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XUNTA DE GALICIA

From Inscription to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the Work of Ana Mendieta*

Charles Merewether

In her luminous but tragically short life, Ana Mendieta produced an extraordinary body of work. For a period of thirteen years between 1972 and 1985, she produced super-8 films and videos, an extensive body of performances, actions and site-specific installations, drawings, prints, objects and sculpture. And yet since her death in 1985, there has been very little critical attention paid to her work, as if the nature of her death has overshadowed this possibility.[1] One may ask, how are we to read or look back upon the work of Mendieta without the informing presence of her violent death surrounding us, lapping across the shores of our perception? How do we separate the work from the biographical, an issue that was itself precisely the subject of Mendieta's own concern as an artist?

Throughout her life, Mendieta produced an art whose fugitive appearance carried within it the fragile aura of a disembodied trace of the real, of the remains of life amongst the ruins of modern culture. To review the scope of her art is to see quite clearly the way she pushed herself through her work as a perpetual becoming. As such two critical approaches to the making of art appear central to Mendieta's concern: the question of the body and the performative and the work of art as a trace. With each approach, the location of meaning and identity (authorship and the self) is displaced from the fixity of the image or place onto the performative and the marks of inscription. As Shoshana Felman, writing on femininity, would propose, it was not a question of "what model do I imitate, what structure of otherness do I identify with; but what structure of otherness do I address myself to".[2]

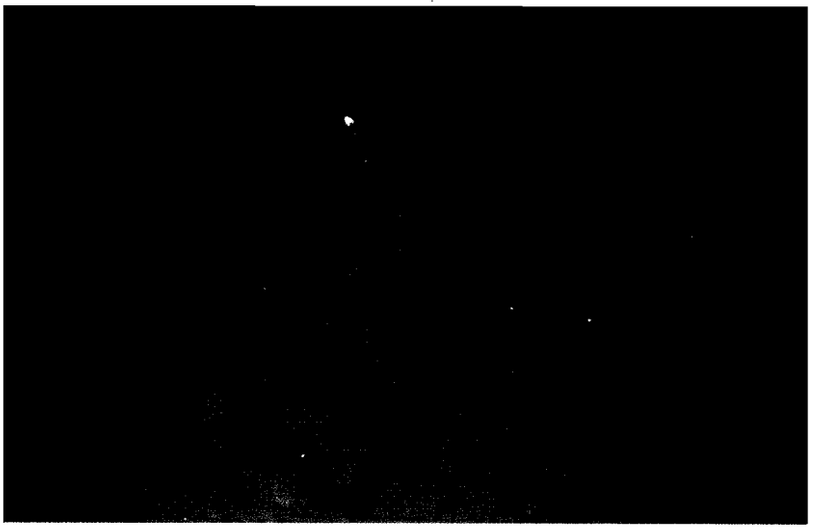
By assuming forms of embodiment and disembodiment, the ephemeral, transient character, and therefore unstable condition of the work, becomes the subject. She writes herself into and out of the text, all the time working against its constraints, its proximities to the organic, to the animal, seeking to expose the body's limits and excesses, if only to embrace in this fragile space of difference how the body as woman is the object of sacrifice. For Mendieta, the body as the subject of violence, eroticism and death was the body as woman. This took her to points and places of extreme and closest of all to the concept of death as always the border across which the horizon of exteriority could be viewed.

Throughout her work, she seeks to unwrite realism, to wedge a space between the body and the text of the body, the imaginary wholeness of the relation between artist and the work, making her truth provisional and contingent. Identity is always in the making and Mendieta radically disturbs its perpetual positioning by laying waste to its idealization and authorizing an image of difference founded within a space of absence, a *mise-en-abîme.* In these terms, the work represents a profound critique of the social sphere and an attempt to think the outside, the heterogeneous as the site at once of restitution and dissolution.

The focus of this essay is on the early period of her work from 1972 until 1975 when she made her first *silueta* (silhouette) work. By so doing, I wish to suggest the kinds of intersections her work made with that of her contemporaries and the intellectual framework within which it was elaborated. From this perspective, one may not only reevaluate the significance of Mendieta's early period, but re-envision the trajectory of her work and its profound engagement with modernism and cultural modernity.

