

THE POTENTIALS OF THE EARTH

The Itineraries of Teresa Pereda

Mercedes Casanegra

Teresa Pereda's work from 1996 to 2008 has been characterized by the use of earth for the creation of her works.

Soil gathered from different places: from Argentina —her homeland— as well as from other territories she has reached as a result of specific circumstances that she herself created. This emerging stage is a complex one, as it involves connecting events and circumstances that have arisen from a change in language, a process that has followed its own articulated program.

Her new quest has led her to handmade paper, maps, artist's books, engraved glass, boxes made of wood and glass, and pieces of sheet metal. However, there has been one common denominator in the new materiality of her works: soil, sought out, requested and received.

One of the characteristics that has marked her recent work is the continuous and ever-increasing surrendering of the autonomy in her artistic work. This is due to the fact that Teresa Pereda has addressed a number of questions, including the identity of Argentina, the relationships between her country's and America's native communities and European immigration, individual and collective memories, matters related to urban and rural life and the concepts of nature and civilization, and many others.

She is not the only one who has followed this path; it has been traveled by others, but Pereda has always addressed her work from new and different angles, employing different practices. Beyond the well-known

interest of modern artists in tribal and primitive art and culture, she delved into work that was closer to home, closer to Argentine artists of the first and second half of the 20th century. Using art as their medium, they explored the Argentine identity and its geographic, cultural and historical location as the result of an ethnic mix which is as varied as it is unique; this includes, among others, the oft researched question of alterity. From Xul Solar and his invention of the “Neocriollo” style to the pre-Columbian traits of Torres García and his followers—including Argentine artists such as Alejandro Puente, César Paternosto and Marcelo Bonevardi— these questions are present. Other members of this group include Leónidas Gambartes and his inclusion of native art motifs in his painting; Luis F. Bénédict, who imagined an encounter between local cultures and the first European travelers and who also illustrated the customs of the Argentine countryside as part of his scientific observations; Nicolás García Urriburu, who highlighted national landscape icons, such as the ombu tree, and Alfredo Portillos with his pre-Columbian native rituals. All these artistic investigations form part of a search for that which came first and that which is original—a search for roots and thoroughly non— Eurocentric visions of everything (ethnicity, politics, economics).

Soil from different parts of the country, and in some cases from other nations, took the place of oil paint. Tools such as mortars, strainers and sieves replaced the brushes that Teresa Pereda had used in the practice her art for sixteen years. The new period, begun in 1996, was marked by the prominence of this fundamental element. However, this would only be the tip of an iceberg, the first in a complex web of events that changed not only Pereda’s production but also her position vis-à-vis her work and, consequently, that of her audience as well. This incipient stage was characterized by the notion of a process rather than by the idea of making specific artistic objects. From here on, the notion of traveling, of going from one place to another, of moving along roads and, sometimes over seas, became a central issue. Geography—or in other words,

the immense extension of Argentina's territory— would justify and shape her new works. She went from painting and representation to action and direct experience.

Her reflections and work in connection with the earth coincided with a specific economic and political context in Argentina. Carlos Menem's second term was underway and the imaginary splendor that was supposed to accompany the privatization of state companies had vanished. Economic conditions were worsening and there were signs of an impending recession. The consequences of all this were starting to be seen in both the city and the countryside, though in rural Argentina, this reality was more evident. In 2001, the great Argentine crisis began, though the country's overall recovery after the initial catastrophe was not as slow as it might have been. This is due, possibly, to the richness of the earth and the country's proverbially abundant plantations and harvests. Teresa Pereda's attitude towards her works in Argentina operated much like a seismograph that portrayed the agitation and oscillations that occurred not only in the land itself but in the life that was vibrating and underway there, too.

En Route to a Transformation in Languages: A Change in Subject and a Journey of Initiation

The 1992 *Objetos mágicos* (Magical Objects) solo show at the Palatina art gallery clearly evidenced the beginning of the change in Teresa Pereda's artistic goal: she gave up the representation of walls and windows for that of objects and textiles, most of them of Mapuche origin. Two years later, in 1994, her series *Espacios mágicos* (Magic Spaces), presented at the same gallery, involved an assortment of variations on her previous body of work. Her exclusive dedication to painting would continue until 1995 and a few years later, at the beginning of 2000, she would definitively abandon her paintbrushes and oils.

