

Water, Women and Action Art in Latin America: Materializing Eco-Feminist Epistemologies

Esther Moñivas

The role of women in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been and is unquestionably transcendental. Precisely because their conceptual positions are not homogeneous, they have contributed to destabilizing fixed stereotypes. Nevertheless, the erasure of the stories of women artists of Latin America during the era of dictatorships is still a dramatic situation. Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta among others have demonstrated that these women not only faced the very real risk of disappearing because of their dissident political positions, but also had to live with the invisibility in which the art system, the public and their own colleagues subsumed them.¹

Latin America and the Caribbean involve a specific context of social, political and environmental issues, but above all the region constitutes a field still often considered “eccentric” with respect to the hegemony of Western culture whose centres gravitate around western Europe and the United States. If we talk about women, environmental issues and Action Art, this eccentricity becomes “radicalism,” a label that covers gestures from the most subtle to the most dramatic, as shown by the paradigmatic exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* (2017) at the Hammer Museum.² The emergence of women in Latin American conceptual artistic practices since the 1960s entails in itself a disruptive process, as the curator Deborah Cullen also examined in the ground-breaking exhibition *Arte (no es) Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000*, held at New York’s Museo del Barrio in 2008.³ This process has not yet been addressed in adequate depth in academic analysis, and efforts such as the exhibitions mentioned before or the archive and exhibition project *re.act.feminism #2* (2014)⁴—which increased public knowledge of the performative practices in

¹ Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta. 2017. *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*. (Cat.). Los Angeles, Munich, New York: Hammer Museum, DelMonico Books/Prestel.

² Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* [Cat.], (Los Angeles, Munich, New York: Hammer Museum, DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017).

³ Deborah Cullen, (ed.), *Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas, 1960–2000* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008).

⁴ Bettina Knaup and Ellen Stammer, *Re.Act.Feminism #2* (Nürnberg: Verl. für Moderne Kunst, 2014).

diverse countries related to feminism, gender and queer criticism—need to be reinforced.

In *Ecofeminism from Latin America (Women from the Margins)*, Mary Judith Ress has exposed how ecofeminism has led Latin American women to take a new look at themselves.⁵ Within the framework of ecofeminism, cultural, historical and biological considerations about the relationship of women and nature have spurred a rich debate. Coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, the use of the term *écoféminisme* was originally extended in the United States by a coalition of academic and professional women during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This branch of feminism investigated the long historical precedents that associated men with rationality, order and direction, as well as women and nature with chaos and irrationality. Ecofeminists understood that this dichotomy had served to justify a hierarchical structure that grants power to men and allows for control, oppression and exploitation.

Significantly, also in the late 1970s the Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, psychoanalyst, linguist, psycholinguist and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray contributed decisively to problematizing the connection between the embodied experience of femininity and fluidity. Her essay “The Mechanics of Fluids,” published in 1977 in the book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, situated the concept of fluidity in an ambiguous and indeterminate position in contemporary critical theory, considering it as a productive framework for understanding the exclusion of femininity from the “proper order,” the conservative and the normative identified with the regime of the solid. Irigaray recognized the importance for women of asserting fluidity as a site for appropriation and resistance to phallogentric culture, but at the same time called attention to the risks of considering it an unproblematically positive term related to the progressive, arguing that this is also the category by which the exclusion and silence is effected. The fluid, understood in its opposition to the regime of the solid and as a source of difference, would perpetuate division and exclusion.⁶ Irigaray’s essay was criticized several times as essentialist but, as Elisabeth Stephens has recently argued, the terms of the question she opened are debated by feminist new materialists and poststructuralist-inspired feminisms to this day, proving the critical urgency of the role of matter in the framework of an epistemological change⁷. In my opinion Irigaray’s arguments makes also sense when we think in the influential contribution of Gaston Bachelard, whose psychoanalytical study of

⁵ Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America (Women from the Margins)* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

⁶ Luce Irigaray, “The Mechanics of Fluids” in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977]), 106-118.

⁷ Elisabeth Stephens, “Feminism and New Materialism: The Matter of Fluidity”, *Inter/Alia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 9 (2014), 186-202.

the material imagination of water published in 1942 contributed to spread the archetypes of the “Maternal Water and Feminine Water,” represented by the Ophelia Complex, the nutritious link between water and milk, the woman-water-moon interconnection, and the immersion rites of virgins, among others.⁸

A decade after Irigaray’s essay, ecofeminism began to divide into different branches, in this case following the argumentation of the problematic relationship between women and nature. Ynestra King’s article “What Is Ecofeminism?,” published in *The Nation* in 1987, marked the transition from the development of a theoretical basis to a period of expansion both in the number of adherents to ecofeminism and in their scopes. The “cultural” branch encouraged the intimate relationship between women and the environment, while the “radical” one considered that this association reinforced stereotypes and sustained patriarchal domination. To these divergences were added the voices of women from developing countries, who denounced the appropriation of indigenous cultures by western colonization and the inequity of race, class, sexuality and ethnicity also within ecofeminism. “White ecofeminists” were accused of being partially responsible for sustaining exploitation in developing countries, contributing to the dramatic effects of capitalism on *other* societies and environments. Despite divergences and contradictions, contemporary feminists concerned about ecological destruction have begun to embrace the term *ecofeminism* once more, redefining it through manifold perspectives.

