

## Contemporary Art Facing the Earth

### *Introduction*

In this paper, I examine the alignment of aesthetic and ethical strategies, in contemporary earth art projects that effect a phenomenological experience of nature's alterity. The artworks that I will discuss elaborate perception as a deliberate act of receiving sensation, which I contrast to Maurice Merleau-Pontian mode of tactile vision which has been associated with postminimalist sculpture and nineteen sixties land art.<sup>1</sup> As an alternative to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model, whereby the subject intends towards an object, actively reaching out for it, and ultimately apprehending by 'taking hold' of it with a penetrating touch, contemporary earth artists deploy the artwork to both mediate and allegorize the bodily sensation of nature as a disarticulation of surfaces. They thereby develop a complex ecological stance in which not only is nature understood to feed into and then exceed one's field of perception, but the perception of nature's otherness becomes an ethical act as well as an aesthetic experience.

The artworks in question, a performance sculpture by Ana Mendieta, a series of photograms by Susan Derges and a biosculpture by Jackie Brookner, all express touching, seeing and in one case even tasting nature as a detection of bodily limits. The reception of sensorial information occurs in spite of, and because of, those limits. In each artwork, the body is the locus of the human-earth exchange. The body is performed both as a kind of sculptural object that is entwined with the earth, but also as a surface that separates itself out from natural activity. More precisely, though these earth artists locate

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, The Viking Press, 1977 or Alex Potts, "Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s," *Art History* 27 no. 2, April 2004, p. 282-304.

their bodies within the materiality of the earth, the artwork instigates an inversion or turn against natural substance in order to gain a perspective of its alterity.

Though contemporary earth art is often described as sculpting with photography, or photographing sculpture - the more familiar artworks of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo have often fallen under this description - what becomes evident is that the discrete categories of 'the three-dimensional object' and 'the pictorial document' are no longer accurate to describe the aesthetic object of earth art practice. More often, earth artists are concerned with expressing how the art object emerges as a product of the performed relationship between the body and the earth, and reveals the way the body and the earth constitute one another through the friction between their respective surfaces. In place of notions of the three-dimensional sculptural object and its characterization in terms of material, texture and form, here I use the concept of 'the elemental' to describe the substance in which the contingency of the body and nature is staged. Instead of the pictorial image, what is usually thought of as a supplement that documents and replaces the ephemeral artwork, I will be detailing the visual component of these works as a surface on which 'the face' of nature appears. The substance of the elemental and the appearance of a face are inextricable components of the earth artwork, though neither effectively delivers the earth as a totalized concept, image or object. It is worthwhile to take a moment to unpack each concept in slightly more detail.

### *The Elemental and the Face*

The notion of the elemental has appeared recently in the domains of environmental ethics and eco-phenomenology, in connection with conceptions of the

earth as an irreducible entity. John Sallis, for example, posits that philosophy's concern with sensibility is fundamentally a turn towards the elemental of nature.<sup>2</sup> The concern with the sensible, he explains, is a quest for that which is not intelligible as a thing, but for the unbounded and indefinite substance from which intelligible things emerge. The elemental entails this fundamental source of emergence and furthermore, Sallis continues, the earth is the primary elemental. Most importantly for my purposes is the model of the earth that Sallis advances. The elemental earth is more than an inert substance that could be reduced to a schema of production whereby things are merely composed of matter. It does not compose things, rather, it is that from which things manifest, or as Sallis puts it, it is the penultimate, "from which of manifestation".<sup>3</sup>

In distinguishing between the material composition of the earth and the process of its manifestation in things, Sallis asserts that the earth possesses an unknown dimension by which it exists as the foundation for that which emerges from it. He notes that the earth subtends precisely by withholding itself or closing itself off, thus providing a terrain on which 'things of the earth' might exist.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, like their elemental foundation, earthly things possess the same quality of self-closure. This leads Sallis to discuss the way in which the earth manifests itself in things, but also how its manifestation resists the transparency of intelligibility. He describes the earth's presence in things as a countenance that is inseparable from a face, "It is the visage of something that withholds

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<sup>2</sup> John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," in Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman (eds.), *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 2004, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," p. 143.

itself precisely in offering its physiognomy, of something that displays its secret strength but in such a way as to keep it secret in the very display."<sup>5</sup>

