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The Poetic Act as an Act of Resistance in the Feminist Practice of Ana Mendieta

Between the potential *to* and the potential *not to*, according to Giorgio Agamben, there is a process of a creative (poetic) act, as an *act of resistance* towards the end of one's own completion, in this context analyzed through the work of feminist artist Ana Mendieta. Regarding the (in)completeness, Mendieta's oeuvre exemplifies a perfect illustration that the *disappearance* of her art work is a way of communication that *resists* production of any formal finality, as a process within which the traces of the media used (her own body) also disappear because of the time and circumstances left to nature. The *dematerialization* of artwork in Mendieta's case epitomized one of possible aspects of exposing the *act of resistance* as a realization of a quantum of potential through the *event*, appearing as a *poetics of inoperativity* as defined by Agamben and erasing boundaries between the *inception* and the *performativity* of the poetic time, a duration that is not limited to one existence or aesthetic phenomenon. In the intersection between early *feminist art practices* (based on essentialism) and the second wave that relied on anti-essentialism as a new conception, Mendieta's work positioned its own dialectic among the separated feminist views about the use of the *female body* as a medium.

Key words: potential, poetic act, act of resistance, event, dematerialization, inoperativity, female body

Поетски чин као чин отпора у феминистичкој пракси Ане Мендијете

Између потенцијала *to* и потенцијала *not to*, према Агамбену (Giorgio Agamben), постоји процес креативног (поетског) чина, као *чина отпора* према крају сопственог довршења, у овом контексту посматрано кроз рад феминистичке уметнице Ане Мендијете (Ana Mendieta). Што се тиче (не)потпуности, Мендијетин опус представља савршен пример да је *нестајање* њеног уметничког „дела“ начин комуникације који се *опиру* производњи било какве формалне коначности, процес у којем трагови коришћеног медија (њеног тела) такође нестају услед времена и околности које су препуштене природи. *Дематеријализација* уметничког дела у Мендијетином случају илустровала је један од могућих аспеката излагања *чина отпора* као остварења квантума потенцијала кроз *догађај*, појављујући се као *поетика иноперативности* коју је дефинисао Агамбен, бришући границе између *инцептуалности* (зачетка) и *перформативности* поетског времена, трајања које није ограничено на једно постојање или естетски феномен. У пресеку између раних

феминистичких уметничких пракси (заснованих на есенцијализму) и другог таласа који се ослањао на анти-есенцијализам као нову концепцију, Мендијетино дело поставило је сопствену дијалектику између одвојених феминистичких погледа на употребу *женског тела* као медија.

Кључне речи: потенцијал, чин стварања, чин отпора, догађај, дематеријализација, иноперативност, женско тело

1. The act of resistance in the poetic act

Following the fundamental principles of the seventh decade of the XXth century and the problematization of the work of art as an open-ended proposition, Ana Mendieta's oeuvre marked the transformative period of feminist art from essentialism towards anti-essentialism, raising the question of the *use of the female body* in the core of her creativity.

Early feminist art practices (around 1970), aimed at representing feminine aesthetics, based on shared common sexual identity¹ explored by the use of the female body. Furthermore, their practice incorporated an exploitation of women's handwork and crafts that were mainly concerned with the creation of *positive image* of women. The second artistic feminist phase developed together with the feminist theory based on a re-examination of the stereotypical view of female identity, by questioning the issue of representation (Meyer 2006, 318–319). The theoretical discussion has taken a predominantly poststructuralist line of deconstruction,² positing a critical view on the use of female body at the center of the new dialectic, or more

¹ According to Laura Meyer, "The most controversial aspects of the feminist art movement in the 1970s centered around the celebration of women's art and ... women themselves, as a distinct category united by a common sexual identity and shared social experiences." Furthermore, it was a kind of strategy or fight for resolving the predominate "demeaning" stereotypical image that was already represented by the male artists in the mass media. It was a path for bringing back the "dignity" of the female body and female sexuality. These resulted in collaboration and solidarity among women artists (Meyer 2006, 318).