The Scene of a Crime

From 1972 to 1975 Mendieta produced a startling series of experimental "actions" and performance works. And as with other contemporary artists, her early work shows the influence of Erving



142. *Untitled,* Iowa, 1977. [cat. 27]

Goffman's characterization of social exchange as a performative and ritual encounter in which the subject or identity could be located.[3] In particular, Mendieta began to explore issues concerning social taboo and transgression, focusing on the subject of sacrifice and crime around the body as woman. From this perspective, it was the work of writers such as Foucault and Marcuse who, in their critique of the repressive conventions of society, provided such artists as Mendieta with an important theoretical and political armature to their work. In their terms, the role of modernism could serve as a critical injunction in offering a critical aesthetics of emancipation from the symbolic order.

One of the first of these works was an untitled performance of November 1972 in which she presented herself standing naked against a wall holding a white beheaded chicken.[4] In the beginning of a short super-8 film she made of the performance, the audience sees the head of the chicken being cut off and the remaining body handed to Mendieta. As Mendieta takes the beheaded chicken by the legs, it jerks about uncontrollably. Mendieta holds the chicken tightly, away from her body, but upside down by the legs in front of her at the height where its neck dangles in front of her pubis. Closing her eyes momentarily, the death throes of the chicken reverberate through her and the blood spurts across her own body.

147. *Untitled*, Iowa, 1977. [cat. 32]

Mendieta's subjection of herself to this scene brings a sense of proximity and identification of woman's body to that of the animal.[5] Moreover, the violent conjunction of her naked body, the killing of the animal and its dying coalesce as a scene of estrangement for the spectator. As spectators we become witness to the subject of sacrifice, the victim. It is what Victor Turner would define as a point of liminality, a threshold state of exchange between the dying body and that of the living. In staging the act of animal sacrifice, Mendieta's performance commits a scene of violation that is the subject of taboo, and what a western audience would associate to be a "primitive custom."[6] While the action appears as a transgression of everyday civility, the fact that Mendieta refused to mark it as the custom or ritual of another culture, suggests that the site of such sacrificial violence lies within the profane world in which we live.[7]

This was the first work where Mendieta used blood, and commenting on it later, she remarked that she "started immediately using blood, I guess because I think it's a very powerful magic thing. I don't see it as a negative force." She then added: "I really would get it because I was working with blood and with my body. The men were into conceptual art and doing things that were very clean."[8] And, moreover, at this time, as she later wrote:

> *The turning point in art was in 1972, when I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I want the image to convey and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.*[9]

In April of 1973, she performed what was the first and most confrontational of three actions around the subject of rape.[10] This followed an incident on the Iowa University campus where a fellow student had been raped and murdered the month before. The first piece was performed in her own apartment in Moffitt Street, Iowa City. Mendieta had invited friends and fellow students to visit her and leaving the apartment door slightly open, they entered to find themselves in a darkened room except for one light over a table where Mendieta lay stretched out and bound, and stripped from the waist down smeared in blood. On the floor around her lay broken plates and blood.[11] In an interview in 1980, Mendieta related how the incident had "moved and frightened" her. Referring to the work, she added "I think all my work has been like that – a personal response to a situation (...). I can't see being theoretical about an issue like that."[12] The issue was about naming

rape, that is, not only breaking the code of silence surrounding it, but its anonymity and generality.

The subject of rape was not new to the field of art during these years. An emergent feminist movement had influenced women, working in performance art, happenings and dance, to address the subject not only in terms of its violence, but also as a process of gendering woman as feminine. The difference between this work and that of Mendieta's was that by staging the incident herself, the performance intervened upon the event. That is, not only did it testify to the occurrence but, by the act of repetition, of its re-iteration, an audience was constructed as participant. The focus is not, then, only on the victim, but on the witnessing, on the event-taking-place.[13]

Furthermore, the first work is staged twice over, first with those who come to her apartment and then the photographs. The experience of shock in coming across the violated body transgresses the normative mediations that surround the subject. And in its restaging as a photograph, what becomes most powerful is how it implicates us as an immediate witness to the scene of violence. Yet, we are confronted too by a scene that in its representational form produces an image of profound disturbance, a kind of paroxysm in time in which the scene of violation remains somehow unalterably present.

