



Ana Mendieta
Moffitt Building Piece, spring 1973
Super-8 colour, silent film
transferred to DVD

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 planned – as a problem to be solved. The final images in the sequence depict a man in striped worker's 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 unawares, carrying the day's mail. *Moffitt Building Piece* (left), an early work within Mendieta's archive, highlights her consistent interest in the charged properties of blood, with its corporeal and metaphoric associations with birth, love and death.¹ 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 ineluctable and familiar – virtually everyone can relate to it implicitly and emphatically because the body is the most fundamental aspect of human existence.'² This passage, from the foreword by museum director, Ned Rifkin, summons 'the body' as a fundamental, even universal (uninflected, ungendered, unracialized) body; but what 'body' is on display in a work like *Moffitt 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 "camps" [...] 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.³ Which feminisms mattered for Mendieta? And which feminisms are at stake now as 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 lauded and widely recognised figure within feminist art histories; her work has been featured in many major exhibitions of women artists⁴ and she has also been at the forefront of Latin American art history, with these two ostensibly distinct spheres sometimes coming together (as when her art was included in the 1995 exhibition *Latin American Women Artists 1915–1985*). Mendieta has also been written about in many important volumes on women artists and feminist art.⁵ 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.'⁶ 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 (she continued to live in Iowa until 1978, when she moved to New York City).⁷ 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 campus, including performance artist Vito Acconci and feminist conceptualist 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.⁸ 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.⁹ In addition to this move of self-substitution or self-surrogacy, the piece has a distinctive collaborative aspect – she needed help to tie herself up in this fashion, and relied on – *depended on* – others to observe and document her in this state.

In the rape pieces, Mendieta seems to be rehearsing various postures of female subjugation or submission, almost as if to exorcise 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 roped 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.¹⁰ 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 flies 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. *Rape* (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 atrocity document is escalated by the explicitly posed female body. Yet in perhaps her most well-known works, the *Siluetas* series, living bodies have been evacuated, leaving 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 blood and animal entrails in an open suitcase and left it in 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.'¹¹ Instigating morbid interest if not horror, this suitcase recalls Brazilian artist 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)



Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations), 1972
Colour photograph (detail)



Adrian Piper
The Mythic Being, 1973
 Video

where she transferred her friend Morty 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.'¹² In truth, the result is closer to drag than to 'reality'—an exaggerated, playful artifice. She also engaged in a series of exercises distorting her appearance through wigs and make-up, in *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* (1972); this piece bears a resemblance to Martha Wilson's later photographic diptych, *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, Mendieta'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 21* (1980) also using make-up and multiple personae to visualise the ways in which femininity has been strongly associated with whiteness. These works resonate with Mendieta's interest in intersectionality, the multiplicity of bodies, the unfixed qualities of identity, and the performativity of gender and race.

It is crucial to our understanding of the response to Mendieta'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 Mendieta'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 Mendieta's 'shocking, bloody rape "tableaux"' as one of many examples of work by artists including Piper, Wilson, Eleanor Antin and others who were interrogating questions of identity within conceptual frameworks.¹³ As Lippard understood it, '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'.¹⁴ In 'The Pains 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 Mendieta and Piper, again as examples of what she calls 'the sexual and gender-oriented uses of the body in conceptual art by women artists'.¹⁵ Though Mendieta 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 *Heresies*

After Mendieta 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 Mendieta was active within A.I.R. for several years; however, her commitment to A.I.R.'s feminist politics is still somewhat contested.¹⁶ This photo of the 'women of A.I.R.' places Mendieta 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 tokenised focal point of the image (above).



