

Bloody Pleasures: Ana Mendieta's Violent Tableaux

On May 19, 2014, piles of bloody entrails littered the sidewalk directly in front of the entrance to the Dia Art Foundation on West 22nd Street in the renowned gallery district of Chelsea in New York City. On several feet of white paper, on which the phrase “I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive” was scrawled, blood and guts splattered onto the sidewalk, poured from a plastic bag by a woman wearing a white Tyvek jumpsuit. The woman’s bloody bootprints tracked alongside the trail of chicken remains, amplifying the crime-scene quality of the event (fig. 1). The pool of chicken guts, and with it a pungent odor that filled the street, was left by the feminist performance collective the No Wave Performance Task Force (NWPTF) in protest of Dia’s retrospective of artist Carl Andre (Steinhauer 2014). A member of the collective, Christen Clifford, described the event as a “public action” that served both as a demonstration against the retrospective and a memorial to Andre’s former wife, fellow artist Ana Mendieta, whose violent death has been the topic of unresolved controversy since her “fall” from a window in the couple’s thirty-fourth-floor Greenwich Village apartment on September 8, 1985.¹ Although he was acquitted of the crime in 1988, many remain convinced that Andre pushed Mendieta to her death. The gruesome mess left outside Dia was intended to be a chilling evocation of that tragedy.²

It is obvious to those familiar with Mendieta’s oeuvre that the choice of blood is also a direct reference to the artist’s own practice; *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)* (1973) is one early example. In a performance for fellow University of Iowa students, the artist held a freshly decapitated chicken whose violent thrashing sent sprays of blood and feathers across her nude body. NWPTF’s use of blood evokes Mendieta’s practice, her death, and the larger epidemic of gendered violence that they have often come to emblemize. However, whatever the good intentions of the NWPTF, many feminists challenge the continued conjoining of Mendieta’s art with her violent end. Just as Julia Bryan-Wilson has argued in her essay on Men-

¹ Quoted in, “We Have Agency, “we wish Ana Mendieta was still alive.” YouTube video, 7:46. May 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EznmPOhPnK4>.

² For an in-depth discussion of Andre’s trial and the events leading up to Mendieta’s death, see Katz (1990).



Figure 1 *I Wish Ana Mendieta Were Still Alive*, No Wave Performance Task Force, performance and protest outside Dia:Chelsea, New York City, May 19, 2014. Image courtesy of Jillian Steinhauer. This figure is available online in color.

dieta, “Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta” (2013), the persistence of this narrative, and those that have specifically focused on her relationship to feminism, has served to mute the multiplicities still to be discovered in her work. Noting the words of artist Coco Fusco, Bryan-Wilson troubles the mythology of Mendieta “as a metaphor for female

victimization” (2013, 35). Turning away from this metaphor, this essay examines the shifting of the violent encounter between bodies, those of the artist and the spectator in particular. My hope is that this decentering of Mendieta’s body will provide a new reading that is in dialogue with, not in opposition to, outstanding historical and cultural narratives.

The NWPTF event began with collective member Karen Malpede, clad in a white hazardous-waste-protection suit, reading from Christa Wolf’s 1983 novel *Cassandra*. Attendees were encouraged to wear coveralls as well and to write variations on the event’s title, *I Wish Ana Mendieta Was Still Alive*, on them. The suits, Clifford explained, were intended to help generate “a shared sense of solidarity,” a solidarity in their anger over Dia’s support of Andre’s work and, more broadly, the continued marginalization of women in the art world within which Dia has been a formidable force. This low-budget uniform also amplified the messiness of the scene in both its literal use of putrid material and as a metaphoric site of disaster, or gruesome tragedy, in which these protestors-cum-mourners were distinguished as sterile witnesses.³

When Malpede concluded her reading—an excerpt detailing the Greek hero Achilles murdering a woman—Clifford ruptured the bag of chicken remains and poured it ceremoniously across the white banner in silence. The splashing of liquid entrails and the thud of soft organ tissue provided the only soundtrack aside from the constant ambient noise of New York City traffic. When the bag was empty, Clifford’s bloody hands opened the book *Who Is Ana Mendieta?* (Redfern and Caron 2011) to pages containing excerpts from Mendieta’s own writings. Finally, the action concluded when collective members and onlookers joined in chanting the phrase “I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive.”

NWPTF’s protest is one of several recent events that have sparked questions about how the persistent return to Mendieta’s death may limit our understanding of her creative contributions. Indeed, these questions were also the focus of the panel “Feminist Urgent Roundtable: Ana Mendieta’s Artistic Legacy and the Persistence of Patriarchy,” which was held only four days after the public action outside of Dia.⁴ Organized by Katya Grokhovsky of the Bruce High Quality Foundation in New York, the panel included prominent figures within the contemporary art world, such as

³ For video footage and commentary of the event by NWPTF members, see *We Have Agency*, “we wish Ana Mendieta was still alive.” YouTube video, 7:46. May 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EznmPOhPnK4>.

⁴ Feminist Urgent Roundtable is an ongoing series of discussions organized by Katya Grokhovsky, founder of Feminist Urgent.

feminist artists Mira Schor and Mary Beth Edelson, as well as NWPTF members Ester Neff, Lindsey Drury, and Christen Clifford.

During her talk, artist Susan Bee urged participants to focus the evening's discussion on Mendieta's legacy rather than Andre, the Dia retrospective, or the events of the artist's death. "When you only focus on her victimization," Bee stated, "[Mendieta's] legacy is lost."⁵ Echoing this sentiment, Mira Schor refuted the "lens of victimhood" that has come to color the historicizing of the artist, and Kat Chamberlin reperformed one of Mendieta's earliest works, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)* (1972). As in the original, Chamberlin slowly transformed her appearance by gluing hair to her face. While crafting her beard, the artist recited a self-authored statement (not part of the original performance) that highlighted the continued lack of support for women within the art world. While many of the attendees shared their feelings of grief and anger, dancer Lindsey Drury rather bravely stated her belief that declarations of Andre's guilt or, as she described, consensus over him being a murderer, can't be the terms through which Mendieta is discussed. The divisive effect of Andre's trial, particularly in the New York art world, has had lasting effects, and, while it was palpable at times, the roundtable did considerable work at diffusing it. Drury's statement that her "wishes are irrelevant to Mendieta's death" (an affront to the "I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive" mantra of the NWPTF) enunciated the crucial turn in feminist discourse that recent events were already marking. This turn complicates the biographical placement of Mendieta within art history, a challenge that resounds beyond the specifics of her life to critically engage the discipline at large. As the roundtable format suggests, this process is most effective when multiple voices, perspectives, and approaches are embraced so that dialogue might begin to replace the monographic and monolithic narratives that subvert conflict in favor of consensus. This essay is a contribution to this burgeoning debate, offering one mode of reimagining Mendieta as a figure whose works perform disruption and uncertainty not only across her own body but across those of the spectators as well.

