

INCORPORADOS:

The Art of Ana Mendieta

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THE ART OF ANA MENDIETA, THOUGH STILL LARGELY UNRECOGNIZED, HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN ART HISTORY. NOT ONLY IS IT SIGNIFICANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW WAYS OF CREATING ART, BUT THE IDEAS PRESENTED CALL INTO QUESTION COMMONLY ACCEPTED ATTITUDES OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN RADICAL WAYS. IN HER REJECTION OF THE GALLERY SPACE AND TRANSFORMATION OF PERFORMANCE ART INTO SCULPTURE WORKS, INTO ART AS A DISAPPEARING ACT, MENDIETA EXPLORES THE SHAKY BOUNDARIES OF WHAT ART ACTUALLY IS AND COULD BE. IN THESE EXPLORATIONS, SHE DISSECTS THE IDEA OF IDENTITY AND GIVES A NEW DEFINITION OF IT ON HER OWN TERMS. THIS ESSAY EXPLORES MENDIETA'S MOSTLY IGNORED EARLY WORKS IN CONJUNCTION WITH HER MORE WELL KNOWN LATER PIECES IN ORDER TO GIVE A MORE FULL EXAMINATION OF BOTH THE IDEAS PRESENT AND THE IMPORTANCE THE WORK HAS BEYOND HER OWN PERSONAL LIFE AND TO THE WHOLE OF SOCIETY.

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Ana Mendieta's work consists of revolutionary concepts. It revels in calling into question traditionally accepted views of life and society as a whole. One of the most commonly recognized concepts of human life is the notion of personal, individual identity. In general, most people assume that they are all individuals and find their identity aligned in a fixed way with their own race, gender, heritage, creed, and political status. Due to her own complicated upbringing, Mendieta was not willing to accept the conventional notions of identity as a fixed concept. Her work is based on the belief that there is no one true way to statically define identity and that true identity can only be found in the rejection of individuality. Her beliefs stem from a profound understanding of the Afro-Cuban mystical religion of Santeria. Using the culture of Santeria and her own personal beliefs, Mendieta's artwork expresses the problematic connections between traditionally opposing forces and the complications of commonly understood concepts. She matured through her work by exploring innovative ways to create that, in their own definitions, challenge traditional views of art itself. Through the progression of her work, Mendieta formed a sophisticated way of exploring and uniting the boundaries between supposed opposites. She walked a tenuous line between meanings which served to enrich her work with a multitude of underlying implications.

Although her artwork does not find its sole basis in biography, it is important to understand the upbringing of Ana Mendieta in order to appreciate how she came to her radical views later in life. Mendieta was born to a privileged family in Cuba; however, as a teenager, Mendieta was sent to the United States as a part of the Catholic-based initiative, Operation Pedro Pan, to escape the dictatorship of

Fidel Castro. She was bounced from orphanage to foster home and back again in different Iowa neighborhoods, never really finding one true place to call home. During these formative years, Mendieta was treated as an “other.” She had no family to remind her of her own heritage and strong background or to help her cope with being in this strange new place. She lived in neighborhoods where she was one of a very few Latins and has stated that she felt isolated and ostracized by other children and adults. Because of this particular situation, Mendieta developed a different way of looking at herself and her own identity. She was uprooted from the homeland with which she would have traditionally associated her identity. Her sense of identity, and what it means to have one, was complicated by her own situation. Instead of remaining confused and searching her whole life to find one true identity, Mendieta used her artwork as a means of complicating and reversing traditional views of identity as a fixed, immovable thing. Through her work she attempted to expose the complications that arise from fixing identity, in a gendered, political, or social sense.

