

The Socio-political nature of the work of Ana Mendieta

Art has long been used as a means for change and in combating dominant socio-political hegemonies. Prevailing social and political attitudes have often ostracised artists with the capitalist nature of Western society often rendering artists as incongruent with the wider society's desires. Many contemporary artists have responded to this alienation by taking up the role of social parrhesia, a truth-teller who speaks the truth because they know it is the truth. The lived experiences of many contemporary artists have influenced their work with work stemming from the artist dealing with social issues of racism, sexism, misogyny and sexual discrimination common in the contemporary art world. Of course, the art world and art institutions in themselves are oftentimes complicit with wider social and political issues, with a sometimes unconscious desire to maintain a white heteronormative male-driven art world prevalent in many western-based institutions. Maura Reilly argued in her book *Curatorial Activism* that “sexism and racism have become so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language and logic of the mainstream art world that they go almost entirely undetected”. (Reilly, 2018, P.21) This argument acknowledges the struggles of female artists of colour and opens dialogue on what the idea of normal is in an art setting. The idea of a ‘contemporary art genre’ in itself is paradoxical due to the overwhelming breadth of practice that it encompasses but what is clear is contemporary arts ties to the neo-liberal art museum. The neo-liberal art museum has instilled an inherent value system onto the art world. Museums have sought to follow the operations of the private art markets, focusing on the work of artists who have a known commercial value, a desire that often amplifies the work of deceased caucasian male artists. This high-performing art market work oftentimes is

an apolitical aesthetically driven art practice that largely revolves around painting and sculptural work. This raises the question of whether museums are neglecting non-commercial art forms like performance, video or photography that focus on a social or political message as it's often of little economic value, instead the value is in the metaphorical messages that art creates. To answer this question I'm going to look at the work of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta who was active around the time of second-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism brought an open dialogue to issues of sexuality, domesticity, the workplace and reproductive rights amongst others and Ana Mendieta's work was inherently feminist in nature with her use of her own body and emotional connection to nature prevalent in her work. (Ana Mendieta 1948–1985 | Tate) Mendieta was born in Cuba in 1948 to an upper-class family. Mendieta along with her sister Raquel would flee Cuba in 1961 under the aegis of Operation Peter Pan due to political instability. Due to being unaccompanied by any adult family and with no relations within the United States, the sisters were sent to Dubuque, Iowa where they “experienced not only a new environment but a new sense of difference, compounded by the intense racial climate during the Civil Rights Movement.” (Cabañas, 1999, P.12) Mendieta would be reunited with her mother and younger brother in 1966 and her father in 1979 with the family settling in Cedar Rapids Iowa. After discovering an intense love of painting and art at school she completed a B.A. in art in 1969 and her first M.A. in painting in 1972. Her M.A. experience engaged her with ideas of the art process and the body and the relationship between artwork and the viewer which would result in a dramatic stylistic change away from painting to performance, video and photographic work. In this essay, I will look at three case studies of Mendieta's work those being her *Sileuta*

series, her *Untitled (Rape scene)* and her *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)* as evidence of the socio-political nature of her art.

In Lucy R. Lippard's essay *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* Lippard rejects the idea of feminist art or women's art as a distinct style or movement instead arguing that it's filled with distinct individual styles and personal expressions but instead works towards a common dialogue. One of the distinct elements of feminism in art practice that Lippard observes has been the idea of ritual. Lippard states that rituals:

... become ritual in the true sense only when they are filled by a communal impulse that connects the past (the last time we performed this act) and the present (the ritual we are performing now) and the future (will we ever perform it again?). (Lippard, 1980 , P.363)

Mendieta's *Silueta* series can be seen as an example of feminist-focused art using ritual. Mendieta's *Silueta* series took place from 1973-1980 between Iowa and Mexico. Mendieta's abstract but distinct female figures were created by physically connecting her body into the land to explore her desire to repair her sense of being uprooted and exiled from her native Cuba. A key focus of this work was the relationship between present and absent. Mendieta varied between her style of figurative mark-making into the surface of the earth, a symbolic returning of the body and soul to nature and sculptural addition, that was grounded in the idea of perishability. (Nestor, 2021) Mendieta's work has a distinct ephemeral quality with her mark-making oftentimes being created with her understanding that it would resolve itself into nature, subsiding any lasting impression. Mendieta used a wide variety of materials for her work including gunmetal, branches, moss, sand, fire, ice and animal blood amongst others. Fig. 1 shows *Silueta- Imagen de Yagul* which was

