

Thirty Years Later

On September 8, 1985 the Latina body of a female Cuban-American artist fell 34 floors onto the roof of a deli in New York.ⁱ Now more than thirty years after this controversial death of the artist, Ana Mendieta, I ask, why does this story still matter? In September of 2016, when a group of protesters stood outside of Berlin's modern art museum, Hamburger Bahnhof, with linked red-painted hands and a white sheet showing a blood red silhouette, directly referencing Mendieta's artwork, the world was once again reminded of Mendieta's importance.ⁱⁱ Through her art, Mendieta demanded the spectator to acknowledge the ugly and inconvenient truths of the world, while bringing to the forefront those stories that had been swept to the wayside and forgotten. When we are told the facts of Mendieta's own life and when we see the symbolic actions made in her name by protesters, we are not only reminded of Mendieta's forgotten importance, but also the importance of the other stories she brought forward, the stories she commanded her spectator to acknowledge through her art and its defining grotesque aesthetic.

Displacement

In 1961, at the age of twelve, Ana Mendieta arrived in the United States as a political refugee from her native country of Cuba through the government sponsored program, Operation Pedro Pan, "[...] designed to provide escape from the social and political unrest caused by the events surrounding the Cuban Revolution," specifically the Communist regime of Fidel Castro.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mendieta's experience of living in exile within the U.S. made her aware of her intersectional identity as woman of color and displaced foreign refugee. In Cuba, Ana Mendieta

had been considered white-Cuban and was born into a prominent, well to do family, but in the U.S. she became *Other* through awareness of her race and class as a Latina woman who was now growing up in the foster care system.^{iv} This growing awareness led Mendieta into an identity crisis that Laetitia Alvarado has broken down through use of the terminology “marked” vs. “unmarked” by claiming Mendieta as “suddenly marked” when living in exile in the U.S.^v Such a description assumes a measurability of racialization that is site specific and relies on an antagonizing notion of *Other*, relating directly to Hortense Spillers idea of the locality of racism described as, “the toxicity of looks as quantifiable measure and as an example of the intersection of gender, race, and skin color.”^{vi}

Definition of Self: Object or Subject?

Mendieta’s artwork has typically been read as either essentialist feminist or as a more personal exilic art in which Mendieta is trying to work through her identity and find cultural grounding.^{vii} In this paper, I will argue that both of these readings of Mendieta’s artistic style are simultaneously accurate and inseparable. Mendieta’s art undergoes a political transformation as the artist’s use of her own body becomes increasingly metaphorical throughout the evolution of her work. Mendieta explores representations of the female condition in her artwork, focusing upon the physicality of the female body as object, while simultaneously referring to questions of subjective identity when using the act of creating, or performing, art as a process of working through self-crises within a broader visual dialogue of identity politics.

I argue that while Mendieta’s earliest performance work shows the use of her body as epitomizing the role of a more American feminist essentialist object, placing her work into a

second wave canon as she attempted to assimilate to the U.S., the later use of her body becomes more metaphorical and subjective through her individual self-identity. This later work reflects a progression toward a third wave feminist understanding where, although still essentialist, is more in line with her intersectional identity and shows better compromise of Cuban and American self.

When reading the overall oeuvre of Ana Mendieta, one must consider art historian Linda Nochlin's notion of "exhilarating exile," understood as a heightened awareness of cultural difference that inspires creativity for artists who are living and working in exile.^{viii} It has been argued that artists living in exile found their new home countries to offer a place where they could reinvent themselves and express their creativity and individualism outside of their more conservative and traditional home countries.

Between the Artist and Spectator

Hans Breder, the University of Iowa Multimedia Program founder, where Mendieta studied, writes,

[...] Intermedia engages the spectator as participant. It is collaborative, conceptually grounded, performative, ritualistic, site-specific. It exists in liminal space where the interplay of two or more media propagate new ideas, new forms, new ways of seeing and being.^{ix}

Through her performance art, and considering this definition of multimedia art, Ana Mendieta initiates a social conversation by calling for the spectator to witness controversial scenarios that lead each one of them to question their cultural and/or social ideals by employing these "new ways of seeing and being." She accomplishes this moment of flux through the use of the grotesque aesthetic that commands the spectator's attention and ultimately their participation.

