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After Nature: The Expanded Landscapes of Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz

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Abstract

The article explores women's interventions into landscape through the experimental practices of Cuban American multimedia artist Ana Mendieta and contemporary Brazilian visual artist and filmmaker Ana Vaz. Interested in the material and metaphorical intersections among film, landscape, and geology, I focus on the geological imagination of landscape partaking in Mendieta's and Vaz's art while asking what sorts of aesthetic regimes and formal strategies they choose to express it. Mendieta's comprehension of earth as matter, medium, and a deep surface for inscription of traces comments on the materiality of film as a recording medium from the point of view of geologically oriented art. Vaz's landscape, inflected with human interventions, emerges as an enormous living medium of memory, linking its exploration to a geological approach and the work of excavation while transforming deep time into what the artist calls 'cinematographic multiperspectivism'. The article argues that it is the attention to the geological that unites these two artists in their critique of the position of exteriority and of landscape as an object of contemplation. Mendieta and Vaz depart from traditional aesthetics of landscape as a view by moving toward landscape as a network of relations among humans, memories, and times.

Landscape Transformations: From Frame to Geology

'Landscape as a way of seeing from a distance is incompatible with the heightened sense of our relationship to Nature as living (or dying) environment. As a phase in the cultural life of the West, landscape may already be over'. (Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*)¹

In his seminal article on landscape in cinema and experimental film, P. Adams Sitney refers to only one female director, Marie Menken, when mentioning the artists from whom Stan Brakhage learnt the elements of cinematic landscape.²

¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 22.

² P. Adams Sitney, 'Landscape in the Cinema: The Rhythms of the World and the Camera', in

Nonetheless, women artists' responses to landscape in different media have a long history, especially in experimental filmmaking, which as long served as an arena for women's artistic preeminence.³ From Margaret Tait to Babette Mangolte to Ute Aurand, landscape fascinates, remaining one of the privileged, as well as one of the most challenging, subjects for the camera.⁴ Women artists' interventions into landscape have recently intensify at a time when landscape — in light of our shifting relationship to the natural environment and expansion of geographical and cultural borders — resurfaces, as Erika Balsom suggests, as a 'distinctly contemporary concern'.⁵ This article focuses on Cuban American multimedia artist Ana Mendieta's experimentations with Super 8mm film during the 1970s and contemporary Brazilian visual artist and filmmaker Ana Vaz's assemblages of 16mm filmed materials, found footage, and digital moving images. Their natural, social, and personal histories all intertwine in Mendieta's and Vaz's very different practices to blur a system of boundaries through which the genre operates in its experiences of place or land. These two artists represent a break in the monopoly of traditional European landscape, turning their cameras to Cuban, Mexican, and Brazilian locations. But they also break the monopoly in a greater sense — bringing forward the ambiguity and elusiveness of landscape as an idea and experience, the artists contribute to the transformation of our ways of thinking critically about the very notion of landscape and its aesthetic paradigms, especially at the intersection of landscape with the issues of time, depth, and memory.

Sanctified by the authority of art history, landscape has long been understood in terms of the visible, as a view inside the frame — the imposition of the frame mediates land as landscape. The concurrent emergence in the seventeenth century of Cartesian philosophy and of landscape paintings supports landscape as an issue of frames and grids, detached representation, and observation of nature from a position of culture. A hierarchical arrangement of components within a view, landscape became a complex assemblage of visual and imaginative constituents subordinated to a thematic motif that unifies a setting into totality. *Field Beach*, painted in 1850 by Mary Blood Mellen, one of a number of women painters associated with the Hudson River School, exposes landscape as a set of relations — not merely among water, land, and sky, all embraced by a curve of a picturesque New England gulf — but those that are essentially anthropocentric (fig. 1). A group of people in the middle ground is pictorially

Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge (UK) and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 103–26.

