Foreword

Ana Mendieta: Traces is the first comprehensive survey of this influential artist’s work to be presented in Great Britain or the German-speaking world. It persuasively demonstrates that her art, while very much rooted in the concerns of her day, maintains a powerful connection to our present moment. Born in Cuba in 1948, Mendieta was forced to immigrate to the United States as a child due to her father’s political situation, and much of her work is obliquely haunted by the exile’s sense of displacement, while also reflecting her position as a double minority in North America’s largely white, male art world of the 1970s and 1980s. From the beginning, motifs of transience, absence, violence, belonging, and an identity in flux animated her multidisciplinary art, which ranged nomadically across practices associated with body art, land art, performance, sculpture, photography and film. At its core lay her recurring use of her own body – its physical and photographic traces – and her interest in marginal outdoor sites and elemental materials.

Spanning her brief, yet remarkably productive, career, this exhibition explores the many distinct facets of her practice. It captures her powerfully visceral evocation of ritual and sacrifice, as well as cycles of life and decay, while also highlighting her pioneering role as a conceptual border-crosser. Including photographs, drawings, sculptures, Super-8 films and a substantial selection of photographic slides, most of which have not been exhibited until now, Ana Mendieta: Traces reveals an artist whose underlying concerns led her to bravely re-work and re-combine genres, to draw on different cultures, both archaic and contemporary, while challenging the limits of the art discourse of her time. Her work continues to profoundly challenge, disturb, influence and inspire.

Hayward Chief Curator Stephanie Rosenthal has done a wonderful job of bringing this exhibition together in ways that take on board recent scholarship on Mendieta and also cast a fresh light on lesser-known aspects of her practice. Assistant Curator Dominik Czechowski and Curatorial Assistant Jessica Cerasi, with help from intern Morgane Conti, provided crucial organisational and research support. For their original and thoughtful contributions to this catalogue, our thanks go to Julia Bryan-Wilson, Adrian Heathfield and to Stephanie herself. Hayward Publisher Nadine Monem did a superb job managing the content and design of this publication, with interim Hayward Publisher Ben Ferguson stepping in to complete the job, ably assisted by Faye Robson, Editor. Rosalind Horne project-managed the anthology section of the catalogue, while Melanie Mives earned our gratitude with her elegant catalogue design.

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Sabine Breitwieser wishes to thank the entire team of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg for collaborating with her on this project before her official start as the new director, especially Gottfried Paulus, Finance Director, Tina Treffel, Curatorial Assistant, and Susanne Greimel, Registrar.

Ralph Rugoff
Director, Hayward Gallery

Sabine Breitwieser
Director, Museum der Moderne
Art is a material act of culture, but its greatest value is its spiritual role, and that influences society, because it’s the greatest contribution to the intellectual and moral development of humanity that can be made.

Ana Mendieta

For many years Ana Mendieta attempted to create a sculpture in the sky made out of smoke – a sculpture that would materialise for a very short moment, change shape, fade out and disappear, leaving a trace on the camera film and in the memory. This unrealised work characterises the spiritual and ephemeral nature of Mendieta’s work and its resistance to categorisation. Throughout her life, Mendieta fought to cast off established classifications (body art, land art, performance art, feminism), and by never quite fitting into any of these recognised forms, she located herself in areas that had previously remained unoccupied. This yielded a body of work that served as a surface onto which diverse ideas, impressions and theories could be projected.

The ‘in-between’ nature of Mendieta’s work also stemmed from the way in which she saw art: as inseparable from her body, her life and her cultural heritage. Indeed, a central source of its power is her radical exploration of her own roots and the rigid conceptual language she developed to address them. This, in turn, saw her investigating the fundamental connection between human beings and the earth. Her works – subtle, small-scale, at times almost invisible – are imbued with what she understood as a very real magic, relating to the religion and ritualism of her native Cuba; a magic that arose from her capacity to tap into ancient knowledge and ritual while constantly challenging the divisions between nature and her own body.

Mendieta’s artistic credo was lived out on a variety of levels and the media she used to produce and record her work took on a new importance and led inevitably to a blurring of the line between documentation and artwork.

