Julia Bryan-Wilson
Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta

Looking at Blood

In 1973, Ana Mendieta had blood seep out of her apartment building onto a sidewalk in Iowa City; she then documented the responses of passers-by as they walked past this suggestion of domestic unrest. Her film captures a range of approaches towards the spilled, now-public mess: indifference, curiosity and — in a conclusion so logical it seems almost premeditated — as a problem to be solved. The final images in the sequence depict a man in striped work overalls and a painter’s hat emerging from a door at the staged scene of the crime to sweep the debris into a cardboard box. While this act of careful workmanship unfolds, the other figure in the frame hurries on seemingly unaware, carrying the day’s mail. Matrik Building Piece (left), an early work within Mendieta’s archive, highlights her consistent interest in the charged properties of blood, with its corporeal and metaphorical associations with birth, love and death. Not only that, but this piece points to the artist’s lifelong interest in the terrain of temporality, the utilisation of spaces outside of traditional art sites, the primacy of documentation and the implication of audiences as witnesses after the fact.

With this piece, Mendieta created a situation that unfolded unpredictably over time, in which the bodies she shot were visibly marked by gender, race, age and class, even as the precise body of the hurt or wounded one that has presumably leaked these vital fluids stays unknown and unknowable. What remains is, in fact, a remains: a leftover stain, unidentifiable by any axis of difference that might be mapped onto a physical form. Yet it has become commonplace within the literature on Mendieta to say that her work is about ‘the body’, the very first sentence of the catalogue for her major retrospective at the Hirshhorn Gallery, entitled Earth Body (after the artist’s own description of her work as ‘earth-body art’), states: ‘Art made from, with, and of the body has an immediacy and directness that is inextricable and familiar — virtually everyone can relate to it implicitly and emphatically because the body is the most fundamental aspect of human existence.’ This passage, from the foreword by museum director, Ned Rifkin, summons ‘the body’ as a fundamental, even universal (uninfected, ungendered, unmarked) body, but what ‘body’ is on display in a work like Matrik Building Piece? It makes little sense to say of a work like this that it is about ‘the body’, as if ‘the body’ were a stable or monolithic category that transcends all difference; the bodies here are multiple and situational, put to work in diverse capacities. Mendieta’s work dismantles, dismembers and decomposes the integrity of a singular body, by generating an array of corporeal forms, as well as by activating spectators whose bodies complete the circuit of viewing.

For Mendieta, who moved from Cuba to the United States when she was 12 and was involved in a range of activist efforts regarding the intersection of race, gender and nationality, ‘the body’ could never be one thing; bodies were porous, fragmented, constantly reconstituting themselves. In this essay, I examine how ‘the body’ in Mendieta’s work — especially the female
body - has become a lightning rod for her reception both within her lifetime and posthumously, specifically as it has been recruited for various feminist theories. Her work has been controversially taken up within competing feminist ideologies, ones that have shifted dramatically over time and have been received by what Miwon Kwon calls at least two seemingly irreconcilable "comps [...] At the crux of this distinction is the status of the body in representation and as representation. That is, the body as a transparent signifier of identity and self versus the body as a nexus of arbitrary conventions of meaning, the body as 'signature' or 'sign': which feminisms mattered for Mendieta? And which feminisms are at stake now on her legacy is being re-evaluated and reassessed in light of shifts within and around feminist politics regarding race, the environment and nation? Mendieta has become a loud and widely-recognised figure within feminist art histories; her work has been featured in many major exhibitions of women artists and she has also been at the forefront of Latin American art history, with two ostensibly distinct spheres sometimes coming together (as when her work was included in the 1995 exhibition Latin American Women Artists 1975-1985). Mendieta has also been written about in many important volumes on women artists and feminist art. Despite (or indeed because of) this curatorial and critical framing, some critics have questioned if feminist theories and politics indeed mattered much at all to Mendieta; writer and artist Luis Camnitzer has written, 'Her work was often seen as a programmatic expression of feminism enhanced by a US perception of mysterious exoticism. It was therefore also seen in the context of a superficial anthropologism prevalent in art. Some of her success within these perspectives can be attributed to a misunderstanding. Her work is not programmatic. It is, much more simply and modestly, a self-portrait in Camnitzer's view, the 'body' most convincingly examined by Mendieta was her body. How, then, are feminist theories relevant for understanding her work? With its ambivalent approach to figuration (and her sensationalised death), Mendieta has been made to speak for quite distinct, even competing, feminisms, especially as these feminisms articulate radically different approaches to 'the body'.