Mendieta's first image of the series. In the photograph, Mendieta has buried herself in an open Zapotec tomb and has covered her body in white flowers. (Nestor, 2021) Mendieta had developed a personal connection with Mexico, seeing her hybrid upbringing between Cuba and Iowa as similar to the colonial European influence on Mexican culture. Also, Mexican culture's preoccupation with death and history of ritual sacrifice both became elements of interest which were featured multiple times when she included her own body in burial imagery in the series. In the photograph, Mendieta's arms are down by her side, one of the two typical positions



Fig. 1 Ana Mendieta, Imagen de Yagul, 1973, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

for her photographs. The other position featured outstretched arms that were symbolising the Minoan snake goddess. This series undoubtedly conveys a sense of ritual as a means of healing and also the existence of life in death. The work focuses on the reintegration of the body to the centre of being. (Danaher Jr.) Due to her uprooting from Cuba, Mendieta experienced a sense of displacement and discomfort in the United States. The abstraction of her being, culture and nature as well as the racism and alienation she felt in Iowa feeds her mourning nature for her loss and her lack of belonging. A press release from a 1977 exhibition of the Silueta series at the Gallery of New Concepts explains Mendieta's fascination with "primitive art and cultures". She elaborates further that through creating this art she's transcending herself "in a voluntary submission and a total identification with nature". (Mendieta et al, 2013, P194)

One of the most important roles of politically and socially engaged artists is the act of responding to what they see happening around them. In 1973, Mendieta created her *Untitled (Rape Scene)* in response to the sexual assault and murder of fellow university of Iowa student Sarah Ann Ottens. Sarah Ann Ottens was a nursing student who was found dead in room 429 in Rienow Hall at the University of Iowa having been suffocated allegedly by another student. As seen in Fig.2 Mendieta recreated the scene as it had been reported in the press. Fig. 2 is an accompanying photograph of Mendieta's performance piece. Mendieta who at the time was completing her M.A. under the tutelage of Hans Breder, invited fellow students to her apartment where they found Mendieta behind a purposefully ajar door. The students discovered Mendieta stripped from the waist down, bent over and tied to a table with cow's blood covering her buttocks, thighs and calves and the cow's blood had also pooled around her feet on the floor. Mendieta has created a dramatic tableau, with the lighting focusing on her lower body and the side of the table with her upper body and clothes blending into the darkness surrounding her. ('Untitled (Rape



Fig.2 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, Tate Gallery

Scene)', Ana Mendieta, 1973 | Tate) This work speaks to a specific threat of violence against women and also the nature of the media reporting crimes against women. Mendieta's action is a direct reenactment of what was reported to be the scene of Sarah Ann Otten's murder and through this reenactment Mendieta "confronted the spectacularisation of violated female bodies, ...". (Mendieta et al, 2013, P.28) By inviting her fellow University of Iowa students to see the brutal imagery of rape and

murder, Mendieta opens a dialogue about the nature of media reporting of crimes against women. It's a confrontation between what can be said and what can be seen with the shocking nature of this crime and the imagery surrounding it being morally wrong even though society has accepted the graphic reporting through words as acceptable. The work also explores Mendieta's ability to perform as in this piece she embodies the identity of the victim as the "identity of the artist is not central to the work ". (Mendieta et al, 2004, P.75) Mendieta often used blood as an element of her art, having been inspired by the radical Viennese Actionism movement of the 60s and 70s. This also informed the use of her own body as a vessel for meaning within her art and how it allowed her to transform herself into both a singular person and a representation of female suffering. The work also allows for a certain connection between Mendieta and others as it is a collaborative piece that required others to tie Mendieta up, to discover her in that position and also to photograph and document her work. Mendieta's work has allowed for observation of violence and the gaze and it allows an "ambivalently dialogical relationship to bodies (including those off-scene) as they form, deform and influence each other". (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, P.29) by This piece was one of three actions that she created in response to Sarah Ann Otten's murder. The two other actions took place around the campus setting with Mendieta again being photographed semi-naked with blood splattered around her. By staging these actions in a public setting Mendieta has consumed the viewer and has directly confronted the wider university community with the widespread nature of violence and sexual assault perpetrated against women. Linda Nochlon argued in her article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* that:

women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take- part in the creation

of institutions in which clear thought and true greatness are challenges open to anyone—man or woman (Nochlon, 1971, P.37)

Mendieta has destroyed the false consciousness of her campus by showcasing what can and would happen at the University of Iowa. Mendieta has taken away the sanctity of the gallery space instead using her apartment as a stage for her to allow others to see the vulnerabilities of society. In essence, Mendieta has brought the harshest realities to a shielded society, shattering the mirror hiding the realities of gender.

