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Women and the body in art

The body is perhaps the primary metaphor for a society's perception of itself. The individual and spoken language are what make up the social body. The physical body is a kind of boundary between biology and society, between drives and discourse. (Viso 2004)

For this essay I will be looking into identity, Female(self) portraiture, and the way culture affects female artists from different backgrounds. I will be exploring the use of the human (the female) body in different types of practice. I will be looking into and comparing Liliane Lijn, Elke Krystufek, Ghada Amer, Ana Mendieta and Tracy Emin. Krystufek often uses her own body in her work in a very intimate yet impersonal manner, as a tool rather than actual subject matter. Lijn creates work exploring among other things the connection between body and soul, mostly sculptures using her body as a blueprint for moulds, rarely displaying any facial details but still have much more of a personal feel than much of Krystufeks work, which has a more political approach and works with identity in a more general sense. I will also be looking at use of so called female media. In this section I will compare Tracy Emin (mainly her bed piece and quilt series) and Gada Amer and her embroidery. Both use methods that are often considered craft and subject matter that is very much female, but with very different intentions and results. I will also be looking into the difference between practicing female (feminist) artists in different parts of the world, Amer from Egypt Where Islam is the major religion. Krystufek and Emin from western Europe: Krystufek from Austria and Emin From the UK. And finally, Mendieta from revolutionary Cuba.

Illustrating the inner self

Liliane Ljin is an American sculptor (though she now lives in London), who works in a wide range of materials though mainly sculpture and video. The works I have chosen to illustrate this essay are all bronze and mica sculptures involving light in one way or another (argon lights and fire). I have chosen these particular works because I feel they best illustrate the self representative side of Ljins practice and her way of using the female form in a non traditional way. In the words of Hilary Spurling in Ljins book *light and memory* (Spurling 2002) "As a writer I have watched Ljins sculpture mutate over the past 20 years with surprise and a growing sense of recognition. The neat glossy compositions of the 60s and 70s have been steadily overtaken by a procession of stranger pieces: woman of war lady of the wild things, electric bride, my body my self, not so much art objects: as in Ljins words : as new and odd species on earth: these aliens are the end product of a process that will be familiar to any writer novelists were already working on it when Virginia Wolf defined her position in the 1920s: I have the feelings of a woman but only the language of men if the new languages evolved to express those feelings in the novel have no equivalent in the visual arts it is at least in part because women found access to their own bodies blocked of by art history" The female form has been used in art more or less since humans began creating art and very much before more modern concepts such as feminist and/or female art.

Women artists today are still finding their place in the modern art world which is very much established by men. Ljins response to this issue has been to by choice of materials and compositions represent the female soul or spirit rather than an accurate representation of the physical aspects. She does this mainly by using light which has been a constant in Ljins practice both as method and subject matter. In Some of her earlier works such as 'bride' and 'feathered lady' the female form is only vaguely hinted at in a very much abstracted fashion no real formal

reference to the female form but yet something distinctly feminine about them 'the bride' and 'electric bride' are also hints at a reference to Duchamp's bride stripped bare, a very male and crude way of representing the female body with an engine. Ljins brides are more ecstatically pleasing and definitely more feminine, as put by Hilary Spurling (spurling 2002) "Ljin adapts His allusive and reductive procedures to achieve sexually speaking the opposite effect 'far from being stripped bare Ljins bride(1988) is sumptuously adorned."