Although female Latin American artists emancipated from the logic of capitalism still constitute a minority within the whole of society, their proposals for an ethical interrelation with the environment, along with their way of rethinking the ontological, epistemological and symbolical dimensions of bodies and substances, constitute absolutely necessary questions.

In order to reconsider the footprint that the slightest, ephemeral or socially silenced gestures can leave in physical-symbolic space, this chapter will explore the positions that some Latin American women have maintained in the field of contemporary art in relation to the ontology, epistemology, ethics and symbolism of water. As I tried to demonstrate in recent years, the increasing presence of water in contemporary art and the symbolic updating that this has undergone in recent decades stimulate broadranging cultural reflections directly related to the way in which semantics and matter, culture and nature are intimately woven.⁹

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *El agua y los sueños. Ensayo sobre la imaginación de la materia* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002 [1942]) 175-202.

⁹ Esther Moñivas, *Presencias hídricas en el arte contemporáneo. Una perspectiva desde la semántica material* (PhD diss, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2011). <https://www.safecreative.org/work/1102288597018>.

This chapter does not seek to offer a genealogy of feminist art practices that involve the materiality of the women's body and the water in Latin America. Rather, inspired by rheology, the systemic and the neomaterialist perspectives of Luce Irigaray, Jane Bennet and Karen Barad, the text gathers political, social and ecocritical micro-gestures that *matter*, taking into account the paradoxes that they pose as material-discursive practices. It aspires to agglutinate around a problematic conception of the *fluid* a non-linear sequence of interrelations between bodies, memories, imaginations and “vibrant” materialities that occurred between 1966 and 1986 in different places in Mesoamerica and South America.

For this aim I have selected five artists with different degrees of international recognition: Lygia Clark from Brazil, Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, the duo Yeni y Nan from Venezuela, and María Evelia Marmolejo from Colombia. They all coincided with the initial development of ecofeminism as a response to the problems inherent in patriarchal and hierarchical systems, as well as in their advocacy for subjectivity and intuition. They contributed to materializing ecofeminist epistemologies before this movement became popular and received attention out of the academic environment. All them converged also in working intuitively with performativity, the physiological and biological dimension of their bodies, the recovery of nature-based forms of spirituality, the exploration of nonlinear and relational structures based in the use of water and other fluids, and women's gender roles. Although the symbolic connections between the concepts of *women* and *water* may be glimpsed in their artworks (through symbolic presences of amniotic waters, source of life, fertility, and death), a full analysis of these is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the discussion below starts with the most essential interactions—direct contact with fluids, the perception of the interior and the exterior, and the extended body—and then moves towards the integration of bodies with liquid water and the experience of certain forms of fusion with nature, before concluding with an exploration of other complex rituals of transfer and healing. All the works selected emphasize the subjectivity and the materiality of the body-environment, offering rich and paradoxical interpretations that we have intentionally wanted to leave open.

The Skin of Water

In his well-known study *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Gaston Bachelard argued that our first material images are born of our own flesh and organs. The skin and the organs would thus constitute not only the point of departure in perception, but the interfaces of a permanent communicative process.¹⁰ It is no coincidence that almost three decades later, with the beginning

¹⁰ Bachelard, *El agua y los sueños*.

of Body Art and Action Art in the late 1960s, water began to have an important place as an active agent in artists' physical-psychological processes. In the conceptual rethinking of the artist's role and the relationship between artwork and the environment, this material—which crosses into the body, transports biotic information and connects interior with exterior in a constant transfer of substances and memories—received particular attention as an artistic means. On many occasions the human body is part of the work, but in other cases it is recreated through metaphorical objects that amplify the experience of the internal flows and that experiment with the threshold or “skin.”

Working under a military dictatorship and the censorship and limitation of rights that went with it between 1964 and 1985, the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1920 - Rio de Janeiro, 1988) was a key participant in the conceptual renewal in Latin American art.¹¹ Her fascination with phenomenology and psychoanalysis led her to conceive of artistic practice as a form of therapy to explore mind and body. Influenced by Freud and Merleau-Ponty, Clark's work revolved around the complexity of perception, and questioned the body/mind and subject/object dichotomies. As Christine Macel has pointed out, the artist proposed “a way of being in the world that was part of the overall rhythm of things, wordlessly, in what she called a ‘mute thought.’”¹²

With her *Objetos sensoriais* (Sensory objects) series, conceived to be manipulated by the public, she proposed new forms of interrelation between subject and (artistic) object. In order to demonstrate the dynamic and interconnected dimensions of the artwork, she introduced fluid water into sealed plastic bags in a similar way to what Hans Haacke, influenced by Systems Theory, was doing at the same time in his *Condensation Cube* (1963-1965). Clark's *Livro sensorial* (Sensory book) (1966) combined sounds, tactile sensations and emotions, as well as movements of the nervous system and fluid movements of the material components:

Each page contains bubbles of water inside, and other materials such as an aluminum scourer, shells, stones, plastic, and on the last page—and this seems very important in dialectical terms—there is a mirror where man finds his reality and that of the world, after having touched everything, in a sensory and tactile way.¹³

¹¹ Lygia Clark Foundation, N. d., accessed May 1, 2018, <http://www.lygiaclark.org.br/>.