The demand to participate, to be witness, became central to Mendieta during this period. In these months of 1973, she also produced another series of actions in downtown Iowa City. The first, performed in April, entailed leaving a small suitcase filled by blood and bones on a street corner. The following month she presented two further scenarios of blood seeping out from beneath the doorway of her apartment building onto the pavement and another, *Clinton St: Dead on Street*, where Mendieta lay in the middle of a street as if dead. The fourth in October, was a *mise-en-scène* of an apartment violently destroyed, mattresses strewn and torn, stained by blood, and again leaving the door open so that the passerby might chance across the scene. In each case she had a camera set up in order to photograph the reactions of people passing by. Each of these actions demanded that the public become an audience and bear witness to an event about which they had no real knowledge. All that was left was the evidence of a crime: the severed body, the spilt blood. The scene of the crime is not only the object to which they are witness, but insofar as the actions acquire meaning through their public reception, the public is itself transformed into a participant of the crime.

In addressing the issue of a crime as constitutive norm of bourgeois society, Mendieta was recovering what Bataille and the *Collège de Sociologie* had explored in the work of Sade and in the inter-war period of Fascism. What so fascinated them was the way crime might reveal and challenge the repression of the unconscious by the bourgeois culture and therefore the very material that Fascism tapped.[14] From this perspective, Mendieta's work offered a cultural critique of the symbolic order and bourgeois society as inaugurating and masking violence. However, by restaging symbolically the act of crime, Mendieta was also making a link between art and crime and defining the potentially transgressive function of art and her role as an artist. For Mendieta, the relation between art and criminality was its position of exteriority or heterogeneity to society, and in writing about herself at this time, Mendieta perceived that she had a choice between becoming an artist or criminal.

Later, in a 1983 interview, Mendieta referred to the anger she had felt and still did growing up in an orphanage and as latino in the US. Art was, she said "her salvation":

> *I know if I had not discovered art, I would have been a criminal. Theodore Adorno has said, "all works of art are uncommitted crimes." My art comes out of rage and displacement. Although the image may not be a very rageful image, I think that all art comes out of sublimated rage.*[15]

In a passage that Mendieta may well have read from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno write of how "a yielding attitude to things, without which art cannot exist, is not so very remote from the very violence of the criminal."[16] Such an idea, as the authors point out, corresponded not only to Freud's concept of the death instinct, but also to Caillois" work on mimeticism. The boundaries between self and other, the repressed other within the self, are dissolved. And this release of desire constituted the origin of art.[17]

Sacrificial Violence

In a period of two years between her first visit to Mexico in 1971 and her next in the summer of 1973, Mendieta began to read what had become for many a kind of handbook to Mexican culture, Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude.*[18] The impact of the book on Mendieta was profound and its ideas would remain with her throughout her life.

While much has been made of Paz's central thesis concerning what he perceives as an essential inferiority in the Mexican character, it also contains an extended reflection on the theme of sacrifice and the relation between man, the sacred and nature.[19] For Paz, the two dominant religious traditions of Mexico, catholicism and Aztec culture, had been both founded on the idea of a sacrificial economy, economies which entailed death through sacrifice, but as a means of releasing a surplus vital energy and the possibility of community.[20]. In these terms, Paz's book was indebted to the work of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss and, in turn, to both Bataille and Caillois, whose elaboration of a theory of sacrifice was based on a concept of excess or *expense.*[21] As Bataille proposed:

> *Death, and death alone, constantly ensures the renewal of life. The law given in nature (...) life is effusion, it is contrary to equilibrium. It is tumultuous movement that bursts forth and consumes itself.*[22]

Like Bataille, Caillois also noted that just as with festival where waste and destruction "are rightfully part of the festival's excess," so death by sacrifice is a ceremony of renewal or generation of the *socius.*[23] Such a connection between the economy of sacrifice and that of festival, resonated strongly in Paz's conception of Mexico, reflected in the following words:

> *Everything merges, loses shape and individuality and returns to primordial mass. Ritual death promotes a rebirth; (...) the orgy, sterile in itself renews the fertility of the mother or of the earth. The fiesta is a return to a remote and undifferentiated state, prenatal or presocial. It is a return that is also a beginning (...). The group emerges purified and strengthened from this plunge into chaos. It has immersed itself in its own origins, in the womb from which it came.*[24]

However, what makes these ideas seem so startling is that they were written immediately following World War Two, the violence of which, Paz would seem to suggest, has a certain inevitability or necessity. That is, Paz invokes violence as a necessary passage to obtain transcendence, a transcendence empowered by a dialectic of love for and aggression against the maternal. Paz's fascination with Mexican culture was to understand how modern and ancient Mexico resolved "man's eternal solitude." Under the influence of Catholicism and the impact of post-war Existentialism, Paz argued that in a modern society dominated by individualism, it is only through "expiation and redemption" that the

"solitary or isolated individual transcends his solitude, accepting it as a proof or promise of communion".[25]

For Paz, like Bataille, poetry could resolve the conflict between the local or contingent and the universal by appealing to a language whose source is prior to and outside history, in a realm of myth. Poetry offered the possibility of returning to a kind of communion, of oneness with the self and environment, which religion once provided. In *Las Peras del Olmo*, he wrote "religion and poetry tend towards communion; both start from solitude and try, through the nourishment of the sacred, to break down that solitude and

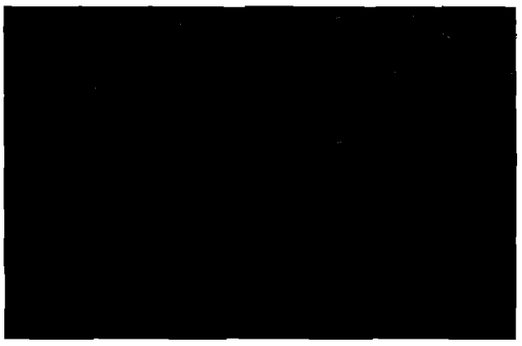
152. *Untitled*, Iowa, 1979. [cat. 54]

return to man his nature."[26] Such an appeal could be made because this place outside of history provided the source of moral order.[27] This was the stuff of myth and where Paz's work represents a radical departure from the ideas of Bataille and Caillois, and towards that of Levi-Strauss. It was not that Bataille or Caillois denied the urgency for myth in the modern epoch, but that modern culture was based on its denial and an estrangement from the natural world on which ancient myth had been founded. For both Paz and Levi-Strauss, myth was viewed in terms of a universal model of communion, which could offer a way towards integration and wholeness. Paz's modernity could be realized through the primitivist construction of Mexico as other, and woman as the womb of the earth. Woman, that is, as the *telos* and origin of man's desire and redemption, *her* sacrifice as the foundation of representation and *his* promise of continuity.

Such ideas offered an extraordinarily direct account for Mendieta's sense of herself and experience of exile from her country and detachment from the United States. As a result, Mendieta copied and integrated directly into her artistic statements whole passages and phrases

from Paz. Amongst these, the following statement by Mendieta reveals the profound movement which generated her work.

> *All detachment or separation provokes a wound. A rupture, whether it is with ourselves or what surrounds us or with the past or present produces a feeling of aloneness. In my case where I was separated from my parents and my country at the age of 12, this feeling of aloneness identified itself as a form of orphanhood. And it manifested itself as consciousness of sin. The penalties and shame of separation caused me necessary sacrifices and solitude as a way of purifying myself. You live it, like proof and promise of communion.*[28]



153. *Untitled*, Iowa, 1979. [cat. 55]

Mendieta's words are an abbreviation of Paz. She follows his movement from separation and solitude to necessary sacrifice, but then edits out the idea of overcoming exile and the idea of redemption resolving itself in communion. Rather, her text rests with the idea of the necessity of living a life of sacrifice and solitude.