Curator Robert Storr, has argued, "The grotesque reverses the normal order of things, makes the familiar strange, and calls into question long-held truths about the world, the body, and human beings."^x Typical of most definitions given to this aesthetic, the grotesque includes a social and ethical responsibility with "[...] the presence of truths which it cannot wholly grasp [...] left for each 'beholder to work out'."^{xi} The grotesque aesthetics in this sense creates an abject "[...] challenge [to] accepted conventions both social and aesthetic, this strand makes visual what is most threatening, inspiring fear and repulsion as it tears at the ultimate boundary between self and oblivion."^{xii}

The grotesque aesthetic causes a level of ambiguity that triggers a sort of crisis or conflict within the spectator, a visceral reaction. In 1969, Robert Doty wrote,

The grotesque threatens the foundations of existence through the subversion of order and the treacherous reversal of familiar and hostile [...] it is a direct and forceful means of exposing man to man, and man to himself.^{xiii}

The spectator's role is crucial to this definition of grotesque as the aesthetic demands a gaze and reaction to the original grotesque action created by the artist or performer.^{xiv} Charles Merewether describes Mendieta's early artworks as having, "demanded that the public become an audience and bear witness to an event about which they had no knowledge."^{xv}

Gender and Beauty

When using the female body as subject, it is important to be aware of the tradition that has accompanied the history of art and how male artists have predominantly used the female body as object. It can be argued that it was necessary for Mendieta to use the grotesque aesthetic at the time Ana Mendieta was creating her works in order for the female body to not become

sexualized or misunderstood as an object of beauty. In a 1976 article, art critic Lucy Lippard, warns women against self-exploitation with use of their own body in artwork by stating,

When women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism [...] Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful.^{xvi}

In 1972, during one of Ana Mendieta's earliest documented performances, Morty Sklar shaved his beard while Mendieta transferred the trimmed facial hair to her own face, creating the appearance of naturalistic facial hair on her female body.^{xvii} During the performance, Mendieta symbolically transformed herself into a man by playing with visual gender expectations. While Sklar, a man, could remove his facial hair and still remain visually "male," Mendieta could not add facial hair to her body and remain visually "female," or at least visually *pure* "female." The addition of facial hair immediately places the female body in flux as either flowing between gender identities or crossing-over entirely. Mendieta's performed nonconforming gender identity causes the spectator discomfort and becomes her grotesque aesthetic as the identity remains up for debate.

Similarly, Mendieta's series *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Transformations)*, created between 1972 and 1973, critiques social and cultural expectations of beauty (fig. 1). In this series, Mendieta manipulates her physical appearance by using tools, such as make-up, wigs, and stockings that allow her to perform multiple altered visual identities. The grotesque aesthetic comes through with the confusion and crisis of identity that is created when considering her *altered* appearance through the misuse of traditionally acceptable tools.

The most unique of these appearances, and also the most controversial of these

appearances was created by using stockings in a subverted fashion. Although traditionally worn as a skin covering, Mendieta uses the stocking in a unique location as a facial skin covering. The superimposition of the coloring of the stocking with her natural skin tone makes her complexion appear much darker, while also flattening her features by virtue of the compression operated by the elasticity of the materials. Her complexion therefore appears scarred with runs that are present in the stocking. Such markings do not only bring about a conflict of beauty, but more importantly a conflict of racial beauty by playing with visual expectations as related to racial stigma.^{xviii}

The Racialized Self

In Ana Mendieta's series of *Glass on Body Imprints* from 1972, she photographs her own face in different expressions and manipulations by pressing her features against a sheet of plexiglass. Mendieta's body parts become violently distorted, which critics have said, creates an ambiguous *Other*.^{xix} When her gaze looks directly into the camera and meets the spectator's gaze, it leaves an uneasiness for the spectator, again, speaking directly to the definition of the grotesque aesthetic. This performance comments on the process of racialization when she exaggerates certain features through the use of tools, and makes a statement about gendered violence through the violent act of the performance itself. Mendieta is exaggerating the racialization of her body by heightening those features that play to "[...] popular notions of what being a person of color in the United States 'looks like.'"^{xx} This description relies on location specific stereotypes of what race looks like "[...] and artificial understanding of what we understand by 'black.'"^{xxi}