EARLY WORK

In her earliest experiments with this concept, Mendieta attempts to call into question the most basic forms of identification. In her series, *Facial Cosmetic Variations* from 1972, Mendieta photographs the facial distortions that occur as she dons different colored wigs and paints her face with theatrical makeup to change her skin tone. The effects are so subtle that in each picture it appears to the viewer that he or she is looking at a completely different person altogether. Through very little effort on her part, Mendieta plays with the most personal aspect of a human being's individuality, his or her own face. By showing that she can manipulate her face into something that is entirely

foreign to how she actually looks, Mendieta exposes the problem with fixing one's own identity on facial features. She uses herself as a clean slate to question the notion of true individuality.

In her M.A. thesis project, *Facial Hair Transplant* from 1972, Mendieta goes further in her investigation by exploring and challenging the notion of gendered identity. Here she documents the transplant of the freshly-shaven beard of her male friend, Morty Sklar, to her own face. His hair color matches hers almost identically and the transition from female to male is almost effortless. She says of the piece in her thesis statement, "After looking at myself in a mirror, the beard became real. It did not look like a disguise. It became a part of myself and not at all unnatural to my appearance."ⁱ By simply gluing hair onto her face, Mendieta straddles a line between the sexes and exposes the complexity of commonalities between the two. As Jane Blocker explains, "By working with the conventions of the binary to represent identity but being unable herself to fit their regulatory practices, her work exposes their untenability."ⁱⁱ She suggests, as she did in her *Facial Cosmetic Variations*, that she can inhabit the identity of a male even though she is only altering her surface appearance. She represents maleness with facial hair; however, if a woman can just as easily take on that particular part of the male identity, how firmly rooted is that gendered identity?

In her *Glass on Body* series from 1972, Mendieta further challenges the notion of gender by using a glass sheet to distort the forms of her naked body, most successfully in the piece where she completely eliminates her nipples and distorts her breasts; she blurs the edges between male and female, creating an alternate human form. According to Gill Perry, "She both takes control of the experience, directing the viewer's gaze towards the ways in which a woman's body might be abused or disfigured (as, for example, through rape) and alienates herself from it, creating a more emblematic image."ⁱⁱⁱ In part of the same series she presses her face against the glass, violently distorting her features, producing an almost grotesque and inhuman creature.

Here she exploits the human form in ways to disassociate it with any kind of gender identity.

Mendieta's lack of roots from childhood caused her to research where she came from during her more adult years. She found a strong connection with the religion of Santeria, which furthered her efforts to challenge traditional values and concepts present within society. The religion of Santeria does not connect with modern, American notions of identity, life, or death very well. Santeria practice and mythology places an importance on the connection of seemingly opposing forces. Mendieta's performances expose the falsehoods of traditional views on fixing identity to external characteristics. She attempts to apply a Santeria explanation to modern day societal problems.

INFLUENCE OF SANTERIA

Through the influence of Santeria, Mendieta uses her talents and abilities to try and uncover what has been hidden from the waking world. Her early opposition to the "secrets" that are kept in modern society perhaps grew out of her anger and reaction to the rape and murder of a fellow student at Iowa University. This personal situation which confronted Mendieta caused her to react in a surprisingly radical way. Her performance art pieces which she entitled *Rape Scenes*, present a startling and gruesome look at the reality that is covered up by our world. "These works, made as feminist statements of protest, graphically depicted the horror and brutality of this everyday occurrence which is so ineffectively addressed by the police and legal system."^{iv} Mendieta would invite friends, professors, and students either to an "art happening" or simply over to her apartment for the evening. Before they were scheduled to arrive, Mendieta would stage herself in such a way so to appear as if she had been raped and murdered. Guests would arrive under the false pretence of a casual event or gathering of people, only to be confronted with the horrible and terrifying reality of the rape of a woman. Instead of covering up these awful occurrences, Mendieta exposes them to the public in order to instigate an upheaval of their mental reliance on the media. She in turn also gives more meaning

to the appalling events by giving them a real, raw quality for the public to see.

