

*For a new concept of Nature in the 21st Century: Eco-feminism, art and cultural politics*

In the 18th Century the positivist mind feared Nature, because as an organism populated by unpredictable and uncontrollable forces it endangered a system which sought to explain reality through a strictly rational grid, upholding the superiority of the male subject. Reason was considered the exclusive domain of white and western man and was envisaged, in resemblance to the male phallus, as a light which crossed things, turning them into a malleable and usable passive matter. In this process envisioned as culture, in the more vast sense of a civilization movement, and by opposition to an obscure nature and a mysterious and unfathomable woman, the world around had to become predictable in order for progress to continue, the latter being identifiable with the growing exclusion of what is different.

Just as a woman is fertile, the world of chaos would have to be sown and ploughed in order to exclude all uncertainty and ambiguity. From the moment the surrounding world is penetrated by Man's light of reason, the threat it represents, as the Other active and unpredictable subject is apparently neutralized, becoming an object, an abstraction of matter, inert and immutable [image 2].

Thus, the mechanical metaphor symbolizes the rational ideal through which Man interprets the world in order to apprehend and manipulate it. In reality this symbol is what in Kantian terms could be called an "*apriori*" category, since just as Man is thought through language, the latter expresses a cause-effect relationship and a linear development which does not exist between things which are separate from Man, but only in language. This linear conception, disconnected from the world, does not translate the connection between things which escape us in language, as water escapes from the hands. Nature, thus perceived as a machine, becomes vulnerable to rape, like a woman, particularly a slave or a woman from the lower ranks, because it has no soul. That which does not exist in language is pure and simply banished as

a detour to norm, as is demonstrated by the growth in practices of witchcraft during this period.

History has been written by a minority within humankind and its diverse cultures, which created a universal concept of Man seen as a cultural being, engaged in a growing manipulation and instrumental exploitation of Nature, thus considered as the “Other”. Culture is stated as superior exactly in the sense that it has the capacity to transform Nature. The consequent undervalue of Nature, as something to be “transcended” and the principles derived from such civilizing movement, directed towards a growing technological use of Nature, has also lead to the devaluation of domains associated to femaleness and connoted to Mother-Nature.

Through the *apriori* of language, Occidental white Man is identified with the human species, while as woman and other races are considered exceptions which confirm the rule. Thus the existing linguistic illusion that woman is a minority: each time “men” are referred to it is not necessary to specify they are “male”, but when “women” are referred to, it becomes necessary to address them as the “Other” of man.

Claude Lévis-Strauss noted that even before slavery and class domination men had, in his words, “approached women in a way that would be used some day to introduce differences in every one”. The power of a woman was thus the first experience that a man had of his own power, serving subsequently as a model to control nature, the remaining share of humankind and society. Thus the cultural construction of a “woman” is so necessary to a man, for it assures his status of “Lord”. Just like all other “detours from the norm” are pejoratively labeled as opposites, as differences more or less amorphous and inert, like different parts of Nature. Similarly to the later, groups different from the universal “Man” are voted to the law of silence, with no right to an active participation in their own destinies [Image 3]. They don’t even have the right to have their own name, since they are merely defined negatively, even when, as is the case of women, such exclusion is accompanied by an idolatry which petrifies her in a dream of stone.

Thus, women are captured by a trap already predicted by the system, since all systems grant the instruments to think the anti-system: If she fights for equality between men and women, she faces the risk of perpetuating the same hierarchy of values men have; if, on the other hand, she fights for the right to be different, valuing activities and functions previously connoted as negative and attributed almost exclusively to women, such as nursing, decorative arts, the domestic life of a mother, and so on, she can only count on the applause of men to whom logically such task division is convenient. [image 4]

Both cases are founded in the essence of a woman who is not natural at the get go, but who is interweaved by a complexity of social practices which include family, education, culture, publicity, cinema, marketing, to name a few. These comprise what we might call the industries of subjectivity of our society and its cultural policies, or rather, ways of creating power through a culture of differences. These differences are in reality arbitrary and generators of power. Therefore they exist in the frontier between the dichotomies created, as in the case of the Man/Woman division, guarding them through mechanisms which reach out to the most intimate spheres of the psyche. Hence, the silence of those excluded groups is often imposed from the inside, for a whole negative valorisation is created which ridicules whoever positively assumes to be different from the norm.