Sallis' evocation of the visage or countenance of the earth brings me to the idea of the face, which I use to explain the visual documents that evoke the earth but nevertheless sustain a certain unintelligibility. Where for Sallis the earth is a visage that withholds itself, for Levinas the alterity of the other, which is beyond even the *idea* of otherness, presents itself in the concept of 'the face', which he specifically opposes to a discernable image. He writes, "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me..."<sup>6</sup> Though Levinas describes an encounter with a specifically human Other, his notion of the face resonates with the ecology's redefinition of the earth in terms of its rupture from human discursive categories. Accordingly, by elaborating the visual manifestation of the earth in the artwork as a face, I am drawing attention to the artwork's recognition of the earth's irreducibility. Specifically, what is at stake in the artworks at hand is the expression of the artist's encounter with the earth in terms of the earth's resistance to representation. I therefore underscore the primacy of the artist's use of the body, which, I suggest, is both the locus of contact with the earth, and the device by which the spectator understands the limits of his or her ability to perceive it.

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<sup>5</sup> John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas quoted in Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 88.

*Ana Mendieta's Siluetas*

I begin with a discussion of Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980), a sequence of performances in which the artist impressed her bodily form into the land in a practice she called 'earth-body sculptures'. The imprint in Mendieta's practice is both a metaphor for the interpenetration of the body and the earth, and the agent by which Mendieta performs their differentiation through the reciprocal marking of surfaces. The imprint encompasses both three-dimensional and two-dimensional elements; by sinking herself into the elemental substance of the site and asserting her body against it, the artist ensures that the aesthetic dimension is prompted as a function of both the sensation of the earth's volume and depth as well as its surface.

Anne Raine astutely points out that Mendieta's *siluetas* initiate an uncanny oscillation by which her body and inert matter occupy the same space. Yet, more subtly, in performing her body as imprint, as a shared space that indexes both her body and the earth but delivers neither as coherent object, the artist expresses the irreducibility of each to one another. Furthermore, by positioning of the body and the earth as contingent, and as mutually marking one another, but remaining unavailable to one another and to the spectator, Mendieta reveals the body's capacity to receive sensations of the earth and to do so precisely because the body draws up against the earth and vice versa. Not coincidentally, then, in a *silueta* work entitled *Incantation a Olokun-Yemayá* (Figure 1) executed in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1977, Mendieta deploys the imprint as the penultimate figure of touch. The indexical properties of the imprint (its status as a physical marking of the land through the application of pressure) thus coincide with its metaphoric connotations (as a representation of tactility).



**Figure 1.** Ana Mendieta, *Incantation a Olokun Yemayà*, sand, black and white photograph, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1977. © Estate of Ana Mendieta, Galerie Lelong, New York.

In this work, the artist stages a facing of the earth, placing the body inside the outline of a giant hand. Unlike her other *silueta* works, the focus here is not the dissolving imprint – it was not photographed in a sequence of color slides that document a temporal performance. The key to this work is the division between the body’s surface and the earth’s surface, and the figuration of that contact as an act of touching and being touched. Mendieta created the hand by piling sand along the outline. The hand is not pushed into the land from above, as though to allegorize the artist’s touch; rather, it gives the illusion that the edges of the hand are pushing out from underneath. The hand is thereby set in tension with the body’s shape that is pushed into it. The sense of pressure is further emphasized by the fact that the head of the body’s imprint is set in the opposite

direction from the fingers. The hand does not echo the imprinted body; it is situated across from it, the head at the inverse of the finger into which it is laid. Moreover, the hand does not close around the *silueta*; it remains open against its surface, receiving the imprint but not absorbing it. In a now notorious statement Mendieta describes her *siluetas* as a way of becoming an extension of nature and of nature becoming an extension of her body.<sup>7</sup> She carries this out, however, not through union with the material of the earth, but by entering into it and then disarticulating herself from it.

Alphonso Lingis writes that the elemental gives rise to sense, and is itself sensed as immersion. He is quick to add, however, that sense arises not by an intentional direction of the viewing eye and the grasping hand aiming at objectives, but by a movement of involution.<sup>8</sup> In pushing her body into the ground, Mendieta immerses herself in the earth and then, significantly, she withdraws, leaving the imprint. This involution gives the earth a face - not a literal face but a surface of appearance. In *Incantation*, the imprint expresses the character of the open hand's touch that pushes against it - the hand receives but does not grasp or enfold. Mendieta pictures this encounter as an exercise in immersion in and pressure against, thus sustaining a sensorial reciprocity. In the intimacy of matter on matter the imprint is knotted into the land, marking Mendieta's presence on the site, but at the same time evidencing the artist's retraction. In so doing, she performs the body as a surface that receives the earth's appearance; that is to say, the earth has come forward, constituting and embracing the

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<sup>7</sup> Ana Mendieta cited in Anne Raine, "Embodied geographies: subjectivity and materiality in the work of Ana Mendieta," in Griselda Pollock (ed.) *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts – Feminist Readings*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 228.