In the 90s Ljins work became less abstract and started to include the female form on a more direct level. As she herself puts it in an interview with Asa Benveniste (Benveniste 1977) "how can we disregard our bodies? You talk about the contradiction between the mechanical part, the thing that gives power and the result of that power, and I would answer you by saying we live in a society where we are schizoid, we are mind and body, and they are separate. We live without realising we have bodies"" however she goes on to say "I'm an optimist. I am trying to connect. I think we're all very divided, mind and body – and I think one has to connect one's mind with one's body." For example 'My body my self' is made using bronze casts of the artists own body representing the outer solid shell or container and sections of industrial mica and clear blue argon lights in glass tubing to demonstrate the "inner self" (something Ljins work becomes increasingly about) the effect is visually very pleasing the hard industrial materials mixed with the soft blue light is in my opinion very successful in representing the strength and beauty of the female spirit in a very tangible way. 'Fire my soul' is another work made in much the same way though 6 years later after a mastectomy. This sculpture has a much more distinguishable face but it and most of the bronze sections of the body are fractured broken up and somewhat disjointed giving the piece a very different, more oppressive harsh feel rather than the more uplifting and soft "feel" of 'My body my self'. The light used for this piece also influences this, a faint vaguely sinister red glow rather than shining blue. Though faint the light is still very much a

focal point however as with most of Ljins works.

Lilith is the last piece in this series, here the solid materials work very much only as a container for the flames which leap out bright and hot through all cracks and openings. As stated by Hilary spurling (spurling 2002) "like much of Ljins work Lilith and her companions can be read on many levels as dialogue between contemporary and classical form, between decay and growth, death and rebirth, constraint and liberation. In these extraordinary inventions Ljin has found a way to look frankly and directly at the female body. She has reclaimed the imagery of a male-imprinted tradition by evolving the kind of language Woolf proposed nearly a century ago; a plastic language of great visual inventiveness, emotional power and allusive range with which to explore what it means to be, think, and feel as a woman at the start of the twenty-first century." All of these works are to some degree self-representations, representations of Ljin as a person and as a female, rather than direct self-portraits though *fire my soul* leans more towards referring to Ljin in an autobiographical sense Whereas pieces like *bride* and *it's a girl* are more portraits of femininity and the female spirit in an even more general sense.

The persona, the non private body

Tracy Emin is one of Brittan's most famous modern artists. Emin has (with help from the media) built up a very colourful public persona for herself, though there is an ongoing debate as to how much of this facade is genuine and how much is just an act and publicity stunt. Emins work is largely self representational, as Neal brown phrases it in his book about the artist (brown 2006) "central to Emins work are ideas of self portraiture, with aspects of the portrait, The biography and the autobiography all invoked, moving uncontainable between literary and visual representations of the self" The idea of Emins persona is much debated a strange combination

of uncomfortably intimate honesty with a strange sense that Emin shows us just what she wants us to see though as Brown goes on to say (brown 2006) “the nature of the truth of Emins Art is not a problem to be disentangled, but simply that she wears her heart honestly on her sleeve and is a highly professional artist, with an artist’s strategic vision and entitlement to arrange and mediate her work to best effect” This apparent contradiction makes her work all the more interesting.

Emins work is especially after her mental breakdown (as a result of medical complications due to a wrongly preformed abortion), and her subsequent recovery is centred around Emin as a modern west European woman with all that entails of Freedom, insecurity and rights. Emins work often gets called feminist and possibly in some ways it is though feminist is these days a title liberally distributed to any female working with the female being as subject matter in any way, As the artist herself puts it in an interview with about this time in her life and the change it brought to her art practice (brown 2006) “I realised that there was a greater idea of creativity... the essence of creativity – that moment of conception, the whole importance, being of everything... I realised if I was to make art it couldn’t be about a fucking picture... it had to be about where it was really coming from”

Emin has often used text in her work though in typical Emin style the writing is often grammatically incorrect and written with a very obscure personal vocabulary which results in the works being intimately personal yet un-relatable by outsiders. This is a constant theme in Emins work, baring her soul in words and images we can’t or won’t understand this is a large part of what artistically speaking makes Tracy Emin, Tracy Emin her very unique simple yet complex style of representation. Emins personalised language is also apparent in her more strictly biographical book “strangeland”. After reading this book I find myself feeling like i know both all and nothing about the artist as drunken ramblings are mixed with heartfelt confections in a

fascinating jumbled literary artistic mess. Strangeland gives the impression that Emin like many similar artists lives to a great extent in her own head and with her work is both inviting the viewer in and simultaneously rejecting them because they don't and can't belong there.