¹² Christine Macel, “Lygia Clark: At the Border of Art” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment Of Art, 1948-1988*, ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Luis Pérez Oramas (New York: MoMA, 2014), accessed May 20, 2018, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1005-part-1-lygia-clark-at-the-border-of-art.

¹³ All translations by the author unless otherwise stated. *Lygia Clark* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998), 206.

Even more elemental is the sensory object *Desenhe com o dedo* (Draw with your finger) (1966), consisting of a small amount of water and air contained within a double sheet of plastic material which invited viewers to create footprints and ephemeral traces. With this seemingly simple gesture, Clark substituted the preeminence of visuality in art for a more haptic and multisensorial approach, while ontologically the body of the participant became part of the work and the work could be conceived of as an extension of the body. Respective skins could thus be perceived more as connective membranes than as dividing boundaries, feeding a certain form of osmotic imagination.

Lygia Clark's relational objects pose a poetic, epistemological and ethical exploration of the human relationship with the environment, both living and inert. As an answer to the torture and oppression that defined the Brazilian military dictatorship and that led her to remain abroad between 1964 and 1976, her artistic strategy was in itself a way to redefine the human being, expanding its limits and reconsidering the importance of interaction, participation and reciprocity within a system. Direct contact with diverse materialities is probably the most immediate medium for destabilizing the perception of the limits of the self. Her relational art thus opened an important path of exploration not only for other artists who followed her steps, but also for the public, bridging physical distances and valuing sensorial and emotional experiences as part of the artwork.

Rituals of Dilution

The recovery of ancestral symbolism and the sacred sense of water throughout the twentieth century constituted a cultural process that has been highlighted by authors such as Carl Gustav Jung, and Gernot and Harmut Böhme. They posed that with the end of the disarticulation of the numinous symbols that rationalism established in Western culture (and with this, the loss of an important part of spiritual values), the return of the symbolic significance of the four elements revealed human beings' psychic need to reunite with nature. As Gernot and Harmut Böhme have pointed out, "one could say that, today, [the natural elements] come out of marginality."¹⁴ This thesis would partially explain the retrieval of the purifying and cathartic essence of water in artistic practices (among other cultural areas), taking on its full meaning within the social and moral disintegration of developed societies, but also within the framework of other cultures affected or devastated by Western imperialism. In both cases this partial restoration of ancestral *familiarity* with water has been possible because, ultimately, its essence has never ceased to be ingrained in everyday life. But the

¹⁴ Gernot Böhme and Harmut Böhme, *Fuego, agua, tierra, aire. Una historia cultural de los elementos* (Barcelona: Herder, 1998), 365.

ritual and mythological updating of water also has converged with other important processes. The alteration of the natural water cycle and its serious consequences opened the first social debates at the end of the 1960s. As Luigi Settembrini said in relation to water:

the deep disturbance of its natural cycle today conditions its availability—a condition that we naively thought that as “natural” was therefore “unlimited”—, the axis of the territory and the global climate of the planet, and this situation makes us fear today for its destiny and, therefore, for ours. Thus, the mythologies related to water change as a direct consequence of this fact, and together with the more ludic characteristics of water, linked to the body and movement, the ideas of symbol of purification and total rebirth are also reinforced.¹⁵

Concerns over survival have undoubtedly been another driver for water’s symbolic renewal. Artistic creation has played an important role in this renewal, offering since the 1970s a range of possibilities of aesthetic and emotional re-identification with water through the creation of new myths and modern rites, often based in personal catharsis exercises derived from experience in an unbalanced society. The symbolic projection of art as a cultural nucleus in which dreams, intuition and the manifestation of the unconscious are fostered, has served as an excellent catalyst for ancestral archetypes. It has also favored the confluence of a ritually impoverished West and other cultural traditions that have maintained the cult of water and ceremonies related to it, as is the case in certain Mesoamerican and South American cultures.

The sense of *reintegration* in nature—and intrinsically of *rebirth*—is exemplified by the extensive *Serie Siluetas* (Silhouettes series) by Ana Mendieta (Havana, 1948 - New York, 1985). After being exiled from Cuba at a young age in 1961, Mendieta went to the United States. Between 1973 and 1980 the Cuban-American artist developed numerous performances mid-way between Earth Art and Body Art in natural spaces of Iowa and Mexico. They were private rituals of healing and purification carried out in public spaces through the connection of the female archetypal body with the natural elements. Mendieta thus expanded her previous work around the body by transferring it to a natural space, a place to leave the mark of her own politicized sexual and cultural identity, claiming a territory for women in art and questioning the structures of power from her condition as a Cuban exile. Her search for her Afro-Cuban roots came together with a specific interest in the myths and religious practices of pre-Columbian and Antillian cultures as condensers of an essence and cultural knowledge that the artist considered to be the most profound:

¹⁵ Luigi Settembrini, “Agua (sin ti no soy)”, in *Agua (sin ti no soy) : III Bienal de Valencia*. [Cat.] (Valencia: Fundación Bienal de las artes, 2005), 17-22.