Martha Wilson
I make up the image of my perfection/ I make up the image of my deformity, 1974
 Color photograph, text



The members of the A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 1979
 Black and white photograph
 Left to right, top: Mary Beth Edelson, Nancy Spero, Donna Byars
 Middle: Rachel bas-Cohan, Sarah Draney, Dotty Attie, Anne Healy
 Bottom: Pat Lasch, Clover Vail, Ana Mendieta, Daria Dorosh

A.I.R. provided Mendieta with a platform to exhibit her work, as well as a crucial network of support for her artistic experimentation, and it was there that she had her first solo shows in New York. For these exhibits, she continued to make the work she is famous for, the *Silveta* series and was rapidly absorbed within a larger movement of white US feminism interested in reclaiming the historical importance of goddesses, one that was meant as a corrective to the naturalisation of patriarchal ideas of religion. But as Olga Viso has noted, Mendieta had already been exploring prehistoric art and multifaceted notions of spirituality within several ancient cultures; this interest predated her knowledge of the feminist reclamation of goddesses.¹⁷

In fact, the issue of goddesses and Mendieta would prove heated in the context of ideas about essentialism and fraught, 'innate' correspondences made between female bodies and nature.¹⁸ Briefly, in the late 1970s and early '80s Mendieta was viewed as one of many female artists seriously grappling with this subject. Her work appeared in the feminist publication *Heresies* in their 1978 special issue on 'The Great Goddess' (p.33) in Gloria Feman Orenstein's 'The Reemergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women'.¹⁹ Orenstein writes of Mendieta's *Silveta del Laberinto* (1974): 'In this piece someone traced her silhouette on the ground [...] Her image was imprinted upon the earth, suggesting that through a merging with the Goddess spirits are evoked that infuse the body and cause such occurrences as out-of-body journeys or astral travel'. Orenstein elides the collaborative aspect of her work – 'someone traced her silhouette' – and places Mendieta in a homogenising context in which all 'Goddess spirits' are more or less equivalent, collapsing the cultural specificities and historical differences that Mendieta was keen to emphasise.

Mendieta's relationship to goddesses was complex and volatile; she became resistant to having her work seen as another iteration of a trendy subtopic that became increasingly suffocating and rigid. She even drastically modified the aesthetics of her *Silveta* series to move them away from goddess associations, removing the arms from her torsos to make them into more open-ended forms.

As she stated:

The reason why I had the hands up was because it was like [...] a way of going into the earth. It didn't have any other kind of connotation but what I found happened was that some critics started writing about my work very specifically, in terms of the Great Goddess, and I didn't want my work to be looked at in such a very specific kind of way. I want my work to be open because it's made in that kind of spirit. So later on I got rid of the arm.²⁰

In fact, Mendieta always emphasised that she worked with 'real specific earth' rather than a generic idea of 'earth'; likewise, she was interested in *specific* goddesses not 'the Goddess'.²¹ She fought hard to have her careful research into particular geographical contexts made legible rather than subsumed under the larger totalising rubric of undifferentiated 'Goddess spirits', as in her A.I.R. exhibition, *Ana Mendieta: Rupestrian Sculptures*, in which the gallery notes state: 'The works in this exhibition are named for goddesses from the Taino Culture indigenous to the Caribbean' (pp.212-13). Jane Blocker describes how Mendieta differed from some of her contemporaries like Mary Beth Edelson, writing that when feminist critics 'appropriate Mendieta to a white goddess model and dis-locate her understanding of the earth from its origins in specific Cuban cultural traditions. It is difficult not to read this dis-location as a "whitening" of the image of the earth goddess, as a way of purifying it of its roots in African and indigenous cultures'.²² Mendieta resisted being subsumed within a white feminist agenda that insisted upon the cross-historical and cross-cultural singularity of 'the goddess' or 'the female body', instead grounding herself more insistently in specific contexts and traditions, widening the spectrum of both goddesses and bodies.

Mendieta struggled to define herself and her work within the sexism and racism of the art world during the 1970s and '80s. She was part of an A.I.R. task force on 'discrimination against women and minority artists', and became an active and vocal advocate for Cuban artists both male and female.²³ During this time, she participated in a wide number of New York art events dedicated to thinking about feminist art, and was on the editorial collective for the *Heresies* special issue on feminism and ecology, called 'Earthkeeping/ Earthsaking'.²⁴ Within its pages appears Mendieta's project *La Venus Negra* (The Black Venus) (p.215); works such as these have inflected recent readings of Mendieta as an eco-feminist, a reading that was only preliminarily beginning to circulate in her lifetime.²⁵