"Plugging into Mexico was like going back to the source, being able to get some magic just by being there.

Ana Mendieta
Photography served as a nuanced means of reframing her works, creating a hermetic seal and enveloping them in an aura of archaism. For her first key solo exhibition at the Corroboree Gallery of New Concepts (Iowa University in 1977) Mendieta chose to present her works in the form of photographs. All 27 colour photographs in the exhibition were single images selected from slides that Mendieta had used to document works made between 1976 and 1977 in the landscapes of Iowa and Mexico (pp.194–95). In a statement for the exhibition she explained her intentions: ‘The viewer of my work may or may not have had the same experience as myself. But perhaps my images can lead the audience to [speculate] on their own experiences [of] what they might feel was very clean.\(^\text{15}\) Even at this early point in her career, her practice already did not quite ‘fit in’ and she found herself operating in her own in-between space, which would become her characteristic artistic approach.

Beyond Painting

While Mendieta’s work was clearly influenced by conceptual art, minimalism, performance art and the theme of ‘body art’, her use of gunpowder, as well as her iconography was rooted in the cosmology of pre-Christian religions and the Catholic symbols and rituals of Mexico.\(^\text{21}\) As early as 1972, when she completed her studies in painting, she stated that her aim was to create works that were infused with the magic and power of pre-historic and ancient art.\(^\text{14}\) These paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the images to convey, and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.\(^\text{15}\) In her paintings, there were already signs of her interest in Mexican, African, prehistoric and pre-Columbian art; they are filled with archaic forms and references to primitive art; motifs were placed in the centre of the canvases and her compositions were influenced by figures in African dress.

The ‘earth-centred Santería’, as well as the entire religious pantheon of Cuba and the Caribbean, became an important inspiration for her work.\(^\text{22}\) She explains its significance to her work at the beginning of her statement for the Corroboree exhibition: “It seems as if these cultures provided me with an inner knowledge, a closeness [to] natural resources. And it is this knowledge that gives reality to the images they have created. It is this sense of magic, knowledge and power [that] primitive art has and that I myself have ascribed to my personal attitude toward art-making.”\(^\text{16}\) These influences become visible in Mendieta’s use of blood, feathers, her use of gunpowder, as well as her exploration of Abaká and Náñigo Burial and connections she forged with specific goddesses in the titles of works such as Blood (The Black (sexich)l) or Untitled (Ochún), to name just a few.

Mendieta’s Silueta series allowed her to feel a deep connection between her own body and the earth: “I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) 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. Through my earth-body sculptures I become one with the earth. (…) I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really [a] reactivation of primal beliefs (in) an omnipresent female force; the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being.\(^\text{4}\) The move from painting to first performance and also her first earth-body sculpture, Untitled (Grass on Woman), 1972 (pp.76–77)\(^\text{7}\) These were followed by performances, such as Untitled (Facial Cosmical Variations) and Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (pp.70–73), which explored transformations of affecting her own body, and Blood and Feathers and Chicken Piece (Chicken Movie) (pp.86 and pp.41–43), which tapped into both Viennese Actionism and the rituals of Santería, the syncretic, Afro-American religion practiced in Cuba.\(^\text{20}\) These works turned Mendieta into something of an outsider in Breder’s class. As a woman who was not producing conceptual art in the usual way, she was also the only woman: ‘I really would get it’, she once said, ‘because I was working with blood and with my body’.
Earth-body sculptures was thus based on an almost physical urge for Mendieta.