Consequently, I consider that it does not make much sense to appeal to the difference of the “feminine”, because we are all different, even men are different from “man”. It will mean far more to name the feminine world positively, not necessarily incompatible with men, and regardless of the sex. We should thus overcome the dichotomy man/woman making it permeable in way that, following the same path, other dichotomies such as Nature/Culture could become more fluid.

Both men and women are confined to a structure of the system which considers as supreme values progress and the transcendence of the present, of what’s happening here and now. Historically, power is born out of division, first with specialized work, then by spreading out the creation of symbols which consolidate those separations and define task distribution within such structure. Dichotomy between the private

sphere – confined to women and the functions of caring and nurturing – and the public sphere – men’s domain and exclusive place for sacred rituals - is correlative to that hierarchy of values. Similarly, the prohibition of incest and the sacred law of exogamy, as defended by Lévis-Strauss in “The Elementary Structures of Kinship”, asserts the power of the social in relation to the biological and of the cultural in relation to the natural, averting that the biological family becomes a closed system and assuring dependency towards the biological group. Thus the dichotomy between the public and private domains is entwined in the devaluation of nature in relation to culture and in the affirmation of the latter’s superiority, along with the supposed inferiority of women in relation to men.

Man, not being able to generate life on his own, is defined as a creator of symbols and traits which remain beyond his life, an eternal action whose value is opposite to the ephemeral characteristics of female tasks associated to domestic life, such as nurturing, caring and educating. These are activities which leave no traits behind and are contrary to the typical functions of men, namely, building, dominating nature, conquering territory or creating laws.

It becomes obvious how the feminine/masculine dichotomy is a fruit of culture itself. This is not about consolidating the projection of the “Other” in “Woman” and in “Nature”, thus mystified and placed outside the scope of interaction with the world, which is merely circumscribed to men. Firstly, through an analogy of the exploitation of Nature and the exploitation of women, a demonstration of how phallus centric values structure power relations in society, and secondly about opening up to the capacity of learning with Nature and strategies of facing life so far considered feminine, in order to create a sustainable economy.

If it is accurate to state that “Feminism” is above all a cultural construction, it is equally true that in general there are tendencies and different sensibilities not always necessarily related to gender. In the context of a technological society, based on the appropriation of Nature as a resource of a progress which moves towards the ultimate destruction of all species on Earth, it becomes urgent to lend a voice to

subjectivities without history, since they were excluded from canonized narratives which framed subjects within power regimes.

Just like Nature, Woman more than Man, crosses cycles and is transfigured by metamorphoses. Her time and disposition change like the tides. Unlike man longing for ecstasy in a unique and always postponed climax towards a vertiginous movement of growth of her production capacity, she does not see the world through a vertical hierarchy, drafted in the phallic symbol. In this hierarchy of values, “more” is always a synonym for better, even if it generates *more* misery, destruction and inequalities. Woman has generally a tendency to see the world within a horizontal perspective, contemplating the co-existence of differences. On the other hand, though differences between man and woman have been exacerbated by man and to a large extent created, it is plausible that Nature has endowed woman with a better capacity to place herself in the position of the “Other”, given that in early childhood, she has to anticipate a still not-able-to-talk infant’s needs and wishes.

Since it was through a woman that man had his first experience of power, it should also be she the first to raise her voice and create an alternative speech to male’s dominant speech, becoming active and not reactive. In this sense, eco-feminism may provide an important contribution to a new non-instrumental concept of Nature, not by victimizing woman and Nature as passive agents, but by affirming their difference as sole antidotes to a society based on a constant production of dichotomies and on a vicious circle of separation/exclusion/appropriation.

Nevertheless, a feminine approach to the world as we understand it here, is not exclusive of the female gender, since it is possible for some men with a subtler sensibility to be able to perceive interstices and nexus between things. This is especially true in the art world, which creates a privileged universe where other forms of understanding the world, distinct from a dominant masculine view, may emerge. Women/man dichotomy is here understood as a stereotype of behaviour, independent from gender. Likewise in art, which represents a micro-system, there are several types of sensibilities. In this context, we consider good examples of different approaches to the world surrounding us, Robert Smithson, James Turrell or

Heizer's art in contrast to the ecological art of Ana Mendieta or Alberto Carneiro. Man is used to consider woman, just like Nature, as his own property by divine right and consequently he organized a system of laws and of knowledge of how to exploit, and protect in order to exploit, a reserve of natural resources. Nature and woman are thus seen as the background where qualities emptied of the other's ghost may stand out: culture, spirit, rationality. Hence, for instance, Heizer states he doesn't care for Nature but he merely intends it to serve as a neutral background for his monumental *Land Art* works.