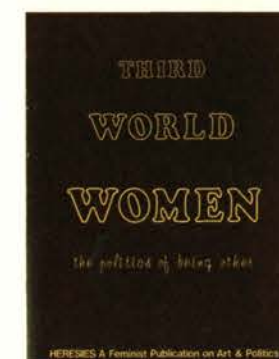
As she immersed herself in activist circles, Mendieta became dissatisfied with the A.I.R. collective and sought connections elsewhere, including within the Cuban exile community and within Third World feminist organisations. Though the *Heresies* collective had published an issue on 'Third World Women' (right), Mendieta realised how deeply ingrained racism was within white US feminism. In this she was not alone; panellists at the Soho 20 Gallery in 1978 on 'Third-World Women Artists' - including Pindell, Faith Ringgold and Tomei Arai - discussed how 'individual encounters with the feminist movement had been keenly disappointing. Most of them had found white feminists incapable of comprehending the peculiar plight of non-white women - either because they were partners in the oppression or because they were too preoccupied with their own priorities to deal meaningfully with those of others'.²⁶

Mendieta began to disidentify with the 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*, she wrote: 'American feminism as it stands is basically a white middle-class movement. This exhibition points not necessarily to 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"'.²⁷ Mendieta's identification as a 'Third World woman' is related to a much wider move for women of colour in the US to self-organise around this phrase.²⁸ 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).²⁹ Another influential text, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, was published in 1981; it features an entire section dedicated to 'racism in the white women's movement', as well as one on 'the Third-World Woman Writer'.³⁰ The cover of the first edition of *This Bridge* features the schematic outline of a woman's body on all fours, and, though she is on her knees, she is clearly in motion, unburdened 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).³¹

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'.³² During the trial and its immediate aftermath, Mendieta was reduced to the status of victim, heroine or both.³³ A tell-all account, *Naked by the Window* (1990), by journalist Robert Katz, as well as a recent feminist graphic novel, *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* (2011), by Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, have circulated her biography to popular audiences.³⁴

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.³⁵ Though the conflict of 'bad' or regressive 1970s essentialism versus 'good' or progressive 1980s-'90s anti-essentialism is often reduced to a false binary, there have been major divisions between these conflicting ideologies.³⁶ Mendieta died just as the tensions between the two were coming to a head.³⁷ By the late 1980s, rather than dismiss Mendieta for her goddess titles and use of female forms, feminists became more interested in challenging presumptions of Mendieta's 'essentialism', emphasising instead qualities such as 'impermanence, distance, vulnerability and remoteness'. These later words are from Mira Schor from 1988, who wrote that Mendieta's work was easily 'criticised by contemporary feminist writers'.³⁸



Top: *Heresies* #5, 'The Great Goddess', 1978
Bottom: *Heresies* #8, 'Third World Women', 1980

More recent feminist authors have more stridently defended Mendieta against charges of essentialism. Irit Rogoff writes, with some distaste: 'Lest 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"'.³⁹ Anne Raine states, 'I want to think of her work as inscribing not female or "natural" essences, but a gendered physicality, memory, desire and representation, across a concrete material terrain always already marked by politics and history'.⁴⁰ To avoid branding Mendieta with loaded words like 'nature' or 'biology', recent feminist authors use terms like alterity and fugitivity (Magdalena Maiz-Peña); exile and performativity (Jane Blocker); seriality and mimesis (Susan Best); trace and index (Joanna S. Walker); or 'spatialising and geographising gendered sites' (Rogoff).⁴¹ In broad strokes, writers have turned to a few key themes that are consonant with poststructuralist feminism: Mendieta's persistent evacuation of the female body, the iterability and repetition within her practice and the levels of mediation introduced by her use of the document.⁴² 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 *Siluetas* series, *Fetish* series and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series, veer strongly toward the essentialist pole in both intention in and reception', yet at the same time acknowledges that Mendieta's works exceed those readings with their emphasis on enigma and absence.⁴³

There have also been attempts to remove Mendieta from feminism altogether, as when Camnitzer 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.'⁴⁴ Merewether misapprehends how feminisms, far from marginal or limited, have been pivotal to the formation of contemporary art. But what are we to make of Mendieta's resignation from A.I.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 politic that might have 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.'⁴⁵

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 powerfully committed 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 organising, 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 unafraid to use the word 'faith'. As Cherrie 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 faith of activists



Christine Redfern / Caro Caron
From *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, 2011
Published by Feminist Press

I am talking about.'⁴⁶ It is fitting, then, that the newly reissued version of *This Bridge* features a work by none other than Mendieta – *Rastras Corporales* (Body Tracks) – on its cover.