Gendering Intermedia

Mendieta first encountered the US feminist art movement at the University of Iowa, where she received her MFA in 1972. Though she began her studies as a painter, she moved to the University's Intermedia department chaired by Hans Breder to explore more multidisciplinary perspectives. Breder invited many visiting critics and artists to the university, including conceptual artist Vito Acconci and feminist conceptivist Martha Rosler. In what would be a particularly formative encounter, Mendieta met art critic Lucy Lippard in 1975, after Lippard's guest lecture on women's work. But even before her formal exposure to the rapidly expanding feminist art movement in the US, Mendieta had been pursuing issues of identity, including the malleability of gender, physical abjection and violence - both regarding unspecified victims, as in Moffitt Building Piece, but also directly related to violence against women.

This concern found form in 1973 when Mendieta inaugurated a series of works in which she confronted the spectacularisation of violated female bodies, after a reported incident of violence against women on the Iowa campus. In Rape Scene, Mendieta had herself tied to a table in her apartment, her lower body naked and smeared with cow's blood in a terrifying durational event that was 'discovered' by friends and fellow artists (p.87). Feminist writers have pointed out that by making herself the object of both violence and the gaze, Mendieta complicates any simplistic idea of female victimhood: in addition to this move of self-substitution or self-erasure, the provocative aspect of the event - she had to lie to her self up in this fashion, and relied on others to observe and document her in this state.

In the rape pieces, Mendieta seems to be reigning various postures of female subjugation or submission, almost as if to exercise them. They are extreme images of objectification, but hers is not the only body here; their production as art pieces immediately conjures up other bodies that are both explicit and implicit collaborators: those who raped her limbs together, those who photographed her, and those who viewed both the live event and later, the documentation. A similar haunting of labouring figures occurs in other works, including Sweating Blood (1973) a short Super-8 film in which Mendieta's head fills the screen in a tight close-up, rivulets of blood dripping down her face. An assistant used a syringe to squirt blood onto Mendieta's scalp before the shot: the camera was stopped periodically so that fresh blood could be applied (p.44). While Mendieta's practice has largely been understood as solitary, the foundational inter-relationality proposed by pieces such as these serves as a counter-argument to Donald Kuspit's assertion that her work is pathologically self-absorbed, masturbatory and narcissistic. Mendieta's work proposes not a narcissistic attention to her own body, as Kuspit would have it, but rather a more ambivalently dialogical relationship to bodies (including those off-scene) as they form, deform and influence each other.

Kuspit's argument fails in the face of many feminist readings of Mendieta that insist upon her performances of gendered victimhood; yet to focus only on the female body narrows our understanding of how her work functions. Ripe (1973) (p.85) shows Mendieta outside splayed on her back, bent over a fallen log and bleeding, as if abandoned while grievously injured, or even dead. Who photographed this alarming situation? How are we rendered culpable as voyeurs? In Rape, Mendieta evinces one of her central concerns, which is the placement of a female form in the landscape, importantly located outside of an art context. The jolt of crisis that accompanies this abjectly document is escalated by the explicitly posed female body, yet in perhaps the most well-known works, the Silueta series, living bodies have been evoked not only outlines or suggestions of shapes. In other works of this period, Mendieta produced interruptions within public space, startling unsuspecting viewers with her evocative and grotesque creations, as in Suitcase Piece (1973), where she placed plastic bags containing animal entrails in an open suitcase and left it on an Iowa City park. As she stated in a lecture at Alfred College, 'I work in public spaces [...] unless it's a very restricted kind of area, I don't ask permission and it's always really interesting for me to have the reaction of the people around me': implication of moralistic societal norms of not horror, this was Artur Barrio's gauze-wrapped 'bloody packages' left at sewage grate openings and in parks in the late 1960s. In such pieces, Mendieta prompted a range of viewer responses to violence, including (but not limited to) violence against women; it is crucial to keep in focus how the bodies at stake were sometimes partial, contingent or otherwise unreadable.