One of the strongest feelings when looking at the work of Mendieta is that although her work was tied to the time it was created, it remains relevant to the times today. In 1973 Mendieta, who was enrolled in her second M.A. this time in Intermedia under Hans Breder, completed a series of photographs called *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)*. As seen in Fig.3, the work consists of a colour close-up of a young Mendieta whose face is blushed with blood. This group of images as often in Mendieta's work come from an action where she posed for the camera with blood trickling down onto her head and neck and marking the neckline of her white cotton top. Mendieta is photographed with her head tilted back away from the camera, with her bloodied nostrils visible. Her eyes remain vacant as they stare towards the camera and the blood has become congealed and clumped in her dark hair. ('*Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)*',



Fig.3 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)*, 1973, Tate Gallery

Ana Mendieta, 1973 | Tate)The blood that covers Mendieta is most prominent

around her eyes, forehead and throat with the blood appearing to have trickled downwards from the top of her head covering everything below. The image is graphic and naturally distressing arising thoughts about violence and abuse committed against women. The imagery though has a certain degree of ambiguity to it. Unlike the previously shown work such as her untitled (rape scene), Mendieta here is not responding to a direct incident, instead, she's creating an action that opens a subjective dialogue about what a person sees from this image. For some people, it may be a striking and poignant piece of art that captures the misery and violent nature of domestic abuse. The work can also be examined and understood as relating to imagery surrounding martyrdom. In Christian belief Martyrdom has been rewarded and upheld as an example of good Christian faith and the ideas of sacrifice relate to Mendieta's hybrid Cuban-American upbringing. It can be understood that blood for Mendieta is both a strong political tool to amplify the feminist cause as well as a symbolic element for renewal and destruction, for life and death. In her Silhueta series, Mendieta often would pour animals' blood into her protrusion of the earth's surface as a way of connecting herself to the ground, a reintegration of her body into her spirit. Mendieta has relinquished control allowing a viewer to see what personally affects them through her work. The abundance of Christian belief in America as well as the political drive for women's rights at the time allows Mendieta to highlight the nature of such a prevalence of violence against women in a supposed God-fearing nation. The work also bears a resemblance to a mugshot due to the close headshot which may also speak to the social stigma women face in communicating the abuse they face as well as the untold shame it brings.

Mendieta's contribution to performance art and her ability to stimulate art that worked for a feminist cause is undeniable. Mendieta's relatively short yet prolific artistic practice abruptly ended when she died in 1985. In the early hours of the 8th of September 1985, Mendieta fell to her death from the 34th floor of her Manhattan Mercer Street apartment which she shared with her husband, abstract minimalist sculptor Carl Andre. Andre, when calling for emergency services, relayed that Mendieta had "somehow gone out the window" but suspicion quickly rose that Andre had contributed to Mendieta's death. Both had been drinking heavily prior to Mendieta's death with Andre suggesting that Mendieta had committed suicide but that he was also not aware of what had happened. Andre's claims were dismissed by Mendieta's close friends as they knew that Mendieta had a personal fear of heights and that she would not have willingly climbed out of the window. It was hypothesised that Andre in a drunken rage pushed or threw Mendieta out of the window causing her untimely death at 36. When police arrived at the apartment they found Andre with scratch marks on his nose and arms indicating a struggle between himself and Mendieta. It was also reported that a doorman heard a woman repeatedly screaming "no" around the time when Mendieta died. (O'Hagan, 2013)

Andre would eventually be indicted three times on the charges of murder but was acquitted of the murder of Ana Mendieta due to a lack of evidence. The acquittal as well as Andre's lawyers' suggestions that Mendieta's art foretold a desire to commit suicide enraged feminist activists and Mendieta's close friends. In the years following Mendieta's death, Andre has continued to have work exhibited in major art institutions. This continuing support for Andre has drawn criticism from feminist scholars and has resulted in the picketing of his shows such as a 1992 protests by the Women's Action Coalition outside a group exhibition at the Guggenheim's

downtown art gallery in SoHo. Outside this show that featured Andre as a selected artist for the inaugural opening of the downtown gallery, almost 500 feminists picketed his inclusion with banners reading statements such as “Where is Ana Mendieta?” (O’Hagan, 2013) Although Mendieta’s legacy has somewhat been overshadowed by the nature of her death, her restless explorations of her earth-body art have yielded an eternity of feminist-forward art. Her work evoked the desires of female sexuality and revealed the often violent nature of male sexual desire. Mendieta's work provided an intimate and vulnerable look into the socio-political nature of America in the 70ss and 80s and has created a lasting legacy of the potential women of colour have to create change. As Adrian Piper stated “... the art of CWAs (Coloured Women Artists) is an innovative threat to the systemic intellectual integrity and homogeneity of the Euroethnic art tradition ...”.(Piper, 1990, P.275) Mendieta created art that was deeply centred on who she was, on her ethnicity, her longing for a homeland and this was directly confrontational with the white eurocentric desires of the male-dominated art world.

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