Though the *Land Art* movement appeared in the sixties as an attempt to break from a traditional artistic circuit of artistic production and diffusion – the atelier, the gallery and the museum – its processes do not differ from the traditional creation of a representation detached from Nature. The latter is seen as a source of matter, lifeless on its own, used as a painter uses the colours in tubes. Instead of brushes and spatulas, drills and pickaxes are used. There is not even an attempt from artists from the first current of *Land Art* of closing in on Nature. At the time, abandoning painting and sculpture in favour of “specific objects” conceptualized in 1985 by Donald Judd was already the consummation of an important step towards dissolving frontiers between arts. Nature was an immense white canvas and artists would discover its limitless possibilities.

Thus, for instance [image 5], in *Whirpool, the Eye of the Strom*, Oppenheim drew in the sky an ironic oxymoron in a spiral shape whose lightness was the antipode of the means required for its performance. To him – at least in this work – Nature is merely a surface among others over which a line can be inscribed, no matter how ephemeral. In fact, ephemeris itself is characteristic of the eternal metamorphoses and rebirth of Nature, used by many *Land Art* artists as a colour or catalyser of certain effects which are part of the work, without however trying to dilute the work of art into the surrounding environment. On the contrary, the work is distinct from the landscape due to the interference of technological and industrial tools. A few of the most paradigmatic examples of this intentional demarcation and attitude before Nature are the *Double Negative* , (1960 -70 [image 6]; *Dissipate # nine Nevada depressions* [image 7], 1968 and *Complex City* from Michael Heizer [image 8],

*Lightening Field* from Walter de Maria [image 9] or still, the famous *Spiral Jet* from Robert Smithson [image 10]. In *Double Negative* [image 11] – comprised of two symmetrical cracks, separated by a ravine about 500m long – it was necessary to remove 240.000 tons of land to form two ramps in the extension of the cracks. Likewise, we can include here the works of Christo [Image 12], since the length of the construction is such that the artist even considered as an integrant part of his work the process of acquiring sponsorships and other bureaucracy permit requests, and for this reason published all documents in a volume. Though, unlike other artists, Christo did not manipulate Nature in the sense of digging or altering it and to a certain extent he created shapes which imitate the self-generational character of Nature [Image 13] , and are thus fused in the surrounding environment [Image 14], expanding on the idea that Nature is separate from artistic procedures.

Heizer reclaims art to the measure of the American-like industrial world (*we live in the epoch of 747, the space ship*) and Robert Morris shows little concern for any ecological notion of Nature, having as sole criteria for the choice of places the despoilment of architectonic buildings in order to make works stand out for their neutrality. On the contrary, ecological art of Ana Mendieta and Alberto Carneiro embodies a type of sensitivity which could be here named feminine in its trans-gender sense. Both artists work within a logic of sustainability: not leaving wastes behind, they act in symbiosis with Nature, aware of a fragile connection between the latter and Man.

*The Silhouettes* of Mendieta [Image 15], apart from subverting the monumentality of male gestures of first wave *Land Art* artists, recovers the power of gesture reconnecting Man to Nature through ritual. Mendieta recorded and sculpted in the sand [image 16], on ice [image 17] and on earth [image 18] through a repetitive ritual, the shape of her body, a silhouette which, at times more explicitly is mistaken for a vagina. Occasionally those rituals involved violence, of fire [image 20] which destroys and of death [Image 21] which corrodes the living . In a straightforward way, Mendieta alludes to primitive rituals such as the cycles of birth, growth, sacrifice and rebirth.

Identification between the soil's fecundity and that of a woman was a distinct trait of agricultural societies. According to Mircea Eliade, it is generally assumed that agriculture was a feminine discovery since, while men were absent hunting, women had the opportunity to observe natural phenomena and attempt to reproduce them. Subsequently, and also due to their own fertility they have gained the reputation of being able to influence crops. In numerous cultures, there are legends and superstitions under various forms which rely on this connection to intervene and provide good crops. Generally the more fertile a woman is the more her proximity is beneficial. Recovering these rituals is to Mendieta a way of making real through repetition the connection to Mother-Earth. This cyclical time of the crops, of lunar cycles, of rebirth and death, is opposed to the linear time of patriarchal society which moves towards a vertical ascension and its own destruction.