The change that took place in 1992 was spontaneous and necessary,

yet there was a prior clue that this change and its inspiration were close at hand: her first trip to Mexico, which she made a year earlier. For Teresa Pereda, this trip was part of the awakening of memory, a journey of journeys that obliged her to retrace the steps of her own biography and move into the proximity of her own objects, experiences and journeys. The journey moved her to such an extent that it can be considered a migration of initiation¹. "Any contact with the Mexican people, as brief as it may be, clearly shows that beneath the Western guise, ancient beliefs and customs are still present. These living remains are a testimony to the vitality of pre-Cortés cultures," says Octavio Paz, proudly and nostalgically². Teresa Pereda was stunned not only by the monuments, constructions and objects of the original cultures, but also by the works and buildings of the colonial period, products of a mixed-race conception.

In a work published in 1999, we said that the objects that the artist called "magical" were in fact "a key to the multiplicity of dimensions that her work was giving way to³." "The magical object ... invites us to change and become someone else without ever really becoming someone else⁴."

The trip to Mexico was like a historical analogy for Teresa Pereda, one she used to reflect upon her own identity; this would in time become the story line for her future work. She had found a deep link between the works of the Mapuche people—whom she had always felt close to— as a

1_ Many artists recount similar experiences after coming into contact with Mexico. Two examples are Josef and Anni Albers, artists with Bauhaus and New York backgrounds who became fascinated by Mexican culture, which ranged from handicrafts and textiles sold in open-air markets to pre-Columbian architecture. They felt that "art was everywhere" in the country. Carlos Jiménez, "In partibus infidelium," Madrid, Babelia-El País, November 25, 2006.

2_ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980), 81.

3_ Mercedes Casanegra, *Teresa Pereda* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Argentinas de Arte, 1999), 20.

4_ Octavio Paz, "Arte mágico," in *La búsqueda del comienzo. Escritos sobre el surrealismo* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1980), 49. This was part of a reply given on a questionnaire on the topic of magical art that had been sent out to a group selected by André Breton.

symbol of the foundational culture of her own country and her own subjectivity. On the other hand, her reaction to the syncretism of Mexican cultures cannot be compared to that of other artists from overseas who were fascinated by the pre-Columbian primitivism. As a Latin American, the ties with these first inhabitants were stronger and more complex for Pereda due to the fact that the territory in which they had lived, the Americas, and the one where she was living were one and the same. The *magical* objects played this “talismanic” role for her, leading her towards a new vision of that other part of her identity.

The Prefiguration of New Art Forms: Journeys Towards Mixed-Race Rituals (A Gateway to Ecology)

In 1994, Teresa Pereda continued working on her pictorial *series Espacios mágicos* and as she did, the notion of the traditional art object came tacitly undone. Though her painting continued, a new artistic approach was being formed, one which we called “aesthetic action” (the journeys) at the time. This in turn was supported by her research into the underlying idea of mixed races, a conceptual territory to which her work was also turning. The secret thread spun during her trip to Mexico was now unraveling.

Over the course of a year, from March 1994 to March 1995, she travelled to Yavi, in the province of Jujuy and to Los Alazanes, in the province of Neuquén; both trips would be crucial to her new artistic work. She was led to these two places, which lay between one and two thousand kilometers from Buenos Aires—the capital of Argentina—for similar reasons: the artist wished to attend ceremonies very much tied to the local cultures. She was interested in researching both the question of mixed races as well as the customs of the communities that had originally inhabited the regions. The first ceremony she visited in Jujuy was an ancient ritual carried out by the indigenous people to celebrate Christ's descent from the cross on Good Friday; the second one was *Nguillatun*, a rogation in which the Mapuche people ask the god *Nguenechen* for a

blessing and for the fertility of the earth, men and animals. The artist witnessed and participated in both rituals. In each case, she became emotionally involved and, as a way of offering something in return, she wrote a poem.

Now the break in her work, which first materialized in 1992, is more categorical than a simple preference for the pictorial rectangle. With the perspective that time affords, it becomes clear that at that moment she was embarking upon a new path, articulating the meaning of her work, which at this point projected onto other levels of reality. In her previous paintings, the objects of the Mapuche culture and the ponchos—a mixed-race object—had been framed and presented in a ritualistic environment. Therefore, moving from these works to actually traveling in order to witness the rituals in person—both physically and emotionally—was a natural consequence. Although the question of religion itself was never the center of Teresa Pereda's work, here it is an interesting key to interpreting a broader vision, one which also anticipates the transformations that her work would soon undergo. Both the painting and the intentions that lay behind the journeys reveal a religious understanding of the concept of reconnecting, *of connecting heaven and earth once again*; by bringing them closer together, the human being who lives between one and the other becomes more aware of his or her location between the two and his or her relation with them.