Mendieta also explored the gendered associations of facial hair in the piece that became her Master's thesis, Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (1972)
where she transferred her friend Morfy Sklar's beard onto her own face. She later wrote: "After looking at myself in a mirror, the beard became real. It did not look like a disguise. It became part of myself and not at all unnatural to my appearance." In truth, the result is closer to dragging than to 'reality'—an exaggerated, playful artificial. She also engaged in a series of exercises: distortion her appearance through wigs and make-up, in Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations) (1972); this piece bears a resemblance to Martha Wilson's later photographic diaries. I make up the image of my perfection/ I make up the image of my deformity (1974) (right). In fact, Wilson was one of the visitors to Iowa's Intermedia program. Significantly, Mendelssohn's investigations of this type relate to projects by other women of colour thinking through the imbrication of race and gender by transforming their visages, including Adrian Piper's nearly contemporaneous Mythic Being (1973-75), in which some audiences see Piper as a black male, triggering responses in public spaces; in this image, the artist is applying facial hair as one aspect of the preparation (left). Some years later, artist Howardena Pindell produced her video Free, White and 2 (1980) also using make-up and multiple personas to visualise the ways in which femininity has been strongly associated with whiteness. These works resonate with Mendelssohn's interest in intersectionality, the multiplicity of bodies, the intertwined qualities of identity, and the performativity of gender and race.

It is crucial to our understanding of the response to Mendelssohn's work that the first writings about her to appear in major publications were within decidedly feminist contexts. Two early articles, both written by Lippard, focused on Mendelssohn's early work from Iowa, including Rape, within the larger rubric of women's role-playing, the instability of identity and conceptualism. The first, 'Transformation Art,' which was published in Ms. magazine in 1975, discussed Mendelssohn's shocking, bloody rape 'tableaux' as one of the many examples of works by artists including Piper, Wilson, Eleanor Antin and others who were interrogating questions of identity within conceptual frameworks. As Lippard understood, 'the turn of conceptual art toward behaviorism and narrative about 1970 coincided with the entrance of more women into its ranks, and with the turn of women's minds toward questions of identity raised by the feminist movement.' In "The Pursuits and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," published in Art in America (1976), Lippard widens her scope to think about European artists like Marina Abramović, Gina Pane and Ulrike Rosenbach alongside Mendelssohn and Piper, again as examples of what she calls 'the sexual and gender-oriented uses of the body in conceptual art by women artists.' Though Mendelssohn is now understood as an artist who merged performance art with land art—as is signalled by her phrase 'earth-body art'—these articles remind us that she was initially viewed as a feminist conceptual artist, whose ephemeral medium was the transitory nature of flesh itself.

Activism, A.I.R., and Heroes

After Mendelssohn moved to New York in 1978, she became involved in a number of feminist organisations, including joining the A.I.R. gallery collective (in 1977, she had shown her work at A.I.R. in an exhibition called Out of New York Invitational). It is undeniable that Mendelssohn was active within A.I.R. for several years; however, her commitment to A.I.R.'s feminist politics is still somewhat contested. This photo of the women of A.I.R. places Mendelssohn in the front and just right of centre and, with her bright white blouse, open smile, and her direct eye contact, she is arguably the focal point of the image (above). The members of the A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 1979 Black and white photograph Left to right: Jo-Ann, Mary Beth Edelson, Nancy Spir, Donna Byrnes, Minnie Pinn, Rachel Theresa, Carol Brown, Anne Maine, Anne Wald. Bottom: Pat Basch, Claire Gil, Ato Mendelssohn, Dora Daan.
Mendieta began to distance herself from feminism practiced by the white majority of members in A.I.R., in her curatorial introduction to an exhibition called The Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States, in which she wrote: 'American feminism is for a basically white middle-class movement. This exhibition points out the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more toward a personal will to continue being "other."' Mendieta's identification as a 'Third World woman' is related to a much wider move for women of colour in the US to self-organize around this phrase. Black women were among the first in the US to articulate this feminism: the Combahee River Collective began meeting in 1974, and issued 'A Black Feminist Statement' in 1977. Later anthologised in the widely-read book, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave (1982). Another influential text, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, was published in 1980; it features an entire section dedicated to 'racism in the white women's movement', as well as one on 'the Third World Woman Writer'. The cover of the first edition of This Bridge Called My Back described the schematic outline of a woman, and, though she is on her knees, she is clearly in motion, unbundled by any literal weight. Just at the time of this flurry of activity, Mendieta resigned from A.I.R. in 1982; she gave no reason in her official letter, instead letting her dissatisfaction and anger hover unspoken between the blank lines (resignation letter reproduced on p.216).