³ See recent anthologies: *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴ *Landscape and Film*, ed. by Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2007); *Film Landscapes: Cinema, Environment and Visual Culture*, ed. by Jonathan Rayner and Graham Harper (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁵ Erika Balsom, 'Why are artist filmmakers turning to landscape?', *Freeze Magazine*, <<https://frieze.com/article/why-are-artist-filmmakers-turning-landscape>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

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Fig. 1: Mary Blood Mellen. *Field Beach*. Circa 1850. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Cape Ann Museum.

included, enveloped by the seashore line and the coulisse of trees while the entire composition points to the landscape's implications of a human perception, thus a viewer and a viewpoint, that is often external to the landscape. Landscape always dramatizes the human presence — even without figures inhabiting the field of vision, the viewing position points to the human control over representation. Landscape, as Malcolm Andrews notes, is always figured: formed, inhabited, and interpreted.⁶ The soft yellow tone in capturing the sunset lights in Mellen's tableau saturates the entire image, and emanating the sense of the pastoral calm and harmony with nature, it expresses another constituent of landscape that Georg Simmel pointed to in his 1913 essay 'The Philosophy of Landscape' — atmosphere or mood as a primary carrier of a landscape, a universal unifier that permeates all of its different material elements together.⁷ Recent critical insights on landscape see it more as culturescape, a cultural instrument, and a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other.

⁶ Malcolm Andrews, 'Impressing the Landscape: Place and Human Presence in the Recent Work of British Moving Image Artists', in *Figuring Landscapes*, ed. by Catherine Elwes, Eu Jin Chua and Steven Ball (London: International Centre for Fine Arts Research and Camberwell College of Arts, 2008, pp. 12–48).

⁷ George Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Landscape', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24.7-8 (2007), 20–29.

Excavating the German term *Landschaft*, historian Simon Schama describes it as having a strong connection with aspects of ‘jurisdiction’, suggesting that the very term ‘landscape’ came to be associated with loyalty not only to a particular geography but to a particular set of ideals.⁸ For Schama, landscape is based on the principles of belonging, of connection between people and place, rather than being exclusively evocative of the pleasure of pure aesthetic contemplation.

The intervention of the moving image into landscape shatters its normative conventions and surpasses all previous restrictions, especially the enforcement of immobile enframing as the unifying principle. As Eu Jin Chua notes, the moving image

is probably the medium or aesthetic site in which we see, most powerfully, the wrestling away and reclaiming of the landscape tradition from its bourgeois-Romantic roots. Film and video art is very good at activating the dialectics — or rather, the multifariousness — of landscape, because, in the moving image, everything that was excised and excluded from traditional landscape rushes back into the picture with a vengeance, not least, movement and sound [...].⁹

This inclusion of the excluded informs my exploration of the juncture between the women artists’ experimental film practice and landscape, particularly the inclusion of time ‘in’ and ‘of’ landscape that forces the artists to point their cameras to land and to the relations between surface and depth. Mapping the landscape’s range of meanings, I am interested in the material and metaphorical intersections of film, landscape, and geology — changing over time as well as fossilizing in time, landscape emerges as a medium of time, mirroring cinema as another time machine. This calls for reconsideration of landscape in the context of the recent ‘geologic turn’ in the humanities and film and media studies and to rely, for example, on the concept of deep time, *Tiefenzeit*, by which a media theorist Siegfried Zielinski connects time with earth and with its depth.¹⁰

I focus on the geological imagination of landscape in Mendieta’s and Vaz’s art while investigating the aesthetic regimes and formal strategies they choose to express it. The attention to earth as a raw material for landscape is foregrounded in Mendieta’s experimental films, for whom the geographical and material conditions of landscape and the elements of land, fire, and water are always imbued with a sense of embodiment. Mendieta’s comprehension of earth as matter, medium, and a deep surface for inscription of traces comments on the materiality of film as a recording medium from the point of view of geologically oriented art. Vaz’s landscape, inflected with human interventions, emerges as an enormous living medium of memory, linking its exploration to a geological

⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 10.

⁹ Eu Jin Chua, ‘Untethering Landscape’, in *Figuring Landscapes*, pp. 99–102.

¹⁰ Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). On geological turn, see Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

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approach and the work of excavation while transforming deep time into what Vaz calls ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’.¹¹ I argue that it is the attention to the geological that unites these two artists in their exceeding of landscape as an object of contemplation with a critique of the position of exteriority and a departure from traditional aesthetics of landscape as a view toward landscape as a network of relations among humans, memories, and times. The geological perspective allows us to recognise landscape as the site at which the human subject is present albeit no longer central.

Tracing landscape: The Prehistory and Deep Time of Ana Mendieta

‘I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools’. (Ana Mendieta)¹²

‘I really feel that it’s important in my work that I use dirt and sand because these [...] speak about the history of the world or of the earth, of nature, too’. (Ana Mendieta)¹³

If landscape has been understood as an intrinsically detached view, Land Art — which Ana Mendieta practiced with her post-Minimalist works on locations in Iowa, Mexico, and Cuba — dissolves the distance between the subject and the object. As an artist experimenting during the 1960s and 1970s with the emerging genres of conceptual, body, performance, and Land art, she contributed to these varied dialogues, while the heterogeneity of her art does not allow to confine the artist within any of the definition used to describe her praxis. Embracing feminism, Mendieta subverted the monumental gestures of male Land artists such as Robert Smithson by imposing the human scale onto the landscape. And while accentuating embodiment of landscape, she was particularly attentive to the meeting of her land-body art with the act of filming that grew into an inextricable constituent of the hybrid form she created with sculptural interventions in the landscape in the *Siluetas Series*.