Mendieta, on the other hand, confronts the ideas of "earth" and "nation" reclaimed by American Land Art artists. As a Cuban exiled in the U.S at the age of twelve, Mendieta has always felt the experience of being in-between: between her home land and the exile land; between the black and the white (she was usually considered as non-white by Americans). In this "out of border" position it became increasingly evident to Mendieta that the construction of the ideological mechanisms of nationalism, which traverse the creation of a pure American art, the patriarchal hierarchy of values and the tendencies of feminist movements in the 70s, universalized woman's image as depicted by the Occidental white woman model.

Art, as a cultural practice, is a system of reproduction of meanings and positions through which these same meanings are wasted. The impulse to search for roots, for a house - "ecois", in the broadest sense – for a place of belonging which provides shelter and defines contours within reality, is a universal one. Narratives which build the idea of nation are steeped in strong emotive associations. This is how people accept giving their lives to the nation. She does not exist anywhere in a material form but is imbibed in symbolic representations. It is remodelled in anthems, in games and even in art and literature, creating what Judith Butler has called "authoritative speech". Mendieta tries to create outside the patriarchal speech and reclaim matriarchal values. Since these have been excluded by society they are in a

privileged position to question systems of values subdued to hierarchies which structure transversely all domains in society, including art.

What I call here eco-art is a home, “ecois”, which encompasses all human and non-human diversity, which seeks to live in communion with the earth where we all live without interfering in the natural cycles of life. In order to reach such objective it is vital to understand that a “home” – in the global sense of Earth – which we create reflects structures in our mind, and is too an ecosystem where several processes interact. Thus, when diversity is abolished in Nature, outside us, there is equally a homogenizing effect within our own structures of thought. We must conceive the two processes as two sides of the same coin. Just as destruction provoked by Mankind on the natural habitat of species leads to the extinction on average of a species per day, so disappear everyday words used to express different ways of understanding life and the world; entire languages, in the broad sense of symbolic systems, are condemned to silence and ways of sensing are cut at their root. The whitening effect of the universal concept of progress is gradually spreading like a virus at a disturbing velocity. If we let economical powers – which reduce everything to a common denominator – define the future, all biodiversity will become homogeneous – a process which finds its foremost expression in biotechnological design.

Within Man’s mind, the feminine side is the “other” who he projects to the outside, exacerbating it. It is an obscure maternal matrix of which he tries to set himself free due to his connection with his own mortality. The more feminine the Woman’s stereotype the more real Man feels. If we accept that the difference of gender is above all produced through a net of social practices and institutions of which family, art, education, the artistic system and the media are an intrinsic part, we also accept that the female and male sexes are not necessarily connected to their gender. Thus, for instance, a woman could feel like a woman in certain periods of her life - when she is a mother, in the sense generally given to the term, a giver and caretaker of life - and in other periods she could feel as more masculine or androgynous. Other woman may not feel the experience of maternity as being connected to the woman condition, as is the case of lesbians. These certainly have a different experience of womanliness, but not a less valid one. On the other hand, some people are born with

a man's sex and fell psychologically and affectively as women or vice-versa, many of them end up having surgical operations to change sex. In short, there is a great diversity in ways of feeling what is commonly denominated in a reductionist manner as feminine or masculine. To avoid such dualism which taints speech and perpetuates a mental structure subjacent to the devaluation of the feminine, I rather use here the term feminine, independent of biological sex, to define a certain form of sensitivity which escapes a phallus-centric one.

In this context, the work of Alberto Carneiro [Image 22] is closer to a more feminine approach to Nature. In 1972, Carneiro published his "Notes for a manifest of ecological art" and has been faithful to those principles since then. His intention was to "recover in the memory of aesthetic sensations the values of Earth which in Man were defined and structured in the sequence of time". Having worked during his youth as an image-maker and having spent his childhood in close contact with Nature, he had an intimate knowledge and respect for the former, which is revealed in the subtle ways he works materials. His artistic behaviour does not try to impose a shape to materials but rather lets their inner shape gleam. Influenced by oriental culture, his work comes from within and not from the external to the internal. Therefore, for example, when representing water [image 23], fire [image 24] or the forest [image 25], he does not represent a visual expression of these but rather their inner being, meaning whatever inner sensations water, fire and the forest can be translated to. His sculpture works with simple things: the memory of experiences lived with Nature, wood, stone, metal, air and fire. Using elements found in landscapes he works them, perfecting them by the gouge and chisel in order to bring out the aesthetic sense of all things in Nature, subsequently creating with those elements an environment, but without welding, nailing down or forcing in any way the materials themselves.