In her early earth-body sculptures, Mendieta positioned her own body in the landscape and asked someone else to photograph the result. From 1975 onwards she largely ceased this practice and created a silhouette of her own body as a proxy: “I decided I didn’t want to be in the work anymore [because] I don’t particularly like performance art.” She made prints of her own body in the earth or sand, or – as in the case of her Fetish works and her Island works (pp.37–38 and pp.126–27) – she recreated her whole body in organic and non-organic materials, including stones, soil, grass, flowers, moss, blood, pigments and, later, gunpowder. In 1978 she started to distance herself even further from using her own body as an artistic tool and began to fashion archaic forms from nature rather than introducing these forms into nature. In the works in which she continued to use her body, such as Tree of Life, which she made in 1976 (below), it seems to literally blur into nature.20 In the works created without her body, there are instead traces of it, either representing it or pointing to its absence. It is as though she had inscribed herself into the landscape.21

While the relationship with her own body, ancestral past and the earth were primary inspirations for Mendieta, her formal language and artistic development also owed something to Marcel Duchamp and Henri Matisse. In her final-year dissertation she discussed the work of Duchamp and in 1973 she created the film Door Piece (below), which references Duchamp’s Étant donnés (facing page) with its peephole perspective.22 In Étant donnés Duchamp created one of the most distinct images of the naked female body in a landscape. And it was in 1973 that Mendieta first positioned her own body in the landscape for Rape (p.85).23 This work was part of Mendieta’s artistic response to the rape of a fellow student in Iowa: A young woman was killed, raped and killed at Iowa,” Mendieta explained. “In one of the dorms, and it just really freaked me out. So I did several rape performance-type things at that time using my own body. They were tableaux… [...] So I guess that was the first kind of way in which I started using my body and doing something […] I did something that I believed in and that I felt I had to do.” She lay face down on the forest floor, the lower half of her body naked, and had the moment documented in a colour slide film.irit Rogoff’s comment is especially apt here: “Both trauma and dislocation were converging on the geography of her own body.”24 The tableau, as Mendieta later called it, was created in public under the gaze of her fellow students; in later works spectators would no longer be allowed to watch her at work.

In contrast to Mendieta’s work, Duchamp’s Étant donnés contains no obvious signs of violence; it is a highly erotic piece that arose from his relationship with Maria Martins and in which the many facets of his work are subsurned. Mendieta once said that “the basic instincts in a human being are eros, pleasure, life, and the death wish” and that her works were about precisely these things. A distillation of these ideas pervades Étant donnés, which makes it all the more plausible that this masterpiece exerted its influence on Mendieta. Duchamp’s Étant donnés reflects his interest in the idea of a distillation of all the media through which he worked. Despite the fact that decades earlier his ready-mades had already put an end to painting in his output, this later work is in effect playing with the idea of a three-dimensional painting.25 It would be going too far to claim the same for Mendieta and her Siluetas, yet there are certainly connections here to her own painting and to that of Matisse. Above all, it was Matisse’s use of patterns and ornament that fascinated her, and in Mendieta’s bodies made from organic substances there are echoes of Matisse’s abstractions of the human body (as in La Danse), which are seen in an even more reduced form in his cut-outs (right). While Duchamp’s approach to the female body in a landscape retains a similar emotional intensity to that of Mendieta, Matisse’s influence can primarily be seen formally.

Sculpture Becomes Photography

Earth-Body Sculptures

Mendieta did not regard her works as performance art, but neither were they “earth art” or “process art”: “My work is basically in the tradition of a Neolithic artist. It has very little to do with most earth art. I’m not interested in the formal qualities of my materials, but their emotional and sensual ones.”26 She made a particular point of distancing herself from male-dominated land art, and the culture of working with nature, it’s a different type of landscape work. I am thinking of the males, Robert Smithson and those people. If you could see Smithson’s work and isolate it, and see a photograph of the Spiral Jetty, you can say “Wow [...] if you see the whole body of work, his retrospective – his brutalised nature. He used it.”27 Mendieta saw her work as being on a human scale, and it’s really about a totally different spirit. It’s like in connection with the paleolithic spirit. As opposed to the industrial spirit. And that’s what I’m interested in. In my work I’m re-vitalising the idea of nature in a different way. I would say I have to identify with someone spiritually, and their use of nature, it would be someone like Richard Long, although I think his work is definitely very English. It’s culturally very different from mine. But so what?
I think these are things that people don’t look at and have not analysed. Robert Smithson was pouring glue and tar.