² Some of the most influential writings are: Linda Nochlin "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1970); Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago "Female Imagery" (1973); Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975); Lucy Lippard *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (1976); Griselda Pollock *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (1988) Judith Butler *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993); *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999). The ancestry of gender genealogy was early developed by Simone de Beauvoir, and later by Monique Wittig. Poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Giles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and others, drew different theoretical discourses related to psychoanalysis, language, and signifying practices, as an extended line of structuralism and semiology, representation in art, body politics, etc. It was a broad theoretical field (dialectical materialism, essentialism, and anti-essentialism) that was further developed by Elizabeth Cowie, Lisa Tickner, Charlotte Witt, Nancy Fraser, Linda Nicholson, Drucilla Cornell, that anticipated the sustainability and influential transdisciplinary praxis of feminist theory and feminist art until today. All this became a body of theory that became part of the feminist studies in education in the 1990s.

precisely, the explicit use of the body as a female imagery. It implied, that the new approach, the new poetics, was in need of a new *artistic language* that could replace and reframe the vision of representing femininity, without losing the identity quest. For the purpose of this study, Ana Mendieta's oeuvre, seemed relevant to open this discussion on a philosophical level, as her work is considered to belong in the decade of "most prolific production of feminist art,"³ according to Jane Blocker. It was (precisely) the shared ambition among performative artists, Mendieta as well, to underline the centripetal and thus move forward marginalized toward the core of the artistic idea: "[...] the 1970s is now difficult to find because its innovations have failed to meet the demands of profitability, how much more elusive is the artist whose gender and ethnicity placed her on the margins of this margin?" (Blocker 1999, 9).

In this context, Mendieta's work was observed by Blocker, as towards "experimentation, feminist consciousness, and identity politics" (Blocker 1999, 9).

By analyzing Aristotle's way of understanding the transformation of potency (*potenza*) through action – possibility or actualization (*potere*), through vision, speech, or shaping what is or is not in the domain of potential, to give presence to absence, Agamben in "On Potentiality" (Agamben 1999 a, 177–184),⁴ argues on the essential contrast between potential (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*) (Agamben 1999 a, 177–179). Later in "What Is the Act of Creation?" (Agamben 2019, 14–28), he develops a hypothesis of the stretch between the potential *to* and potential *not to*.⁵ He does so advancing Deleuze's statement, for whom the "act of creation" is a kind of "act of resistance" (Deleuze 2006, 323), where the resistance to death is directly related to the resistance to information as a paradigm through which a certain power is exercised. Considering the *dematerialization* of the work of art as turning materiality into information, and the information taken as a *political* strategy in art, we can most certainly claim that Mendieta's work is as a crossing between the two key stages in feminism, essentialism and anti-essentialism. In 1973, Lucy Lippard wrote: "[...] it was usually the form rather than the content...that carried a

³ Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, Robert Morris, Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, Ana Mendieta, Eleanor Antin, and others, created performative artworks that are considered to be "marginal media" and "unsalable practice", obviously, neither of them is consolidating with the idea of institutional existence. They belong to the "loss" of the 1970s (Joseph Roach). For further observation of the whole picture of art-institutions relationship, it is important to underline that "alternative media" ended up being the subject of "formalist critical framework", as Douglas Crimp noted by asking: "Where is this decade?" and "Where are these media?". These question lead toward conclusions that art institutions are building up a new canon again (Blocker 1999, 7).

⁴ As editor Daniel Heller-Roazen notes, "On Potentiality" was held as a lecture in Lisbon, 1986, in the context of conference organized by the College international de philosophie; it appears in this volume for the first time.

⁵ The title of the essay "What Is the Act of Creation?" evokes that of a lecture "What is the Creative Act?" given by Gilles Deleuze in Paris in March 1987, published in Deleuze 2006, 312–24. Agamben's hypothesis about potentiality in relation to actualization was initially formulated as a stretch between potential to do and not to do, later abstracted into potential to and potential not to, excluding the verb "doing".

political message”. As she theoretically demonstrated the dematerialization of the art work: “For artist looking to restructure perception and the process/product relationship of art, information...replaced traditional formal concerns of composition....and physical presence,” we can clearly notice that the traditional poetics were replaced by a complex conceptual structuring, concerning not only the materiality of the objects but also the representative regimes that structured the reality in which these ideas have been executed, i.e. often *in situ*, outside the institutions (Lippard 1997, xiv-xv). The presence, and then the absence of the body in Mendieta's works, confirms her critical view of the irreducible and raises the question through the event as a place of occurrence: “...the female body as a fleeting presence, an avatar of the cosmic cycles of creation, destruction, and transformation” (Meyer 2006, 323). Her 1981 statement: “I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette)” (Quinn 2017, 148), suggests that representation is a kind of language where the body mediates between two dynamic entities. Disjunctions set between essentialism and anti-essentialism are questioned, as Blocker sees Mendieta's boundary “is made of ashes” (Blocker 1999, 32) and “the use of her/the body almost always approaches erasure or negation”, resisting to any finality or framing of what so ever that will bring representation to any closure.