It was perhaps during my childhood in Cuba that I was fascinated by art and primitive cultures for the first time. It seems as if these cultures have an internal knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge that gives reality to the images that I have created.¹⁶

In this series, her personal celebration of femininity and the cyclic sense of life and death in nature resulted in a visual language which, though seemingly simple, was full of spiritual and symbolic resonances, in which Mendieta carefully selected materials and locations based on their energetic and metaphorical properties. In addition to documenting these actions with slides, the artist made previous sketches and descriptions in her diary, such as: “To make a hollow silhouette... to add blood, or water that looks like blood, to fill it up, to drain it into the sea, to refill it again. The red water/blood will mix with the sea.”¹⁷ In this period, Mendieta dug and modelled numerous representations of her body with water and mud. In 1976, for example, she dug her figure on the shore of the Mexican beach of La Ventosa (in the state of Oaxaca) and filled it with red tempera in such a way that this metaphorical blood was slowly washed by the waves of the Pacific Ocean.

Mendieta worked at times in Cuba and Mexico, but her primary residence was in New York from 1978 until 1985, when her life ended dramatically. One remarkable work from this period was a silhouette that she modeled on the beach of Ochún in 1981 (*Untitled*). It consisted of only a schematic and empty profile: two undulating sand lines that emerged from the shallow water and that seemed to allude simultaneously to the movements of the water, the body of the artist and her native island. The location that Mendieta chose for this artwork—in Key Biscayne, the southernmost point of Miami—undoubtedly intended to reactivate the symbolic meaning of the name of Ochún; the Orisha deity that represents fresh water, sexuality, fertility, beauty and love. This intervention also repeated an undocumented silhouette that the artist had previously made in one of the northernmost points of Cuba, as if reactivating a latent memory.¹⁸ It can perhaps be understood as a metaphorical return to the original earth through the connection that water establishes with all its shores.

Along with her first silhouettes, Ana Mendieta also did two performances documented in Super 8 in which she left her body to the movement of water currents, in tribute to Vito Acconci's *Drifts* (1970), coinciding with a visit he made to the artist in February of 1974.¹⁹ *Untitled (Ocean Bird Washup)* (1974),

¹⁶ María Ruido, *Ana Mendieta* (Guipuzcoa: Nerea, 2002), 98.

¹⁷ Ruido, *Ana Mendieta*, 95-96.

¹⁸ Fundació Antoni Tàpies, “Ana Mendieta”, 1997, accessed May 2, 2018, <http://www.fundaciotapias.org/site/spip.php?rubrique214>.

¹⁹ Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta : Earth body. Sculpture and performance, 1972-1985* (Washington DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 163-165.

also made on the beach of La Ventosa in the Gulf of Tehuantepec in Mexico, was documented in a recording of four and a half minutes. The body of the artist, self-transformed into an anthropomorphic animal or a mythical creature covered with feathers, floated among the waves until the current eventually deposited her on the shore. In *Untitled (Creek)* (1974), the three and a half minute-long recording shows the naked body of the artist being carried away by the current of a river in San Felipe, Mexico. On this occasion Mendieta looked towards the riverbed and turned her head just to breathe, suggesting more clearly the image of an extinct life, exposed to natural rhythms through its direct union with water.

Mendieta knew how to combine in her work the primordial image of the immersion in water with an aestheticization of the body's movement charged with emotional tension, but above all she developed a particular ability to merge the concepts of nature and culture and to suggest the dissolution of ontological limits between water and her body. Her therapeutic rituals addressed the pain of uprooting and disappearance, specifically in the *Silhouettes series*, where the body is primarily noted through its absence. The transformation and cultural displacement developed in what she called "earth-body works" transgressed the bounds of autobiography to convey a universal dimension which highlighted the active role of women.

Mendieta was deeply immersed in the feminist art practices of the late 1970s and early 1980s led by Myriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago and the Mexican collective Polvo de Gallina (PDG), and her work was developed at the height of ecofeminism. Her spiritual and healing actions highlighted the connection between the environment, historical erasure, bodily injury and violence against women. More specifically, her interest in drifts, fluids and water can be seen as intuitive research into the ancestral symbolic connections between the body of women and water. Nevertheless, Irigaray and the "radical" branch of ecofeminism could also have seen her proposals as a way of updating or reinforcing dichotomic epistemologies in relation to the men-solid-mind conceptual connection.