It was crucial to Mendieta that the works that she realised outside in contact with nature should involve her own body, that she should come into physical contact with the ground, that she should get dirty as she prostrated herself in the mud. In her proposal for Bard College in 1984 she wrote: ‘Opposed to the Earthworks of the 1970s, which use nature in its most literal sense, my purpose and interest is rooted in nature’s symbolical meaning. My works do not belong to the modernist tradition, which exploits physical properties and an enlarged scale of materials. Nor is it akin to the commercial historical self-conscious assertions of what is called post-modernism.’ Initially Mendieta described her work as tableaux, as she had done in the case of Imagen de Yagul (Image from Yagul); later on she referred to them as sculptures: ‘I work in public and I don’t really, unless it’s a very restricted kind of area, I don’t ask permission […] I work alone and I don’t consider my work to be a process art. I considered it to be a sculpture at this point.’ Mendieta often talked of earth-body sculptures and this was also the term she used in her lists of works for exhibitions.

Photography was the form chosen by Mendieta to render her private actions visible in an exhibition context. In addition to this she also showed films at screenings, for instance at 112 Greene Street in 1976. Later she transferred her films to VHS and showed them on monitors. This raises the question of what happens between the event and the image: what are the transformations that take place? Mendieta specifically used photography to control the public’s perception of her actions. Usually she showed sculptures in her photographs from above or frontally depending on whether she had realised them vertically or horizontally. The selected view is seen without any surroundings to speak of. The strong focus unsettles the viewer’s orientation and makes it all the harder to understand the proportions in the work and the individual placement of the forms gives them an archaic impact. Mendieta described this quality as ‘magical’ and this was precisely what she was aiming for in her photographs.

Starting with Imagen de Yagul (Image from Yagul), Mendieta’s works thus always existed on two levels: as a sculpture in nature and as a documentation of that sculpture in the form of photography and/or film. The photographs or film footage also had their own artistic meaning: ‘To me, the work has existed on different levels. It existed on the level of being in nature and eventually being eroded away. But obviously when it’s shown to someone as a photograph, that’s what it is. It’s a photograph of an object, right? In a landscape. When you see a portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe, you don’t say, “Well, is that a documentation of Georgia O’Keeffe or what is it?”’ In 1982, at a time when she had already realised her first indoor sculptures, she explained her use of photography and film: ‘In galleries and museums the earth-body sculptures come to the viewers by way of photos, because the work necessarily always stays in situ. Because of this, and due to the impermanence of the sculptures, the photographs become a very vital part of my work.’

Mendieta had no interest in categorisation. She did not describe herself as a photographer, yet she regarded the pictures she took as a significant aspect of her work: ‘I always did the things for the image […] I didn’t consider that a performance […] I would shoot a roll of film, right […] I have always just said, “OK, this is the work that I designate as the work” […] I’m controlling really pretty much what you’re seeing.’ The camera angles that she selected were generally quite straightforward, as though one were looking at the work in its “real” setting.

Whereas her 1977 exhibition was barely reported in the press, her 1979 exhibition at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York attracted considerable attention in the press (pp.202–03). Once again she showed photographs of her Siluetas, mounted on card, includingUntitled (Silueta), 1978. Writing in Art in America, Gilbert Coker questioned whether Mendieta’s photographs did her work justice: ‘Mendieta wants the public to come upon her outdoor works as one comes upon nature. She is opposed to any form of simulated gallery exhibition at the A.I.R. Gallery, State University of New York, Old Westbury. Installation view.

Installation view

installation, and this is certainly to her credit. And an outdoor environment brought indoors leaves much to be desired. Still an exhibition of documentary photographs, even if made by the artist (Mendieta photographs and films her own work), isn’t the answer either. One hungers for the natural smells and sound. We want to experience the actual piece, to feel the elements [...] The weight of this problem, it would seem, rests with the conventions of our galleries and arts institutions [...] One hopes a visionary one will appear to provide space conducive to Mendieta’s works as they should be seen.50 From time to time, for instance in her Old Westbury exhibition in 1978, Mendieta experimented with installations, but she did not pursue this any further in an in-depth manner (pp.195–99).51 One reason was certainly the lack of funds and a suitable space, but it also seemed that she simply resisted the idea of attempting to transpose nature into an interior setting. Nevertheless, the exhibition in Old Westbury, for which she filled an entire room with leaves and trees and introduced one of her Siluetas into this installation, did pave the way for her later floor pieces.