The *dematerialization of the art object* meant placing one's own body in the process of mediation between *the work, the artist, and art*, destabilizing the normative categories as a strategy that re-examines the cultural norms and contexts in which *feminist art* sought to stabilize.

[...] that the work of art had been and could be viewed as distinct from the identity of the artist who made it; that all artists had equal access to the authority that this movement sought to diminish; that an attempt to subvert that authority in an artistic context would not be recuperated by larger cultural claims to dominance [...] (Blocker 1999, 10).

But this meant that the object of art no longer needs the explicit body as an essential category of feminine presence – rather that it is the absence that confirms its belonging to the continuity of feministic goals: “By repeatedly turning her own body into an art object, Mendieta took part in the 1970s trend in which the artist's physical self became both image and medium” (Blocker 1999, 10).

Speaking of the act of creation as a poetic act (*poiein*), Agamben believes that as the *potential* is released by the *act of creation*, the *act of resistance* will be *internal* to it (Agamben 2019, 17–18). According to Aristotle's thesis, that there is a constitutive co-occurrence of *potential* and *impotential (adynamia)*, as “a privation contrary to potential (*dynamis*)”, or as an “impotential of the same and with respect to the same thing”. Reflecting on this statement, Agamben notes that *impotential* “does not mean the absence of any potential”, on the contrary, it is *the potential as resistance* moving to the act, which confirms and defines “the specific ambivalence of any human potential”, which for Aristotle is “the essence of potential” (Agamben 2019, 19). That power of resistance, is what restrains or keeps the movement towards the act, towards the action, as impotentiality, capable of moving in two di-

rections, and is the result of intimate and non-productive resistance (Agamben 2019, 20). Nonetheless he also supposes that there can be no actualization that totally negates the potential, nor a potential that can never be realized. Impotential consequently suspends the power of real potential, which does not mean powerlessness, or potential in its entirety (Watkin 2014, 138). Hence “the potential (not to), is not another potential juxtaposed over the potential (to) but its inoperativity that results with deactivation of the same potential” (Agamben 2019, 23). This is, what Aristotle in “Book Lambda” (*Metaphysics*) calls *pure potential*, the ability of the potential not to act, and inoperativity that shows the ability to think for oneself (Agamben 2019, 24).

For this dialectical discussion, this would imply that the joint movement or activation of the possibilities of the potential *to* and the potential *not to*, will be crucial for the activation of the act of resistance, towards any finality or definiteness of the affected instances. This reflection opens the key to contemplation and inoperativity, according to Agamben, often in association with the unity of “politics and art” (Agamben 2019, 27). Inoperativity as opposition to operativity,⁶ can also be interpreted as a political category of the state of potential (its transformability) that would take place in the *event* as a possible domain for which the Badiou’s formulation offers a consistent clarification. As according to him: “[...] the word politics from the point of view of its scission means understanding it as designating both the immanent process of the unfolding...political prescription in fidelity to an event, i.e. the emergence of a possibility proscribed by the state of the situation” [...] (Corcoran 2015, 254).

If we look through feminist theory perspective, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999) notes that “formation of language and politics that represents women as ‘the subject’ of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics,” where “the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (Butler 1999, 4). This statement implies that the *act of resistance* in performative acts as an artistic language (not performance), would be in relation to “that which one opposes [...] turning power against itself to produce modalities of power,” understood as – political contestation (Butler 1993, 225). A supportive discussion arguing the *act of resistance* in the poetic language, taking into account the *semiotic* aspect of language as a signifying system, can be found in Julia Kristeva’s overall discussion about the possibilities to produce excess regard to social apparatus:

What we call *significance*, then, is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the ex-

⁶ Since this study refers to the interpretation of the potential in the category of art as language, as a possible entirety of the form, in this context it is important to note that ‘operativity’ as positive category implies a passage from one state to another, accomplished through a transformation (Greimas & Courtés 1982, 219).

change system and its protagonists — the subject and his institutions. This heterogeneous process, neither anarchic, fragmented foundation, nor schizophrenic blockage, is a structuring and de-structuring practice, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and society (Kristeva 1984, 7).