<sup>8</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1996, p. 125.

body within it, in order to elicit sensation in that body. Mendieta mobilizes the aesthetic dimension of the artwork as a confrontation by which the body receives sensation across and through its limits.

### *Susan Derges' Receptive Surfaces*

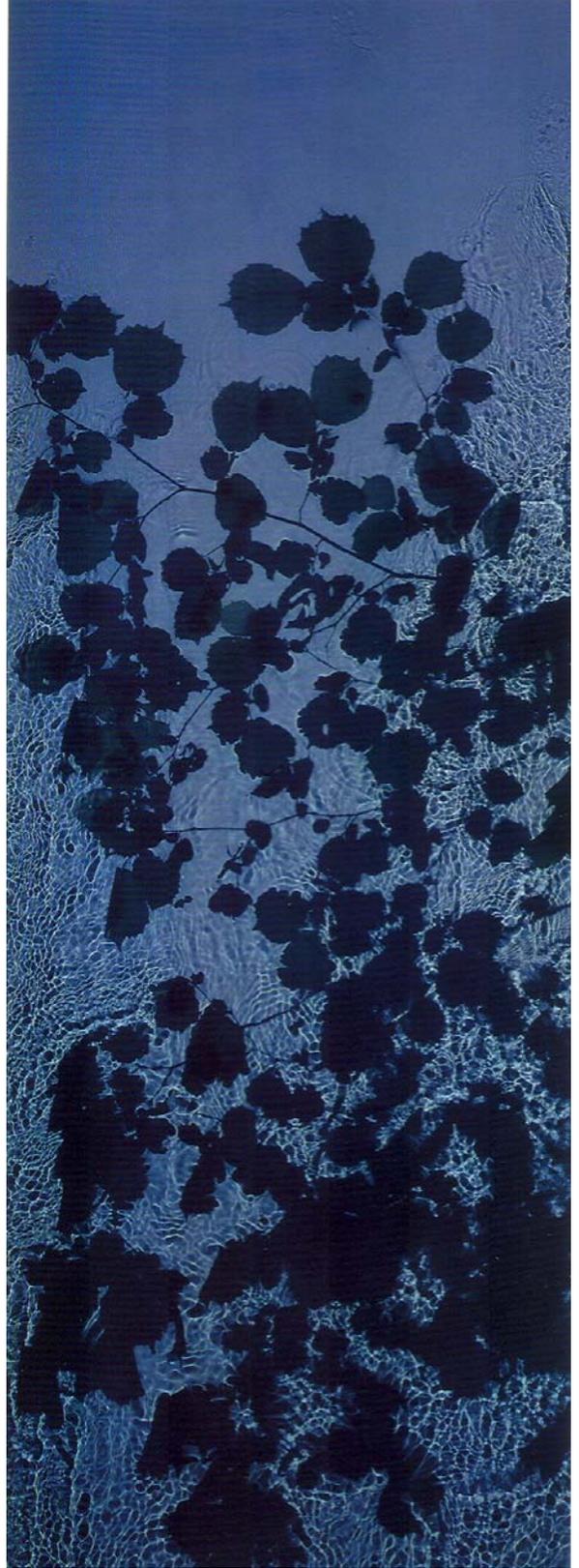
The elemental, in Mendieta's work is the medium that binds the body and the earth together, and when deployed as a surface, it illuminates the face of the site. The photograms of the British artist Susan Derges similarly assert a surface within the elemental as a means of giving nature a face. In a series of photograms from 1998, Derges documented periodic changes to the River Taw in Britain (Figures 2-3). The photogram is an image produced without the use of an optical apparatus; Derges does not use cameras or lenses to generate it. Instead, the photogram is made on Ilfachrome paper. Unlike photograph paper, Ilfachrome is a positive paper used to print transparencies as opposed to negatives. It has three emulsion layers, each sensitized to one of the three primary colors so that each layer records different color information of the image. During development, in a process called 'dye destruction', unnecessary portions of the color dye are bleached out.<sup>9</sup> To create the necessary contrast between reflected light and dark background, the artist works at night. She submerges a sheet of paper in the river, and at the right moment affixes the image by releasing a flash of light. With the flash of light, the paper absorbs the patterns of the water's movement.