Integrations in Water

Similar in its ritualistic facets, the work of the Venezuelan duo Yeni y Nan, formed by Jenniffer Hackshaw (Caracas, Venezuela, 1948-) and Nan González (Caracas, Venezuela, 1956-) in the early 1980s, included a cycle of public performances dedicated to water. They were, together with Antonieta Sosa, the first women who participated in the Action Art of Venezuela with their own

bodies and constitute a key reference point in the field of Venezuelan conceptual art.²⁰

Their *Integraciones en el agua* (Integrations in Water) (1981-1982), staged during the XVI Biennial of Sao Paulo, alluded to the cycles of life and nature, and specifically investigated the psycho-physical dimensions of birth and transformation. Using as a stage a large transparent sheet of polyethylene held by its four corners at an approximate height of one meter and filled with water up to a hand's breadth, Yeni y Nan dressed in black, submerged themselves and initiated a choreography of slow movements. Coming from a martial arts, yoga and theatre background, they displayed a kind of spiritual union through the synchronicity of their bodies in "amniotic liquid." They finally "broke the waters" and re-emerged (or were *reborn*) wearing white elastic fabrics representing the transformation experienced. With this artificial uterus, they symbolically integrated the spaces of culture and nature, and corporal and psychic transformations.²¹ Even though this performance had an urban location, their entire oeuvre suggests that the water they used in fact represented a wider concept of the ocean as a source of life. In this context their body was reaffirmed from a double condition: "capable of giving and receiving life, simultaneously mothers and newborns."²² The importance of the multisensorial, relational and therapeutic dimension—and even the plastic sheet used as container—suggests that they probably knew both Lygia Clark's artworks and Mendieta's performances. This duo also understood the potentialities of using water as a semantic laboratory to explore intimate women-nature relationship, and to explore physical and mental transformations, mainly using material changes of state and physical-chemical reactions as catalysts.

Yeni y Nan worked together in Venezuela from 1977 to 1986, in a political context free from dictatorship but not from the tensions present throughout Latin America. Although their work constituted a violent break from the artistic tradition of the country—rooted in Geometric Abstraction and Kinetic Art—, recent exhibitions have tended to highlight its harmonious, soft, meditative, elegant and balanced character. Their poetic intensity is seen as related to intimate and psychophysical transformations, but not so evidently to the social and political context. Nevertheless, as Marcela Guerrero has pointed out, they were deeply concerned with ecological issues and environmental awareness,²³ orienting

²⁰ Susana Benko, "Yeni y Nan (Sólo show)", *ArtNexus 78 - Arte en Colombia* 124 (2010), accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.artnexus.com/Notice_View.aspx?DocumentID=22103.

²¹ María Elena Ramos, "Una aproximación al cuerpo de la performance en Venezuela", *Performance Ceeipc* (blog), May 28, 2007, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://performanceceeiipc.blogspot.com/>.

²² Re.act.feminism. A performing archive. n.d. "Yeni & Nan. Integrations in Water", accessed March, 1, 2019, <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=254&e=a&v=&a=&t>.

²³ Marcela Guerrero, "Yeni y Nan" in *Digital Archive Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, n. d., accessed March 15, 2019, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/artists/yeni-y-nan/>.

their work to the exploration of natural cycles and archaic symbols of the four elements through the direct contact with water, earth and air. The duo experimented mutual destabilizations and restabilizations in the interrelation of their bodies with these materials as a way to explore the fragility of humankind and the planet, suggesting processes of drought, barrenness, exhaustion as well as rebirth. For example, in *Transfiguración elemento tierra* (Transfiguration element earth) (1983) they documented in video the process of evaporation of water, drying and cracking of the layer of white clay that covered their faces. Their wet hands refreshing and bringing elasticity periodically to this surface was in this case a symbolic materialization of the eternal cycles of life and death (Figure 8.1).

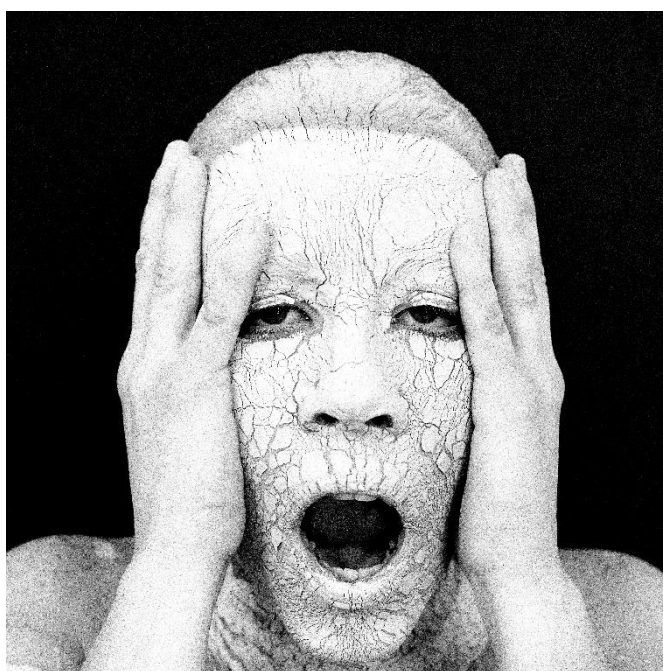


Figure 8.1 Yeni y Nan. *Transfiguración elemento tierra*, 1983/2013 (detail). Digital prints from original negatives, 13 x 13 / 33 x 33 cm. Source: © Yeni y Nan. Courtesy of the artists and Henrique Faria, Nueva York.