In many ways Emin's practice appears related to that of Elke Krystufek they both go for seemingly "shock value" to the point where this becomes expected of them and therefore becomes normality. This type of practice especially when speaking of feminist angles is in the west especially western Europe becoming in some ways obsolete, you can't shock the desensitised. In this respect artists like Ghada Amer has if you can call it that an advantage being a woman in Muslim male dominated society where the least show of skin provokes a strong response, where as artists like Emin and Krystufek can show themselves naked and often in provoking poses and/or blatantly refer to the female body medically and sexually speaking and viewers for good and bad take little notice of the provocation.

For example In Emin's work simply entitled "my bed" Emin places her own bed complete with soiled knickers, empty vodka bottles, contraceptive and morning after pill packets, used tampons etc, here Emin again appears to show very intimate insight to her own life with depression alcoholism and promiscuity playing a very big part. This seemingly unedited look into Emin's life is complicated by the fact that it is actually arranged by the artist and put in a gallery and subject to the viewers scrutiny and theorising as Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang states about Emin's bed piece (Steiner Yang 2004) "once again She (Emin), Seemed to be presenting the reality of her daily life just as it was, without any kind of meditation or editing of the facts... while Emin certainly is making selected parts of her autobiography visible, it is the visitor who completes the work by projecting their own imagined ideas about her life and character"

The body in cultural identity

Ghada Amer is an Egyptian born and raised artist who later moved to France and then on to America. Amers work makes use of stereotypical female media mainly embroidery to juxtapose her explicit pornographic imagery taken directly from pornographic magazines and such. The female as an artist is central to Amers work much like Emins though in Amers case the representation is less personal, the artist herself is never apparent in her work, she lets her work represent her in a less personal but certainly more directly political way. Amer work is centred around her identity as a Muslim woman and her response to the increasingly strict Muslim male dominated views in her home country. Amer work consists almost exclusively of embroidered canvases often including acrylic paint and inks for colour in combination with the very provocative imagery she uses, often taken from pornographic magazines and the like, produces an interesting contrast. The medium of embroidery being very domestic and “appropriate” for a (Muslim) woman mixed with the “offensive” imagery of pornography sends a strong message. As put by Germano Celant (Celant 2007) “the decision to embroider thus defines a symbiotic and emotional area of traditional sensitivity, linked to her own cultural identity”

Her embroidered pieces were to start with very neat with all excess thread trimmed of or hidden, but in many of her later works the threads are left hanging over the front of the canvas, this in combination with the dripping, draping semi transparent nature of the acrylic is a more obvious comment on the tradition of veiling in strict Muslim society. There never seems to be any males present in Amers work this is a common denominator for much of the work of all 5 artists is that the women are alone or sometimes with other women, and always proud and defiant for male influence of their identity and nature.

Another aspect of Amers Practice is her use of traditional Muslim literature in her work, using celebrated literary works being virtually ignored by the western world due to their origins. As stated by Fereshteh Daffari (Daffari "2006) "one agenda of Amers work then, is, to celebrate Arab culture, much belittled in the west, by seeing part of its literary history before western eyes". Amer like Mendieta Is very strongly influenced by her cultural origins, this may seem in some ways contradictory to her other work, both criticizing and celebrating her cultural heritage, this is in part due to Amers rare point of view seeing her beloved country change from a distance (when living in France) to more restricted and traditional values

Amer Grew up in Egypt but went to art school in France it was on her visits home during this period that she noticed more and more during her visits home especially in the late 80's a return to traditional Muslim values with all that that entails for Women. Her main focus became the veil and the veils effect on Muslim (female) life. In an article by Laura Auricchio, Amer is quoted from a previous interview commenting on her own response to the increasing popularity of traditional Muslim values and veiling (Auricchio 2001) "When I go home, I feel so conscious of my body, every time, conscious of the relationship to the body of everything I wear. Everything is so hidden that if you have a finger out, it becomes the focus of sexuality." Auricchio goes on to say "Amer has identified her work as "a vengeance against this." Amers identity as an Egyptian (Muslim) born artist who then lived for an extended period of time in western European France, and then on to America gives her a unique if sometimes complicated perspective on female religopolitical issues.