In the summer of 1973 Mendieta returned to Mexico, this time to Oaxaca with her companion Breder. Each morning they went to the market and she would plan her work for the day. On one occasion she lay covered by a white sheet on the parapet of Hotel Principal, placed an animal's heart over her stomach and poured blood over her body, between the legs and on the ground beside her.[29] On another occasion, after returning from the market with white flowers, she drove to a place she had been to before, an ancient Zapotec site with courtyards, a crypt and open tomb. Taking the flowers, she lay naked in the tomb with branches of white flowers laid over her body, so that they appeared to be growing from out of her.[30] Named *El Yagul* after the site, she later spoke

of it in these terms: "The analogy was that I was covered by time and history."[31]

The homage to Frida Kahlo and specific reference to her work was clear. Stopping in Mexico City, they had visited museums and Kahlo's house in the Northern colonia of Coyoacán. There she had had the opportunity to see some of Kahlo's paintings, especially works like *Roots* (1943) and *The Broken Column* (1944), a self-portrait with fertile roots growing out of her body into the crevices of the barren earth. Mendieta's work suggests in a simple and immediate form the relations between death and the resurgence of life.

154. *Untitled*, Iowa, 1979. [cat. 56]

In the work of Mendieta, however, there is the suggestion of a quite different movement of thought. For although her performance work, at this time, appears close to Paz's conception of death and renewal, what was of equal importance to Mendieta in Paz's account was that the unstated, but necessary, sacrificial object was woman. This was something she had also discovered in Kahlo's work, and for Mendieta this relationship was critical. Not only did it expose the subject of society's repressive violence, that is the object of crime, but as much revealed that the relation between death and nature was the constitutive condition given to woman, that is, to keep her always outside the social, displaced, in a state of exile. An economy of excess depends, in other words, on its incommensurate relation to use value and both a recognition and disavowal of difference. It is, as René Girard remarks in his revision of Levi-Strauss, that the absent center of myth is the victim whose traces mythology is devoted to covering up.[32] This absent center is the site of sacrifice and its subject the sacred and the accursed or abject who are

identical, irreducibly ambivalent, and born in the same moment as desire. In Girard's work on sacrificial violence, it is the figure of the victim which is the foundational requirement of both violence and the sacred. He observes the victim comes after nature and before culture, which originates in the sacred (...). The victim serves to bridge the gap between nature and culture and to mark their definitive rupture.[33] And as with sacrifice, the feminine body of woman is the object of transgression and therefore that which yields the experience of the sacred and against which the identity of one (male) is defined.

The Sacred Imprint

In the strongest sense, trangression exists only from the moment when art reveals itself. Bataille [34]

Between late 1973 and February 1974 Mendieta performed and filmed a series that returned to the use of blood as its central component. The first short super-8 film of three minutes was made in November, 1973 entitled *Sweating Blood.* Focusing on her face with her eyes closed, time passes until first imperceptibly blood begins to trickle down from her hairline over her face, and then with time begins to run freely covering her face completely.[35] She then made a series she would call *Blood Writing* followed by *Blood Signs.*[36] *Blood Writing* (March 1974) comprised a series of "action paintings" directly onto the wall with her body.[37] In the first of these, Mendieta appears half clothed, pushing herself against the wall, dragging it down to leave the mark of her breasts and a silhouette of the body.[38] This was followed by another series of actions but with her clothing on. Covering her hands and arms in red liquid, then stretching them out or holding them high over her head, she pulled herself down against the wall to a crouching position, leaving different curving lines suggestive of the body.[39] In *Blood Sign* she dipped her hand in a bucket of blood to spell out on the wall the words: SHE GOT LOVE and in another action, she painted an arch with her outstretched arms, then the words: "there is A devil inside me".

To some extent this work corresponds closely with previous ideas about sacrifice in terms of the notion of expenditure of the heterogeneous. As Freud proposed in *Totem und Taboo,* the function of the rites of purification is to protect the subject from becoming contaminated and free society of this pollution through the expulsion of the subject who has defiled. Caillois observed that "the very health of a human body requires the regular evacuation of its "impurities", urine

and excrement, as well as, for woman, menstrual blood."[40] As viewed by Paz, this space is that of the maternal body, as "a place of passage, a threshold where *nature* meets *culture.*[41] By using blood so directly both in this work and earlier, Mendieta's work adopts the very material which Freud had symbolized as the two taboos of incest and murder upon which culture and society rest.

