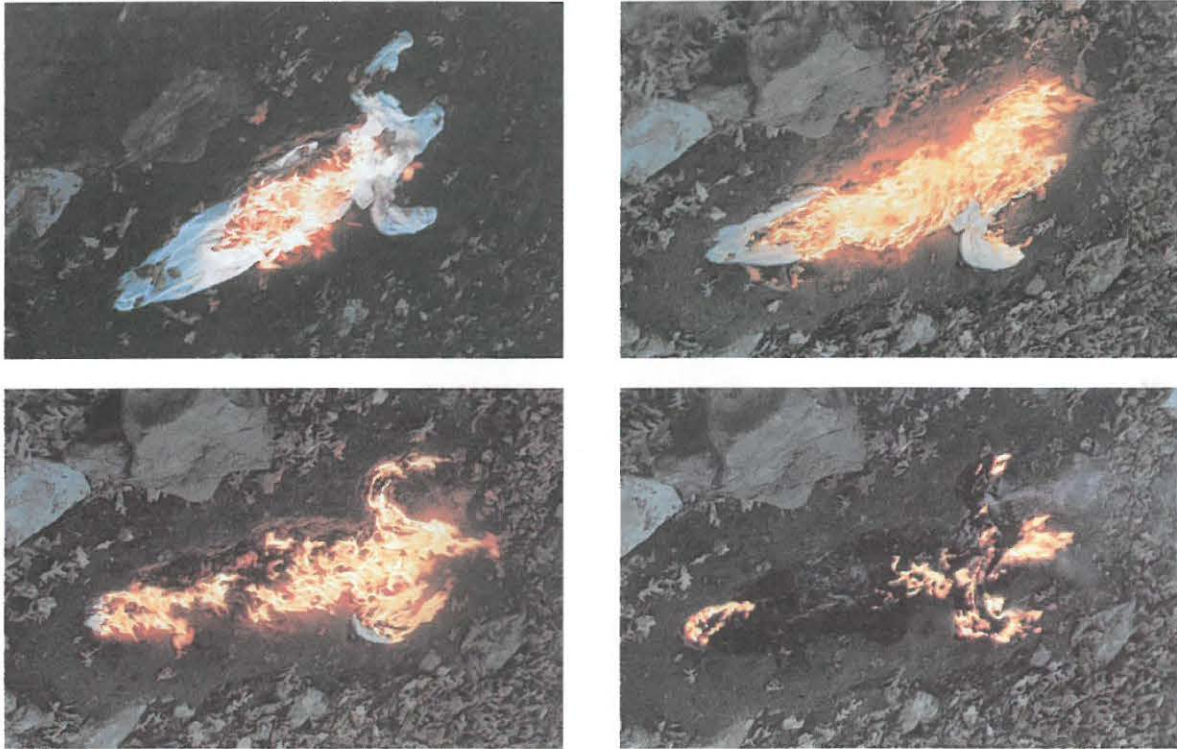


Fig.1.8.  
Ana Mendieta.  
Untitled.  
Iowa 1979.  
gunpowder silueta.  
Dimensions unknown.



**Fig.1.9.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1975.**  
**Cloth and gunpowder silueta.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig.1.10.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1978.**  
**Snow Silueta.**  
**Dimesions unknown.**





**Fig.1.11.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Mexico 1976.**  
**Red pigment silueta on sand.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



5289809





**Fig.1.12.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Mexico 1976.**  
**White cloth on dry wood.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.13.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1977.**  
**Silueta with sand and branches.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.14.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1977.**  
**Mud and grass silueta.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.15.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1978.**  
**Grass silueta.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig.1.16.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Anima.**  
**Mexico 1976.**  
**Performance.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig.1.17.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Iowa 1978.**  
**Siluetta of weeds, pieces of wood and dried roots.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**

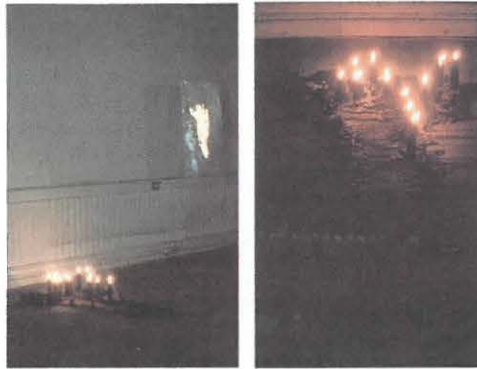


**Fig.1.18.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Mexico 1980.**  
**Carved clay bed with roots.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**





**Fig. 1.19.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Mexico 1980.**  
**Figure carved clay.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**



**Fig. 1.20.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Burial of Nanigo.**  
**New York 1976.**  
**Black voodoo candles.**  
**79 x 39 x 10 inches.**



**Fig. 1.21.**  
**Ana Mendieta.**  
**Untitled.**  
**Mexico 1976.**  
**Red flower silueta on sand.**  
**Dimensions unknown.**

### 10.3. Practical component.



Fig. 2.1.  
Yolandi Bronkhorst.  
**Fragile Object.**  
2002.  
Performance/site-specific.  
1.5 m x 1.3 m.