[...] poetic language [...] became a practice involving the subject's dialectical state in language (Kristeva 1984, 82).

And this is precisely the *act of resistance* in the *poetic act*, no matter which medium is chosen to situate a language articulation.

2. Artistic language, poetics and boundaries

In a rather lengthy span of his philosophical writings, Agamben raised a contemporary discussion about the relationship between the *potential* and the *act of creating* (the poetic act), which seemed appropriate to be used as an interpretation on Mendieta's artistic line, in terms of an alternate approach to the notion of feminist art. The latter meant rethinking of the idea or vision of exhibiting, representing, or shaping a work of art in some final form. To come to the point, feminist practices need to be reconsidered from the point of view of discussing *artistic language*.⁷ If we underline Agamben's thought "language is what must necessarily presuppose itself" (Agamben 1999a, 41), then we can consistently impose the question: how much of its potential, of its formal gravity towards its own completion in the process of the poetic act, could be retained? Mendieta created artworks, left to be unwound by historical time and the environmental process, considered as a specific *open form of potentiality*. When one reflects on the feminist aesthetics of Mendieta, one may articulate that it is not created from the already present and known elements that are utilized by the artistic language, but that the methods she uses are uttered⁸ together with the language that she develops. The traces of the body, the earth, the dust, the fire, the ashes, the water, the snow, all belong to nature, they are all ephemeral, and they return and decompose in the earth, passing through the po-

⁷ We can approach the perspective of artistic language and the discussion of representation from many other positions also. Julia Kristeva anticipated the notion of language as a productive structure, introducing the concept of *semanalysis* wherein language is a signifying process, not simply a static system (Kristeva 1986, 24). Judith Butler considers that language has a discursive effect on producing subjects, concerned with signification and meaning (Osbourne & Segal 1994, 32–39). Deleuze also considers the language as transformative (Deleuze 1990, 2–3). Derrida introduces the term *différance* and language as differential and differentiated entity, delayed at the very beginning (Derrida 1978, xviii).

⁸ Following the linguistic meaning of the noun utterance (*énoncé*) defined by Algirdas Julien Greimas: "In the general sense of 'that which is uttered', we understand utterance to mean any entity endowed with meaning [...]" (Greimas & Courtés 1982, 362–3). Utterance as impregnation in context, as literal meaning, indirect act, or appropriative element (Searle 1979, 42). For the meaning of *utterance act*, J. L. Austin made deeper analysis, considering its mobility in illocutionary act to be the force of the speech act. In this presumption uttering brings certain meaning and certain force, which is performative *per se* (Gravey 2014, 24). For the notion of uttering in the performative domain, wherein power acts as discourse, see Butler 1993, 2.

etics of Ana Mendieta, they belong to the potential *to* that resists to be potential *not to*, or more accurately, to the language that stretches its own boundaries for a conceptual purpose.

Or, if we line up this claim with the philosophy of language than we can find that according to Ian Hodder “representation is not a direct practice, in the sense that it constitutes its own language”, but that “representations use a series of conventions that make up this language”, where the reference frameworks are embedded within the representation (Hodder 2001, 269–280). Agamben's philosophy of language suggests that “language creates its own discourse through linguistic discovery” (Agamben 1999a, 43). This discovery is discernible in Mendieta's works of art, and does not end with the poetic act, it continues with the *event* that stretches the work of art as an *open form* and supposedly changes the perception of how feminist art can be conceptualized without direct use of the female principle as opposed to the predominantly dominant male art.⁹