By the close of that year, art historian Anna Chave had published a version of a talk she gave at Dia:Beacon titled "Grave Matters: Positioning Carl Andre at Career's End" in *Art Journal*. In it, Chave carefully reads the Andre retrospective and its accompanying catalog for their strategic omission of Mendieta and for the suspicious compensatory narration of the

⁵ An audio recording of the roundtable can be found at "Episode 1: Feminist Urgent Roundtable: Ana Mendieta's Artistic Legacy and the Persistence of Patriarchy." Podcast. 1:47:09, May 23, 2014. http://katyagrokhovsky.podomatic.com/entry/2014-05-26T14_33_45-07_00#.U4PA9kTgiBQ.tumblr.

minimalist as a figure who, in his “weak and submissive” state, is in need of protection, something the art world and legal system have already provided in full (Chave 2014, 20).

These events foreground an imperative among feminists to redress one of the most stifling tendencies in critical writing on Mendieta both past and present, which is to read her work through a reverse trajectory as though her death was foretold in her artistic practice.⁶ Whether or not one believes that the NWPTF’s public mourning in the shadow of Andre’s retrospective was the ideal space to talk about Mendieta, an important conversation was ignited. The momentum of this exchange has created an opportunity to move away from the incessant historical anchoring of Mendieta’s work in Andre’s personal and professional trajectory. Taking up Drury’s request to generate a feminist response that embraces divergent personal and intellectual priorities or, as Ann Ferguson named it much earlier, an “ethics of disagreement” (1995, 381), this essay takes part in the challenging of Mendieta’s place in art history while not presuming a final line. The priorities here are to aid in redirecting scholarship around the artist so that Andre is no longer a necessary starting point for explorations of Mendieta’s work, acknowledging the ways her death can mobilize crucial examinations of the persistence of violent patriarchy while refusing to inscribe her as a victim.

In her text, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe* (1996), Anne Wagner grapples with the often problematic and limiting effects of integrating biography into art historical scholarship. Her writings on Eva Hesse, in particular, parallel many of the sentiments expressed in this essay. Hesse, like Mendieta, died at a young age, and the tragic circumstances of her succumbing to a brain tumor have become formative elements of her artistic legacy. Wagner’s text interrogates the kinds of mythologizing that both romanticize Hesse and delimit readings of her work. In a statement that rings as true to Mendieta as Hesse, Wagner writes:

When we import her into our present, she appears there unchanged; she does not emerge, like some returnee from Shangri-La, only to age instantly and assume the guise of a woman she would have become had she lived. Hesse, in late middle age, I feel certain, would have been a considerably less attractive cultural commodity. . . . It is

⁶ Sean O’Hagan (2013) expresses this sentiment with regard to Mendieta’s work. Likewise, in 1986, the Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery at the University of Ohio dedicated an exhibition to the subject of rape in Mendieta’s memory and, in the essays in the accompanying catalog, the suggestion that Mendieta’s work was haunted by the inevitability of her death prevails.

her (un)timely death that has meant that she has survived to play a special cultural role: forever under thirty-five, she answers a hunger for youthful, tragic death. She is the “dead girl,” the beautiful corpse who counts for so much in so many cultural narratives. (1996, 197)

After reading this, one can't help but question what phrases such as “I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive” or “Where is Ana Mendieta?” are truly calling for and what work these laments do to perpetuate the cultural narrative against which Wagner warns.⁷ In questioning the dominant story of Mendieta as yet another “beautiful corpse” in the growing pantheon of “dead girl” artists, this essay is in step with the broader move in feminist scholarship that Wagner's text signals and that the recent activity around the Andre retrospective demands. While the social and personal experiences of women artists, as with all artists, can be central to understanding their creative and intellectual work, they cannot define it in full. How biography itself is gendered, moreover, further complicates the ramifications of such historicizing as premature death in male artists—Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol, for example—are coded in terms of tragic yet heroic genius while Mendieta and Hesse become, to use Wagner's terms again, perpetual “wounds,” victimized and ever bleeding (198).

What is at stake is a full understanding of the contributions of artists whose works are constrained by the particulars of their biography, specifically when it includes violence or trauma. This kind of historicizing, when it has little counternarrative, marginalizes meanings that challenge the more alluring and lucrative tropes available for women artists. This essay avoids the tendency to reduce Mendieta's life and work to her death and instead attempts to disentangle her oeuvre from her biographical relationship to violence. A preoccupation of her early studies on brutality, which often manifest in the staging of bloody scenes akin to the recent Dia protest, are frequently described as eerie omens of her eventual death or deemed provocative for their public staging of violence as a social problem.

This writing moves away from the body of Mendieta and toward the viewer of her works, performing a critical shift that decenters the artist and places the subjectivity of the viewer at the fore. Focusing on Mendieta's disruption of conventional spectatorship, the reading offered here contends that her gruesome tableaux trouble the idea of an activist or em-

⁷ “Where is Ana Mendieta?” was the slogan used by members of the Women's Action Committee when protesting the racial and gender disparity of the opening exhibition for the Guggenheim Museum's Soho location in June 1992, which included only one female artist and work by Andre. The same phrase is the title of Jane Blocker's *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (1999).

pathetic witnessing, a type of reading that often seems naive and utopic in the face of lived reality. The kind of activism she stages allows, instead, a consideration of how desire works as a function of spectatorship, particularly in relation to violence. It is not the acts of gross cruelty that these tableaux suggest, or even explicitly quote, but the implication of the viewers of violent imagery that becomes the locus of uncomfortable inquiry.