Coda: Afterlives

As Mendieta's work is taken up in different contexts over time, it is inflected by contemporaneous feminist theories and activities. Her work is seen not only within catalogue exhibitions and art history journals, but in the many homages, 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 Carl 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 Troyano and Raquelín Mendieta, the artist's sister, placed photos of Mendieta's face on top of Andre's flat metal works: a moving evocation of loss and grief. For artist and writer Coco Fusco, Mendieta's multifaceted exilic 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'.⁴⁷ In Fusco's words, 'scores of (mostly white) feminist artists have claimed affinities to Ana, and have invoked her name as a metaphor for female victimization', a reduction smacking of lightly veiled racist opportunism. Fusco states that 'there are more than a few of Ana's colleagues who, remembering her struggles to gain recognition [...] find the current appropriation of her image painful and even exploitative'.⁴⁸

One year after the Guggenheim protest, Nancy Spero (one of Mendieta's A.I.R. colleagues) performed her *Homage to Ana Mendieta* at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, a recreation of a piece by Mendieta that Spero had first performed in 1991 in a spontaneous act of commemoration.⁴⁹ Cuban artist Tania Bruguera produced a series of reconstructions of Mendieta's work in her 11-year-long *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta* (1985–96); 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.⁵⁰ 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, overleaf) that recalls Mendieta's *Sweating Blood* (1973) (p.44).

These diverse echoes 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



Regina José Galindo
The Weight of Blood, 2004
Video still



Tania Bruguera
El Peso de la Culpa (The Burden of Guilt), 1997-99
Decapitated lamb, rope, water, salt, Cuban soil flag made out of human hair and fabric

themselves.⁵¹ Mendieta was deeply concerned with bodies, with their flesh and bones and fluids. Her work maintained some tether to the realm of representation, even as in its later years it became more abstract, such as *Árbol de La Vida* (Tree of Life) (1982) (p.103) and *Furrows* (1984). In such works, the curved outlines have become disarticulated from any clear corporeality, rejecting self-containment. *Furrows*, in particular, with its ripples emerging from the grass, is barely recognisable as a coherent or closed figure. Radically simplified and structured around pre-existing elements, these works gesture out of themselves; they extend into space. Both are organised around a strong vertical line – the trunk of a tree and a footpath – 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 Mendieta moved *contra el cuerpo* ('against the body') – in the sense that a counter-attack is a redoubling of effort, and a counter-proposition does not negate the original but seeks to answer it. Just as there is no such thing as 'the earth' or 'the goddess', there is no such thing as 'the body' in Mendieta's work; she goes against 'the body' to reassert the existence of, and interdependency between, many bodies.