That the poetics of language can potentially be open to infinity is also written by Otto Rank in *Poetic art and Its Hero* (1932): “Language is both creativity and creative itself. Man creates himself by naming his constituents, and extends this creation to the cosmos” (Rank 1989, 67). Agamben believes that there is an expressive form, a form, a voice that clearly indicates that there is an “event of language” (Agamben 1999a, 42). Art that takes shape through representation will be stretched or found in a process of extension between two potentials: the potential of full realization (*to*) and the potential of retention (*no to*), appearing as a quantum of occurrence in the process of the poetic act. This *quantum of occurrence* is especially noticeable in Mendieta's artworks, bringing forward Agamben's notion for the poetic language: “[...] the origin reveals itself as trace” (Agamben 1999a, 42). Yet, Blocker's assertion that the use of the earth in Mendieta's poetics has specific symbolic meaning, shows that the ephemeral reads multiple meanings: “It is a womb, both sexual and maternal, the fundamental source of life, a homeland, a pre-historic origin, nation, nature, a landscape, a link to ancestry, a burial site, and a sentient being [...] these bountiful associations did not originate with her, her handling of them is much more than a simple reiteration [...] through its symbolic imbrication with the female, the earth is as culturally constructed, ideologically determined, and hegemonically controlled a concept as femininity itself” (Blocker 1999, 45–46). In the series *Tree of Life* (1977), *Fetish* (1976–77), *Siluetas* (1973–80), *Volcano* (1979), *Anima* (1976) and *Sandwoman* (1983–84), the *art object disappears*, i.e. only a footprint or trace of the body remains as a medium, challenging the basic categories of representation of the work of art. In fact, when it comes to the visibility, the appearance, the form of the work of art concerning the idea or vision of its presence, another question arises, and that is the one related to the exposing of *boundaries* of the language of art, in line with the question: “What does it mean to

⁹ In the complex relationship between identity categories, which includes gender and class construction of identity, feminist art that is characteristic for Ana Mendieta goes beyond generalization, and to what is considered to be a division between art created by women and female art. For the ideological category of female art see Pollock 1988, 11–16.

see and expose the boundaries of language?” (Agamben 1999a, 46). According to Agamben, the idea is a vision of language as such, and language is at the same time a mediation of its own existence (Agamben 1999a, 47). These presupposed boundaries in Mendieta’s artworks are not merely imposed by the way that the artistic language is structured, they are set with intention and conceptualized by the artist, as a subject of the deconstructive method, planned to be unbounded for the constitutive openness of the artistic form. The subject of this study is actually about how much of the potential for actualization is embedded in the process of the poetic act, whether actualization is a *process* or a *work*, and examination on which feature of the work of art (as a process) allows open affiliation to the duration of the potential, which is not limited to one existence, one vision or one phenomenon. The potential *to* in Mendieta’s artworks, shows up that it is a part of a longer process, explored and emanated through series of artworks, or events, never discharged in one appearance, never enclosed in the boundaries of one representation, or ending up to be the potential *not to*. In Mendieta’s case the production of work of art is not abandoned. The poetic act as a process, is constitutively embedded in the life cycles, nature and earth mutability, it ages together with the constitutive open.

The distinction between *practice* and *poetics* is crucial in this context, because the practice (*praxis*), as an action that maintains its own end and as such is repetitive according to Aristotle, is something that is superior to the productive activity (*poesis*) whose possession in its own end (*entelecheia*) is in the work itself (Agamben 2019, 10). For example, the series *Silueta* (1973–80), *Volcano* (1979) and *Anima* (1976), they are photographed and documented, left as artefacts of an ephemeral process, while the process of earth-body dialogue always changes, even within one series. The anthropological-corporeal dimension of the works, the use of the body as a medium makes these artworks changeable on the level of the poetic gesture, as Agamben notes: “Anthropological changes correspond, in language, to poetological changes,” they “call into question the very borders between languages” (Agamben 1999b, 51). In comparison with Robert Smithson’s earth works, the aesthetic space of Mendieta is denser and more compressed and the potential *to* streaming towards potential *not to*, is evident even in between two consecutive realizations. In *Silueta Muerta* (1976) the traces of the body are flat, on the surface, appearing as if they had sprung from the ground, and not pressed, at the same time leaving the impression that the earth had swallowed them. This process seems to be omnipresent, exceeding the temporal dimension, and this is way we see her artworks as atemporal and that their end is not in the work itself. In *Volcano Series no. 2*. (1979), the structuring of the work is done by adding earth as *found material*. The created holes, like graves, suggest a strong *ritual* presence, the burning, fire and ashes, testify to a process, to an action, to an event. Her statement “I make sculptures in the landscape. Because I have no motherland, I feel a need to join the earth, to return to her womb” (Quinn 2017, 146) displays that she believes in the inexhaustibility of potential of the poetic act to be extended in more than just one artwork. Repeating the reverse process from birth could also mean self-embedding in the impossible and the mysterious.