Violent encounters

In spring 1973, a University of Iowa student was found dead in her dormitory room. The nineteen-year-old woman had been, in the words of the local newspaper, “severely beaten and mutilated after being strangled to death.”⁸ “Mutilation” is a euphemism for the sexual trauma the woman suffered during the attack. One month later, Mendieta created a number of performances that were direct responses to this tragedy. For the first, Mendieta invited a group of colleagues and friends over for what was supposed to be a casual gathering. Upon arrival, however, the visitors were confronted with a horrific scene of a bloody struggle. Half naked, bleeding, and tied to the kitchen table, Mendieta posed as the victim of the brutal rape and murder (fig. 2). As Julia Herzberg details, Mendieta recreated the scene of the actual murder as the press described it: “Dish shards were scattered about the floor; a hanger was left near the table . . . and there was blood in the toilet bowl” (2004, 152–53) (fig. 3). Whether or not the friends and fellow art students Mendieta invited over that night were aware that they were seeing a performance has since become subject to a retrospective mythologizing; very little archival record of *Untitled (Rape Scene)* remains. However, Herzberg’s interviews with some of Mendieta’s classmates indicate that, although a performance was expected, the subject of the piece unquestionably shocked all present (1998, 163–64). While the sight of a violent crime is certainly a cause for distress, it was not simply Mendieta’s body, lying motionless and bloodied before them, that produced the drama of the work. Instead, the discomfort was generated by the insinuation of the viewer upon confronting the artist’s body in this manner. Having looked, for example, one may feel implicated in the crime, troubled by the call to witness the grotesque aftermath of rape.

Two subsequent versions of *Rape Scene* were staged outdoors in the woods surrounding the University of Iowa campus. In both, Mendieta

⁸ “Find Fingerprint in Coed’s Murder,” *Spencer Daily Reporter*, November 14, 1973, 5. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1907&dat=19731114&cid=369GAAAIBAJ&sjid=lv0MAAAIBAJ&pg=2662,2607660&hl=en>.



Figure 2 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

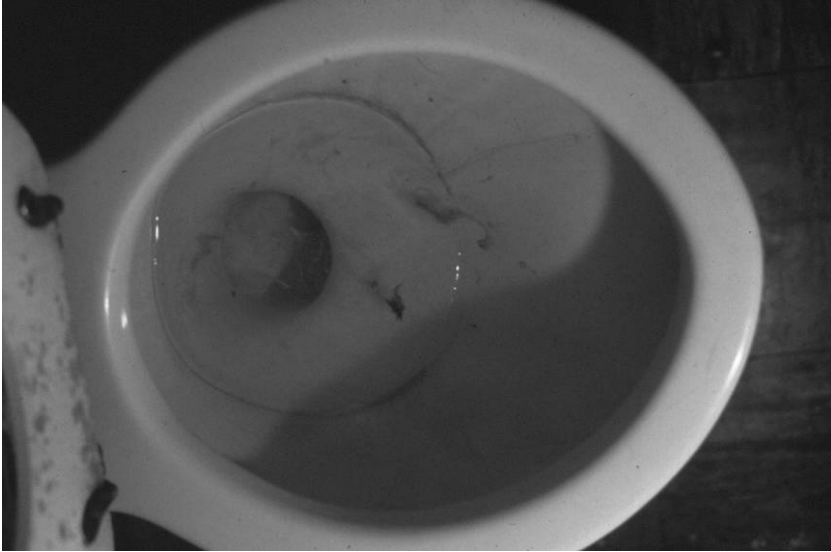


Figure 3 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

posed with her half-naked body either draped over a fallen tree trunk or face down in the grass, smeared with blood and left for passersby to find (fig. 4). By moving the work outdoors, Mendieta reached an even more diverse audience. Further, this expanded public would not be aware that the body strewn in the brush belonged to an artist who had been experimenting with performative events (information to which the invited guests at the previous version were apparently privy). The desire to extend her visual attacks, or as she called them “tableaux,” to a wider audience preoccupied Mendieta for the remainder of 1973. The implications of this focus pull her practice even further from her feminist contemporaries. Rather than stage protests, rape defense workshops, or public speak-outs addressing sexual violence, for example, Mendieta provides no space for the “victim” to speak. There is no form of collective healing or community outreach offered by the artist. Mendieta’s feminism engages us differently, capturing the viewer through implication in the pervasive culture of violence in which we are all members. Whether it leaves the viewer apathetic or disturbed, the violent encounter staged by Mendieta reveals something of the nature of the viewer’s relationship to violence that, unlike empathy, can be as disquieting as the fact of rape itself.

In her 1988 text, *Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern*, Arlene Raven describes *Rape Scene* as an “activist art strategy” with em-



Figure 4 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

pathy as its driving force (158). More recently, Olga Viso has suggested that the work was intended to “incite public reaction and conversation which [Mendieta] felt was often sublimated in our society” (2008, 23). These types of descriptions are often supported by quotes from Mendieta herself, who later stated that this work, among a number of others she executed in 1973, was made “in order to bring attention to this crime and all sexual violence” (Raven 1988, 157). However, the full critical impact of *Rape Scene*, when it is discussed, which is a rare and almost always brief occurrence, is stifled by the assumption that the work is an empathetic activist gesture. Inscripting the display of sexualized violence in a reductive notion of activism erases the more troubling viewing positions established by Mendieta’s performance, positions that move beyond empathetic or revelatory witnessing. Instead, it is precisely what the assumption of empathy elides, namely the role played by desire and pleasure in viewing rape, that these works call forth, challenging the utopic notions of civic duty and moral certitude on which prevailing readings rest.