Illustrating the idea of self

Elke Krystufek like Liliane Lijn often uses her own body in her work though in a much different

way. Her goal is not so much self portrayal as stereotypes of portrayal Krystufek gives the impression of “baring her soul” to the viewer (B. Steiner, J. Yang 2004) “Elke Krystufek seems to champion the authenticity of personal expression. In her paintings videos and performances, she appears to be offering the most private revelations about herself and her life, weather in the form of her own photo album, her expressive self-portraits or her intimate poses and explicit actions. But no matter how private or real these public displays may seem they turn out to be more or less stereotypical gestures based on socially conventional roles and preconceived patterns of behaviour Viewing Krystufeks practice as a whole she is more a chameleon than a distinct persona morphing into a suitable character for her current piece. (B. Steiner, J. Yang 2004)” “The art business has a great deal to do with projections as a person you are confronted with this daily. A self-portrait is also an opportunity to correct that again and again” Krystufek like Ljin often uses her own body but also her face though this in no way makes her work as personally revealing as Ljins. Ljin very much keeps the same identity throughout her self explorative practice, Krystufek on the other hand often displays very specific characteristics in specific works but these are not constant or compatible like Ljins rather a wild exploration of possibilities and variations.

Krystufek overwhelms us with images of her face and body but no real sense of narrative or personality, Krystufeks work is more portraits of her thoughts and opinions rather than her physical and spiritual self. Her self portrayal is at first glance obvious but on closer inspection often fake. One has to search through this multitude of hints to get any real idea of Krystufek herself. Ljin in opposition keeps the same vague identity throughout her work but never reveals much of her thoughts or opinions, her work is more self portrayal on a spiritual level more than physical or philosophical. Krystufek Works mainly with collage and performance, often like in pieces such as “satisfaction“ where she masturbated in the studio space in front of an audience, the shock value of the piece apares to be a very important part of her practice (Noever 2006)

“Elke Krustufek’s art is passionate, emancipative, aiming to incite and excite the viewer, to break conventions, taboos, to cause shock: whether it is aggression or shame, her actions aim to trigger reaction.” Works such as *Satisfaction* (and also much of Amers and Emin’s work can seem to be merely pointlessly obscene and aggressively feminist this is rarely the effect at least not in a conventional sense as it is not about hey look at me I’m a woman I’m doing something I’m not supposed to it’s more a case of yes I’m successful, female and career driven but I am still a woman feminism has changed drastically in later years and it is now in some ways doubling back on itself women artists are now concentrating on being proud and accepted in the art world because they are women not in spite of it as stated by (Ebilmayer 2006) “it is no longer the naked, sexual body that is obscene, the new obscenities are work, money, violence, central heating, passports, airplanes’...you start missing the male gaze, everything sexual” In modern driven society where career and materialistic thinking dominate people’s lives we miss the more natural order of things that makes us who and what we are. Artists like Krystufek, Emin and Mendieta all approach this issue if from somewhat different angles.

The body as symbol

Ana Mendieta was born in 1948 in Cuba but moved to America at the age of twelve, her and her sister were part of operation Pedro Pan which was evacuating children from Cuba because of the unstable political climate in the country due to Fidel Castro’s revolutionary ideals. This move and the lasting effect it had on Mendieta as a person greatly affected her work, as stated by Guy Brett in Olga M Viso’s book *Earth body* (Brett 2004) “Ana Mendieta herself used the phrase “I am between two cultures you know?