Even when Mendieta was still alive, there was no real agreement regarding the success or otherwise of her use of photography. Some critics saw the photographs as the real strength of her work. As early as 1979 Judith Wilson spoke out in favour of the photographs in the Village Voice: ‘For me, the confusion of documentation, art object and art act that Ana Mendieta’s work provokes is one of its most compelling features.’ Whether Siluetas consists of her ritualistic process of interacting with nature, of the immediate product of his interaction, or of the records of both process and product, she presents to the public is a question that draws nearly all the major tendencies of contemporary art into play.47

In the late 1970s Mendieta started to use less colour film and to create instead life-size black-and-white images.48 She first started making black-and-white prints in 1978 and in spring 1980 she bought a new camera that allowed her to make prints measuring 40 x 60 inches. According to Wilson, at the time Mendieta was toying with the idea of not only hanging her photographs on the walls but also laying them on the floor, ‘to enhance our sense of being at the actual site’.52 It seems this was never actually done, but her desire to create life-size prints and her use of black-and-white prints underline the sculptural aspect of her work and anticipate her later floor sculptures.

Towards Sculpture

In 1960 Mendieta returned to her native country, Cuba, for the first time. This first occasion was a cultural exchange visit, and she visited the country again several times in the following years.53 On her third trip to Cuba, in 1981, she realised her Rupestrian sculptures: nine archaic forms that recalled fertility goddesses, carved from the soft chalkstone of the Escaleras de Jaruco and sunk into the ground.54 Well, “Rupestrian” actually means carved in stone, because it’s an Italian or a Latin-rooted word. And also all of those images that I carved in Cuba, they were named after Tainan culture goddesses which was the original culture of the Caribbean area [...] to reactivate them.55

Whereas she had previously worked with forms that she ‘found’ in nature (having ceased to inscribe her own silhouette into the landscape), the sculptures in the Rupestrian series are considerably more abstract in their appearance and symbolise figures such as the Goddess of the Wind (Guabancex) or the Mother of the Water (Atabey) (p.137). Although these may call to mind the Woman of Willendorf (right), they are also reminiscent of Mendieta’s own early paintings and her interest in Matisse.56

Mendieta took black-and-white photographs of these sculptures with a 2½-inch camera that allowed her to make prints in a large format.57 Her aim was ‘to enhance our sense of being at the actual site; she was no longer satisfied with small-format colour photographs.58 That same year, at the A.I.R. Gallery, Mendieta showed life-size59 black-and-white photographs of the Rupestrian sculptures for the first time. The photographs were mounted on relatively thick wooden panels (pp.212–13). Each wall contained just one or two photographs. Through this approach she achieved a far closer relationship between the presentation in the gallery and the sculpture in situ. The photographs almost looked like reliefs. This exhibition paved the way for the floor pieces that Mendieta would make in the coming years.59 I’ve been trying to find some way that I could make more permanent pieces, without changing the spirit of the work [...] My work is really pre-industrial, even the look of it.60

It was at this point that Mendieta increasingly started to realise works in interiors, which also meant that there was less need to document them in photographs or on film. In the early 1980s she started to draw more as she explored the linear nature of sculpture and the effect of paper.61 In the exhibition of Mendieta’s work presented by Yvonne Seguy in 1982, drawing was the main focus for the first time. Alongside the drawings there were just two life-size black-and-white photographs, including La Vivificación de la Carne (Vivification of the Flesh),62 which depicts an earth sculpture that calls to mind an abstract human body (pp.148–49). She used similar forms in her floor sculptures that she was now starting to experiment with, one of which she showed at PS1 in 1983.63 A year earlier she had realised Maroya (Esculturas Rupestres) – a gunpowder sculpture which she thought of as an incense burner – in a private garden in Miami, and Árbitra (Witness), a sculpture made out of tree branches integrating an existing tree trunk, in the grounds of an art school in Connecticut.