Following the mid-twentieth century turn to making art in and of the landscape, Mendieta’s work expresses an attitude toward the natural environment as a pliable medium, a tool for art, or a studio, while her ‘earth-body sculptures’, made during the 1970s, offer vital convergences between Land Art and film. When working directly on the landscape and with the earth as a raw material, Mendieta became intimately familiar with and liked Iowa’s soil containing

¹¹ Stefan Salomon, ‘A Cinema That Could Explode or Implode: Ana Vaz Discusses *Occidente*’, *Mubi Notebook*, 1 June 2016, <<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/a-cinema-that-could-explode-or-implode-ana-vaz-discusses-occidente>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

¹² Ana Mendieta, proposal for the New York State Council on the Arts, 17 March 1982, reproduced in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, ed. by Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), p. 216.

¹³ *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. by Howard Oransky and Laura Wertheim Joseph (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), p. 128.

clay, which made it easier to mould. The artist described her *Siluetta Series* — for which she cast numerous anthropomorphic shapes and silhouettes onto the earth by carving them into rocks, sculpting bodily forms out of sand and gunpowder, submerging them into water, or lighting fire to create outlines — as an ongoing dialogue between the landscape and her body. When either placing her body directly on land or constructing an avatar form of herself impressed and integrated into various natural environments, she thematized a contact with the earth that rendered the earth as a living thing. Testing the body's capacity for identification with earth, *Genesis (Buried in Mud, 1975)* slowly reveals Mendieta, appearing with arms outstretched, breathing below a layer of mud — thus, the soil, breathing in resonance with her, emerges as animated living matter.

The images, documented via Super 8 film, slides, and photographs, registered Mendieta's experimentation with the material substructure of art objects and communication with landscape in relentless attempts to leave an imprint on its surface. Articulated through an ontology of loss and disappearance, such photographs or video moving images that documented Land Art have often been interpreted as secondary to the original work and experience.¹⁴ I argue that Mendieta's silent shorts, filmed in black and white or colour, constitute a kind of single film, or as John Perreault suggests, a cinematic mural.¹⁵ They point to a consistent filmic practice of landscape united by a specific set of themes — geological elements of landscape, the earth as canvas, time inscribed on the surface — in reciprocity with the time-base medium of film. Mendieta's interest in time, history, and memory imprinted into surfaces of landscape is inseparable from the gesture of filmic recording. If a phenomenological framing of Land Art places accents the embodied experience of landscape in resonance with the corporeal experience of art work,¹⁶ Mendieta's art equally foregrounds the meeting of earth with technology through the relations between a temporary and ephemeral earthwork and its filmic documents and records.

As an art student at the University of Iowa, Mendieta studied Pre-Columbian culture, primitive art, and archaeology. In 1971, she accompanied the anthropologist Thomas Charlton on archaeological digs in Mexico. Prehistoric cave art permeates the filmic representations of Mendieta. The caves she entered with her tools and the camera are one of the intermediates of the earth depth in Mendieta's landscape — a womb of nature, a prehistorical site of ritual, and a place that accepts images. The cave determines one of her art's essential preoccupations — inaugurating the process that separated humans from the surrounding world, the cave frames art as both a symbolic action and a tactile

¹⁴ Kathy O'Dell, 'Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s', *Performance Research*, 2.1 (1997), pp. 73–81.

¹⁵ John Perreault, 'Ana Mendieta: The Politics of Spirituality', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 24–51 (p. 25).