3. Event, stretching through the poetic act

In the essay “What is the Act of Creation?” in the book *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism* (2019), Agamben essentially opens the key to the contextual comparisons of metaphysical with the contemporary notion of representation, which is moved/displaced from work, action (*ergon*) and end or a goal (*telos*), through the act (*energeia*) in the event itself (Agamben 2019, 9–14).¹⁰ In Mendieta’s artworks, particularly in Silhoueta series (1973–80), this movement from concrete actual form (placing body in the earth) through the action (removing the body from the place in which was placed) and leaving remains, traces, contours of body, could be considered as an event in which *energeia* of the poetic act had passed through.

The event, defined as conceptual and appropriative by Heidegger: “...is of the difference, but it keeps the difference and its essence concealed” (Heidegger 2012, 127), seems to be relevant to interpret the *act of resistance* in Ana Mendieta’s poetics. Firstly, the *act of resistance* appears in the poetic act itself, i.e. there are traces of body removed. Secondly, inceptuality is present from the beginning of the action, it is embodied in the very idea of the making (creative act). And all this begins with the aim to resist any formal finality, yet not to overpass the event that holds this (un)finishing.

The decision to put in form something that will be formless later is aptly argued by Badiou’s hypothesis of the event, as the formalization of something that was previously inform. The event as the affirmative division/split of what was the negation of form and the negation of that informality, will mean visibility of what was in negation, part of the formalistic impossibility, or its affirmative opportunity (Corcoran 2015, 117–120). Also, we can approach Badiou’s conception on the *matehme of the event*, drawing a parallel argumentation on Mendieta’s artworks in series, not isolated and separated individually ‘count-as-one.’ According to Badiou: “[...] event ... presents the infinite multiple of the sequence ... it presents itself as an immanent résumé and one-mark of its own multiple. [...] by means of

¹⁰ Although there are several determinants of the term *telos* by Aristotle, as “purpose”, “intent”, “end” or a “goal”, Agamben maintains the equivalence with the term *end*, in order to show its transitive meaning in the terms *ergon*, *energeia* and *praxis*, i.e. to hypothesize the opposition between potential (*dynamis*) and the act (*energeia*). This transitivity (of meanings) is crucial in the context of Mendieta’s works, because most of them retain their (un)completion in the process of “disappearance” (removal of the body), that could be considered as open-ended process, resting in *dynamis*. Rereading Aristotle, Agamben explains that the end (*telos*) is the same as the action (*ergon*), the work, and the work is the same as the act, actuality (*energeia*), i.e. engaged in work, the act of creation, because the act (*energeia*) originates from the action (*ergon*) and therefore tends toward its own completion, interpreted as self-possession to its own end. The key point is that the act, actuality (*energeia*) could be preserved in the thing made, the work, when it is produced beyond its use, or not considering its use. Underlying Aristotle’s claim, Agamben notes that *praxis* could be regarded as the action whose end is in itself, and as such is superior to productive activity, *poiēsis*, whose end is in the work (Agamben 2019, 9–14).

the pure signifier of itself immanent to its own multiple, manages to present the presentation itself, that is, the one of the infinite multiple that it is. [...] that mark of itself, belongs to the eventual multiple” (Badiou 2005, 179–180).

4. Performance and performativity, negotiating personal and political

If we follow the current lines of art in the 1970s, earth art, body art, performance art, conceptualism, they mostly refer to art as experience. The *potential* to which conceptually incorporates *inoperativity* towards its own completion, as an ephemeral process, event, situation, is not reduced to *potential not to*, but replaced by *processuality* or *performativity*, through the transformation of the poetic act into a duration that does not have only one final and defined end.