In the text that accompanies the audiovisual presentation on the artist, Nicolás Rubiío makes reference to the question of religion. He saw that a symbolic cross was formed by the north-south route and the east-west one. Both of these marked the directions in which Teresa Pereda had moved, either away from the big city or away from Mitikile, her place of residence. The religious significance, in its original connotation, would place her work in a new context: it would literally broaden horizons, representing a real change of scenarios. In this way, the notion of *moving from one place to another* became essential in her works. By

undertaking these new practices, Teresa Pereda was beginning to move away from the more institutionalized and traditional artistic modes, which were more rooted in the great 20th century cities. The notion of space had changed for the artist: it no longer occurred *in* the virtual, two-dimensional way the canvas proposes. Instead, the limits had extended to the point where they now coincided with the real horizon. The artist's world view was changing or perhaps her vision of the world was taking a new shape. The notion of *mixed-race ritual* opened up this perspective and made it patently evident that something was needed or missing in Teresa Pereda's artistic development as well as in present-day culture. This need involves recovering the awareness of how human beings are inextricably related to nature and to another universal principle that exceeds the dimensions of the human domain: the relation between the heavenly sphere and the human one, be it in the figure of Christ or of Nguenechen the Mapuche god.

Itineraries, Maps, the Earth and its Children (Parts of a Complex Organism: The New Work)

The trips we have mentioned and Nicolás Rubiós's text are recorded in her first artist's book called *Las dos plegarias de Teresa Pereda* (Teresa Pereda's Two Prayers), 1996. As it was being put together, in 1995, the idea of including soil—that is, the inorganic material itself—into the manufacturing process of the paper arose.

"The idea was to write on the ground, on the soil, of the country. I was dedicated to studying, to witnessing people's ceremonies, and including the soil in the paper was like symbolically rooting it in the earth itself, rooting it in a paper that contained the earth of the country," remembers the artist.

The journeys would become planned itineraries, similar to those of an ethnographer. At that point, the three acts of collecting soil, meetings with certain people born and raised at each destination and using maps

became caught up in a circular and inextricable plot. With the passing of time, it became clearer that a change of paradigms was taking place: a shift from a more self-referential type of work to a more open, complex and less autonomous model.

The first planned trip was undertaken as if it were scientific field work. This journey –to the Argentine provinces of La Rioja, Catamarca and San Juan in July, 1996– would serve to set the tone of the artistic investigations to come. The result of the experience was a strong sense of understanding and a connection to the land and its people. This connection grew during the trip through La Rioja and Catamarca –two forsaken provinces suffering from severe poverty– and during the visit to the shrine of *La Difunta Correa*⁵ in San Juan. Throughout the trip, the figure of Tránsito Tomás Campillay, a man born and raised in Ojo de Agua, Córdoba, whose life Pereda was already familiar with, had been on her mind. As soon as she left the shrine, she understood that a cycle and concept had come together. After searching intuitively for some time, the artist now knew what elements comprised a living organism, that is, the new kind of work she was beginning.

From then on, this is how she would operate artistically: she would undertake projects in which each stage would be planned, bearing traces of her anthropological intentions. Indeed, careful planning was important to allow what most interested her –collecting soil and meeting people– to occur at the right moment and in the best way. Little was left to chance.

From then on, she designed new itineraries, made symbolic markings on the maps, searched for persons born and raised in each location, planned the expeditions to the regions traced on the maps and made all these things happen. Once she arrived at the chosen location, she would hold prearranged interviews; there would be exchanges and meetings to foster human contact, rapprochement and a visceral understanding

of each personal history. She would then collect handfuls of earth from each person's native land, the land that had given birth to them. After this, she would head back to her own dwelling and workplace with her earth and, in some cases, ashes. And there, upon her return, the paper would be made, and the maps engraved with earth.

Tránsito Tomás Campillay from Ojo de Agua, Córdoba, an area made up of deserts, hills and valleys; Gabriel Cañicul from Junín de los Andes, Neuquén, a volcanic area on the slopes of the Andes; Ercilia Moreira de Cestac from Azul, Buenos Aires, where the Pampas lie; Dionisio Duarte from Oberá, Misiones, a village set in a littoral and rainforest area. With these people, she completed *El libro de las cuatro tierras* (The Book of the Four Lands), from 1996 to 1998. Four journeys, four stories, four lands. Part of the artist's work consisted in revealing the correlation between each name and its place of origin. In each place, she also chose a local deity or an object of popular devotion as a central character. An intuitive color scheme accompanied this project: red, black and volcanic earth—among the infinite possibilities—according to each area.