Toward a Deeper Grotesque

In 1973, Mendieta introduced a new performance series dealing with rape and other forms of sexual violence. During this series, Mendieta's grotesque aesthetic is taken beyond a point of unease or awkwardness to a point of violence and horror that tests the spectator's role and reaction as they unwittingly become witness.^{xxii}

[...] when a young student at the University of Iowa was found murdered after having been brutally raped [...] I started doing performances as well as placing objects and installations in public space in order to bring attention to this crime and all sexual violence.^{xxiii}

Ana Mendieta explains her motivation for this series as, "to bring attention." She is re-enacting both specific and generic scenes of rape and sexual violence. These performances give a voice – a space – to all of those victims who were either forgotten or not able to speak up for themselves. With the use of her own self to perform the role of victim, Mendieta turns the material of her female body back into an object. Arlene Raven describes this object of the female body present in these performance scenes as, "[...] invisible, anonymous, interchangeable, untouchable, whose name we don't know and whose suffering we have never truly heard."^{xxiv}

The grotesque of these scenes is created with violence and disgust. When Ana Mendieta conducted *Rape Scene* in 1973, spectators unexpectedly and unwittingly became eye-witnesses to a violent crime scene (fig. 2). At this point, there is no option for the now witness to remain solely spectator, as they are forced to navigate the response to such distressful shock. As Mendieta did not prepare her spectators by informing them of what to expect, the previously unassuming audience now has to reconcile the conflict and decide whether what they have been thrown into is in fact a performance or an actual crime scene that requires action to be taken.^{xxv} It evokes a visceral reaction of crisis between empathy and rage for the spectator.^{xxvi}

With these images of the documented performance, Mendieta brings forward yet another constructed code of identity politics, that of the *rapeable* being, the essential female victim.^{xxvii} Alvarado reads the documented scene “[...] by the bondage of her wrist with rope, echoing a lashing or lynch scene [...]” (fig. 3).^{xxviii}

Mendieta is creating such controversial visual dialogue in order to bring forward that which she hopes to change. In an undated journal she writes, “‘ver en calma un crimen es cometerlo’ (to calmly observe a crime is to commit it).”^{xxix}

Rape Scene collapses the private and public realms and points to the culture of silence around the mistreatment of women that the audience then itself replicates through its (our) ‘wonder gaze,’ thereby indicting fine art culture and its role in societal violence.^{xxx}

In a heightened, essentialist statement, Ana Mendieta’s friend Carolee Scheemann states,

[...] the violence against women relates to the whole patriarchal sense of violence against the natural world, and the resistance to gendered integrations, and of course Judeo-Christian traditions had prescribed the denial of sexuality as a source of wisdom and knowledge and the silencing of women’s experience.^{xxxi}

Beyond the Second Wave

In her critique of second wave feminism, Ana Mendieta referred to it as, “basically a white middle class movement.”^{xxxii} In 1980 she helped curate an exhibition titled, “The Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists,” at the A.I.R Gallery in New York, the first all-female cooperative gallery in the U.S. In her curatorial statement for the exhibition Mendieta asked the question, “Do we exist?” and continued by saying, “During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us.”^{xxxiii}

Ana Mendieta's involvement with A.I.R. reflects her continual search for a sense of community after the displacement from her homeland as a child. However, she grew critical of A.I.R. for "[...] not [being] as politically motivated or as diverse as she would have liked."^{xxxiv} As Mendieta acknowledges the limits of American second wave feminism, "we see that her aesthetic practice was deeply committed to thinking race, identity, gender, and class as intersecting projects whose constitution indicates practices and relations of power that get concretized in what we understand as 'identities.'"^{xxxv} During the 1970s Mendieta grew increasingly less involved with the A.I.R. gallery as she began frequent travel between New York and the Latin American world.