- Mendieta's early work has been helpfully catalogued in Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich/New York, 2008)
- Ned Rifkin, foreword, *Ana Mendieta Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985* (Washington, D.C., 2004), p.11
- Miwon Kwon, 'Bloody Valentines': Afterimages by Ana Mendieta', in M. Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 165-66
- Such exhibits include the following touchstones: *Making their Mark: Women Artists Move Into the Mainstream* (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1989); *Féminin-masculin: Le sexe de l'art* (Centres Georges Pompidou, 1995); *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996); *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (curated by Amelia Jones at the Hammer Museum, 1996); and *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (organised by Connie Butler for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007). This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it points to how Mendieta's work has been curated into avowedly feminist contexts as well as seen in relation to other female artists in shows that do not have an explicit feminist lens
- For example, Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (New York, 1990), Norma Broude/Mary D. Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York, 1994), and Connie Butler/Alexandra Schwartz (eds.), *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 2010). Again this list is partial – please see the bibliography on pp.238
- Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin, 1994), p.93. Camnitzer was a close friend of Mendieta's, and dedicated this book to her
- See Julia Herzberg, 'Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980', in Viso, *Earth Body*, pp.136-79.
- Lucy Lippard, 'Who Is Ana Mendieta? Nobody Else', in Christine Redfern/Caro Caron (eds.), *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* (New York, 2011), p.6; See also Viso, *Earth Body*, p.46
- Kaira M. Cabañas, 'Ana Mendieta: "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am"', in *Woman's Art Journal* (spring-summer 1999), pp.12-17. See also Hanna Kruse, 'A Shift in Strategies: Depicting Rape in Feminist Art', in *The Subject of Rape* (New York, 1993)
- Donald Kuspit, 'Ana Mendieta, Autonomous Body', in Gloria Moure (ed.), *Ana Mendieta* (Santiago de Compostela, 1996), pp.35-82
- Mendieta, transcription of slide lecture at Alfred University, 1981, from the Mendieta archive.
- Mendieta, MA thesis statement (Iowa City, 1972)
- Lucy Lippard, 'Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women's Art', in Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), pp.89-98.
- Lippard, 'Making Up', p.91
- Lippard, 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art', in *The Pink Glass Swan*, pp.99-116
- Raquelín Mendieta states that she joined A.I.R. primarily because she failed to find commercial gallery representation in New York; communication with the author, July 2013
- Viso, *Earth Body Art*, p.45
- Jennie Klein has delved into this complex issue with more detail than can be accommodated here; see her 'Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s', *Feminist Studies* Vol. 35, No. 3 (fall 2009), pp.575-602
- Gloria Fenem Orenstein, 'The Reemergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women', *Heresies: Great Goddess*, Issue 5 (1978), pp.74-84. It is important to recognise that many differences are quite alive within the *Heresies* special issue (if not necessarily in Orenstein's article); the publication includes pieces by artists not commonly associated with goddess discourse, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles
- Alfred University lecture
- Ana Mendieta, interview with Joan Marter (1 February 1985), from the Mendieta archive
- Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, Exile* (Minneapolis, 1999), p.19. The goddesses that Mendieta referenced were not, at all uniformly Cuban, or Latin American, or African, or indigenous, as she explicitly drew on Etruscan and early Roman references as well. We must be attentive to her wide-ranging curiosity and not force onto her simplistic presumptions of her 'Latin American' content, for that impulse has its own essentialising undertones. It is also troubling when Mendieta's interest in a range of sacred and spiritual traditions is collapsed into the syncretic Cuban religion Santería; for one reading that is overly reliant on a framework of Santería, see Mary Jane Jacobs, *Ana Mendieta: The "Silueta" Series, 1973-1980* (New York, 1991)
- Laura Roulet, 'Ana Mendieta as a Cultural Connector with Cuba', *American Art*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (summer 2012), pp.21-27
- Heresies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Issue 13 (1981)
- See, for instance, the reproduction of a piece by Mendieta on the cover of environmental studies scholar and feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo's book *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY, 2000)
- Lowery Stokes Sims, quoted in Judy Seigel (ed.), *Munity and the Mainstream: Talk That Changed Art, 1975-1990* (New York, 1982), p.105
- Quoted in Viso, *Earth Body Art*, p.73