Mendieta's Feminist Receptions

Mendieta's reception has been indelibly marked by her shocking death in 1985 and the uncertain circumstances that led to it, including the trial and acquittal of her husband, minimalist artist Carl Andre. Their relationship took on a lurid cast that has been called a 'Modernist martyrdom built on a foundation of Romantic myth.' During the trial and its immediate aftermath, Mendieta was reduced to the status of victim, heroine or both. A tell-all account, Naked by the Window (1990), by journalist Robert Kastell, as well as a recent feminist graphic novel, Who Is Ana Mendieta? (2011), by Christine Redfern and Cara Caron, have circulated her biography to popular audiences.

Beyond how her death has retroactively shaped our understanding of her life, Mendieta's work has undergone many shifting interpretations. One historiographic tale told is that, in the 1970s and early '80s, she was understood as part of a larger essentialist feminist discourse, but this reading shifted along with the emergence of post-modern theories to focus on her transgressing artistic boundaries and a further attention to her status as an exile. The basic contours of these methodological divides and artistic movements are carefully laid out by Gill Perry. Though the conflict of 'bad' or repressive 1970s essentialism versus 'good' or progressive 1960s-90s anti-essentialism is often reduced to a false binary, there have been major divisions between these conflicting ideologies. Mendieta died just as the tensions between the two were coming to a head. By the late 1960s, rather than dismiss Mendieta for her goddess titles and use of female forms, feminists became more interested in challenging presumptions of Mendieta's 'essentialism', emphasizing instead qualities such as 'impermanence, distance, vulnerability and remoteness'. These later words are from Mira Schor from 1985, who wrote that Mendieta's work was easily 'criticised by contemporary feminist writers.'
More recent feminist authors have more stridently defended Mendieta against charges of essentialism. Irin Rofegoff writes, with some distaste: 'Left all of this sound like an attempt at an archetypal "feminine" artistic practice, I hasten to say that Mendieta's work cannot be summed up as a representation of the dreaded biologically essentialist "feminine."'1 Ann Raine states, 'I want to think of her work as inscribing not female or "natural" essences but gendered physicality, memory, desire and representation, across a concrete material terrain already marked by politics and history.'2 To avoid branding Mendieta with loaded words like 'nature' or 'biology,' recent feminist authors in one terms like alterity and fugitivity (Magdalena Zabala); exile and performativity (Jane Slotter); and visibility (Susan Best); trace and index (Joanna S. Walker); or spatialising and geographising gendered sites (Rofegoff).3 In broad strokes, writers have turned to a few key themes that are consonant with poststructuralist feminism: Mendieta's persistent evocation of the female body, the iterability and repetition within her practice and the levels of mediation introduced by her use of the document.4 Some art historians take a more dialectical approach; Miwon Kwon, for instance, writes that especially the well-known projects from the 1970s, such as the Silueta series, Fetiche series and Rupasian Sculptures series, were very strongly toward the essentialist pole in both intention and reception, yet at the same time acknowledges that Mendieta's works exceed these readings with their emphasis on enigma and absence.5

There have also been attempts to remove Mendieta from feminism altogether, as when Camilleri calls her work a self-portrait. Charles Merewether states: 'The question of naming has afflicted the scholarship and reception of Mendieta's work insofar as by naming it as Afro-Cuban, Mexican, even feminist, her work has been marginalised as peripheral to modernism, rather than central to the constitution of modernism itself. 6 Merewether misapprehends how feminism, far from marginal or invited, have been pivotal to the formation of contemporary art. But what are we to make of Mendieta's resignation from A/J/R, and reluctance to call herself a feminist? The current plurality of feminist thought has produced reflections on Mendieta's rejection of white feminism as itself a politics that might have been grown with the times; as Esther Alder writes, in distancing herself from a feminist context, she was reacting to an increasingly simplified reading of her work. Feminist thought today, having evolved to embrace a broader and more complex range of cultural practices and experience, is a field that Mendieta would have perhaps found more accommodating.'7

In fact, the feminism that mattered the most to Mendieta - Third World feminism - had concerns quite distinct from the 'essentialism' and 'anti-essentialism' debate, though its theorists and thinkers are largely absent from the Mendieta literature. This is a feminism that is powered by commitment to intersectionality, a feminism that views anti-racism, anti-capitalism and anti-sexism as interwoven, one that addresses questions of economic exploitation, access to health care, homophobia, poverty, workplace organizing, immigrant justice, environmental racism, the feminisation of labour, overconsumption, intimacy, cultural obliteration, decolonisation, etc. This is a feminism that sees spirituality as a political issue, that is untried to use the word 'faith'. As Cherríe Moraga writes in the preface to This Bridge Called My Back, 'I am not talking here about some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts. I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives [...] It is the beating of activists

I am talking about.8 This is the motivation that drives the newly reissuing version of This Bridge: a work by none other than Mendieta - Racism Corporates (Body Tracks) - on its cover.