Systematically, Teresa Pereda had programmed actions and experiences in the same way an ethnographer would have, and being an artist, she then applied her esthetic vision.

Teresa Pereda intended "to reach a deeper understanding of the Americas" when she embarked on the project for an artist's book called *Bajo el nombre de Juan* (In the Name of Juan). She began the project in 1998 and it was completed in 2002. And the land and its inhabitants were, once again, one of the means to acquire this understanding. The strategy was similar, though this time, more extensive. It covered two continents: Europe and America. From a similar anthropological perspective, she searched for some ancient but surviving connection that had been part of the bedrock of both cultures over time. A connection that would serve to symbolically unite the two continents, in spite of the distance

between them. Once again, she delved back into the world of popular celebrations and chose the ceremony of the summer solstice and the festivity of Saint John the Baptist, a former pagan rite that was replaced by the Christian celebration. She returned to the ritualistic environment as she had in *Las dos plegarias...* (Teresa Pereda's Two Prayers) which once again gave her work an ecological significance, that connection with the universe. She made trips to Isil, in the Catalonian Pyrenees in Spain, in 1999 and to Cochinoca in the province of Jujuy, Argentina, in 2000. Jordi Roset Aura and Eduarda Cruz were the main local actors. Earth and ashes were also collected in both places.

Later would come *Tunquén-Neuquén* in 2001, in Chile and Argentina; A trace, no trace in 2004, in Alberta, Canada; journeys and more collection of soil. Later, from 2002 to 2005, she did *1518 kilometros de devociones* (1518 Kilometers of Devotions), a journey to Argentina's shrines, whose number had increased significantly as a result of the 2001 crisis. These would be followed by the performances *Recolección en la llanura: cita en Mechita* (Collecting in the Plains: An Appointment in Mechita) in 2006 and *Recolección en el bosque: cita en Yatana* (Collecting in the Forest: An Appointment in Yatana) in 2007.

The planning of all these displacements was preceded by the use of maps, which were initially necessary to plan the journeys, to measure distances and to check the stages of each itinerary. These maps then started to become works themselves or at least essential, constituent parts of the works. Maps that become works of art are indicative of how "Mapping and map-reading are intimate processes⁶." It is precisely in

5_ Lippard, *Lucy, Overlay*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1983, p. 121. (traducción de Mercedes Casanegra.).

6_ *Living the magical life*. An oracular adventure, Grand Rapids, Phanes Press, 2002, p.140 (traducción de Mercedes casanegra).

those later readings that each journey again overflows with the emotion and love that was originally put into each step of the itinerary. The tracing of the maps brings back the firsthand memory of that experience, that sensual connection with the basic matter: the earth. The earth's feminine nature, resulting from its maternal and supportive nature, serves to transmit and receive that affection.

The Road to Introspection. A Journey to Her Own Subjectivity

“Can making art include more than just ourselves?
Can art build community?” Suzi Gablik⁷

The act of choosing other places and the need to travel as a new artistic modality led Teresa Pereda to immerse herself in her own subjectivity. The idea of journeys had become part of her life during her childhood, and it was now becoming a habit. And once again, the idea of escaping from Buenos Aires became a reality, in 1983 she and her family moved to the small town of Arenaza in the province of Buenos Aires. This break with the traditional forms of doing art was related to the recovery of this habit in her memory. Until then, the artist had obtained standard, common art supplies in urban art stores. She traded that routine of preparing her works of art using the traditional techniques of painting for a sort of statement of *precariousness*, of the “scarcity of resources.” It was as if from that moment on, she worked in an imaginary way, where the “lack of supplies” for executing her works had become manifest. These supplies could only be obtained by making long journeys and visiting the people she had chosen, people from the specific places to which she made her *pilgrimages*. With this attitude, Teresa Pereda was adhering to Luis Felipe Noé’s idea of a “striptease of the goddess of painting,” which is to say that painting in the Western tradition had undressed over time, removing its constituent elements: the drawing of volumes, shadows and light, three-dimensionality, etc. That “nudity” was

⁷ *Living the magical life. An oracular adventure* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 2002), 140

a personal exercise that prepared her for a new kind of creation, both conceptually and experientially. Her strategy in the search for materials became more complex and at the same time, it became the work itself.