In words of María Elena Ramos, “They produced moving conceptual and aesthetic works based on humanity-as-nature: one’s body as a body of the world (and the wellbeing or tragedy of the world as one’s own wellbeing or tragedy).”²⁴ *Autológica del Agua / Autológica del aire* (Autologic of Water / Autologic of Air) (1980), *Integraciones en el Agua* (Integrations in Water) (1981-1982), *Autológica: Agua + aire* (Autologic: Water + Air) (1982) and *Transfiguración elemento Tierra* (Earth Element Transfiguration) (1983) are other examples of their performances related with these issues.

²⁴ María Elena Ramos, “Yeni and Nan: One’s Body as a Body of the World”, 2013, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.henriquefaria.com/exhibition-about?id=69>

Later they got closer to Land Art and Mendieta's oeuvre. The pair extended their sensorial, symbolic and phenomenological inquiry around water with performances such as *Simbolismo de la cristalización – Araya* (Symbolism of Crystallization – Araya) (1984-1986), in which the relationship between the liquid and the solid showed fluctuating boundaries. The Araya region, a peninsula on Venezuela's Caribbean coast, remained unknown even after Margot Benacerraf's eponymous documentary film about the archaic life of the salt miners won an award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959. This happened just before the definitive disappearance of this lifestyle and trade, after five hundred years of exploitation since Spanish conquerors arrived in Araya.

Integrating their naked bodies in the almost hallucinatory landscape of pink water and white formations of Araya's salt flats, the postures of both artists documented in photographs suggest a substantial union with the flows and movements of the surrounding materiality. Yeni y Nan also submerged buckets in the water to explore salt crystallization processes. Beyond the salt flats' obvious aesthetic and geological attributes, the location of the action also invites a political interpretation related to history. The beginning of the massive exploitation of this region dates from the early days of Spanish colonization, when salt was in fact a key to entry for the conquerors by providing them with a food preservative. With the arrival of industrial exploitation and the disappearance of the *salineros* (salt miners), Yeni y Nan's performance seems to be a healing ritual where the subtle traces left by both women in the environment are placed in opposition to the historical violence of colonialism.

Contamination and Transfers

In the art of the second half of the twentieth century, one of the most recurrent aspects of water semantics was the metaphor of pure/natural water versus contaminated/cultural water. The chemical dimension of water symbolism went beyond an ideal of material purity and has its origin in this element's intrinsic relationship with life. Therefore, purity is a fundamental ontological category of water, just as water is itself one of the most archaic symbols of purity in all cultures.

The geographical reconfiguration and the chemical footprint that water acquires as it passes through urban territories constitutes in contemporary societies a fluctuating but also very precise memory of the way in which the relationship between social constructions and nature is currently understood. As a result of the progressive disengagement of citizens from the natural environment and thanks to networks of underground pipes, flows of sewage and discharges of other substances are invisible in cities. Such sanitation infrastructure allows

contaminated fluids, which are distasteful to modern sensibilities, to be avoided, as noted by the controversial Austrian thinker Ivan Illich, known for his criticisms of the key institutions of progress in modern culture.²⁵ The vestiges of urban culture, with millions of annual tons of uncontrolled waste dumping in waters, will undoubtedly give rise to a geological stratum that will be clearly differentiated from all previous geological deposits.

From the visibility of the uncontrolled pollutants discharged in all types of water bodies to the development of purification treatments, manifold artists have developed ethical, aesthetic, scientific and spiritual perspectives to recover the creative and curative experience of water, as well as its enjoyment and biological efficiency. The investigation of currents, temporal rhythms and complex systems of mass movements in hydrological cycles provide patterns and cadences that offer insights into other non-linear systems, such as biological ones. The correspondences between the body and social structures with the distribution and fluid dynamics of water are thus a way of exploring, both scientifically and intuitively, the concept of life and the relationship of the human being with the environment.

Within the multiple dimensions associated with the concept of *flow* in contemporary culture—of ideas, capital, objects, resources—water embodies the image of the most efficient global communication system on the planet. Its permanent transformation articulates cycles of life and death, and its interconnectedness with *everything* in the biosphere represents the most powerful model of physical and information transfer. However, we experience these transfer processes in our lives on the most intuitive and sensory level. Like animals, we rely more on our senses than on the policies and institutions of water management when we bring a glass to our mouths, and we feel strong impulses of repulsion and disgust when we experience the close presence of sewage, water mixed with blood or water laden with the remains of bodies that are nothing but the detritus of our own lives.

María Evelia Marmolejo (Pradera, Colombia, 1958-) has worked repeatedly with the disappearance of (human) traces as well as with matter such as water, blood and the body in three spheres: the ritual, the political and the ecological. Aware of the work of Lygia Clark and Yeni y Nan as well as the Viennese Actionism, during the 1980s she used her own bodily fluids to articulate a critique of oppression, violence and political persecution during the regime of president Julio César Turbay Ayala (1978-1982), while also extending this criticism to the turbulence that was affecting other countries in Latin America. Her use of

²⁵ Ivan Illich, *H2O y las aguas del olvido. Reflexiones sobre la historicidad de la materia* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1989).