It was during this time that Mendieta wrote:

> *I was looked at by the 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. This discovery was a form of seeing myself separate from others, alone.*[42]

However, what Mendieta emphasizes in the work is the body as woman as an instrument and material for the production of art. Art becomes both a form of expenditure and a transgressive form of reinscription. The work appears as a form of signature trace which both issues from within the interior of the body and yet too from its textual exterior. Not only does it release woman as the eroticized subject of defilement but, by reference to menstrual blood, symbolizes, as Kristeva notes "a danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); [which] (...) threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference."[43]

During this period Mendieta's art reveals a fascination with the idea of a symbiotic relation between eroticism and death. In an interview some years later, she stated: "I don't think you can separate death and life. All of my work is about those two things, about Eros and life/death."[44] And, as Bataille remarked in the opening words of his book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality,* "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death."[45] The creative act is at the same time the experience of death. Sometime between 1973-5, Mendieta had copied out the words of Octavio Paz beneath her own artistic statement:

> *Our cult of death is also a cult of life in the same way that love is a hunger for life and a longing for death. Our fondness for self-destruction derives not from our masochistic tendencies but also from a certain variety of religious emotion.*[46]

Incorporating this observation into one of her artistic statements suggests that Mendieta's interest is not simply the subject of death, but the relation of "self-destruction" to "religious emotion." In this regard, Bataille again offers a clear articulation of this subject, when he remarks that: "In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation."[47] Writing of "voodoo sacrifice", Bataille speaks of "an ecstasy comparable to drunkenness (...) brought about by the killing of birds."[48] Similarly, Mendieta in her series *Blood Writing* appears as if possessed, a form of intoxication which is at once the source for and the object of a creative process. From this perspective, it can be likened to what Kristeva defines as the masochistic economy of the Christian mystic, a "fount of infinite *jouissance*" which far from being for the benefit of "symbolic or institutional power.(...) displaces it indefinitely (...) within a discourse where the subject is reabsorbed (...) into communication with the Other and with others." [49] Masochism, like crime, was a form of gathering power through self-loss, an unbinding of subjectivity that dissolves the boundaries in otherness.

While in Mexico, during the summer of 1974, Mendieta began to experiment with the idea of the stain and shroud. This included (i) a series of *mise-en-scènes* of a figure covered in a white sheet standing in a niche, suggesting the Catholic custom of covering sacred statuary at

156. *Untitled*, Iowa. 1978. [cat. 44]

Easter; (ii) a white sheet on which she had imprinted herself in red blood and paint, which was then held up, as if to make visible the act of sacrifice; (iii) her imprint as a silhouette on the ground filled by red blood/paint that slowly spreads out to suggest the bleeding body; (iv) a silhouette with red liquid poured onto the ground in an open tomb.[50] In December, Mendieta drew a number of these actions together as if to produce the final staging of the scene of the crime, the shrouded corpse and its corporeal remains, the stain.[51] Covering herself in blood and paint, she lay on the ground then had herself covered over with a black sheet then afterwards with a white one.[52] The first recalls her Mexican parapet piece (1973), while the second, comprising of only the "body prints", more dramatically marks the disappearance of the body.

These actions recall Yves Klein's *Anthropometric series* produced some thirteen years earlier in 1960-61, in which he covered his female models in paint and then had them lay on sheets to reproduce impressions. Klein wrote at the time of how he wanted to show man in nature by the traces and marks he leaves there in spite of himself, which are always of a marvelous grandeur, artificial, ephemeral, yet forever indestructible.[53] For Mendieta, the relation to the trace was opposite. It was not about indestructibility, but rather about the wasting (defilement) of the body and death as the necessary condition of life. As Bataille remarks: "A work of art and a sacrifice participate (...) [in] the search for a sacred instant going beyond profane time, where prohibitions guarantee the possibility of life."[54]

The set of associations that Mendieta's work provokes brings us back to the subject of origins and the interconnectedness between the origins of the self and art. We are made witness to the corpse as representation, that is, its disappearance marks also its appearance. The stain is an "index of the absent wound", the sheet a funereal shroud.[55] And, in using her own body and the cloth, Mendieta refigures the direct reference to the body of Christ and the shroud in terms of woman.[56] The sheet serves not only as a support, like a canvas, but the work itself. The emergence of the imprint and trace as the residue of the body, therefore marks a violent space between experience and representation, and therefore, like the shroud of Turin, the "baptism of sight." Yet more than that, Mendieta's work makes evident again that this advent of the visible is achieved only through the death of the other.