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Derges, "A Technical Note," in Frish Brandt and James Danziger (eds.) *Woman Thinking River* New York, Danziger Gallery and Fraenkel Gallery, 1999, p. 79.



**Figure 2.** Susan Derges, *River Taw (Birch)*, 12 January 1998, photogram, 66" x 24". ©Susan Derges.



**Figure 3.** Susan Derges. *River Taw (Hazel)*, 16 June 1998, photogram, 66" x 24". © Susan Derges.

For Roland Barthes, the photograph is an ineluctable testament to what has been. The photogram is an even more literal trace than the photograph, however, because it results from the physical contact of the water on the paper. The pressure of one surface against another is secured as an image when galvanized by the flashlight. When the light exposes the water, the photogram is marked with the shapes of the river's swirling vortices, as well as the shadows of tree branches. The photogram is literally immersed in the water, and is a surface on which the contact between the artist and the river is configured into an image that depicts and reveals a glimpse of the river's face.

The tree branch that is silhouetted on the image can be thought of as a technical device that exposes or protects the water, depending on the time of year and the time of day, and by which the river gleams different qualities of light and color. But more than this, the shadow of the tree branch creates a tension on the surface of the water. When activated by the flash of light the photogram assembles it into an undeniable countenance. Like Mendieta's performances, the image is a scenario of reciprocal touch. In many of the photograms, the branches carry a disturbing resemblance to hands with skeletal fingers. In others, the leaves or branches are less human, but nevertheless evoke the sense that the river has come forward in a particular stance or address to the spectator. Its presence eerily mirrors the spectator's position in relation to the photogram. Indeed, the human scale of the photogram (at 66 inches long and 24 inches wide) invites a confrontation between the tree branch and the spectator. Much like the relation between the giant hand and the imprinted body in Mendieta's *Incantation*, the spectator is prompted to experience the photogram in tactile terms, positioned both within the water and against the branch.

Because Derges lies the photogram flat under the water, she creates a tilting of the picture plane, so that the spectator encounters the image seemingly from within the river, lying horizontally. I would suggest in accordance with Leo Steinberg's analysis of the flatbed picture plane, that this horizontal perspective emphasizes the process of the photogram's production – the application of the image onto the paper's surface as a transaction involving the receiving, printing or impressing of information on a 'receptor surface'.<sup>10</sup> The photogram surface is analogous to the surface of the spectator's body. The image of light and shadows are affixed to the photogram as pressure would register on the skin. And like skin, the photogram is a receptive medium; it absorbs the image but its receptivity is predicated on its assertion of surface.

Derges presents the photogram, and symbolically the body of the spectator, as a surface that is marked by the river's movements. Inherently contradictory, for the still image is created by ephemeral conditions, the photogram reveals the river's resistance to transparency as, in John Sallis' words, a face that is continually threatened because its coming forth is always a coming to pass.<sup>11</sup> The countenance that is lit up in the water, and which appears as a consequence of the division that the photogram inserts within the river, is both present and unintelligible, impenetrable but still fragile in its exposure. The visage that arises in the elemental fluid is thus closed off to the invasive movement of seeing as a tactile grasp in the mode of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Instead, the River Taw assembles against the surface of the photogram, so that the spectator receives sight as tactile resistance. The convergence of spectral shapes do not express the river as a totality, but rather as a sensorial abundance that configures the image but also

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<sup>10</sup> See Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> John Sallis, "The Elemental Earth," p. 142

confounds definitive form. The image is not a picture of the river as such, rather it is the agent that indexes a transient moment of intimate contact with the water that can never be reproduced.

### ***Jackie Brookner's Prima Lingua***

Mendieta's *siluetas* and Derges' photograms entail a facing of nature from within it, not by way of an exchange of gazes nor by visually 'taking hold', but by stimulating the earth's appearance on a surface from within the elemental. The sculptures of the American artist, Jackie Brookner, likewise revolve around strategies that initiate nature's visual manifestation.