biological flows is the most direct way to make them visible and confront the public with their physical existence. For example, Marmolejo used menstruation blood to celebrate the female body and the importance of women in the origin of life in her work *11 de marzo—ritual a la menstruación* (March 11—ritual in honour of menstruation) (1981). After identifying the paradox that the blood she used for writing in her artistic actions impressed the public more than the blood spilled daily in Colombia as a result of violence, her artworks became characterized by self-mutilation and extreme psychological experiments involving organic fluids, biological tissues and earth that the artist conceived of as “*arte corporal*”—Body Art.²⁶

Emilio Tarazona contends that as a figure flow relates to the dilution of taxonomic processes for classifying identities based on race, sex, gender, class, and can re-imagine their functions, limits and metaphors. Suggesting a connection with Irigaray’s conceptualization of fluids, he has analysed the politically disruptive function that the use of bodily fluids by many artists had in the particular context of the 1980s in Latin America, noting that

As a flow, bodily fluid are also a sign of attitudes against proposed models of life and their very names—trash, refuse, vomit, metabolic waste—became an emotional and political effect against the supposed stability of a system they tried to disturb.²⁷

Marmolejo’s strikingly defiant attitude and feminist emancipated vision challenged the bases of colonialism and gender inequality in an eminently sexist society by using materials loaded with memory and social meanings. As highlighted by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, Marmolejo called for the reappropriation of the female body as a subjective experience, biological phenomenon and place from which to interact with the world, including in resistance to dictatorships.²⁸

At the beginning of the 1980s, before her self-exile in Madrid, the artist did two private performances in the environment of the Cauca River. Second source of surface water in Colombia, the Cauca directly provides 4.5 million people with water and supports the production of sugarcane. Its course crosses a territory of exceptional beauty which is rich in resources such as coal, limestone, marble, gold, silver, platinum, iron and asbestos, but the health of this great artery has

²⁶ “Arte corporal” is the term that the artist used instead “Body art”.

²⁷ Emilio Tarazona, “Cuerpos y flujos: Una línea de lectura para los años ochenta en América Latina” in *Perder la forma humana: Una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2012), 85–91.

²⁸ Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* [Cat] (Los Angeles, Munich, New York: Hammer Museum, DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017).

deteriorated severely due to misgovernment and lack of urban planning.²⁹ It not only has become the most polluted river in the country, but according to recent news, the environmental impact of the hydroelectric project Hidroituango is now irreversibly destroying the whole system of this artery.³⁰ As it passes through the city of Cali, huge mountains of solid and organic waste flank the waters, uncontrolled residual spills pour into it, and an excess of industries populate its deforested banks.

In 1982, under the title of *Anónimo 3* (Anonymous 3), Marmolejo did a 15-minute ecocritical videoperformance at the meeting point between the city and the river (Figure 8.2). The artist herself described the performance as “A ritual to the Mother Earth [that] was produced as an act of forgiveness for the pollution and destruction of the flora and fauna.”³¹



Figure 8.2 María Evelia Marmolejo. *Anónimo 3*, 1982, documentary photograph, 11.42 x 8.07 in / 29.5 x 20.5 cm. Río Cauca, Colombia. Source: Photo: Nelson Villegas. © María Evelia Marmolejo. Courtesy of the artists and Instituto de Visión, Bogotá.

²⁹ Redacción El País, “Salud del río Cauca sigue deteriorándose a su paso por Cali”, *El País*, August 23, 2017, accessed September 18, 2019, <https://www.elpais.com.co/cali/salud-del-rio-cauca-sigue-deteriorandose-a-su-paso-por.html>.

³⁰ W Radio, “Desastre ambiental en el río Cauca: denuncian la muerte de 50 mil peces y anuncian protestas”, *Nodal. Noticias de América Latina y El Caribe*, February 8, 2019, accessed September 18, 2019, <https://www.nodal.am/2019/02/colombia-tragedia-ambiental-en-el-rio-cauca-denuncian-la-muerte-de-50-mil-peces-y-anuncian-protestas/>.

³¹ Artiste written statement from 1982 and edited in 2010-2011. Source: Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, “María Evelia Marmolejo's Political Body” *ArtNexus #85 - Arte en Colombia* 131 (June–August 2012), accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.artnexus.com/Notice_View.aspx?DocumentID=24747.

Marmolejo used tape and gauze to cover both her body and the earth, suggesting with these elements the ritual character of healing. In the center of a spiral drawn with lime, a toilet with water (a symbol of intimate space, cleaning and a waste hole) enabled the artist to perform a vaginal wash and transfer her fluids to the earth with the intention of fertilizing the contaminated space. In *Anónimo 4* (*Cuestiono que venir al mundo donde no hay beneficios ni tranquilidad para el recién nacido en una sociedad donde cada año, mueren 11 mil niños por hambre en América Latina*) (Anonymous 4 [I question coming into a world where there are no benefits or peace for newborns in a society where eleven thousand children starve to death in Latin America every year]) (1982) the artist documented on video a much more dramatic action of memory exchange, on this occasion featuring human placentas collected by the artist the same day in the hospitals of Cali (Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.2 María Evelia Marmolejo. *Anónimo 4*, 1982, documentary photograph, 11.42 x 8.07 in / 29.5 x 20.5 cm. Río Cauca, Colombia. Source: Photo: Nelson Villegas. © María Evelia Marmolejo. Courtesy of the artists and Instituto de Visión, Bogotá.