Woman of Willendorf, c. 24,000–22,000 BC
In 1983 the American Academy awarded the Prix de Rome to Ana Mendieta and she moved to Rome that same year (pp.217-226). In Rome she had her own studio for the first time, and this also intensified her desire to work indoors: ‘I have never had a studio before because I never needed one. Now I have been working indoors. I’ve always had problems with that because I don’t feel that I can emulate nature. Installation is a take off. So I’ve given this problem to myself (. . .) to work indoors. I found a way and I am working right now with working, with sand, with mixing it, with a binder, and making sculptures. I am very pleased because I am able to get some kind of textures I get outside.’ In addition to the floor pieces she was working on, Mendieta now started to make sculptures from ‘human-sized’ tree trunks (below). In the early 1980s she also commented: ‘My works may or probably have not been made with my body but my body was there. I am not that disinterested in the idea that experience had shaped me. That I was not easy to my works for the viewer to re-experience that experience through the making of photographs. I’m not saying that it was all or nothing. ’

A central source of the power of Ana Mendieta’s art lies in her occupation of ‘in-between’ spaces. Her work, her biography, her political position, her whole worldview were defined by the way in which she strove to ‘explore new land’. Categories such as feminism, body art and land art simply did not apply to her work, because she had carved out her own creative space - the ‘Between World’. Her work is intangible; its essence is absence: the absence of the body, the absent sculpture, the absent moment that is only captured in her work, with sand, with mixing it, with a binder, and making sculptures. I am very pleased because I am able to get some kind of textures I get outside.’ In addition to the floor pieces she was working on, Mendieta now started to make sculptures from ‘human-sized’ tree trunks (below). In the early 1980s she also commented: ‘My works may or probably have not been made with my body but my body was there. I am not that disinterested in the idea that experience had shaped me. That I was not easy to my works for the viewer to re-experience that experience through the making of photographs. I’m not saying that it was all or nothing. ’

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott

Ana Mendieta
Tobacco Grove, 1985
Series of four sculptures of wood and galvanized wire.
So much has been said on the work, life and death of Ana Mendieta that to add a single phrase may seem both excessive and redundant. Yet, the call to come back to this work again and again is irresistible: it is protean, fecund, it demands repeated attention. The thicket of words that has grown around Mendieta’s corpus responds directly to the powerful muteness of the work. If the intensity of this discourse in the 1980s and ’90s were just a necessary consequence of the circumstances of her death, or a reflection of the broader battle over which lives and works really mattered to the art world in the violently politicised atmosphere of that time, then the words might have abated by now. But the arguments have continued to proliferate and thicken, because the work itself, silently, passionately, continues to speak with us. Mendieta’s visceral and incendiary acts, corporeal traces and loamy impressions still touch, burn and trouble. Her use of elemental substances (earth, air, water, fire and flesh), her deployments of the figure and the ground, move through the emotive paradoxes of mortal existence: the lived tensions between the material and the immaterial, the present and the absent, what remains and what departs. As such, these works operate at the limits of what can be thought and said through language. They access feelings of elemental existence, and gesture towards boundlessness and eternity. Though they are evidently marked by the time of their making, these works carry a timeless quality, such that they feel oddly contemporary. No wonder Mendieta’s oeuvre continues to perturb the cultural apparatus that comes to order, place and contain it: the market, the museums, the archives and the arbitrations of art history.