Uttered by her the words have a particular resonance because of all we know about her brief life. The circumstances of her removal from Cuba to the United States at the age of twelve, with her elder sister Raquelín – knowing no English, growing up in a succession of foster homes and

boarding schools in a remote part of the United States known for its harsh winters – she experienced as a profound dislocation. “I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source.” Mendieta's work is centred around the female form and the connection to the land. Her works consist of (at least towards the end of her practice) mainly of what she calls earth body works or Siluetas (silhouettes) these Siluetas are outlines of female forms in various natural materials among others, mud, flowers, stone water etc and occasionally she uses fire (flaring gunpowder mixture).

Mendieta chooses natural materials and settings to comment on the connection with the (mother) land. This relationship to the land is something Mendieta as a political exile felt strongly for, and though she returned several times to visit and create work she found like America that it was no longer the same country she had left. Not long before she died she swore never to return to Cuba. Her work especially the Siluetas are more general though in the sense that she is working with the connection to the world in general rather than to Cuba in particular she is quoted in Earth body saying (Viso 2004) “my art is grounded on the belief in one universal energy which runs through everything; from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy” Mendieta in some of her later Silueta works uses fire to represent this, she concentrated more and more on this aspect of her practice towards the end of her unfortunately short life. Her Siluetas are almost exclusively modelled in the shape of Mendieta herself, though in a way out of convenience it is important that it is her body used because it is about her connection with the land but at the same time her Self is irrelevant as she is merely a part of the whole her works are not self-portraying as such but an attempt at portraying a person's (Mendieta's) spiritual connection with the land.

Early work

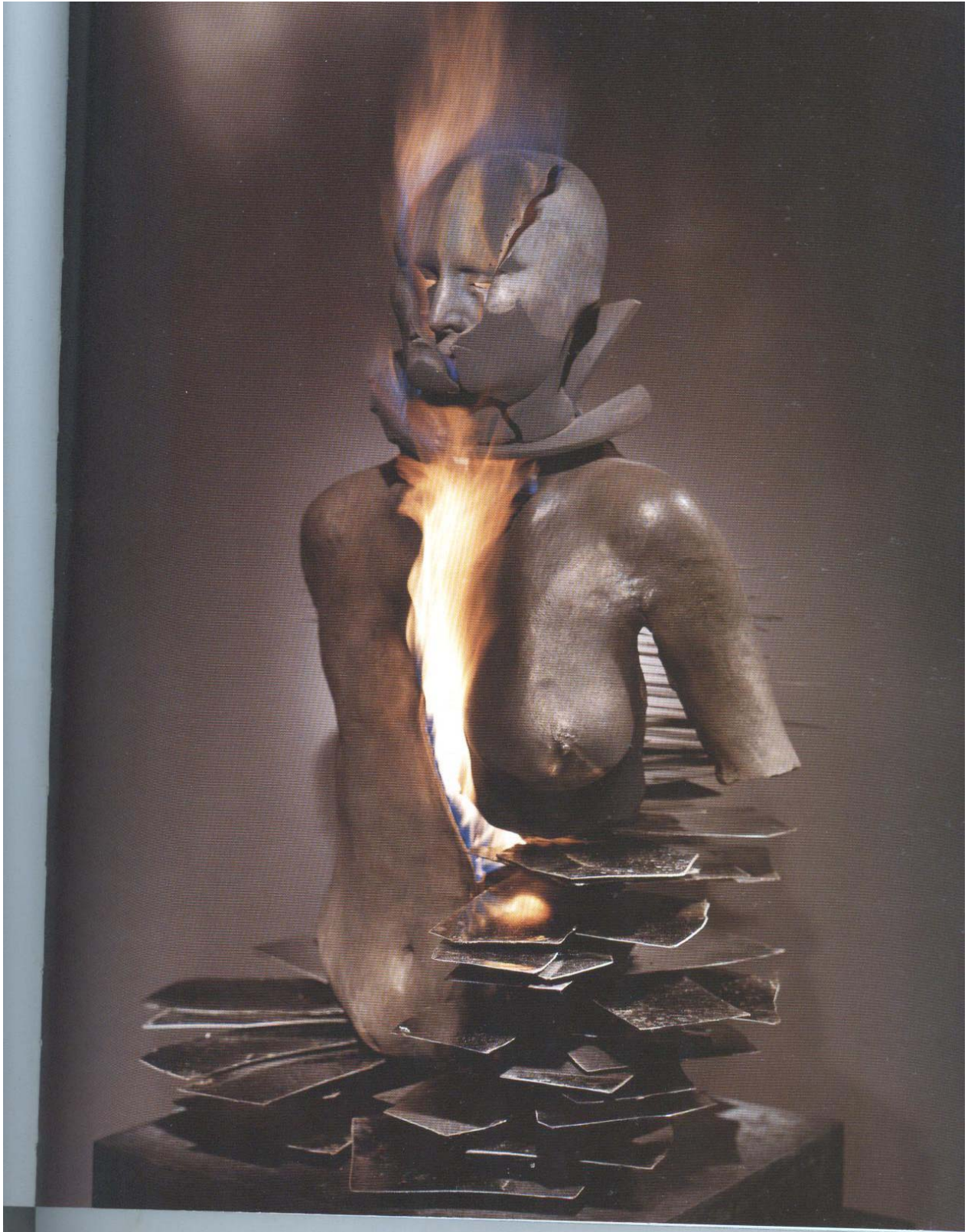
Before her silueta series Mendieta used her body in her work very differently and with a rather different aim in works like untitled (glass body) from 1972. A young Mendieta (still a student at the university of Iowa) changes the shape of her body using a piece of Plexiglas, for example she presses her face up against the Plexiglas distorting her facial features. And in other works especially early in her career she used blood and her naked body as a media for performance pieces. The first in this series untitled (death of a chicken) Mendieta has a friend decapitate a chicken and hand it to the artist. As the body of the chicken thrashes in its last death throes Mendieta's body gets showered in blood. These early works had obvious ritualistic undertones though as Julia P Herzberg stated (J. P Herzberg 2004) "while untitled (death of a chicken) evokes ritual and ceremony, it does not present specific religious practices; it is an artistic creation with associations to generalized religious practices that she often referred to as "voodoo"