¹⁶ Guy Brett, 'One Energy', in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performances 1972–1985*, ed. by Olga M. Viso (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1972), pp. 181–202; Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

intervention with representations such as handprints on stone surfaces, implying the need of the prehistoric artist to project her mark outside of herself through immediate contact with the material. Mendieta's art works linger on the memory of these earliest handprints as a media of fixation of sensory phenomena. In the cave, prehistory and deep time merge in the idea of imprint that inspired Mendieta's *Siluetas*. Returning to Cuba in 1981, Mendieta made a series of 'Rupestrian sculptures': small, shallow-relief carvings modeled on Neolithic representations of female bodies. Shot in the historic caves in Jaruco State Park near Havana, the multi-shot and more cinematically complex film, *Rupestrian Sculptures* (no. 98, 1981), reveals these sculptures installed in a semi-subterranean grotto or carved by Mendieta, following the structure of geological formations into the location. Mendieta's camera persistently gestures toward landscape by panning, tilting, and zooming, and these camera's movements surface as the filmic equivalents of her hand movements — drawing or gouging, digging with small implements, or carving into cave walls or land. Like the outline she draws in the earth that is a production of her hand, resulting from the direct contact of her body with the material surface, the film insists on being made by hands in unmediated contact with material. With the camera 'gesturing' and 'touching' landscape, acting as an extension of the artist's arm and an intermediary between the body and environment, the film manifests itself as a tactile intervention into landscape.

The geological imaginary of Mendieta's landscape poetics determines a set of cinematic strategies — a camera's gaze that partakes in earth as matter without shape or form, beginning or end. Her work with Super 8mm — a medium suitable for recording a performance while also infested with nostalgia, fading colours, and scratches that inscribe time on the film's surface, evocative of other artists such as Peggy Ahwesh and Nina Fonoroff — gestures toward a prehistory of film medium. The short single-take film made with the static, slightly panning and tilting camera is reminiscent of early films. Using a Super 8mm camera, the frame of which approximates a rectangle rather than a square and is just enough to contain the *Silueta*, Mendieta refrains from long shots in favour of closer framing that secures the disappearance of the horizon, turning land into a flat canvas and landscape into a neutral territory with little alliance to a particular place or time. By decontextualizing the earth's surface from other common landscape concerns with the sky, horizon, and expanses of land, Mendieta refocuses the vision to the earth as deep matter and as surface. From a single fixed position, the camera gazes obliquely, usually from above — this verticality of the camera direction fosters the gaze as ready to plunge into the depth of the landscape. In *Volcan* (no. 71, 1979), such a gaze is directed toward a miniature artificial mountain with a *Silueta* at the centre that is filled with white gunpowder. The staged volcanic activity releases flowing white smoke, the movement of which animates the inanimate matter of earth itself — another theme that unifies Mendieta's films is the relation between the inanimate matter of earth and its animations. The earth, burning and erupting, reveals what seems to be a dark hole into the limitless

depth of geological infinity. Here, Mendieta's films try to reach the geological substructure that seethes under the ground — the term 'deep time' suddenly evokes the darker realm looming beneath the earth's surface. Mendieta's earth simultaneously appears as an agreeable material and a disturbing depth resonating with Gaston Bachelard's works on poetics of the elements — earth, for Bachelard, has hidden depth that is not accessible to the eye but only to the imagination: 'the depth of that imaginary mine where so many suffer [...] infernal nightmares'.¹⁷ The void of the earth is an example of the prehistoric that also partakes in the aesthetic paradigm of the sublime, for which the void functions as a model of the unrepresentable. Mendieta engages in this with scale — the volcano, a topos of the sublime, is miniaturized to the human scale, rendering the intimate geological sublime.

For Mendieta, earth's depth is temporal, and a temporal inflection that the artist capitalizes on is the time of the trace, often recorded in the process of its making or disappearance. *Untitled: Silueta Series* (no. 66, 1978), shows an earth-body sculpture — a figure with truncated arms modelled on a Neolithic statuette or akin to a mummy-like effigy enveloped in a shroud drawn in a thick white outline of gunpowder (fig. 2). Gunpowder burns leaving a black *Silueta*, forcibly imprinting onto earth a memory of the body in a negative counter-relief. Five handprints visible on the earth near the *Silueta* confirm the gesture of imprinting. A cloud of white smoke from burning, blown by the wind to the right edge of the image, casts a brief shadow on the earth. This layering of simulacra within the frame — for Oransky, 'the shadow represents the smoke, which represents the *Silueta*, which represents Mendieta'¹⁸ — merges with landscape's geological layers, which for the artist also include what lies on top: mud, grass, water. Each layer possesses its own temporality: the time of earth, time of gunpowder burning, time of smoke dissipating, time of the film itself. As Rachel Weiss notes, time in Mendieta's films 'is not sequential; things don't occur consecutively'.¹⁹ Rather, the time is layered within the singular frame. With the removal of directorial intentions, the camera finds its own dialogue with the geology of the earth, while the single-shot-film format appears the most consistent with showing the palimpsest of temporalities and the geological structure of stratified time by eschewing the sequential logic of film editing.