Part of the allure of Mendieta’s work arises from its striking nonconformity. It is difficult to name and locate her practice in the established narratives of Western art history relating to the 1970s and ’80s. Her work rapidly migrated across art disciplines, without resting in a particular medium or movement. The prolific assimilation, and singular adaptation of, contemporaneous understandings and forms that is manifested in her work situates it between numerous different aesthetic impulses. Mendieta’s early works might be seen in affiliation with body art: her raw Rape (1973), alongside her other gutsy actions of this period, coincide with many aspects of that emergent scene. Mendieta pictured herself stripped, bloodied, ‘brutalised’ and discarded in an anonymous ‘wasteland’, and then again, in Rape Scene (p. 87), of the same year, in a two-hour performance in her own apartment. After years of cerebral, cool and sanitary conceptualism, artists were gripped by the need to re-materialise contemporary art (and to re-politicise it) by using the artist’s flesh as aesthetic matter. Exploring the body as a mutable and woundable thing, as a broken object, body artists tested the limits of social orders and taboos. Physical risk was deployed to question relations of power and desire in gendered identity. Mendieta’s use of degradation and subjection can be read in this vein – her gathering of a small group of witnesses to her posed, ‘defiled’ body imagined as a wound to social conscience, requiring a political salve. Yet it was never Mendieta’s own blood that was spilled in these works (as it was for her contemporaries Marina Abramović, Chris Burden and Gina Pane). She addressed patriarchal violence head-on in these actions, though her work sidestepped the masochism implied in the repeated self-openings of her
body-art compatriots; instead she used animals’ bodies and blood to conjure the ceremonial and the sacrificial. "Sweating Blood" (p. 44), made in the same year as her rape pieces, is a short Super 8 film in which blood from slaughtered cattle trickles down Mendieta’s stilled, passive face. The film manifests ideas common to body art: the physical and the emotional as ruptures in the visual and the rational orders. But it also introduces tropes that will recur throughout her later sculptural, filmic and environmental works: the heart as a more-than-human matter, transubstantiation, the interest in bodies as morphological entities and a preoccupation with corporeal tracings and affective impressions. This last concern, with the emotive force of the visible residues of bodies, is crystallised in another film from 1973, Moffitt Building Piece (p. 26), in which Mendieta filmed the passing reactions of members of the public to an unseemly spill of blood on the sidewalk. The carnal stain is an interruption in the everyday, a social question, but it is also a means to test the living force of bodily remains in a specific site.

As Rape also shows, Mendieta was already embroiled with an art in and of the environment, though one that was quite distinct from the prevailing qualities of much land art: nature made into the monumental, with the landscape designated as a sculptural scene. Mendieta was similarly drawn to the outside, to the natural world, and to making aesthetic interventions within sites seemingly untouched by the human and the cultural. Yet her sculptural gestures in these "remote" locales invoked an altogether more intimate and questioning relationship between the human and "the wild". The term she invented for the Silueta series – "earth-body sculptures" – perfectly epitomises the distinctive, liminal state of this work. The impassioned relation to elemental matter inaugurated in her early works led her into temporary communions with the lovely and formless materials of earth and sand and scrub. Far from colonising the alien wild, making a mark of ownership upon it, there is a being-with nature in these works that disempowers the human claim. At the same time, her long entanglement with sculptural practice was offset by a deep commitment to the utter dissipation of the sculptural object (in nature) and its transition into the quite different durations and dimensions of photography and film. Here there are some visible affinities with conceptual art: the use of serality and documentary-style images as flat evidence of an activity. And yet, for Mendieta, the idea was not privileged over the execution, and these were not detached enactments, as in much conceptual work; the emotional, sensual and affective qualities of her materials were vital and were carried through the, acute, form of the chosen image. Serality is open here, and it occurs as the inevitable consequence of a long-sustained and mutating passion. In her later works, where actual sculptures and totems do endure beyond their making, a dialogue with the dominant notions of minimalist sculpture is evident, but Mendieta combines simplicity, and attention to "matter as matter", with elements quite counter to the minimalist drive: irregular organic forms persist alongside elusive "ancient" symbolism.

Each of these differences with the mainstreams of body art, land art, conceptualism and minimalism is influenced in complex ways by Mendieta’s gender and ethnicity – her experience as a double outsider in the predominantly white, male worlds in which she necessarily moved. Mendieta was in any case a displaced and disadvantaged subject: an itinerant being. Her emigration from Cuba to the United States with her sister in their teenage years was a result of her father’s political situation. At a formative age, this cast the Mendieta sisters out of social privilege, a home and familial relations, into conditions of foster care, and ethnic and linguistic alienation. Much has consequently been made of Ana Mendieta’s relationship to the land as ‘home’; Mendieta once described her work as an attempt to re-fuse with the earth, which she saw as ‘an after-image of the original shelter within the womb’. Early in her career she rejected the institutional ‘homes’ of art practice – the studio, the gallery and the museum – as sites for her work. Thereafter, she made a sustained investment not just in the outdoors, but in the decidedly marginal, non-cosmopolitan and rural spaces of Iowa, Mexico and then, finally, her ‘homeland’, Cuba. If these searches were directed towards some kind of primary dwelling, whether of gender, land or nation, their seriality continues to convey restlessness and the works do not resolve (for their spectators at least) the feelings of alienation from which they may originate. A certain solitude persists throughout.