On the topic of war photography, Susan Sontag wrote, “There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is

the pleasure of flinching” (2003, 41). Similarly, in an essay on French film titled “On Watching and Turning Away,” Scott MacKenzie elaborates on what he believes to be the ambivalent nature of spectatorship in the face of violence. Exploring the notoriously violent *cinéma brut*, MacKenzie describes the experience of viewing grotesque violence as one wherein the “spectator vacillates between voyeurism and alienation, paradoxically increasing the discomfiture because of the self-realization of one’s own processes of desire and identification” (2010, 160–61). These insights help elucidate some of the political stakes involved in representations of violence, stakes that include not only the readily assigned tropes of compassion or outrage but also the suggestion of the audience as complicit viewers. Tracking the history of *cinéma brut* through the documentary tactics of *cinéma direct* and *cinéma vérité*, MacKenzie echoes the suggestion of other film theorists who have foregrounded the shock aesthetic of these genres as modes deployed to challenge the spectator with images of violence and sexuality as real events that rupture the cinematic narrative and its attendant fantasies. In many ways, the *Rape Scene* tableaux perform a similar critical disruption. Placing herself as a raped body within direct proximity to spectators, Mendieta provided little to no safe distance or shelter from culpability. In the words of film scholar Dominique Russell on Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1975 film *Salò*, “There is no safe place from which to condemn sexual violence and disavow our enjoyment” (2010, 6). Like the brutality of the film Russell describes, Mendieta’s *Rape Scenes*, and the numerous violent tableaux that followed, stage precisely this binding of the spectator to representations of the scene of violence, demanding that we address not just the subject but our relationship to it as consumers of its image. The thrill of the horrific can’t be eschewed by good intentions or activist appetite alone, and the implications of a sexually violated woman’s body include not only an attraction to violence but to sexual aggression against women in particular.

Distinct from Mendieta’s other violent tableaux, however, is the specificity of the violated body on offer in *Rape Scene*. Unlike the work to follow, there is more than nondescript human destruction (bones, blood, scraps of clothing) on view in the original series. The artist’s use of her body in these cases, therefore, denotes more than a nod to the concurrent rise in performance art practices to which Mendieta had much exposure as a student in the Intermedia program at Iowa. Rather, acknowledging violence as something that is experienced though specific “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1994, 94), Mendieta obliterates the unquestioned continuities between her body as a Cuban woman and that of the white co-ed whose rape and murder she first restaged in her apartment.

The gendering of rape, a crime that has long been legally and socially defined as an act that men commit against women, or, perhaps better stated, a masculinized sexual aggression exercised against feminized bodies, is accepted with little contestation. Its exclusion of male, genderqueer, or transgendered people, however, is scarcely acknowledged. As Mendieta's staging of rape makes evident, the specificities of race, or what Sharon P. Holland (2012) has termed "the erotics of racism," are also largely absent from public discourse, as was certainly the case in the early 1970s when the artist created her tableaux (14).

Writing against these exclusions within the rising anti-rape and women's movements more broadly, Angela Davis highlights how anti-rape rhetoric was founded on the codification of the white virginal victim and the black male rapist. In *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Davis historicizes the use of rape as a tool of the white supremacist patriarchal order, describing it as "a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (24). This highly influential text informed numerous later scholars, including Kimberlé Crenshaw and Holland, who name the ways violence continues to be constructed, in image and experience, through specific assumptions regarding the race, class, sex, and gender of offenders and their victims. While it is beyond the purview of this essay to address all of these exclusions, mention of them is crucial. Put simply, it is not enough to claim Mendieta's *Rape Scenes* as displays of victimization. While that gesture is in itself bold, this essay insists on considering how the artist's subjectivity as a nonwhite woman raises questions about how narratives of rape are constructed.

These considerations are not simply a burden the artist's body bears but are part of the spectatorial challenge these tableaux enact. In each of the *Rape Scenes*, for example, Mendieta's face is obscured from view, and this, paired with the lightness of her skin, makes any attempt at identification difficult. The relative anonymity of Mendieta's body in these works is scarcely noted in existing scholarship. Paradoxically, her experiences and identity as a Cuban immigrant are often centrally located within discourse around her later projects, the *Siluetas* series in particular. Her use of blood, moreover, has largely been explained via her interest in Santería, an Afro-Caribbean religious practice. What is striking, therefore, is how Mendieta's cultural and racial identifications are called forth in some instances and minimized in others. By conjuring her native Cuba in the context of *Rape Scene*, rather than generating a dialogue with her motherland or the power of Santería ritual, Mendieta evokes the less desirable narratives of imperial

conquest and political unrest, processes that have always included genocide, cultural erasure, and sexual violence.

Avoiding the question of race in relation to these tableaux risks totalizing their subject and flattening related issues of class, sexuality, and gender. As Joanna Bourke states in her exemplary text on the figure of the rapist, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History*, “Rape and sexual violence are deeply rooted in specific political, economic and cultural environments” (2007, 7). Indeed, it is through the intersectional lens proposed by Crenshaw that the *Rape Scene* tableaux can illuminate a new series of questions regarding violence and spectatorship.⁹ If, as Holland (2006, 792) writes, “Visual culture is to some extent idiomatic, as its iconography is designed to produce readily recognizable images,” then what is the iconography of Mendieta’s tableaux? Even without wall labels or curatorial guidance, the artist’s performances, and the photographs that record them, have been unequivocally read as images of rape. What evidence, however, do we have of this crime? A woman bound, nude, and discarded is familiar enough terrain to have already been coded as a body that has been raped. The history of art has certainly done its part to generate an iconography of the raped body; Marcel Duchamp’s often cited *Étant donnés* (1946–66) is one salient example that bares striking similarity to Mendieta’s work.¹⁰

The very naming of the work as an image of rape, both on the part of the artist and the viewer, belies the fact that this is not an image of rape but the suggestion of its aftermath. What allows this tableau to be read so unequivocally as such, therefore, is the recognition of this specific form of violence as one that is enacted on particular kinds of bodies in particular spaces. The gender and race of the victim, we can scarcely deny, illustrate a familiar myth of the rapable body as one that is both female and nonwhite. The space of the apartment occupied by the single young woman, moreover, is one rife with opportunities to rape, the threat of violence seeming to be the price one pays for nonnormative domestic relations. The work raises still very relevant questions about how we, as spectators, have come to recognize rape as an image even when it isn’t explicitly there. How might the legibility of this image have changed, for example, if the gender of the body before us were more ambiguous, belonging to an older, larger, or disabled person?