Mendieta's art work is an attempt to break away from tradition, to form a new way of seeing the female form, liberated from male desire; her "use of the female body as a naked protagonist, not as subject, but as woman unclothed, unveiled, potent and sexual, is radical."^v Ana's rape scenes show a gruesome defilement of the female body; however, they turn the focus from the victim to the participant. The entire event is staged in order to force the viewer to confront the physicality of their own presence somewhere that they have not expected to be. They are the only active participants in the scene, as the subject has been "murdered." The acknowledgement of the viewing of the aftermath of a scene that only the perpetrator might see, implicates them in the crime. This personal experience of the piece serves to free the raped woman from the silence of the crime she suffers. The recognition of the event has an element of power in it.

Mendieta's close ties to Santeria illustrate her more complex understanding of these different levels of identities and meanings. In particular, she begins a direct dialogue with a more complicated notion of blood and the sacrifice. Ritual sacrifice is a central part of religious life to practitioners of Santeria. The sacrifice is not treated as a victim, but as a transcendent being giving its divine force to the one offering it to the gods. "The rituals of Santeria are intended to reinforce and strengthen the *Orisha* (God) while bestowing *Ashe* on the believer. *Ashe* is power, divine power, the grace of God, the life force of God... Blood has *Ashe*. Blood also contains the potentiality of life and is a symbol of life."^{vi}

Her *Rape Scenes* expose this complicated nature of the sacrifice. Violence and sacrifice in the myths of Santeria and pre-colonial religions existed not as forms of punishment or horror, but as integral tenets of life. One story involving the origin of woman, which Ana wrote about for a book she planned on publishing, centers on a woodpecker, "taking the women who had no sex, they bound their hands and

feet and tied the bird to their bodies. The woodpecker began to work where the sex of women is ordinarily located."^{vii} This violent story about the carving out of woman's genitals by a bird's beak was intended to be accompanied with a quiet and unassuming drawing of a figure's silhouette on a leaf. The juxtaposition of the horrifyingly graphic with a kind of tenderness is something that Mendieta will use later in her work. She may be even illustrating this myth in her performance piece *Bound Woman* of 1973 in which she rolls and writhes around naked on the floor with her arms and legs bound together. In this story, sacrifice is illustrated and played with almost as an initiation rite or rite of passage for women.

Women and birds are often conflated within Mendieta's work. This is especially important due to the predominance of the chicken in Santeria sacrifices. In her piece entitled *Feathers on a Woman* of 1972, Mendieta glues white feathers to the entire face and body of a nude woman so that only her hands and genitals are left exposed. In the photographs she takes of her subject, Mendieta poses the woman in a proud and forceful way. Her female sexuality, the source of life, confronts the viewer in its essence, completely unapologetic. In a piece executed in the same year, *Death of a Chicken*, Mendieta sacrifices a live white chicken by having its head cut off. She lets the chicken's blood flow out of its decapitated body, staining its own virginal white feathers, and holds it upside down while it fiercely struggles with its last dying impulses, splattering blood all over her body. The dying blood pouring out of the flailing chicken has a primal, spiritual energy that perhaps only a sacrificial entity in that last dying moment can contain. Here the images of blood and sacrifice are viewed as positive.

In light of this perspective, Mendieta's rape scenes take on a new significance. As a sacrifice, the woman is the ultimate victim of traditional notions of male desire; however, Mendieta wishes to distort this view in order to give the woman's death more profundity and significance. As Mary Jane Jacob suggests, "Mendieta began to invest the image of blood with an ancient meaning and its more positive

interpretation in Santeria as the essence of life.”^{viii} By associating the raped woman with a sacrificial being, she calls forth the complicated notion in Santeria of blood sacrifice as a source of power, divinity, and life.

Santeria taught Mendieta that life and death, male and female, violence and nurture are all concepts that exist in direct connection with one another, not in opposition. Mendieta’s art attempts to explore this instability in a visual way. Mendieta often quoted Octavio Paz in her artist’s statements, saying, “Our cult of death is also a cult of life in the same way that love is a hunger for life and a longing for death.”^{ix} In this sense, a scene of death or murder is at one time a place of intense violence, but with that death, a kind of power and life for the victim may be found.