Coda: Afterlives

As Mendieta's work is taken up in different contexts over time, it is affected by contemporaneous feminist theories and activities. Her work is seen not only within catalogue exhibitions and art histories, but in the movements of art, art historical, and artistic, and otherwise, that have kept her memory alive. In 1992, members of the Women's Action Coalition staged a protest on the occasion of the opening of the Guggenheim Soho, whose inaugural show featured four men, one of them Cari Andre. Their posters asked 'Where is Ana Mendieta?' This was a highly publicised reassertion of how the artist has become, post-mortem, a feminist icon; indeed, this demonstration provides the opening (and title) for Blocker's monographic book. In a separate action, Cuban filmmaker Ela Trujillo and Raquelín Mendieta, the artist's sister, placed photos of Mendieta's face on top of Andrea's flat metal works: a moving evocation of loss and grief. For artists and writer Coco Fusco, Mendieta's multifaceted artistic poetics are somewhat eclipsed by a focus on her death, as the artist threatens to be reduced to 'a contemporary New York version of Frida Kahlo.'9 In Fusco's words, 'scores of (mostly white) feminist artists have claimed affiliations to Ana, and have invoked her name as a metaphor for female victimization,' a reduction smoking of tightly veiled racial oppressions. Fusco states that there are now known few of Ana's colleagues who, remembering her struggles to gain recognition [...] find the current appropriation of her image pantul and ever exploitative.'10

One year after the Guggenheim protest, Nancy Spero (one of Mendieta's A/JR, colleagues) performed her homage to Ana Mendieta at the 1993 Whitney Bienali, a recreation of a piece by Mendieta that Spero had first performed in 1991 in a spontaneous act of commemoration. 10 Cuban artist Tania Bruguera produced a series of reconstructions of Mendieta's work in her 12-year-long Homenaje a Ana Mendieta (1995-96); she undertook considerable archival research in preparation for these actions that were both a complex relocation of Mendieta back to the Cuban art context, as well as a personal incorporation of her influence.12 Other artists have produced more allusive tributes. Regina José Galindo, an artist from Guatemala who has used her own body to think through cultural memory, state violence and crimes against women, sat in a public square under a device that dripped blood down her face, for a work called The Weight of Blood (2004, overcast) that recalls Mendieta's Sweating Blood (1975) (p.44).

These diverse readings of Mendieta remind us that, beyond the tired debate about essentialism versus anti-essentialism, her works remain powerfully current. Mendieta was dissatisfied with being reduced to one vision of feminism, or one articulation of identity; her work, likewise, resists any single template. Though she is a vital presence in the global contemporary art world, Cuban writer José Quiroga acknowledges how Mendieta's work also strategically calls to mind disappearance and the difficulty of remembering: the pieces [...] incorporate feminism, anti-colonialism, earth art and the autobiography of exile. This makes the sculptures very specific but also allows them to cross over into distinct territories negotiated by the images

Christina Radke
Fernandez
From What Is Ana Mendieta? 2011
Published by Feminist Press
themselves.57 Mandela was deeply concerned with bodies, with their flesh and fluids. Her work maintained some tautness to the realm of representation, even as its later years became more abstract, such as Árbol de la Vida (Tree of Life) (1982) (p.103) and Fawrows (1946). In such works, the curved outlines have become disarticulated from any clear corporeality, suggesting a disengagement. Fawrows, in particular, with its rippling emergence from the grass, is barely recognizable as a coherent or closed figure. Simultaneously simplified and structured around pre-existing elements, these works gesture out of themselves; they extend into space. Both are organized around a22 vertical line - the trunk of a tree and a footprint - that reads less as a spine than an indication that the form continues beyond the shape she has created. These pieces do not refuse to be gendered, but they refuse only to be gendered. One could say that in such work Mandela moved contra el cuerpo, and the line is seen in the sense that a counter-attack is a rebuffing of effort, and a counter-proposition does not negate the original but seeks to argue it. Just as there is no such thing as the 'earth' or the 'goddess', there is no such thing as 'the body' in Mandela's work; she goes against 'the body' to resist the existence of, and interdependence between, many bodies.