As spectators, we have been trained to recognize rape through the ubiquity of its image. Mendieta’s tableaux remain so powerful and controversial

⁹ I am indebted to an insightful selection of essays in Doyle and Jones (2006) that were particularly helpful in thinking through the importance of an intersectional approach.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Tom McDonough for bringing this comparison to my attention.

at least in part because of the still-relevant questions they pose about what it means to both make and look at images of rape. They mark what Sarah Projansky describes as a “feminist paradox between a desire to end rape and a need to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it” (2001, 19). Rather than propose a solution to such a paradox, this essay suggests that interrogating the contradictions and uncomfortable revelations about our relationship to violence is another of the feminist possibilities to be found in Mendieta’s work. In her brutal presentations of rape, the spectator’s desire to keep violence foreign or monstrous is refused in favor of revealing how rape plays a role in the very structuring of our social and political relationships, its intimate and always dangerously close imbrication in our own subjectivity.

Often, as with many images of violence, the term “witnessing,” like “empathy,” is used to frame the role and expectations of the spectator. Charles Merewether, for example, describes Mendieta’s early works as having “demanded that the public become an audience and bear witness to an event about which they had no knowledge” (1996, 92). “The demand to participate, to be witness,” he writes, “became central to Mendieta during this period” (92). The concept of witnessing is assumed to be an active force in the artist’s work and is treated as self-evident. Yet the ineffectiveness of this call to witness can be observed in a number of smaller tableaux staged, in a variety of locations, shortly after the rape pieces. In *Alley Pieces* (1973), for example, Mendieta placed a pile of bloodied debris in the alley below her apartment window, and in *Suitcase Piece* (1973), she set an open suitcase filled with bloody and bandaged objects resembling body parts in a public park (fig. 5).

Created during the same year as *Alley Piece* and *Suitcase Piece*, *People Looking at Blood* also involved the public display of bloody remains. In this work, Mendieta left a small, unidentifiable gory mass on the sidewalk outside her Iowa City apartment (fig. 6). The artist, seated in a car across the street, filmed the reactions of passersby as they came into proximity with the pile of animal viscera pooled just outside of the threshold of the doorway (fig. 7). These reactions are the very material of the work as Mendieta carefully documented over two dozen people walking past and, at times, pausing to examine the mysterious disaster. What is most telling about these images, however, is more the lack of response than potential outrage or disgust that a public display of gore might elicit. As Chrissie Iles writes, “The horrific implications of the blood seem to arouse little curiosity in the unwitting participants of the piece, demonstrating a social indifference to violence that lies at the core of Mendieta’s early concerns” (2004, 209). After the inaction of so many people, the piece concludes when an



Figure 5 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Suitcase Piece)*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

older man wearing denim overalls steps inside the building and returns with a cardboard box, into which he shovels the bloody remnants (fig. 8).

Perhaps Mendieta offers these moments of brutality, these piles of abject rubble, not in search of an empathetic witness but to question that witnessing position and its attendant assumptions of proximity, knowledge, and morality? Moved out of a gallery or museum context to generate direct reactions from viewers, the works provoked instead a lack of response. If these tableaux called out for a witness, then that call was rarely heard. Even when it was, there is ultimately no way of gauging whether the response was empathetic. Whether or not these challenges were intentional, they are a significant effect of the work and further interrogate more prescriptive readings that claim the works as sites for collective outrage or disgust in the face of violence.

In yet another of these scenarios, *Bloody Mattresses* (1973), Mendieta seems almost entirely unconcerned with the public encounter with the horrific scene she has staged (fig. 9). Executed in an abandoned farmhouse, *Bloody Mattresses* echoes the crime-scene qualities of previous work, but this time the absence of the body is particularly pronounced. Evidence of a struggle—splattered blood and a ravaged pile of mattresses—creates a chillingly cruel scene that evokes the detritus of a violent rape and murder. The remoteness of *Bloody Mattresses* confounds any reading that suggests a



Figure 6 Ana Mendieta, *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

desire on the part of the artist to heighten public awareness and points instead to the fact that rape often occurs without witness. If Mendieta's violent works refuse the redemptive tropes surrounding the discourses of witnessing and activism, then part of what is found in their stead is the



Figure 7 Ana Mendieta, *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

workings of desire. The naively optimistic assumption that public displays of violence will trigger moral outrage forecloses the uncomfortable truth of pleasure in the act of viewing images of violence, sexualized violence in particular.



Figure 8 Ana Mendieta, *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt*, 1973, 35mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

Performing flesh and blood

Born in Havana, Cuba, Mendieta arrived in the United States in 1961 at the age of eleven with her older sister Raquelin, age fifteen. Separated from the rest of their family, Ana and Raquelin were transported to the United



Figure 9 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*, 1973, 35 mm color slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. This figure is available online in color.

States in Operation Pedro Pan, a program designed to provide escape from the social and political unrest caused by the events surrounding the Cuban Revolution, namely, the fear of the indoctrination of children into the Communist regime that was established in its wake. The Mendieta sisters were among thousands of unaccompanied minors who were sent to Miami between 1960 and 1962 as political refugees and scattered across the country to join families or sent to boarding schools or foster homes. Landing in Dubuque, Iowa, Ana and Raquelin spent their adolescence being shuffled between residential institutions and three different foster homes before Ana enrolled in the University of Iowa in 1967.¹¹ Ana received her BA from the institution and then enrolled in the MFA program, where she studied painting before her introduction to the nascent Multimedia program shifted her interests to more experimental mediums.

Like the story of her death, much of Mendieta's artistic legacy is tied to these formative years. Her removal from Cuba and her separation from her family are frequently cited in accounts of her most famous works, the aforementioned *Siluetas* series. Beginning in 1973, Mendieta created more than one hundred *Siluetas* that involved burning, carving, or tracing her silhouette into or onto the earth. In some versions, Mendieta herself could

¹¹ For an extensive biographical account of Mendieta's life, see Herzberg (1998).

be found covered in mud or sprouting flowers. In all cases her body marks the space as ephemeral intrusion, integrated material, or hallowed trace. Executed in fairly remote locales, the *Siluetas* are predominantly described as a working through of Mendieta's traumatic removal from her homeland.