Jane Blocker distinguishes between *performance* and *performativity*. “[...] The performative describes a special class of actions that are derived from and may be plotted within a grid of power relationships. Like the more common notion of performance, its emphasis on liminality over legibility and change over fixity is effective in placing interpretative emphasis on actions rather than on commodifiable objects”. For Judith Butler: “Performance is not acting but a repetition of (dis)empowered acts”, while Blocker sees performative identity as “unfixed and destabilized in a way that makes its political imbrications paramount” (Blocker 1999, 24). The way Mendieta uses performance is strategic, she privileges the disappearance as an open-ended event that retains its *potential to* towards the *potential not to*, by simply making the journey without an end.

One of the goals of Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and Cal Arts lead by Judy Chicago developed in 1970, was “rejecting the formalist orientation” that prevailed in most art schools, in order to be replaced for “conceptualization of the artworks in terms of personally meaningful content” as “consciousness-raising”, but also as confrontation or resistance of a personal position (Blocker 1999, 12–13),¹¹ as a part of a larger cultural pattern that could be changed (Meyer in Jones 2006, 321). This learning conveyed solidarity among women, still also sharing a feeling of common oppression that resulted with 1970’s slogan of feminism: “the personal is political”¹² – something that we can clearly see in Mendieta’s negotiations midst

¹¹ Mendieta’s approach is considered to be relied on the “depoliticized notion of the personal”, according to Blocker, “both the artist and her work are presumed to be in some ways unknowable, the critical importance of the work is limited, and the identity of its creator is self-evident” (Blocker 1999, 13–14).

¹² “The Personal Is Political”, paper written by Carol Hanisch (1969), discusses the broader socio-political situation in the period around 1968 and the various movements for the liberation of the marginalized and the repressed, as well as a general review and critique of the society. Raising awareness of what it meant to take “a decision to act upon collectively, to be part of a movement” largely resulted with the decision that “together we are a mass movement”. Art may have only marginally contributed to the movement of various groups, Pro-Woman Line theory contributed much more to the wider reception of the movement, but still, the affiliation of women artists in the second feminist wave played a significant role in the struggle for female identity, as ancestry, as legacy, especially for what followed in the 1990s.

identity possibilities, epistemological turn in artistic language and representation, and the dimension of performance.

In some of the works (*Imagen de Yagul*, from the series *Silueta Works in Mexico 1973–1977*) it is clear that her female body is placed on the ground/earth, i.e. that it is a female silhouette, and that essentialist approach is directly applied to the work. While in others (*Untitled*, from the series *Silueta Works in Iowa, 1978*), the silhouette of the body is not clear, especially for those who did not see the performance, but have access only to the documented material, there is only the knowledge that it is a female body. In a sense, the unidentifiable visual is in some way a questioning of the identity category woman – regarded from a feminist perspective, an important step forward in the transition to anti-essentialism, meaning that the re-examination of representation is embedded in the poetic act. The importance of seeing and knowing, and the embodiment of this epistemological turn in language is clearly noted by Jane Blocker:

Does the problem lie with the body and our conception of it or rather with the phallogocentric language and epistemology through which we are forced to see it? What is the real, concrete effect of either essentialism or antiessentialism as political practice? (Blocker 1999, 31).

For Blocker, “no one true identity exists prior to the act of performing”, and “no one identity remains stable in and through performance”, as a performative paradigm that bound the personal and the political, as she further states: “individual acts” are “inseparable from complex discursive power relations” (Blocker 1999, 25). This brings us back to the beginning of the text, where it is noted that “language creates its own discourse through linguistic discovery” (Agamben 1999, 43), i.e. Mendieta’s individual acts are part of the discourse that was built as a potential political¹³ power grid, for identity recognitions and recognition of feminist reality, that continues today as an extension of societal-cultural reformation for equal gender representation in policy-making. Born in Cuba, living in exile – was a complex issue for Mendieta, ideologically and emotionally. She raised this issue to the level of symbolic “the site called home” throughout her work. Mendieta was: “[...] an artist who lived in exile and who played a significant role in advocating women's and minorities' rights” (Blocker 1999, 45–46). The political dimension of her work oc-