LATER WORK

The *Siluetas* series, perhaps Mendieta’s most well known work, shows the movement of her art toward a more primal state. She wishes to insert herself within the land, but she also is well aware of her own physical limitations and the fact that there is no real way to do this other than through death or burial. She solves this problem by tapping into a different way of seeing herself; she “evokes the body (and its death) through memory and association, rather than through more obvious signs of violence and mutilation.”^x Instead of using her body physically, she uses her shadow image, or silhouette, to make marks into the terrain in various ways. By doing so, she relinquishes her own personal identity as it is known in the bodily sense and offers the earth the imprint of herself. She leaves her own mark on the earth and relishes in its ability to absorb it back into itself. In this way she is also furthering the ideals of performance art in the fact that these supposed sculptures are intended to disappear. They are inherently impermanent, intended as momentary glimpses of the human form which will sooner or later, depending on the process involved, be consumed by the power of nature. In many pieces, she carves and sculpts her outline into the earth and mud, allowing it to be eaten away and reappropriated by the landscape over time. In another piece, she allows the

ocean’s tides to take away her silhouette that has been filled in with red flowers and berries. These pieces exist as a trace of abstract sculpture and self portrait, male and female, earth and body, at once solid and present and at the same time decomposing and absent.

Due to many factors Mendieta’s work is often marginalized by critics. Due to the time period and her presence in the circumscribed feminist sector of art, she is often written off as a goddess worshipping artist. Her use of the earth as a mode for creation juxtaposed with her feminist leanings also traps her in the category pertaining only to feminist issues. In the same instance, her complicated background and use of her own body forces her into the categorization of a narcissistic self-worshiper. It is thoroughly impossible to suggest that any one of these criticisms is wholly right or wrong. One is able to assert, however, that there is an element of truth to each one, but that no one meaning or explanation can be attributed to her work. Her critics may have all been partially right in their categorizations, however in fitting slightly into all of these categories, she thus resists specific classification. In her choice of performance art as a medium, Mendieta’s work functions both with and without an “author.” While bits of her biography, personal beliefs, and politics filter in through the works, their explanation does not rest on them.

While she does work within the confines of what is known as the feminized earth, it is Mendieta’s interest in the complicated notion of the purity of nature and the land that causes her to work in this field. Land and the earth have been associated with the female body for centuries, and for centuries, just like the land, the female body has come to be known through a culturally constructed sense. Keeping with her theme of the more complicated notion of identity, Mendieta suggests that just as gender is a culturally constructed, and thus a false marker of identity, so are the culturally constructed territories of the land. She executes her pieces in different parts of the world with the same style. They function as a whole unit and are not noted to have any particularities in them other than what nature had in-

tended (i.e. in different climates or natural zones, such as forest or ocean). The natural and thus more pure and true delineations of identity that exist in the land are more important to Mendieta than the superficial ones suggested by cultural confines.

Critics also often come to the conclusion that Mendieta's *Siluetas* series represents the culmination of an ongoing search for a personal identity. Mendieta has previously outlined in her speech entitled "Art and Politics," her belief that art is intended for a high, noble purpose:

"Art's greatest value is its spiritual role and the influence that it exercises in society, because art is the result of a spiritual activity of man and its greatest contribution is to the intellectual and moral development of man." ^{xi}

Critics tread upon the essentialist view that her work can be summed up as an autobiographical journey, landing ultimately in moments in her works where she places herself within the earth, finding a constant source of fixed identity from which to define herself. More refined interpretations would suggest otherwise: "The persistent characterization of Mendieta's work as signifying her personal loss, a loss forced on a member of the so-called Third World by the West, works only to rehearse the script of dominance and submission on which both colonialism and imperialism are based."^{xii} In fact when looking at her work and writings at the time, all evidence points to Mendieta's reveling in the concept of loss and exile. She does not align herself with any one nation in her *Siluetas*, rather she inserts them into the ground of Iowa, New York, Mexico, Rome, and Cuba in the same way. Her longing was not one for a nation to identify with, but an all encompassing force to let go within. For Mendieta, the earth provided such an option because it "is not a place but a ubiquitous concept, one that makes national identification uncanny. That is, to identify herself with the 'earth' and not with Cuba or the United States means that Mendieta can sustain rather than assuage

exile."^{xiii} The emphasis on disappearance and remaining unmarked by time and place is at the forefront of these works. The power of the physical terrain to remain unchanged by politics and societal conventions is where Mendieta finds solace and power.

CONCLUSION

Mendieta furthered the Santeria belief that there is not one individual or national identity, in a spiritual sense, but there is only the concept of "the all." In an artist's statement Mendieta explains:

My art is grounded in the belief in one Universal Energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of the Universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world. There is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood, the unapprised earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us. There is above all the search for origin.^{xiv}

Mendieta formed her concept of identity as orphanhood and a loss of origin. Identity then becomes, logically, a form of exile and isolation. Jane Blocker explains that in accepting this paradox there is actually "no essence, only the search for essence; there is no identity, only the name; there is no origin, only the cinder"^{xv} Mendieta's work asserts that there is no real origin or true meaning, only the search for this origin and the interplay between different meanings. In her use of her deconstructed body she has not found the origin, but has begun to create a search for that origin.

By creating her *Siluetas*, Mendieta attempts to create a collective identity for both herself and perhaps even the whole of human kind. She inserts her earth sculptures into the land untouched by markers of time or place. In doing so, she suggests that history and culture do not exist in a linear sense, but can be understood as more of a collective understanding amongst peoples. As Mendieta herself asserts, “It is because culture is a historic phenomenon that we must refer to it not just in past and present tense but in the dialectical effect one has on the other, as well as dialectically with other cultures... Civilization emerges as the gathering and use of past experiences, more or less done in an intuitive way.”^{xvi} In the human being’s quest for the origin and thus identity, which will inevitably turn up without an answer, he submits himself to the power of communion with others. In that submission to the community of the all, the collective search for origin becomes the origin in a sense.

Mendieta’s “imagined community crosses all territories, escapes all border guards, can be found anywhere on the planet, [and] is tied neither to language nor to race.”^{xvii} The messages and memories collectively conveyed throughout the past and into the present to formulate a kind of shared and universal identity are what Mendieta attempts to elevate, give power to, and spread throughout the world. If the viewer accepts Mendieta’s deconstruction of the commonly accepted notions of gender, identity, and basic human experiences, such as life and death, he or she can better enter into Mendieta’s rather different and innovative world. In this world, the person occupies no place, no time and is, in effect, no one. However, in this loss of national, gendered, and individual associations, transcendence from the falsehoods and masks of modern day society can be attained. If one can separate oneself from these everyday associations, then maybe life can be lived better and more fully. Mendieta’s work was tragically never allowed to develop past September 8th of 1985. Her fatal fall from a 34th story window marked the end of her life and career. Her works, however, still live on as reminders of both a particular time in history and also a universal fluid that runs through all time and cultures.

ENDNOTES

- i Mendieta, (164)
- ii Blocker and Mendieta, (49)
- iii Perry (173)
- iv Jacob (193)
- v Sabbatino (150)
- vi Jacob (192)
- vii Mendieta (185)
- viii Jacob (193)

- ix Merewether (101)
- x Perry (173)
- xi Mendieta (167)
- xii Blocker and Mendieta (82)
- xiii Blocker and Mendieta (78)
- xiv Blocker and Mendieta (34)
- xv Blocker and Mendieta (34)
- xvi Mendieta (171)

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