Much has been written about these haunting works, and many scholars share Adrian Heathfield's description of them as "a search for home and belonging conducted through the land: a re-grounding" (2013, 23). This framing of the series as a "re-grounding" is supported by the artist's own writings from this period, often echoing an oft-cited passage, in which Mendieta explains: "I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source."¹² Overwhelmingly, the *Siluetas* are defined in these terms. Essentialist overtones of the female body's relationship to the land abound. Anne Creissels, for example, claims that the *Siluetas* explicitly "affirm a female specificity, a difference in essence between man and woman" (2007, 183). The materiality of the pieces, Mendieta's use of fire, gunpowder, blood, dirt, and a host of other materials, on the other hand, become the stuff of Santería ritual. Again, the artist's own explicit naming of the religion as formative to her conceptualization of these pieces is paramount to their reception, and associated tropes of magic, ceremony, and sacrifice have become ubiquitous.

In a particularly heavy-handed interpretation of Mendieta's use of ritual, Donald Kuspit describes her art as "profoundly religious" (1997, 39). He writes, "She [Mendieta] experiences the body as sacred space: a kind of cathedral in which consciousness can soar. . . . Mendieta wants to reconsecrate the body, that is, restore the sense of it as a miracle" (39). The innovative quality of these works and their attendant scholarly reception has certainly shaped a prominent place for Mendieta within the art world in recent decades. The anchoring of this relative fame in the continued foregrounding of her death, as well as the gendered and racialized conceptions of the Latina body as volatile, magical, erotic, and organically tied to the earth, however, has cast a shadow of melancholic mysticism on her oeuvre. Rather than manifesting this kind of personal or biographized drama, Mendieta's violent tableaux stage a confrontation that throws the viewer's own expectations, desires, and fears into troubling relief.

¹² This quote appears in numerous texts, including Jones (1998, 26), Blocker (1999, 92), and Heathfield (2013, 13).

Although the *Siluetas* provide the material for much of the current research on the artist, the tableaux that Mendieta created during her first years as a graduate student in Iowa offer some of the most complicated challenges to the emergent practices of body, earth, and performance art that she would create during the course of her abbreviated career. The first of their kind in the United States, the Center for New Performing Arts and the Multimedia Program were founded by Hans Breder, Mendieta's longtime teacher, mentor, and romantic partner. Breder proposed the programs in 1968 and, by 1970, the University of Iowa was the first in the country to offer an MFA in Intermedia and Video Art (Breder 1995, 113). Describing the program, Breder wrote, "We knew at the time that we were defining the term [intermedia], giving life to the concept through our work. . . . Intermedia engages the spectator as participant. It is collaborative, conceptually grounded, performative, ritualistic, site-specific. It exists in liminal space where the interplay of two or more media propagate new ideas, new forms, new ways of seeing and being" (114). After completing her MFA in 1972, Mendieta pursued a degree in Intermedia, and it was within this formative stage that she began creating performances utilizing some of the program's innovative approaches (Viso 2004).¹³

During her first year, Mendieta documented several pieces that involved bodily manipulations, including the gender-bending *Facial Hair Transplant* (1972), wherein the young artist cut the hair from fellow student Morty Skylar's beard and glued it to her own face. As Mendieta describes, the project was a manifestation of her fascination with hair, "the way it grows, where it grows and the significance that past civilizations placed on it." She described the results as not having the expected appearance of a disguise but as appearing to be "part of myself and not at all unnatural to my appearance."¹⁴

Although scholarly attention to *Facial Hair Transplant*, like many of her earliest performances, has been minimal, where it is cited, it is often accompanied by references to Mendieta's interest in the body as a site of social and cultural inscription, or as Jane Blocker writes, an "examination of gender identity and physical appearance" (1999, 11). As the quotation above suggests, however, Mendieta was interested in hair as an organic material, a thing that grows and can, like many an uprooted plant, be transplanted. Rather than associate her use of corporeal material with the

¹³ Viso (2004) points out that the concepts of intermedia with which Breder was experimenting were akin to the ways the term developed within Fluxus almost a decade earlier. In 1966, Fluxus artist Dick Higgins used "intermedia" to describe the work of John Cage, Shigeo Kubota, and Joseph Beuys, among others. See Higgins (1966).

¹⁴ From Mendieta's thesis statement, as quoted in Moure et al. (1997, 179).

numerous artists exploring gender performance at the time, Mendieta's action of transference is better considered in relation to her other works from the same year, including *Grass on Woman*. Lying facedown in the lawn of a friend's home, the artist called upon attendees to glue freshly cut grass, bits of soil, and dandelion weed to her back. The result, captured in a photograph, is that of a woman's body in the process of either disappearing into the ground or being resurrected from it. Often described as Mendieta's first foray into earth-body art and as a precursor to the *Siluetas*, *Grass on Woman* has been identified as the inaugural piece in the artist's sustained exploration of the relationship between her body and the earth.

In *Grass on Woman*, as well as *Facial Hair Transplant*, material is cut from its source and then artificially rerooted into, or onto, Mendieta's flesh. Here the similarities between the materiality of hair and grass are made apparent, each affixed to the artist's body, which acts as a canvas for the collaging of these displaced fibers. Concentrating on the materials themselves and on the actions at work in both pieces brings to the fore the experimentation with the body as an organic medium that is a crucial component of Mendieta's early practice. In a brief survey of Western body art, Amelia Jones describes two prevailing tendencies in 1970s performance: the body as a "signifier of individual-turned-collective political engagement" and the shift toward the concept of the "self-as-image" (2000, 22). Jones also notes that these inclinations were complexly linked to an overarching desire to "confirm the 'objecthood' of the body" (22). While Mendieta, like many artists working with their bodies, certainly exhibited both, her exploration of objectivity has been underexamined.