Some remaining paintings, the artist's books, the maps engraved with the earth, the boxes containing different soils, became the traces of this evolution. The question now was process. This bizarre way of looking for materials led her to new universes. She was seeking earth, that "crumbly, inorganic matter which the ground is principally made of⁸." Nevertheless, that common, everyday anonymity possessed the potential to become a much more direct link to the "children" of the earth, its inhabitants. In this way, this search for earth became a circular, ever-growing movement for Teresa Pereda, leading her to encounters with people-symbols from each community. Then, that same reidentification led her back to herself, though by now she was someone else. "...we know that our being is always dying to be 'someone else' and that we will only be ourselves if we are capable of being someone else⁹, says Paz, referring to potential transformations as a result of *magical art*.

These people-symbols were representative of their communities and when Teresa Pereda collected them in her artist's books or in her installations, she was exercising the awareness of a greater imaginary community.

This is what the artist said about her intentions in this regard: "As this journey progressed, I not only covered geographic distances but social, economic and cultural ones as well. I try to reconcile, bring together and add up the components of a country, to soar above the fragmentation¹⁰."

8_ Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1956), 1260.

9-Octavio Paz, "Arte mágico," *Op. cit.*, 50.

10-Teresa Pereda, *Itinerario de un país/1996-2006*, Buenos Aires. instalación, Buenos Aires, 1/1 Caja de Arte.

To create ties, to embrace them, to make anonymous people manifest, to make silent places eloquent. Actions to these ends can be summed up in Gablik's expression, "the building of a community." Nevertheless, Pereda herself was at the center of each action. By physically going to the chosen places, by being the origin, the root, both physically and existentially, in each place, she became the essential tool of her artistic practice and the means by which to amplify emotions rooted in daily life. She became the nexus between the urban and rural environments, between the descendants of the European immigrant and the offspring of the earth, between the old and new continents, between regions, between anonymous areas. She carried out symbolic experiences of reidentification. At the moment of meeting each of the chosen people, each with his or her own identity, she would, in this act of love, once again find herself.

The Symbolic Meaning of her Journey and the Earth. Beyond the Artist as an Ethnographer

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

"Journeys express a deep desire for internal change, a need for new experiences more than for just local displacement... Is this aspiration to travel, as Jung would have it, the search for the lost mother¹¹?" **If we follow this line of interpretation in relation to journeys**, we might suggest an identification between that "lost mother" and the Earth itself, with its female connotations." Teresa Pereda's journeys seem to aim at meeting Mother Earth, to which we all owe our birth. Postmodernism, our period, and its lifestyle are born in great urban centers. In contrast,

¹¹ Jean Chevalier y Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de símbolos*, ob. cit., p. 992.

these journeys to encounter the earth would seem to symbolize an act of gratitude and acknowledgement of that primordial element that, in the urban construction, has become hermetic. The idea of collecting, of recovering and of redeeming the earth would also seem to be part of this vision, as would the artist's own strategy: coming into contact with those who live on it. It is here that the following fact becomes manifest: the connection between the earth and its inhabitants is most evident in the most remote places. The artist was intuitively and poetically aware of this close relation; she felt attracted to that connection and pursued it. And *humus* is precisely the element "used to model man (... matter with which the Creator modeled man)¹²." The earth engenders its children, shaping them, and becomes "the ultimate witness of human life and the cultures that develop within it..."¹³

Teresa Pereda's activities have led her to this place of *the artist as ethnographer*, which is defined by her preoccupation with cultural identities¹⁴. Nonetheless, her poetic interpretation of things and the symbolic significance of her gestures have led her even further. She did not focus on the ideological question exclusively. She was invested in changes that took place in various archetypes of the era, including a slant toward the "Feminine Ethos" in contrast to the previous patriarchic model¹⁵. The horizontal quality of this new approach led her to choose the prototypes of dialogue and a polyphony of cultures that also inhabit this same era. Her symbolic gestures led her to reconnect opposing ideas, times, spaces and persons. She lived with them and she brought them together.

12_ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, op. cit., 992.

13_ Mercedes Casanegra, "Itinerario de cuatro tierras," Buenos Aires, Palatina Art Gallery-Centro Cultural Recoleta, 2001.

14_ Hal Foster, *El retorno de lo real. La vanguardia a finales de siglo* (Madrid: Akal, 2001), 175.

15_ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 59-60.

After the journeys and meticulous works were complete, she recovered the earth in all its nudity and revealed those ancient connotations that it had never lost but which had been eclipsed. And finally, what Teresa Pereda did was highlight the earth's own potential, its power to sustain its children, to give them shelter, its power to bring together distant lands, its fraternal power, in the face of any and all divisions.