¹³ When we think in the context of art and the political in art, it is important to note that the political is a way to reach the *act of resistance*, once it is defined what that resistance is aimed at. It can refer to representation as conventional, to the setting of art, to the content fund of the work, to the place of art in society, and to the relations between the individual and the community which through the act of creation will encourage or oppose, seeing of the political as an organic becoming in the process, through the event of the poetic act. Social gestus, situations, institutional critique, critical art, brought by the dialectics of Brecht, Benjamin, Debord, Ranciere, Nancy, and many others, influenced most of the extensions in contemporary art of today. But in the nexus politics-poetics, Agamben's latest book seems relevantly usable to approach this issue. “Politics and art are neither tasks nor simple ‘works’: they name, rather, the dimension in which linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are deactivated and contemplated as such” (Agamben 2019, 27).

cupies a discursive position, bringing the concepts of “exile”, “nation”, “land”, “ethnicities”, “races” and “identities”, (Blocker 1999, 73–75) as agency of social consciousness around questions of origin and identity.

The transformation in Mendieta’s artworks is employed as a passage, as a transition, as Blocker suggests: “transition...suggests a more active, and not together final, process. It implies movement, a passage between states of being” (Blocker 1999, 87). This passage is crucial for understanding the act of resistance in Mendieta’s poetic act, as a potential *to* that never ends up being potential *no to*. It is a stretching between two points of finality, between two fixations.

This incompleteness can be clearly seen in the Silhoueta series by Mendieta: the belonging of the work of art is left to the earth, to the natural processes that reshape the remains of the silhouettes, and thus are attributed to nature: “[...] an association of female body and maternal nature that reads ambiguously as joyous reunion or deathly embrace or both ” (Foster et al. 2016, 656). Trying to locate the artist presence in the process of making the artwork, Bridgit Quinn describes the relation of the body and the earth as internal *immanence of the poetic act*: “In her Silueta Muerta and many others, Mendieta claimed herself as part of the earth, part of time itself” (Quinn 2017, 151).

5. Concluding remarks

The distinction between *potential* and *poetic act*, is essential to understand the *act of resistance* in Ana Mendieta’s oeuvre. According to Jane Blocker, the use of the earth wasn’t only a medium, it was more a kind of co-operative source of energy that could reduce the presence of the body to its vanishing point: “To anthropomorphize the earth is to endow it with sentience, desire, and identity; it is to think of earth as more than merely a sculptural material” (Blocker 1999, 18). Ritual takes the place of three-dimensional space, it moves and displaces the event from the energy that lies in the *potential to*, as an act of resistance to the full *potential not to*, understanding the setting of the work of art as the *aesthetics of disappearance* (Blocker 1999, 18). Emphasizing the principle of earth as goddess, womb, and mother, Mendieta reinforces primordial female archetypes among feminist art practices in the early second wave of feminism. The identity categories she explores through feminist practices include gender and ethnicity. She raises questions that are social, aesthetic and political, but at the same time she “searches the possibilities for women to break out of their prescribed roles” (Blocker 1999, 127). The question of identity in Mendieta is posed as an *act of resistance* in the poetic act, which occurs with and within the very act of performance, because for her “No one true identity exists prior to the act of performing. Understanding identity as having these ‘performative’ qualities enables a discussion of gender, color, nation, and ethnicity that bypasses essentialist categories” (Blocker 1999, 25). The division or difference that occurs between *performance* and *performativity* is precisely the idea of constituting the real, where in the former it is re-created, while in the latter it is constituted. This means that the *poetic act* participates in the construction of something that is open for further transformation, breaking down the ontology of the established categories of work of art, space, time and duration.

The question of *necessity* reveals another position that propounds the need for formal artistic closure as fear of conflict between the two dynamics, the potential *to* and the potential *not to*. In this context Otto Rank's remarks that "The artistic form itself is a necessary protection for the artist against the dynamism of a conflict that would destroy him if not put into form" (Rank 1989, 98), is something which could emphasize (confirm) the internal dualism that Agamben considers to be essentially immanent in the act of resistance. The act of resistance in Mendieta's oeuvre is constitutive in the process of creation, where poetics have at the same time an operational function of actualization and restraint from the full realization of potential into impotential. The stretching through the event as a procedural action is not limited to the possibilities of representation, it is transposed to possibilities of the artistic language as such.

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Примљено / Received: 23. 02. 2021.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 31. 08. 2021.