The question of how art might articulate nature, though it is fundamentally inexpressible, is the subject of *Prima Lingua* (Figures 4-5). Like many of Brookner's works, *Prima Lingua* is a biosculpture, an object engineered to function as a water filtration system. Brookner's biosculptures are made of stone, rock or concrete, materials on which mosses, liverworts, ferns and other plants can grow and on which snails can proliferate. The artist explains that the biosculpture is a biogeochemical filter: as water flows over it, plants, bacterium and other organisms transform pollutants into sustaining nutrients.<sup>12</sup> *Prima Lingua*, made of concrete and volcanic rock in the shape of a giant tongue, stands in what began as a pool of polluted water. Between 1996 and 2001, Brookner pumped the water over the surface of the tongue. Over time vegetation grew and thickened on the sculpture, gradually purifying the pool.

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<sup>12</sup> Jackie Brookner, April, 2006, [www.jackiebrookner.net/Biosculptures\\_files/Biosculptures.htm](http://www.jackiebrookner.net/Biosculptures_files/Biosculptures.htm).



**Figure 4.** Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*, concrete, volcanic rock, mosses, ferns, wetland plants, fish, steel, 64" x 101" x 80", 1996-2001 (shown here, 2001). © jackie brookner.



**Figure 5.** Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*, profile, 1996. © jackie brookner.

It is significant that Brookner chose the tongue as the sculptural motif. The artist describes the tongue as literally licking the water in which it stands. In foregrounding the role of the tongue to lick the water clean, Brookner invokes a specific mode of sensorial experience that cannot be expressed by any other body part. The act of licking involves two kinds of sensation: touching and tasting. Tongues feel contour and texture, sensing through tactile exploration. However, they need only be applied against something in order to taste. Tasting, unlike touching, is a matter of receiving and registering flavor. Not coincidentally, the tongue pushes out, flattened and wide rather than lying at rest. The tongue offers the lively growth of mosses and plants as though they were a burst of flavor. The aesthetic richness of the work is hinged not on the tongue as a sculptural object or on the vegetation in and of itself, but on the particular way the tongue cues the

experience of the vegetation – allowing it to blossom uninterrupted by a penetrating touch.

Moreover, Brookner draws attention to the role of the tongue as the vehicle of language. Though in a dualistic logic the realm of language is often considered to be separate from and superior to the terrestrial sphere of nature – the discursive sphere being abstract from the material world, according to this framework – Brookner nevertheless secures their inextricability. Nature in Brookner's work is a primary language, a *prima lingua*, to which we are privy before human language. Where Mendieta and Derges deploy their artworks as a means to face the earth from within the elemental in the contact between two surfaces as, in Luce Irigaray's words, 'two lips gathered at the edge of speech', Brookner attempts a facing of the earth *as* this moment of pause before enunciation. The tongue in itself does not form a word; it exposes the unintelligible transaction of sensations that precede and inspire speech. Language, here, is shown to arise from an elemental basis, carried up through the body in the same way the plants grow as a result of the continual flow of water pumped over the tongue. The tongue in itself does not form a word; it exposes the unintelligible transaction of sensations that precede and inspire speech. Moreover, it is not housed in a mouth but in a system of elements - in water, air, and light. Brookner's tongue thus exteriorizes the body; it is exposed flesh that reacts with external nature, thereby revealing that language is spurred forth by the internal sensations generated by the friction between the body and nature.

The face of the earth, encompassed by the growth on the tongue, is paralleled to the articulation of a word, yet its appearance is distinctly resistant to defined meaning as such. Brookner specifies, that the emergence of this face, like speech, is contingent on a

subtle connectivity and division between two domains: between the speaker and the listener, or in this particular case, between the internal body and the external earth. The perception of nature, like the communication of language, is predicated on receiving the subtle expressiveness of that other domain. Thus, in turning processes of speech that stem from inside oneself into external processes of taste and touch, Brookner acknowledges the influx of sensations of nature that precede and inform discursive meaning. She then figures the face of nature as an expression of language founded on receptivity; nature takes root and flourishes because of the tongue's passive supply of contact.

### *Conclusion*

The mechanism of the artworks I have examined is the artist's assertion of the body as a surface against the earth's elemental substance from within it. They essentially turn the earth on itself and evidence its self-closure from intelligibility. The result of this internal division is the coalescence of the earth into an image that discloses its alterity. The image that I call 'the face' is fundamentally resistant to the presumed intelligibility of sculptural form or pictorial representation. Because the body is the locus of the emergence of the face, artists evoke the sensation of the earth's presence, but they do not deliver it as a totalized perception. Through the interplay between immersion in the depths of elemental substance and the friction of encountering that substance across the dividing surface on which the face appears, artists pose the question of how nature is sensed through a retraction from perceptual expectations.

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