The notions of decentering and the obsessive referencing of the corporeal that Jones describes were noted early on by frequent Multimedia Program visiting scholar Willoughby Sharp. A popular read among Mendieta and her colleagues, Sharp's essay, "Body Works," used the term "body art" for the first time as a means of describing "activities in which the artist uses himself [*sic*] as a sculptural material" (1970, 15). The essay notably divides these practices into three categories: body as tool, body as "theatrical backdrop," and body as object. The third type, however, is quickly negated when Sharp writes: "The only case in which a body approaches the status of object is when it becomes a corpse" (15). This statement resounds poignantly with Mendieta's *Rape Scene* as well as her *Mutilated Body on Landscape* (1973), *Burial Piece* (1975), and *Momia y Tierra Negra* ([*Mummy and Black Earth*] 1977). In each, she appears to have literalized Sharp's statement, appearing as a cadaver and, at times, accompanied by funerary objects such as candles, flowers, and graves.

In another important piece of writing on the subject, Cindy Nemser calls for a consideration of the multiple identifications at work in the performative. Published less than a year after “Body Works,” Nemser’s “Subject-Object Body Art” (1971) shares with the former an insistence on the performing body as always both subject and object. Nemser describes this simultaneity in terms of a constant flux and a shifting of the performer’s subjectivity that ignites a perpetual state of transformation. As a formative tenant of performance and body art, the implication, activation, and provocation of the viewer was a point of critical and political rupture to Western conceptions of spectatorship.

The breaching of the divide between spectator and scene engages both bodies (that of the artist and the viewer) into a shifting of subjectivity that, rather than distance the spectator, solicits them into the work “as an intersubjective exchange” (Jones 1998, 31). In her highly influential book, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), Jones describes performance as a seduction or a solicitation, one that definitively elicits pleasure. Pointing to the Freudian notion of transference, Jones foregrounds the function of desire, which is central in the formation of subjectivity as well as spectatorship. Engaging with this theorization of intersubjective performance in relation to violence, however, renders particularly uncomfortable the role of desire within that exchange. While the performative may lure, as Mendieta’s bloody tableaux do, the seduction often quickly turns to repulsion, a constant flux that is distinct from that which Jones describes.

Desire and disgust

In a series of lectures devoted to the theme “Attraction and Repulsion” given in 1938, Georges Bataille explored the tension between these two experiences. Describing what he calls a “sacred nucleus” around which human communication forms, Bataille argues that which is “disgusting and debilitating” lies at the very core of social interaction ([1938] 1988, 111). The concurrent flux of attraction and repulsion that these lectures examine is a productive conceptual frame through which to consider human relationships to violent imagery. If, as Bataille’s writings claim, what is joyous always already contains a spark of death within it, and the abject contains the potential for veneration, then the effects of attraction and repulsion are inextricably linked. The constant motion between these two poles, and their interdependence, may well elucidate the social phenomena of violent images, namely their deployment as both sites of disgust and loci of desire. Bataille goes so far to name this “paradoxical transmutation” (114) as the

heart of social existence and asserts that “nothing is more important for us than that we recognize that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust” (114). Rape imagery embodies the transmutational qualities elucidated by Bataille’s sociological exploration of human interaction. As sites of repulsion, as well as desire, images of rape present a particular set of spectatorial challenges that are made evident in Mendieta’s gruesome tableaux.

Put differently, art offers a critical glimpse into the human predilection for violence, particularly the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing pain. The overarching themes of this essay are partially indebted to Sontag’s observations about representations of violence in her *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Writing about photographs that capture the horrors of war, Sontag insists on the capacity of violent imagery to be alluring: “Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome” (95–96). Calling upon the theories of various writers, including Bataille, Sigmund Freud, and Edmund Burke, Sontag’s prose is an uncomfortable but necessary confrontation with the unbearable truth that “images of the atrocious can serve several needs” (98). These “needs” certainly include the more ethically sound responses of empathy and revulsion, but they cannot, despite our best efforts to suppress it, exclude the pleasure involved in looking.

In a statement that reveals his debt to Freud, Bataille claims that “our entire existence . . . is produced, hence, in a sort of swirling turbulence where death and the most explosive tension of life are simultaneously at play” ([1938] 1988, 124). The polarity discussed in the “Attraction and Repulsion” lectures has a clear parallel in the dueling drives of life (eros) and death (thanatos) theorized by Freud in his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” ([1920] 1957). Mutually constitutive, these drives name human impulses toward both pleasure and destruction that are constantly engaged in a struggle for balance. The simultaneity of this conception of basic instinctual predilections for life and death, pleasure and pain, is precisely what Mendieta’s confrontation with violence makes manifest.

The exploration of these drives was already present in the work of the Viennese Actionists, whose notoriously aggressive actions often revealed in themes of death and the erotic, pleasure and pain, the sacred and the profane. The artists associated with Actionism were highly controversial and garnered much attention for the extreme violence and embrace of taboo that they often staged. Their explicit use of the body, not just as performing subject but as material, may have inspired Mendieta’s turn to her own body as a storehouse of self-generated mediums, including hair,

skin, and blood.¹⁵ The Viennese Actionists, however, famously moved beyond these comparatively pleasant materials to include semen, urine, and feces, human matter that branded the group as almost intolerably excessive in their seemingly celebratory abjection.

The Actionists aggressively subverted the conservatism of post-World War II Vienna, exploiting social taboo to breach cultural and political boundaries as well as those of the European avant-garde. The themes of ritual, sacrifice, birth, death, and sex were called upon as a means to rupture not just the physical body (although that was often part of it) but to examine the social body or, as Hermann Nitsch described, “waking people up” by making them “uncertain about their manifold pseudo-existence” (in Green 1999, 17). The shock and disgust generated by Nitsch’s slaughter and crucifixion of lambs in his long running *Orgies Mysteries Theatre (OMT)*, or when Günter Brus urinated in a bucket before defecating on stage at the Reiff Museum in his 1968 performance *Sheer Madness*, for example, certainly agitated social norms and subverted seemingly any and all traditional definitions of art making and viewing.