In this reading, Mendieta’s art is caught in a repeated movement of return, a search for home and belonging conducted through the land as a re-grounding. And yet the slight and frailable nature of her many impressions in the earth speaks to the impossibility of ever coming home, of ever landing, once one is cleaved from one’s place of origin. The earth in any case is not simply fecund, abundant or generative in these works, it is also often barren, inert and unyielding. Instability, non-belonging and transience are the primary qualities figured in her images. The corporeal traces she conjures seem disposed toward some ‘elsewhere’; Mendieta’s works with the earth are an exception amongst the works of many of her male land art contemporaries, as she refuses gestures towards the land that would impose, supplement and insist. In fact, full landscapes are rarely surveyed in the Silueta series – location is framed out – and instead we look, with slightly downcast eyes, at the contours of a singular feminine body against the matter of land. What we see there is not so much full landscapes are rarely surveyed in the Silueta series – location is framed out – and instead we look, with slightly downcast eyes, at the contours of a singular feminine body against the matter of land. What we see there is not so much a construction, but a lodging, an embedding or swathing of a body in places of temporary comfort or rest. In the later Silueta series, Mendieta’s posed body leaves the scene and what lingers are gougings, mouldings, embers and scorched tracings of the earth’s underlying form, crumbling, flaring, drifting away. The figure becomes body-contour, which in turn dissolves in the formlessness of elemental matter. How to distinguish the figure from the ground? Can one...
say with any certainty that Mendieta is acting on the land, staking a claim, personifying it? Earth and elements are also experienced as agents here. Water flows, dirt crumbles, embers glow and smoke plumes, then vanishes. The anthropocentric status of art is displaced by a vision of human production as only one aspect of a living system of earthly creations. These works might be better read as interactions between the land and the gestures and traces of a woman; invocations of the vibrant relations and flux of all earthly elements including the flesh of the human animal. The land is touched carefully here, caressed, in order to let the incessant and exalting transformation of things speak: murmurs of a radical ecological consciousness.

One cannot locate Mendieta’s works, or think of them as autonomous objects, because the works seldom reside in a single form, but live somewhere between acts and forms. This is particularly the case with the Silueta series, where each Silueta is the relation of a performance, a sculpture and a photograph or a film. Alongside the profound commitment to an art that is sensuously honed from organic matter, that is located in nature, and that reverts to the elements through inevitable processes of decay, we see that this investment produces something else that does not last: image and film. But this is not the common arrest of performance art in a single iconic photograph, which then stands in for the work. As the archival section of this publication makes plain, Mendieta’s images proliferated as she attempted to trace durations of action in the object. What the spectator is dealing with in the face of Mendieta’s work is the relation between matter and forms – performance, sculpture, image – each of which carries distinct durations, each of which is the consequence of an enduring attention. The work is constituted somewhere between these times: it is atemporal. What remains is not a summation or condensation of the work, but a number of visual artefacts that feel initiatory, full of potential; they gesture to future dissolutions or re-formations – an end is never seen. This is also why, despite the temptations of tautological and biographical readings, Mendieta’s work continues to resist its reduction to death rehearsal: its passages are insistently ecstatic, natal and prolic. Mendieta spoke of her work as being ‘in the tradition of a Neolithic artist’, and the affinity goes far beyond materials, forms and symbols. The sense of art as rite – the always-different repetitions, the invocations of transfiguration and transformation – makes this an immemorial art. Spirited matter. It comes from the Americas of the 1970s and ’80s, but also from somewhere far away and sometime long ago, and it is absolutely vital as it leaves.