To speak about the history of the earth and different temporalities of landscape, Mendieta chooses materials and elements — sand, pigment, waves, mud, flowers, gunpowder — that are ephemeral and temporary. In *Silueta de Arena* (no. 65, 1978), the *Silueta* from sand and on sand is emplaced in banks of

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2011), p. 15. See also Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground. An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Howard Oransky, 'Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 80–167 (p. 130).

¹⁹ Rachel Weiss, 'Difficult Times: Watching Mendieta's Films', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 52–63 (p.53).

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a sandy creek — thus, the slowly running water, rendering the flow of time, covers the *Silueta* with a glimmering veil. Mendieta locates the *Silueta* in the liminal area between the layers of earth and of water, between their different temporalities. Left to dissolve, subjected to the smoothing and erosive movement of water, the longevity of the sand *Silueta* is a function of natural processes and the material from which it is made. The self-transforming, metamorphosing earth is ever changing, transgressing all fixed forms, subjecting them to the gradual decomposition of geological temporalities that preceded and exceed human time. For Scottish geologist and naturalist James Hutton, whose *Theory of the Earth* (1778) informed the contemporary theories of deep time, the earth is a machine that, while recording time in fossils, is continuously going through the processes of erosion and reconstruction.²⁰ Reconceived as a dynamic and living entity, earth constantly restores itself, often by erasing traces of humans, and then it itself is outside historical change. As soon as Mendieta situated her sculpture in landscape, a circle of erosion and earth restoration was initiated. On a micro and human scale, Mendieta films Hutton's earth-machine at work. Even encountering resistance from the landscape, the ephemeral fossilizations of her artworks also encounter the film apparatus — long disappearing from landscape, the trace continues to exist on film, fossilized by light on the film emulsion.

Either a voluminous human-like shape or an empty outline filled with soil and grass, the silhouette, as a technique of visualizing the body, is based on an ultimate reduction. The *Silueta Series* renders the decorporealization of the artist's body in the process of its absorption by the landscape — some films record Mendieta's body immersed into lands, while in others, the *Siluetas* become more and more abstracted, transmuting into a trace of the contour. In Mendieta's practice, the body progressively undergoes transformation, reduction, and ruination in its merging with landscape, and the subject gradually vanishes, becoming part of the geological fabric. This movement toward disappearance recalls the logic of the film image: in the process of imprinting on the celluloid, the body decorporealizes. In her interest in inscribing a trace, however mutable and fleeting, the ontology of Mendieta's *Silueta* resonates with the ontology of film image — earth acts as film emulsion, flexible and absorbent, as a medium of recording. In the search for deeper layers of landscape, Mendieta exposes a deep layer of cinema, its ontology as an imprint on the surface, its prehistory as an authentic and ephemeral trace. As André Bazin claims, cinematic ontology stems from the impulse of preservation and recording and then is indicative of the transcendence of death.²¹ While film has an ability to capture a temporal moment, it is not able to capture the grand time of earth — the geological perspective reveals the phenomenological limits of cinematic recording. Mendieta's indexical

²⁰ James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth* (Reprint) (CreateSpace, 2012).

²¹ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), i, pp. 9–16.

and tactile imprints are always a corporeal gesture alluding to a visceral impact of art that exceeds the function of mere recording and preserving.

Of mines and clouds: Ana Vaz's geology of memory

A Idad da Pedra stems from the idea that everything that exists thinks, everything has a mode of thinking and seeing. In that sense, it is a film that takes Gilles Deleuze's idea 'who does the earth think it is' from *A Thousand Plateaus* almost as a cinematographic instruction. The film departs to this landscape that has a particular history while trying to read strata, animals, vegetable, and mineral matter as speaking, seeing, alive things... Cinema is an art, par excellence, of the Anthropocene. (Ana Vaz)²²

Ana Vaz works within the global field of expanded cinema and artists' moving image that, among its many preoccupations, explores the meeting points among the environment, memory, and colonialism, epitomized, for example, by multi-layered installations of the visual artists John Akomfrah. Perhaps, more than other artists, Vaz is concerned with the entanglement of the post-colonial discourse and that of the Anthropocene: with her *America: Bay of Arrows* (*América: Bahía de las Flechas*, 2016) she makes a radical claim by locating the Anthropocene's beginning in the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. And more than other artists, she engages with the question of how the post-Anthropocene cinema might look like, what kind of a visual regime might partake in this new imagination.