The connection that is most readily made between Mendieta and Viennese Actionism is largely material in nature, pointing to their shared use of blood and its attendant evocations of religion and ritual. One striking comparison can be found in Nitsch’s numerous blood paintings, including *Kreuzwegstation* (Station of the Cross [1961]), a canvas, over 6 feet by 9 feet tall, dripping with red paint that is overtly suggestive of blood (fig. 10). Blood and animal viscera also play a primary role in Nitsch’s *OMT*, and this large canvas appears as though it could have been the backdrop onto which the sacrificial sadomasochistic ritual of the performance took place. Nitsch would, in fact, later generate a series of paintings known as the *Splatter Paintings* that were created during *OMT* performances.

Often ceremoniously thrown on the canvas by Nitsch or one of the performance participants, the red paint stains the white canvases in violent thrusts of color that appear to be the markings of a massacre, which is usually the case, as animal disembowelment and crucifixion are regular components of *OMT*. Although more exacting and minimal in her application, Mendieta’s *Body Tracks*, *Blood Writing*, and *Blood Sign*, all executed in 1974, involve the use of animal blood to mark space. In its first instantiation, *Body Tracks* consisted of the artist dipping her arms in blood and slowly dragging them down the surface of a white gallery wall. Beginning with paint-soaked hands held above her head, Mendieta slides

¹⁵ See Herzberg (1998, 150–52) and Viso (2004, 40–42), wherein the authors note Mendieta’s familiarity with the Viennese Actionists via Intermedia.



Figure 10 Herman Nitsch, *Kreuzwegstation (Station of the Cross)*, 1961. This figure is available online in color.

them down the length of the wall, bringing them together just before they hit the floor to create a large scarlet V. In an action that has been compared to Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* (1958), Mendieta uses her body as a paintbrush and blood as paint.¹⁶ While the correspondence to Klein is made frequently, the difference between a woman's body as mark-maker via the direction of a male artist (woman as object) versus Mendieta's mark as authorial signature is radical.

More akin to Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* (1965) or Carolee Schneemann's *Eye/Body* (1963), Mendieta's bloody traces respond to a long-standing masculinist tradition within modernism, particularly the gestures of the Abstract Expressionists.¹⁷ Her use of blood, however, coded her mark-making as inherently violent, threatening, or, perhaps more fittingly, susceptible to violence. In *Blood Sign*, Mendieta dipped her limbs in blood again, this time spelling out the phrase "There Is a Devil inside Me"

¹⁶ In the early 1960s, Klein executed a number of performances enacting his concept of *femme pinceau* (living or female paintbrush) that involved the artist directing a number of nude women to coat their skin in his signature "Yves Klein Blue" paint and then drag, press, or roll their bodies over expansive stretches of canvas.

¹⁷ For more on the masculine tradition in modernism, see Jones (1998, 53–102).

within an oblong arch tracing the height of her body, which she had first traced onto the walls of the Multimedia studio. The scrawling letters, in their uneven color and size, fill their bloody frame in eerie reminiscence of a tombstone. Shortly after completing this work, Mendieta wrote: “I was looked at by people in the Midwest as an erotic being (myth of the hot Latin), aggressive, and sort of evil. This created a very rebellious attitude in me until it sort of exploded inside me and I became aware of my own being, my own existence as a very particular and singular being” (in Merewether 2000, 142).

Although Mendieta was not alone in her urgent need to recode the authorial mark of the artist as female, her explicit use of blood codes her bodily trace, as Merewether suggests, as both object and “subject of defilement” (2000, 129). The specific stakes in the deployment of blood by a woman, and a woman of color, are radically different, therefore, than in the case of the primarily white male practitioners of Viennese Actionism. So, while the material and their associations with sacrifice and ritual may well have superficial similarities, the implications of their use are fundamentally different.

In his essay on Mendieta, “From Inscription to Dissolution” (1996), Merewether argues that the artist’s work references that most taboo and threatening of feminine fluids, menstrual blood, and points to Julia Kristeva’s writing on the abject to further his claims. Kristeva describes menstrual blood as a perennial source of disgust, as “the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate” (1982, 71). The “danger” of menstrual blood resounds with Mendieta’s statement about her own sense of herself, her body, as other and therefore coded as excessive in both its desirability and its threat. Rather than a material kinship, then, Mendieta’s attraction to Viennese Actionism lies in the encounter with human drives that their bloody rituals are meant to be exorcising. The experience of the viewer, moreover, is foregrounded by Mendieta in a way that is less evident in the highly theatrical productions orchestrated by the Actionists. Although Merewether’s text is one of the only studies on Mendieta to suggest so explicitly, his readings of her work as masochistically self-destructive religious rituals are radically different from what is proposed here.¹⁸

If, as described above, the Viennese Actionists explored the abject as a means to access human drives sublimated in society (a repression that

¹⁸ Merewether reads Mendieta’s use of blood and the abject as a masochistic ritual of self-erasure and links this to Christian mysticism and Catholic martyrdom, themes that are not taken up in this essay. See Merewether (2000, 126–34).

generates actual violence), then Mendieta's bloody marks may well be an interrogation of the ways her subjectivity is scripted in the social sphere as the very embodiment of those polar psychic states of desire and disgust. Marked as other in terms of race and gender, Mendieta highlights the position of her body as one that both repels and attracts, the precise conditions that name the event of rape. The romanticizing of the Latina, what Mendieta names the "myth of the hot Latina," frames her public appearance as both sexual object and demonized threat, a social scripting that is theorized at length in the collection *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (Mendible 2007). In her introduction to this text, Myra Mendible describes the very phrase "Latina body" as "a convenient fiction—a historically contingent, mass-produced combination of myth, desire, location, marketing, and political expedience" (1).

Through the medium that first made confrontation with the artist's body and all its race and gender identifications unavoidably present to the viewer, Mendieta's performative actions insist on the particularly violent nature of her subjectivity. By reading these works as confrontations with the practices of art making and viewing that perpetuate oppressive stereotypes, this essay refuses the tendency to indulge in precisely such mythologizing. In the persisting evocations of myth, ritual, and religion, the critical interventions that Mendieta's tableaux offer are often lost or unnamed. The violence deployed by the many avant-garde artists influenced by Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, and Friedrich Nietzsche is often understood as striving for access to a version of human experience that is unmediated by socially mandated morality or religious doctrine. Part of this peeling back, as Mendieta's work reveals, is the acknowledgment of desire and disgust as congruent experiences.

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