After digging a one-and-a-half-meter wide triangle on the banks of the Cauca River and filling it with the placentas, the artist wrapped her body with plastic holding pieces of the same biological material and lay in the interior. This structure was surrounded by three smaller triangles that had been filled with drainage water. The smell of putrefaction and her meditation on “the fear of coming into the world in a society in which survival is not guaranteed,” caused the

artist to vomit and cry compulsively³². These new bodily fluids, mixed with the other materials, acted as a form of symbolic purge and healing.

In her last known artistic action, which took place in 2004 at the Wilmer Jenning Gallery in New York with the collaboration of the Latino Artists Round Table, Marmolejo again did an ecocritical and environmental performance under the title *Amazons, Fusarium, Oxysporum, Glyphosate*. In it she wrote the word *Amazonas* on a wall with blood from her fingers, while the name of the toxic products sent by the United States to fumigate coca plantations was projected. This type of self-inflicted artistic wound continues to this day to shock audiences more than the irreparable degradation of living systems.

Fluid Memories

The unclassifiable Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández (1902-1964) described a fertile image of the dissolution of identities between woman, water and memory in his 1960 short story *La casa inundada* (The Flooded House). In this story, water is the space where the characters move as well as the leitmotif that connects affections, memories, daydreams and frayed conversations. Events “float” in the liquid, diluting and materializing in unpredictable ways. At the end of this suggestive story, Hernández condensed a conception of the relationship between matter and memory that is reminiscent of his favourite writers, Proust and Bergson:

I will die with the idea that water carries within itself something that it has picked up elsewhere and I do not know in what way it will give me thoughts that are not mine and that are for me. [...] No one will be able to forbid me to keep my memories in water.³³

The “liquid element” evidences through its energetic configuration in the biosphere (solid, liquid, gaseous, forming pastes and tissues) that none of its states is ever closed or stable. It is an infinitely variable structure that responds to the slightest alteration in environmental conditions, connecting the micro and the macroscopic. The flow of water constitutes a material *continuum* in which it is not possible to identify truly isolated elements, only variations or nuances. Thus, its

³² “María Evelia Marmolejo, Anónimo 4”, *Digital Archive Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, n. d., accessed March 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2MpQXIx>.

³³ Note that in the original text, the gender of water is feminine: “Es posible, me decía, que ella no quiera otra cosa que correr y dejar sugerencias a su paso; pero yo me moriré con la idea de que el agua lleva dentro de sí algo que ha recogido en otro lado y no sé de qué manera me entregará pensamientos que no son los míos y que son para mí. De cualquier manera yo soy feliz con ella, trato de comprenderla y nadie me podrá prohibir en que conserve mis recuerdos en el agua.” Felisberto Hernández, “La casa inundada” in: *Las hortensias y otros cuentos* (Doral: Stockcero, 2011 [1960]).

quality is diversity, the capacity to receive everything and connect it, constituting a *chaos* (or an order that is imperceptible to the human mind) formed by infinite singularities that are here temporarily deposited in more or less transitory forms, there retained in containers or viscous states, farther flowing again.

In contemporary art, the creative interrelation with water has reinforced epistemological approaches in terms of *phenomenon* and *system* rather than *object*, posing alterations in the categorical and traditional classification systems. The tendency to incorporate fluids in artistic practices has not only coincided productively with the currents of ecofeminism, de-mercantilization and de-objectification of art. Above all, it directs attention towards the deepest dimension of memory: the complementarity of the solid and the fluid; of what is deposited and crystallises (*kristallos*) and what flows and changes (*flux*); of what can be retained momentarily and that which remains ungraspable.

Even though water undoubtedly carries the memories of the artists presented in this chapter, the fact is that art as impressive as that of María Evelia Marmolejo or Yeni y Nan is still today an example of amnesia in most of archives and museums. The stories of women artists of Latin America during the era of dictatorships seem to be just flowing, scarcely crystallized. This should lead us to reconsider the responsibility to narrate the latent and the mutable; to restore what is missing and to bring to the present silenced “floating” stories.

The worrying rise in the pollution of surface waters in Latin America, Asia and Africa, threatens to damage vital sources of food and harm these continents' economies. Population growth, increased economic activity, massive deforestation, the intensification of agriculture and an increase in the amount of untreated sewage discharged into rivers and lakes are the main reasons of the troubling rise in surface water pollution³⁴. Cauca river is just an example of a dramatic situation that is breeding in this región further inequality and that hits the most vulnerable (women, children and the poor). I consider—and this book confirms it—that this plight is also the opportunity to rediscover and boost the role of ecocritical artists in our society. They not only have powerful communicative strategies for combating the lack of awareness, but also for guiding the necessary reeducation of our epistemology and relationship with the environment.

³⁴ United Nations Environment Programme, “A Snapshot of the World’s Water Quality: Towards a global assessment” 2016. Accessed September 18, 2019, <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/unep/document/snapshot-world%E2%80%99s-water-quality-towards-global-assessment>.

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