From a postcolonial perspective, Ana Vaz traces cultural and ecological changes in landscape, blending ethnographic study with attentive reading and hearing a landscape's mnemonic language. Similar to Mendieta, who associated the domination of nature with the project of colonization,²³ Vaz links an ecological sensibility with an anticolonial stance. Taking the ontological turn of the Anthropocene as her most profound philosophical and aesthetic concern, Vaz drives us to reconsider the very existence of the fundamental divide between the natural and the artificial. In *Atomic Garden* (2018), nature, flowers, insects, and the human artifice of fireworks compete for the screen surface, yet through the shared optical phenomenon of flickering, they emerge as non-contradictory forces. Vaz seeks to redefine the frame that constitutes landscape by establishing its outer boundaries, often framing something that is uncontainable, for which the frame appears too small. Intersecting narratives of colonial past and prehistory, mining and land use, sky and clouds, Vaz employs a cinematographic language of spontaneous

²² Ana Vaz's talk 'I Prefer Not to Be But to Tupi: The Age of the Earth', 26-28 February 2016, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, Sonic Acts Academy.

²³ Susan Best, 'The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta', *Art History*, 30.1 (2007), 57-82 (p. 67).

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camera movements, sweeping panning, zooming in and out, and unusual framings to portray a landscape that loosens the binaries between human and geological, animals and people, macro and micro, planetary and atomic. The ideas of landscape memory and historical loss in Vaz's artworks are intertwined with the extractive practices of mining. *Look Closely at the Mountains* (2018), directly devoted to mining activities, engages in the comparative research of the effect induced on landscape by over three centuries of mineral extraction in two regions — the state of Minas Gerais in the Southwest of Brazil and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in France. Vaz's perspective on mining as the transformation of the environment by humans, destroying and yet attempting to alleviate damage already done, intersects with mining as the excavation of memory, resonating with Walter Benjamin's idea in 'Excavation and Memory' that memory can be considered to be 'the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried', so that 'he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging'.²⁴ For Vaz, the earth's depth is a temporal one, the earth is a recording medium that inscribes time in geological strata — the mountains and caves of Minas Gerais become the repositories of memories, prehistoric images, and inscriptions, whereas landscape appears as a palimpsest of different archaeological, geological, and mnemonic layers.

The Age of Stone (A Idade da Pedra, 2013) interferes with the geology of landscape in the most explicit way, as Vaz's approaches landscape as a terrain for excavating and reimagining the past — the geological foundations of Brasilia, a planned city designed by modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer in the central, vast and arid plateau of Brazil, the *sertão*, a simultaneously physical and mental place. The surrounding territory has been historically marked by the excessive mining of minerals and precious stones. For Vaz, the project of Brazil's modernization is intertwined with the idea of Brasilia as a ruin of the future. The city 'denied the prehistory that was consistently there, and the films tries to find its prehistory in this geological deep time that confounds past and future'.²⁵ As the film plays, quite deliberately, with the tradition of ethnographic cinema and its idea of collecting remote landscapes and histories, the image of Brasilia is rendered indirectly, composed from two landscapes, filmed on locations distant from each other and remote from the city itself — Chapada dos Veadeiros, north of the capital, and Perenopolis to the west. In Chapada dos Veadeiros, the camera explores flora, fauna, and geological formations of yellow rocks, captivating in their variety of forms, textures, and colours of stones. These natural formations of rocks are

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Ibizan Sequence', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, (1931-1934)*, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock and others, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), ii, p. 576.

²⁵ Ana Vaz, *I Prefer Not to Be to Tupi: The Age of the Earth*, Sonic Acts Academy, Amsterdam 2016.

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juxtaposed by a montage with an enormous quartzite mine, a landscape made by years of excavation, human digging, and carving inside the earth.