Fig. 2.2.  
Yolandi Bronkhorst.  
**Colony.**  
2002.  
Performance/site-specific.  
850 mm x 800mm.



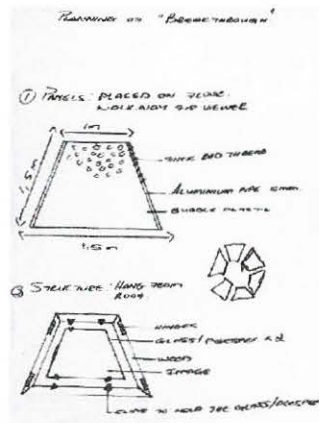


Fig. 2.3.  
Yolandi Bronkhorst.  
**Abstract Life.**  
2002.  
Site-specific.  
600 mm x 400 mm.





Fig. 2.5.  
Yolandi Bronkhorst.  
**Breakthrough.**  
2002.  
Performance/site-specific.  
400 mm x 30 mm.



Planning of Breakthrough.



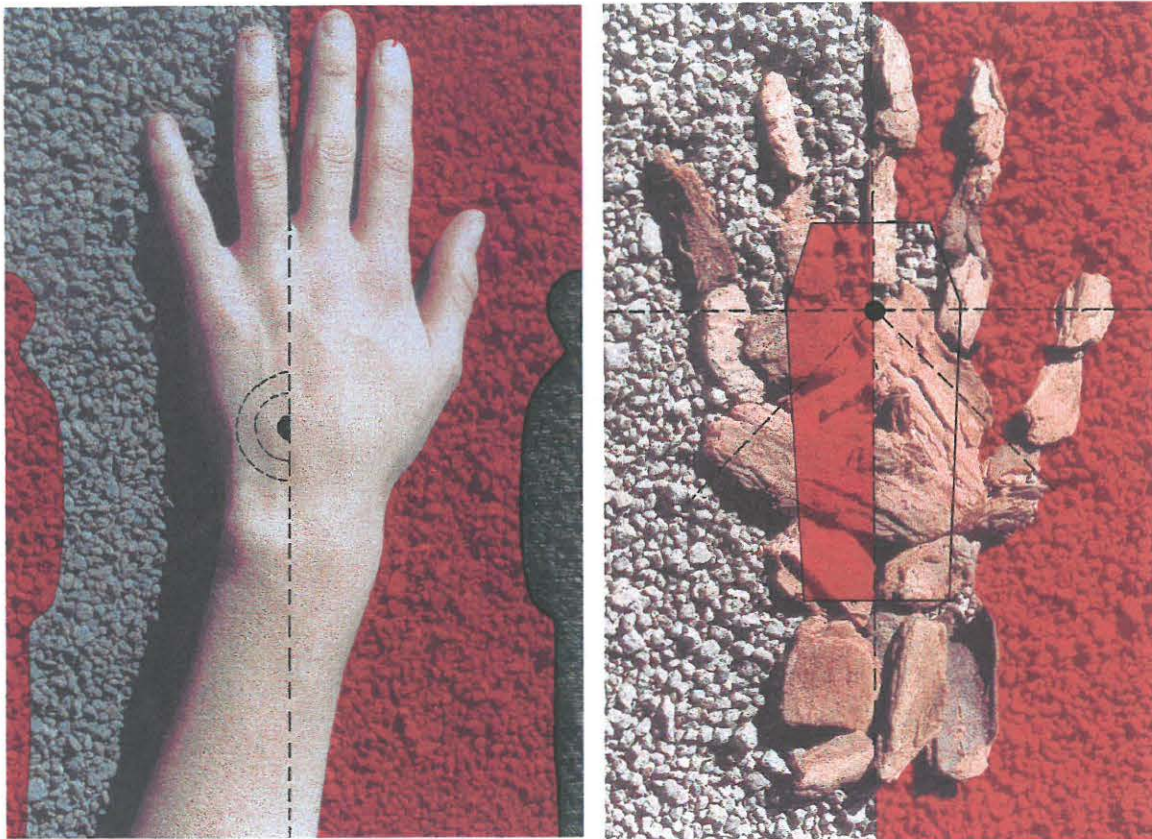


Fig. 2.6.  
Yolandi Bronkhorst.  
**Imprint.**  
2002.  
Performance/site-specific.  
1002 mm x 750 mm.