In 1978 Mendieta worked on a very different series of works among others a performance piece using blood in a much more disturbing way, Mendieta recreated the aftermath of a brutal rape scene mimicking the rape of a student at the university Mendieta was attending and the reports in the newspaper describing the scene in detail. Mendieta staged the scene with herself as the would be victim spread face down over a table naked from the waist down and her lover half smeared in blood. In 1972 Mendieta created a very important piece for the future direction of her work called untitled (grass on woman). In this piece Mendieta lies face down on the lawn of the university while friends of the artist glued grass onto her naked back. This piece was in many ways her stepping stone into her work with the Siluetas, as Herzberg claims (J. P. Herzberg 2004) "this performative piece . with the earth represents, in retrospect, a paradigm shift in Mendieta's work; it is a proto - earth – body piece that began to merge her body with the nature

- even if only tentatively.”

The use of the female body in art changed radically in the last 40 years since the feminist movements of the 70's. Up until the 19th century the female nude was almost exclusively portrayed as an object (be that object commonly a goddess or other such grand idea) an object all the same. To be viewed and judged with no mind or say of its own. One of the first artworks to go against this was Edouard Manet's Olympia: a painting of a reclining female nude, but with important differences. The subject is a prostitute this further made clear by the title, Olympia being a name commonly adopted by prostitutes of the era. But not only that she is quiet obviously looking back at the audience (O'Rilley 2009) “this radical act of reciprocal interrogation was considered vulgar on account of its subject, and her contravention of codes of humility and compliance” As I mentioned the development of female bodies in art advanced quickly with the feminist movements of the 60's and 70's as women more and more are portrayed as “real people” not stylised figures. The main advances these feminists made were to attempt to fully reclaim the female body on all levels but most obviously sexually as this was still somewhat of a taboo. At the time attempting to un scandalize portraits of female sexuality. Artists like Elke Krystufek and Tracy Emin are in many ways the product of this ongoing “debate” displaying intimate, bodily functions in a very matter of fact unapologetic way. We have come a long way since daring to portray a woman as an intelligent interactive person was scandal. And as female artists find themselves with less to rebel against artwork of the body has become increasingly “shocking” as the (art) world becomes less and less shockable. Artists like Ghada Amer find themselves still largely restricted in Amer's case by strict Muslim society to which she refers with her sexually explicit embroideries. Another aspect of development of (female) portrayal is the idea of exploring the mind body connection. Artists like Lilliane Ljin take this less politically aggressive approach to portraying “the female” in the words of Tracy Warr (Warr 2000) “over the course of the last hundred years artists have investigated the temporality,

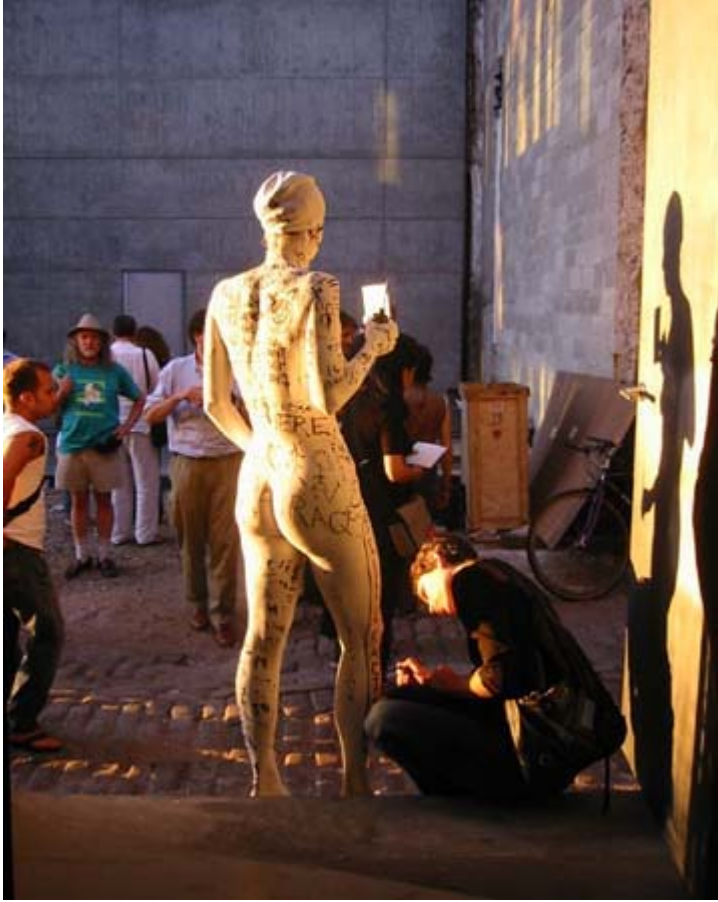
contingency and instability of the body, and have explored the notion that identity is 'acted out' within and beyond cultural boundaries, rather than being an inert quality. They have explored the notion of consciousness, reaching to express the self that is invisible, formless and liminal. They have addressed issues of risk, fear, death, danger and sexuality. At times when the body has been most threatened by these things"



Lilith 2001 bronze, mica and fire Liliane Lijn



My body my self sculpture 1996 mica, bronze, glass, light Liliane Ljin



Elke Krystufek performs Silent Scream



Elke Krustufek Satisfaction



Anne, 2004, acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas, 66 x 79 inches, by Ghada Amer.



Ghada Amer



Ana Mendieta Death of a chicken



Ana Mendieta untitled (siloueta)



Ana Mendieta Grass on woman



Ana Mendieta Tree of life



Tracy Emin my bed

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