While the natural rocky landscape of Chapada dos Veadeiros is filmed by the peripatetic corporeal camera walking among the rocks and the body's corporeal reactions to landscape, its pedestrian rhythm, and even its breathing, are transcribed into landscape images — the mining canyon in the vicinity of Perenopolis becomes aligned with another formal technique. After the camera frames the mountains covered with green vegetation, it follows a man descending a pass into the mine's depths. The horizon gradually rises, moving closer to the top edge of the frame until it disappears from view. Reaching the bottom, the camera investigates the earth's interiority, a monumental human-made landscape of the pit with a panoramic sweep, slowly revealing the landscape at the depth — hills made of stones alternating with flatlands, water reservoirs, winding roads, workers miniaturized to *staffage* figures in the far background, and the stratified geological structure of earth walls. Engaging with the depth of the ruins and geological traces, Vaz's camera glides circularly, partaking in the aesthetic regime of Panorama that since the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries existed as an imperial global medium of landscape in the form of an enormous round painting, supplemented with *faux terrain*, and whose 360-degree embrace offered a seamless horizon and a utopian possibility to see everything from any point of the viewing platform.²⁶ The privileged position of the central and elevated



Fig. 2: The caption: Ana Vaz. *A Idade da Pedra (The Age of Stone)*. 2013. 16mm/HD.
Courtesy of Ana Vaz and Le Fresnoy Studio National.

²⁶ On Panorama, see Stephan Oettermann and Deborah Lucas Schneider, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997); Jonathan Crary, 'Géricault, the panorama, and sites of reality in the early nineteenth century', *Grey Room*, 9 (2002), 5–25; Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); *On the Viewing Platform: Perspectives on the Panorama*, ed. by Tim Barringer and Katie Trumpener (Forthcoming, Yale University Press, 2020).

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platform expressed Panorama's fantasy of conquering and controlling space. Panorama traditionally embraced exotic and global, historical and idealized landscapes — mines and mining constituted a subject of the displays — saturating them with the all-inclusive, indiscriminating consciousness. Panorama's logic of endless horizontality superseded painting, known since the Renaissance as the image in the frame seen from a single viewpoint, a 'view through a window', with the dispersed, seemingly infinite, point of view — a democratic perspective that abolished hierarchy and guidance. Experimental cinema has approached panorama in a number of films, with one of the most compelling examples being a structural film of Michael Snow: the 190' *La Région Centrale* (1971) features a pre-programmed camera set on a remote northern Quebec mountaintop. Snow's camera pans and rotates around itself, exploring the geology of the Canadian wilderness, exceeding the human scale, while exposing the camera's anxiety over the film's largely invisible centre.²⁷

A Idade da Pedra culminates in a two-minute-long take with a full-circle panorama from the centre of the mine, steadily revealing how the white shiny layers of quartzite are seamlessly continued by pillars of some bizarre and petrified monumental structure that imposes its presence as if growing directly out of the geological strata (fig. 3). The structure simultaneously looks like a construction in the making and a ruin being excavated — one of the many ambiguities the film plays upon. The derelict architecture that creates an epistemic uncertainty about the nature of this image itself, its real or hyperreal status, is in fact CGI developed by French multimedia artist Anna-Charlotte Yver to supplement the actual landscape, shot on 16mm. Here, the non-discriminatory vision of the panorama works together with the CGI to erase the distinction between natural and artificial, contemporary and prehistory, the opacity of the geological layers and the porosity of the ruin. The ruin is an object whose presence inevitably suggests absence and whose melancholy, as suggested by Jean Starobinski, resides in the fact that the ruin has become a monument of lost significance.²⁸ A fabricated structure and a copy without the original, the digital ruin, while generating the illusion of a historical encounter, articulates the absence of an actual historical referent or past. A constellation of contrasting materials, Vaz's composite image partakes in the paradigm of *capriccio* — an invented landscape composed of disparate elements, a fantastic collage of actual and fictive elements typically including stylized ruin fragments blended into the natural landscape, an

²⁷ Also see *Too Early/Too Late* by Daniëlle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (*Trop tôt, trop tard*, France/Egypt, 1981). On Panorama in installation art, see Katie Trumpener's essay 'Moving pictures: panorama film, photography, photorama, installation', in *On the Viewing Platform* (book forthcoming).

²⁸ Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789* (New York: Rizzoli; Genova: Skira, 1987), p. 180.

artificial composition with apparent verisimilitude. Since its heyday in the eighteenth century, the imagination of *capriccio* has been grounded in archeology, ruins, and excavation. Figuring spatial compression and iteration, able to stitch past, present, and future together, capriccio has always been, according to Lucien Steil, ‘a catalyst of collective memory and imaginary’.²⁹ The ontology of the digital image, its incomplete and composite nature and constructedness as an object, works here to compress or expand historical duration, to transcend the teleology of history, removing Brasília from ‘a pre-given regime of historicity to truly develop another one’ by rearranging layers of time.³⁰ While the digital *capriccio* testifies to a temporal binding, the image itself emerges not as a Bazinian image that attempts to embalm geological duration in Mendieta’s works but as a postcinematic layering and simultaneity as a different articulation of time and space, as a ruinous edifice that visualizes otherwise incomprehensible deep time of Brasília.