- Within the art world, Michele Wallace was a major figure within black feminism; her article 'Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood' was published in *Village Voice* (28 July 1975); reprinted in Manning Marable/Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology* (New York, 2000), pp.520-23. See also Wallace's groundbreaking *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York, 1979)
- The Combahee River Collective, 'A Black Feminist Statement' (1977), in Gloria T. Hull/Patricia Bell Scott/Barbara Smith (eds.), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York, 1982), pp.13-22
- Cherrie Moraga/Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA, 1981)
- Though not stated in her letter, some of Mendieta's reasons for resigning include: an imminent move to Rome; other emerging opportunities to show her work; and her anger over the fact that her proposal to sponsor a Brazilian artist to take her place in the A.I.R. cooperative had been turned down
- Joanna Frueh, 'Making a Mess: Women's Bane, Women's Pleasure', in Katy Deepwell (ed.), *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester, 1988), p.147
- As Irit Rogoff notes of the trial: 'Her feminist activism, her co-founding of *Heresies*, her third world politics, the constant contact with Cuba, her promotion of Cuban artists in the United States, none of these were mentioned'; *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London/New York, 2000), p.133. (To be clear: Mendieta was not a co-founder of *Heresies*, but, as mentioned above, was on its editorial collective for one issue)
- Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta* (New York, 1990); Redfern/Caron
- Gill Perry, 'The Expanding Field: Ana Mendieta's Silueta Series', in Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Frameworks for Modern Art* (New Haven, 2003), pp.153-205
- See Helen Molesworth, 'Cleaning Up in the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles', in Michael Newman/Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London, 1999), pp.107-22
- Directly addressing this conflict, Mira Schor wrote about a panel at the New Museum of Contemporary Art held in December 1987 called 'The Great Goddess Debate – Spirituality vs. Social Practice in Recent Feminist Art', featuring Nancy Spero, Lynn Blumenthal, Arlene Raven, Kate Linker, Helen Deutsch and Judith Williamson. She recounts: 'The debate exposed a major rift within feminism itself [...] Deutsch and Linker could scarcely conceal their contempt for [Spero's] depictions of women, including ancient goddesses, for the relatively handmade look of her work, and for her identification with 70s activist feminist art [...] Their words, by logical extension, could be seen as possible attacks on the work of Ana Mendieta, given that the debate took place during the New Museum's Mendieta retrospective exhibition.' Mira Schor, 'Backlash and Appropriation', in Broude/Garrard, p.254
- Mira Schor, 'Ana Mendieta', first published in *Suffur* 22 (1988), republished in Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham, NC, 1997), p.66
- Rogoff, p.175
- Anne Raine, 'Embodied Geographies: Subjectivity and Materiality in the Work of Ana Mendieta', in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Ge-*
- Magdalena Maiz-Peña, 'Body Tracks: dis/locaciones, corporeidad y estética filmica de Ana Mendieta', *Letras Femininas*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (summer 2007), pp.175-92; Blocker, *Susan Best, 'The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta'*, *Art History*, Vol. 30, Issue 1 (February 2007), pp.57-82; Joanne S. Walker, 'The Body Is Present Even if in Disguise: Tracing the Trace in the Artwork of Nancy Spero and Ana Mendieta', *Tate Papers* issue 11 (April 2009); Rogoff
- Some authors have gone back and focused on her early student work, with its grotesque performances, to rescue her from charges of essentialism; see Kelly Baum, 'Shapely Shapelessness: Ana Mendieta's *Untitled* (Glass on Body Imprints: Face), 1972', in *More Than One: Photographs in Sequence* (Princeton, 2008), pp.80-93. Others have asserted that Mendieta was working within the more tactical realm of *strategic essentialism* advocated by feminist thinkers like Diana Fuss; see Michelle Hudson, 'Beyond Self: Strategic Essentialism in Ana Mendieta's *La Maja de Yerba*', MA Design Thesis, Georgia State University, 2011
- Kwon, p.167
- Charles Merewether, 'From Inscription to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the Work of Ana Mendieta', in Gloria Moure (ed.), *Ana Mendieta*, p.148, fn. 12
- Esther Adler, 'Ana Mendieta', in Butler/Schwartz, p.391
- Moraga, 'Preface', in Moraga/Anzaldúa, xviii
- Coco Fusco, 'Traces of Ana Mendieta: 1988-1993', in *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York, 1995), p.125
- Fusco, p.125
- For more on Spero's re-performance, see Walker
- Gerardo Mosquera, 'Cuba in Tania Bruguera's Work: The Body Is the Social Body', *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary* (Milan, 2009), pp.23-35; Gerardo Mosquera, 'Resucitando a Ana Mendieta', *Poliéster*, Vol.4, No.11 (winter 1995): pp.52-55
- José Quirago, 'Still Searching For Ana Mendieta', *Cuban Palimpsests* (Minneapolis, 2005), p.189