In a drafted artist statement from 1978, Ana Mendieta writes,

[...] For the past five years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art. Using my body as reference in the creation of the works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature. Through my art, I want to express the immediacy of life and the eternity of nature.^{xxxvi}

Then approximately five years later, Mendieta refers to the importance of an earth-body relationship within her own understanding of identity,

For the last twelve years I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. Having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast out from the womb (Nature) [...] It is a return to the maternal source [...] These obsessive acts of reasserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for being. In essence my works are the reactivation of primeval beliefs within the human psyche.^{xxxvii}

Mendieta's earth-body works from her *Siluetas* series showcase this hybridized understanding between earth and ritual. Referring back to the definition of intermedia as

explained by Hans Breder, this series of performance art is exceedingly site-specific with inherent temporality, becoming ritualistic. Mendieta employs her definition of the earth – of land, and nature – as a mother figure, in which she is able to re-ground her identity through a connection and celebration of earth.^{xxxviii} From this understanding of her artwork, Mendieta defines a more intersectional feminist identity. The use of her body becomes purely metaphorical and subjective as silhouette rather than active, objective actor. Through use of materials such as blood, fire, wood and earth, Mendieta creates a connection with Santeria, a Afro-Cuban religion, as sign of wanting to find a connection with her Cuban homeland, even though she was raised by a Catholic family.^{xxxix}

Mendieta's grotesque aesthetic continues in the visually ambiguous nature of her *Siluetas* series. Jose Munoz writes, "All these *siluetas* resemble a rough outline of something that was once present and is now absent or entombed but nonetheless unconcealed and lingering, like a visual echo."^{xl} Munoz reads Mendieta's *siluetas* as a performance of her "brownness."^{xli} This reading would place this series in line with her previous works that critique traditions of dispossessing people based on a visual code, however it is a more specific critique of "[...] the histories of violence against women and the imperial subjection of Caribbean people."^{xlii} Such a critique reconstructs Mendieta's relation to her homeland and to Cuban people.

In 1980 Ana Mendieta travelled back to Cuba for the first time and became a bridge for the 1980s Cuban generation with the outside world.^{xliii} By becoming involved with the Cuban Cultural Circle and traveling several more times between the U.S. and Cuba in those final years of her life, Mendieta was able to reconcile her multiple identities and continual search for

homeland.^{xliv} Cuban curator, Elvis Fuentes, declared,

Her ability to appropriate and synthesize aspects of Land Art, Body Art, and Feminism turned her into a kind of ‘compendium’ of the various experimental trends of the period. Hence, when she visited Cuba, Mendieta became a catalyst for young creators who were eager to try out new means of expression.^{xlv}

Tania Bruguera, another Cuban artist living and working in the U.S., described Ana Mendieta as, “a bridge between people leaving the island and those staying,” as well as a role-model for Cuban artists.^{xlvi}

Where is Ana Mendieta?

Since the tragic death of Ana Mendieta in 1985, the question has remained, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* Just as she became a cultural bridge in those final years of her life, so has Mendieta’s legacy in the years since her death. Her legacy can be seen in the political performance art that continues with contemporary artists, such as Tania Bruguera, who has paid homage to Mendieta since her earliest series of performance art in which she re-enacted Mendieta’s works, as well as in the political demonstrations made in Ana Mendieta’s name by protestor groups around the world.

This legacy is a mirror for Mendieta’s own hope of bringing forward the stories of the forgotten. The story of Mendieta and her art become increasingly relevant to conversations of intersectionality and cultural exchange in our contemporary, pluralistic world. She brings forward and serves as a salient example of that which cannot be ignored, of that which must continue to demand awareness and relevance of space.