Often, just like Ana Mendieta, Alberto Carneiro directed performances in Nature, establishing a body to body relationship with it, as in *The Stream* [Image26] or *Seven Aesthetic Rituals over a bundle of wicker in the landscap* [Image 27]. The later is a path between a sea and a mountain where the bundle of wicker is an aggregative nucleus which marks the place of each ritual and transforms the earth's substances

into art. This bridge between Nature and culture is fundamental to Alberto Carneiro, because culture is Man's own nature. Hence, according to him, Nature only becomes art when fused with man in the living experience of looking. Nature's body becomes the work's body, resulting from the fusion between the artist, Nature – understood here in its broader sense and encompassing also human's inner nature – and the watcher. Here there is no division between one and the other, only continuation, creation. The *Route of a body* [Image 28] relates the route of a flint-stone since its passage in time through the river water, bathed by infancy, by the hands of the artist, who dug a hole crossed by memories, till it reaches again the mountain. All these actions are documented, as in the case of Ana Mendieta, through photography, which becomes part of the work's body. In a way that reflects his oriental influence, it is not things in themselves that matter but spaces created between things and between them and the surroundings. Thus he creates each work according to the site of the exhibition. In *My Vegetable body* [image 29] he worked inside a room and with materials provided by the museum, most of them coming from a dried up chestnut-tree. Alberto Carneiro became the conductor of energy, and of its forms of growing and of transforming. This importance given to the surrounding environment as a potential activator of memories, lead him to create poetical "environs". In *Cane-plantation: memory/metamorphosis of an absent body* [image 30], Alberto Carneiro evokes mystery places for each place discovered in his innermost being.

Apart from a deep respect for Nature, both Alberto Carneiro and Ana Mendieta have in common the importance given to the body when relating with Nature, the conception of earth as a matrix, a mother generator of life and the importance given to gesture, recovering through this, a ritual of "small" events. As Alberto Carneiro stated in his ecological manifest, "Ecological art will be a return to the origin of our own sources: the rehabilitation of the simplest things in the meanings of aesthetic communication".

In my view, the real path is not in solutions thought from above, global solutions which imply logic of exclusion, but rather in concrete local partnerships, which actually correspond to the state of all things. We are all ecosystems of several sub-

organisms or sub-systems which at a given time coexist forming a body, which in turn is a sub-organism of other more all-embracing bodies. Accordingly, I here defend, together with Carolyn Merchant and Donald Haraway, an ethics of partnership which understands Woman and Nature not as passive agents, victims offering themselves as white canvas for Man's projections – but as active agents, actors of the historical process.

It is only possible to conceive a sustainable relation to the non-human world when we accept as part of our inner self what has been regarded as non-human and stop projecting it in a fictitious and lifeless other. Hence, a new environmental ethics can only be achieved together with a change in dichotomist narratives which sustain social injustice globally. Studies conducted on perception have demonstrated how we respond more receptively to environmental aspects which reveal or resemble the human intention. In this context, ecological art may play an important part by stimulating a different view over not only what we call Nature beyond culture, but also about culture itself. In the same way artists in ecological art work “with” Nature and not against Nature, in a new ecological concept of cultural politics, representatives of industries and governments should work as much with social minorities and local communities as with representatives of natural identities, or natural processes or endangered species, and not *against* them.

The present, rather than being a point in a progressive infinite line, is at the crossroads of coordinates from a vast and complex net. There is no “objective” knowledge of a lifeless matter/object but rather a “situational” knowledge, i.e., the result of a dialectic between variable forces. There is not Mankind on one side and Nature on the other, separated by an unbreakable glass wall which only reflects the dominion of the first over the second, but rather good or bad marriages. Nevertheless, something is certain: it is not intelligent to kill the “Other”, be it woman, Nature, or what is ethically or sexually different, because we will be tied to it for the rest of our lives.