Vaz works toward something she calls ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’, or ‘a collagist impulse to approximate that which has been disassociated through power, logic and reason, enlightenment praxis to account for a history in which things are smoothed out, and linearly organized’.³¹ She is more interested in the relations wherein the elements of the work are spliced together as non-hierarchically ordered parts of a new whole. Vaz’s relation between the different elements of the landscape in a non-hierarchical, multiperspectival manner might be closer to what Sergej Ėjzenštejn has, in a somewhat different context, described through his contradictory notion of the ‘monistic ensemble’. In film, for Ėjzenštejn, space, motion, and sound ‘do not accompany (nor even parallel) each other, but function as *elements of equal significance*’ in the production of a unified aesthetic totality.³² Vaz employs the panoramic movement, digitally assembled landscape, and soundscapes to produce a similarly ‘unified’ visual and aural impression of intense dynamism, a ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’, related for her also to different modes of conversing with the landscape and to the question of how the post-Anthropocene cinema would look. We might reconsider this early observation of Ėjzenštejn in an approach to digital film practice and to time-based art in the gallery. *A Idade da Pedra* became a part of Vaz’s installation, *Depth of Field*, at the Matadero Madrid in 2019, which united four films displayed

²⁹ Lucien Steil, ‘Preface’, in *The Architectural Capriccio: Memory, Fantasy and Invention*, ed. by Lucien Steil (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014), p. liii.

³⁰ Guilherme Carréra, ‘Brasília entre ruínas: os documentários de ficção científica de Adirley Queirós and Ana Vaz’, *Aniki: Revista Portuguesa da Imagem em Movimento*, 5.2 (2018), 351–377 (p. 358).

³¹ Salomon, ‘A Cinema That Could Explode or Implode: Ana Vaz Discusses *Occidente*’, Mubi Notebook, <<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/a-cinema-that-could-explode-or-implode-ana-vaz-discusses-occidente>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

³² Sergej Ėjzenštejn, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 20 (Italic is Ėjzenštejn’s).

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on four large screens inside a dark space.³³ The screens render the gallery as a multiperspectival space, a postdigital picturesque garden that, meant to be walked through, dares the linearity of conventional audiovisual practices. Within the assemblage of installation, each screen is discrete and exists independently but completes each other within a sensible ensemble. In the gallery, the idea of landscape as a more restrictive concept because of its focus on the visual, becomes superseded with the idea of environment as a totality of surrounding forces, implied by its etymology of ‘to encircle’ and ‘to enclose’, suggestive of the replacement of the single linear vector with a spherical space, a visual-sonic envelop in which the distance and viewpoint associated with landscape are no longer valid.

The concept of deep time appears as a strategy of resistance to teleological linearity, as Parikka states in relation to Zielinski, for whom earth times become a theoretical strategy of resistance against the linear progression of media evolution based on progress of technological devices.³⁴ For Vaz, such a resistance culminates in the spatialized gallery cinema that renders a geological concept of stratification while emerging as another form of deep time. Another consequence of experiencing Mendieta’s and Vaz’s artworks is for the anthropocentrism of landscape. Landscape filmmaking definitively places the human subject as the central point of focus, yet contemporary experimental practices that test the limits of perception and representation use landscape as an instrument of thinking and making images at scales that exceed the human. ‘Look closely at the mountains’ from Vaz’s eponymous film is not merely an eco-protest slogan, but an optics — a mode of vision toward landscape to look closely at the immense that itself contains a reevaluation of the landscape through the erasure of a visual hierarchy, such as looking from a distance and from the outside. Mendieta’s images are gathered around the body yet figure in a simultaneous encounter and profound distance between humans and land. While Mendieta transforms the vast scale associated with geology to intimate connections with earth, indeed looking closely at the immense, Vaz renders landscape as an immeasurable palimpsest. Yet even if the human subject becomes less and less the central focus, the artist never erases the human presence, epitomized in the act of creating an artifice — a digital insertion of the imaginary ruin into the natural landscape. Even when considered from a geological perspective, the landscape does not require a total renunciation of human subject — Vaz’s cinematic geology warrants the human as a telluric force.

³³ *The Age of Stone* (2013); *Occidente* (2014); *Há Terra! (There is Land!)* (2016); *Atomic Garden* (2018).

³⁴ Parikka, p. 37.