ⁱ Luis Camnitzer, “Cuban Influences on the 1980s Generation,” *New Art of Cuba*, revised edition, 2003, 92-93

ⁱⁱ Josie Thaddeus-Johns, “Why Protesters Are Still Talking About the Death of Ana Mendieta,” *The Creators Project*,

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- iii *ibid.*, 913
- iv Leticia Alvarado, "...Towards A Personal Will To Continue Being "Other": Ana Mendieta's Abject Performances," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 24:1, 2015, 70
- v Alvarado, 70
- vi Hortense Spillers, "Race" in Stimpson & Herdt, eds. *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* (2014), 393.
- vii *ibid.*, 66
- viii Linda Nochlin, "Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation." *Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics* 17.3 (1996): 317-37
- ix Hans Breder, "Intermedia: Enacting the liminal," *Performing Arts Journal*, 17 (2/3), 1995, 112-20.
- x Robert Storr, *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque*, Site Santa Fe, 18 July 2004 - 09 January 2005
- xi *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. ed. By Frances S. Connolly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 160
- xii *ibid.*, 115
- xiii Robert Doty, *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969, no pagination
- xiv *ibid.*, 144
- xv Charles Merewether, "From Inscription to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the Work of Ana Mendieta," *Ana Mendieta*, ed. by Gloria Moure, Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 1996, 92
- xvi Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art." *Art In America*, 1976, 75
- xvii Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, 11
- xviii Kelly Baum, "Shapely Shapelessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972 in *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, Vol. 67, More than One: Photographs in Sequence, 2008, 83.
- xix *Ibid.*, 86
- xx Alvarado, 73
- xxi *ibid.*, 73
- xxii Alrene Raven "We Did Not Move From Theory, We Moved to the Sores and Wounds," *The Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art presents RAPE: dedicated to the memory of Ana Mendieta whose unexpected death on September 8, 1985 underscores the violence in our society*. Columbus: Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, The Ohio State University, 1985, 5
- xxiii Ana Mendieta, letter to Stephanie Blackwood, The Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art, October 18, 1984
- xxiv Raven, 5v
- xxv Alvarado, 77e
- xxvi Raven, 5
- xxvii Szymanek, 907
- xxviii Alvarado, 79
- xxix *ibid.*, 79
- xxx *ibid.*, 79
- xxxi Carolee Schneemann, "Regarding Ana Mendieta," transcribed by Raegan Truax-O'Gorman, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 21:2, 2011, 86.
- xxxii Alvarado, 80
- xxxiii *ibid.*, 80
- xxxiv Kat Griefen, "Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, 1972-82," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 21:2, 2011, 175
- xxxv Alvarado, 81
- xxxvi Ana Mendieta, draft of an artist statement for a CAPS Fellowship application, Ana Mendieta Papers, Galerie Lelong, New York
- xxxvii Ana Mendieta, application for Rome Prize Fellowship, Ana Mendieta Papers, Galerie Lelong, NY, 1983
- xxxviii Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn

Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2004, 205

^{xxxix} Szymanek, 914

^{xi} Jose Munoz, "Vitalism's after-burn: The sense of Ana Mendieta," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 21:2, 2011, 193

^{xli} *ibid.*, 195

^{xlii} *ibid.*, 195

^{xliii} Camnitzer, 89

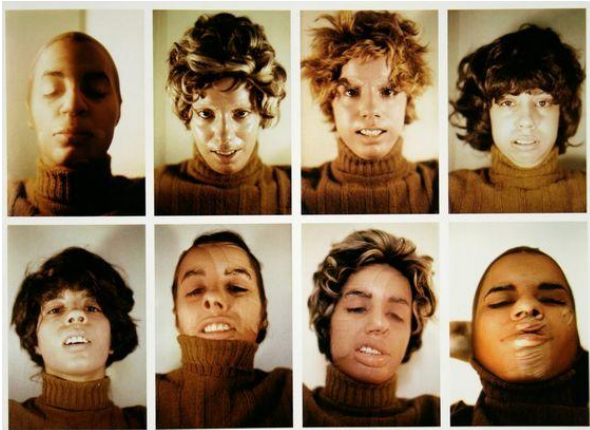
^{xliv} Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 22.

^{xlv} *ibid.*, 23

^{xlvi} *ibid.*, 26

Images

Figure 1



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Transformations)*, 1972-1973. 35 mm. color slide. Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection.

Figure 2



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973. Lifetime color photograph, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Estate of Ana Mendieta

Collection.
Figure 3



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973. Lifetime color photographs. Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection.