

**Eros,  
Death,  
and  
Life:  
The  
Films  
of  
Ana  
Mendieta**

**Michael Rush**

It is ironic that, as I write, the United States government has initiated reestablishing diplomatic and commercial ties with Cuba, after more than fifty years. Ana Mendieta would have been sixty-six years old, born in 1948 and the subject of an untimely death in 1985. At age twelve, in perhaps the most formational decision ever made for her, her parents put Mendieta and her sister, Raquelín, two years older, on a plane to the United States to spare them what might be coming with the new Castro regime. If ever there were an artist trying to recapture lost time and her irretrievably beloved culture, it was Ana Mendieta.

Mendieta was born the second of three children to Ignacio and Raquel Oti Mendieta. Hers was an upper-middle-class family, her father being on the right side of the revolution when it came. He was made an assistant in the postrevolutionary Ministry of State in 1959, but a devout Catholic, he became strongly disillusioned with Castro's anti-Catholic stance and became involved in organizing counterrevolutionary activities. His two daughters were sympathetic with his beliefs (they themselves engaged in some counterrevolutionary activities even as their father worried they might be caught). At the time, there was general panic among much of the population and, given the island's proximity to the United States, planes were surely the quickest and best solution to their current fears of oppression. Their father arranged for their passage to America in 1961, through Operation Pedro Pan, a project spearheaded by a priest in Miami that allowed approximately 14,000 children to leave the country and enter the United States under the guardianship of the Catholic Church. But their lives were not to be easy. Instead of being welcomed by the growing community of Cuban refugees in Miami, they were sent to St. Mary's School in Iowa, where beatings and confinement were reputedly common. The sisters were separated and spent several years shuttling from one foster home to another. Mendieta felt abandoned by her family at home, and severely uprooted. She did not see her mother and brother again until 1966, or her father, who was jailed for disloyalty to Castro, until 1979. He died in 1983. This radical displacement was to form the motivating core of the artist's work in the years ahead; "Who am I? What am I? Where am I from?" would become her constant quests. Launched from her relatively obscure perch in Iowa, Ana Mendieta was to become one of the most original, intensely personal, artists of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

### **Ana Mendieta's Relationship to Film**

Cinema, the highbrow word for movies and films, exists in the popular imagination as a "dream factory," the repository of everyday folks' wishes to be everything from the all-powerful conqueror (Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, 1927) to the all-consuming love interest of a leading man or woman (*Love Story*, 1970). Beyond the Hollywood machine, however, exist thousands of more experimental and personal films produced with a variety of apparatuses, from Super 8 cameras and Handycams to iPads and Google glasses. Artists of all stripes have been drawn to the moving-image camera for decades and for multiple reasons: to expand their palette beyond the canvas and, often, to record their own forays into performance and expanded sculpture; not so much to participate in the narrative structure of "movies," but to engage in what can be a highly personal and intimate communication between recorded

image and personal gesture. Few artists in the relatively brief history of artist's cinema have used the camera so personally and vigorously as Ana Mendieta.

Though most often mentioned in the conceptual company of Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, and a host of other, mostly male, artists—the exceptions being Marina Abramović, Joan Jonas, and Hannah Wilke, among a few others—Mendieta defies available categories. If the descriptor *sui generis* were ever applied to any artist, it would be to Mendieta.

Art historians, being art historians, are often driven by the impulse to associate all artists with a movement, a classification, all bedecked in associations with other artists. I understand the impulse. I have it myself. It's very comforting to find an artist's "place" in the long sweep of history. But some artists, being artists, resist these classifications. Was the polymath da Vinci ever safely contained as a Renaissance painter? Was El Greco? Or, leaping times and genres, were Chris Marker or Jean-Luc Godard rightly sentenced to being generalized "avant-garde" filmmakers? Avant-garde, yes, but who else occupies their place in that genre? No one.<sup>1</sup>

We will return to the issue of contextualizing Mendieta, but let us go directly to the films themselves. My intentions here are mostly descriptive, to be read by the viewer in conjunction with seeing the stills in the catalogue or elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> My hope is that Mendieta's profound originality will emerge loudly by seeing the films.

### **The Films of Ana Mendieta**

Of the more than one hundred films shot during her lifetime, twenty-one are presented in the exhibition. Ten of these were filmed between 1973 and 1975 (her most fecund time with a camera), and eleven between 1976 and 1981.

Mendieta spent eleven years at the University of Iowa (1966–1977), several of them in the Intermedia Program founded by German-born Hans Breder (b. 1935) in 1968.<sup>3</sup> The many influences of this program and the invited artists who participated with the students will be discussed below.

*Door Piece* and *Moffitt Building Piece*, both filmed in Iowa in 1973, share little formal qualities with all of Mendieta's subsequent (and even earlier) films. These two fairly conceptually based pieces are investigations of form, especially *Door Piece*, and, yes, blood—an encompassing material for Mendieta going forward, but not blood in any ritualistic sense. We see here the young artist taking what she has learned from composition and painting classes to the instrument of the camera and seeing what might result. *Moffitt Building Piece* is particularly compelling. In it she films a nondescript building in the city from the outside, from a few feet away, in a parked car. Passersby, hurrying to work or wherever their day is taking them, fail to notice blood near the door; or, if they do notice, walk quickly on by. Part social commentary (doesn't anybody care about the potential horrors going on beyond that door?) and part performance, Mendieta here engages her relationship to blood, which she quickly turns to in the performance film *Sweating Blood*, also from 1973. With the camera pressed closed to her head, hair pulled up, and eyes closed, slowly blood starts dripping from her forehead. Soon the excretion becomes more profuse, suggesting at first an

act of violence, but then, with no facial expression of discomfort or much less pain, we believe that we are witnessing a transformation, perhaps from an animal into a human. Actual transformations (especially human to animal and vice versa) will become another signature part of Mendieta's work.<sup>4</sup>

Blood continues to be foregrounded for Mendieta in *Blood Writing* and *Blood Sign*, both also filmed in Iowa in 1974. Mendieta is clearly quickly becoming rebellious and provocative in these works, while still maintaining private, personal meanings to these actions. I believe it is not unfair to say that, in the safe confines of her life in Iowa, Mendieta is beginning to unleash years of sorrow and pain since leaving her homeland now so many years ago. No expression of grief is more telling (and dramatic) than the shedding of blood. In *Blood Writing*, she paints "SHE GOT LOVE" on a wooden barn door in big red letters.<sup>5</sup> The red paint (or perhaps real chicken blood) drips down the door while Mendieta, after completing the piece, appears in the shadows, her back to the camera. (fig. 1) The title of this piece sounds like a hip-hop song, but it was much too early for that. In a related piece titled *Dripwall*, from late 1973, blood drips profusely from a wall, originating from inside the door.



fig. 1 Ana Mendieta, *Blood Writing*, 1974, Super 8 film, color, silent.

In *Blood Sign*, Mendieta, her back to camera (as it often is in these early works), stands in front of another white building. These series of white buildings begin to appear as canvasses for her. She digs her hand into a pan of red liquid and starts making a rough outline of her body on the wall.<sup>6</sup> She paints "There is A Devil inside Me," then walks away as the camera lingers on the wall. This is a rather urgent cri de coeur or perhaps an announcement that her work was to become a little more vehement in the ensuing months, as it did. We may remind ourselves, however, that the artist's early film from 1972, *Chicken Movie*, *Chicken Piece*, is an intense "performance," inspired by the Viennese Actionists, and presented in front of a class at the Intermedia Program, in which Mendieta, naked, stands in front of a white wall and is handed a decapitated chicken from which she proceeds to drain the blood.<sup>7</sup>



Several art historians have probed Mendieta's relationship to Latin American cultures and goddess worship, though Mendieta disdained labeling herself as a "feminist artist" or "Latina artist": "My works do not belong to the Modernist tradition. . . . Nor is it akin to the commercially historical-self-conscious assertion of what is called post-modernism."<sup>8</sup> While many worthy attempts have tried to historicize Mendieta within the confines of "earth art," "body art," "performance," "feminist art," and so on, as noted above, I take the artist at her word in avoiding such characterizations. Her work also speaks for itself in this regard.



fig. 2 Ana Mendieta, *Ocean Bird (Washup)*, 1974, Super 8 film, color, silent.

In a series of films made in Mexico in 1974—*Creek*, *Bird Run*, *Ocean Bird (Washup)*, *Siluetas del Laberinto (Laberinth Blood Imprint)*, *Burial Pyramid*—Mendieta's affinity for that country was sealed in several ways. (fig. 2) She studied Mexican art in courses at the University of Iowa, including Professor Michael Kampen's "Introduction to Primitive Art." Kampen's broad survey included monuments from major excavation sites such as Yágul, Monte Albán, Mitla in Oaxaca, the Pyramid of the Sun, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the Water Goddess of Teotihuacán. Even more importantly, she studied with specialist Thomas Charlton, who had been conducting archaeological digs at Teotihuacán, Mexico, for some time. In 1971, the artist accompanied him on one of these digs. "That summer had a great impact on my work," Mendieta would later write, "as I rediscovered my Spanish heritage and culture as well as established a tremendous bond between myself and pre-Columbian cultures."<sup>9</sup> Mendieta would go on to interiorize these scientific experiences, transposing them into her art, which, we might say, is much more an art of personalized anthropology than anything conceptual, Post-Minimal, etc.

Equally worthy of mention, Hans Breder did an extraordinary service to his students by inviting the leading experimental artists and critics of his day to the Iowa workshop, often in collaboration with another visionary entity on the Iowa campus, the Center for the New Performing Arts. One such artist and critic was Willoughby Sharp (1936–2008), often considered one of the most brilliant and renegade commentators of the post-1960s New York avant-garde. His presence, along with artists Vito Acconci, Hans Haacke, Allan Kaprow, and especially the now

internationally celebrated theater and opera director Robert Wilson, to name a few, would strongly impact the artistic information from which the young students at Iowa could draw.

In the early 1970s, Mendieta had the good fortune to perform in two of Wilson's intensely visual and choreographed conceptual theater pieces, *Handbill* and *Deafman Glance*. Wilson's working methods remain to this day highly ritualistic. Incorporating into his pieces his years of travel in Asian cultures, Wilson emphasizes silence and extreme economy of gesture in all of his works, which range from the lengthy *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and *Letter from Queen Victoria* (1974) to the recent vaudeville-inspired work *Old Woman* (2014) and an homage to dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, *Letter to a Man* (2014), both featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov. In *Deafman Glance* (1970), Mendieta was a chorus member in a play that dealt with the murder of a deaf child by his mother. (fig. 3) With no words (there are no words in Mendieta's films either), Wilson meticulously orchestrates the movements of the mother, for example, as she prepares a glass of milk, or of the son reading in his room. Mendieta would have been subjected to endless hours of rehearsals to perform her practically still choreography. This type of attention to silence, ritual, and discipline appears to be a profound influence on her work.<sup>10</sup>



fig. 3 Robert Wilson, *Deafman Glance* at Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, April 22, 1971. Mendieta performed in the chorus for the premiere on December 15, 1970, at the Center for the New Performing Arts, Iowa City, Iowa.

Mendieta's *Siluenta Series*, in both photographs (35mm slides and negatives) and Super 8 films, is perhaps her most poignant expression of her intensely personalized anthropology. She created "silhouettes" of her body in all manner of places and positions: carved out rock formations; in sand and snow and ice. In these pieces she both inserts her body into the multimillennial ages of the earth and extracts from the earth primal energies for her own life as a human bound to the earth. She seals her bond with this earthly ground by lighting fire to the silhouettes or allowing them to disappear into the water or the dirt-bound cosmos. In two of her most visually compelling films, *Fire Silueta* (1974) and *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece)* (1976), she actually constructs effigies of her own body and sets them afire. Fire, of course, is another essential element to her, included with earth and water. In fire she is not immolating herself in sacrifice, but uniting herself to a primordial life-giving element.

In our desire to contextualize Mendieta, as noted above, we should avoid surface comparisons to land artists, performance artists, feminist artists, conceptual artists, postmodern artists, and so forth. While related to these pioneering artists, Mendieta's work is unique and singular in the history of mid-to-late-twentieth century art. For antecedents, one might look at Maya Deren's films *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), or *At Land* (1944), which features Deren on a beach, very much blending with the elements but seeking her own identity through the people she encounters. (fig. 4)



fig. 4 Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943, 16mm, black and white, silent.



fig. 5 Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *Swamp*, 1971. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

Two films by Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, *Swamp* (1971) and *Mono Lake* (1968), resonate somewhat with Mendieta. In *Swamp*, Holt carries a Bolex film camera through the tall, reedy grasses of a New Jersey swamp. Her eyes do not move from the lens while Smithson directs her navigation. (fig. 5) *Mono Lake*, a very personal “home movie” of sorts, features Smithson, his wife Holt, and artist Michael Heizer examining the volcanic land surrounding this alkaline California lake. Later identified as land artists, one can observe their then-innocent engagement with a primal earth. Though deeply rooted in the conceptual (film and its projection potentials, film as a performer, etc.), Anthony McCall created a series of films in the early 1970s using fire, which engaged this basic element in a ritualistic way, all titled *Landscapes for Fire*. In these films, his personal relationship to fire becomes palpable as he and the fire perform what might be called Fire Happenings. Among other users of Super 8 film, one might also consider the work of Peggy Ahwesh, Nina Fonoroff, and Kathy Geritz.

In the end, Mendieta herself expresses most simply and elegantly through the trajectory of her work: “I came from a tropical country, Cuba, and I have pictures of myself, seven months old, crawling around on the sandy beach. We had a house there, and I would be outside from 7:30 A.M. to 2:00 in the afternoon . . . out in the water and the sand. I learned about my body from doing that. Now I continue to use my body to communicate with the world. That way I can do something, step away from it, and see myself there afterward.”<sup>11</sup>

As can we.

- 1 In Mendieta’s case, historians and critics visibly struggle on the page to find her a “place” even to the point of writing self-contradictory statements in the same paragraph. There is enough information to suggest historical comparisons in Mendieta’s films within the context of a few other artists, but not in easy tracks such as “land art,” “performance,” “feminist art,” etc. See below.
- 2 In my opinion, Mendieta’s films cannot really be appreciated apart from her photographic work, which often inspired the films or accompanied them. Her sculptures, and especially performances, also offer important insights into the films.
- 3 For an excellent thorough study of Mendieta’s time at the University of Iowa, see Julia P. Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1998).
- 4 Mendieta engaged in several “Bird Transformations” early in her career. Two compelling photographs from 1972, both titled *Bird Transformation*, feature a naked female model hired by the artist (a very rare occurrence), completely covered in white feathers. Mendieta would do the same herself in future photos and films. In one of these two photographs, the model stands in a religiously familiar cruciform pose, arms outstretched; but in the other, she sits on a step, legs wide apart revealing her genitals, hands firmly grasping her knees in a defiant “devil inside me” kind of a way. The pose recalls Austrian artist Valie Export’s similarly exposed portrait carrying a gun (*Aktionhose: Genitalpanik*, 1969).
- 5 *She Got Love* is the title of the artist’s first retrospective in Italy at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin in 2013. The catalogue contains several useful reminiscences from Mendieta’s friends [see the essay “En el Tronco de un Árbol Vive Ana” by Raquel Cecilia Mendieta] and an interview with her by artist Linda Montano. See Beatrice Merz and Olga Gambari, eds., *Ana Mendieta: She Got Love* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2013).
- 6 This gesture with her body anticipates her series of now iconic photographs *Body Tracks* (1974), in which she placed her arms high above her head and dragged them down a banner pinned to the wall of the Intermedia studio.
- 7 Hans Breder, founder of the Intermedia Program, introduced his students to many international trends in performance, video, mixed media, etc. One of the groups he was particularly interested in were the Viennese Actionists, a loose-knit group of politically driven “actionists” known for their graphic depictions of blood-related and even masochistic gestures. Most active from 1960 to 1971, members included Gunther Brus, Otto Muhl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Hermann Nitsch. Valie Export has a peripheral involvement with some members of this group.
- 8 Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985* (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 32.
- 9 Above details regarding Mendieta’s education and experiences in Mexico are covered broadly in Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977,” 64ff. Quote by Mendieta, *ibid.*, 67.
- 10 For more information on *Deafman Glance*, see interview with Robert Wilson and Sylvère Lotringer, *Semiotext(e)* 3, no. 2 (1978): 20-27; reprinted in *Schizoculture* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).
- 11 Mendieta, interview with Linda Montano, “Ritual/Death,” in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, ed. L. M. Montano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 394-399; reproduced in *Ana Mendieta: She Got Love*, 200.