Becoming Other than Oneself

During this period of intense experimentation, Mendieta made two decisive shifts in her work. The first was through removing herself as the material object of her art and in its place replicating herself, and the second was to work directly within the landscape, that is, with the land. This shift in her work freed her from a polarity between a form of essentialism and the idea of all things being a social construction. And, although she had explored the idea of the subject as originating within the locus of relationships, and therefore always already alienated through its inscription into the symbolic order, the issue of separating the body and self had, until this point, remained unresolved. That is, while her work sought to address the idea of the social as founded on an identification of woman as nature and the excluded other, the very fact of using her body made it less than clear whether the *materiality* of the body was already exterior to language.[57]

By moving her work into the landscape, these issues took on a further dimension. It was now a question of how one might imagine an outside that could be viewed not only as a figuring of a "utopian beyond," but exposed, as Judith Butler argues, the "constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity."[58] From this perspective, the violent erasure which she performs on her work constitutes an attempt to critically distantiate the work from the possibility of recuperation, a recuperation which naturalized the outside or heterogeneous as other than cultural.

For this reason, we may understand why one of Mendieta's favorite stories, a story she refers to many times in her notes and statements, was of a custom amongst the people of Kimberly.[59]

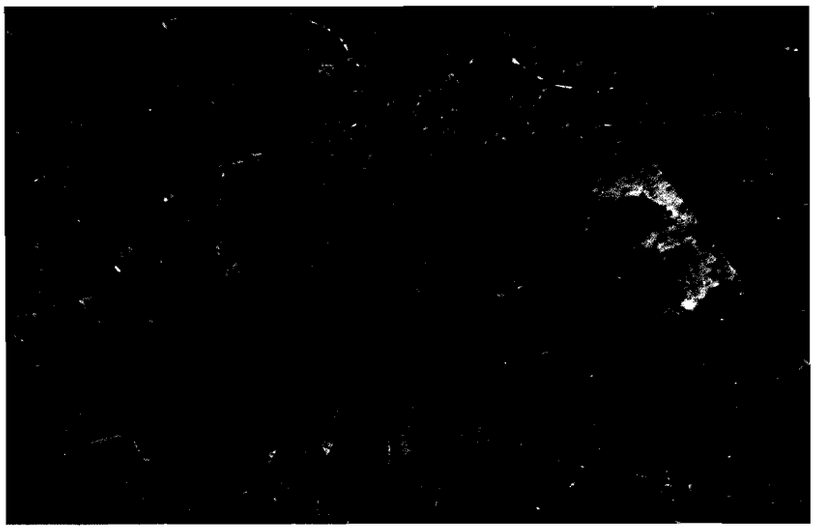
> *The men from Kimberly go outside their village to seek their brides. When a man brings his new wife home, the woman brings with her a sack of earth from her homeland and every night she eats a little bit of that earth. The earth will help her make the transition between her homeland and her new home.*[60]

After citing this, Mendieta notes:

> *In other words that little bit of earth will make possible the transition between the two homes. By the same token making earth-body sculptures is not the final stage of a ritual for me but a way and a means of asserting my emotional ties with nature and conceptualizing religion and culture.*[61]

The earth itself is disinterred in the woman's body as a gesture of depatriation. This figure of utter submission is an abandoning of oneself. The woman transforms herself into the earth. The significance of the Kimberly story was that, for Mendieta, it represented a poignant example of her own exploration of the relation between the interiorisation of the foreign and exteriorisation of the self. Furthermore, the idea of being taken outside of oneself to become other, as characterized by the story, symbolized the relation between her homeland, exile and her place of adoption. Exile meant for Mendieta both a "discovery within the self of a capacity to survive and grow in the new environment, and transcendence" of her condition of exile.[62] Art became a refuge, a means, the only means, of forging a link to her culture, but also engaging with her newfound environment and culture. In this sense art, as in writing, becomes a discourse of desire, a desire to recuperate and return. As she writes:

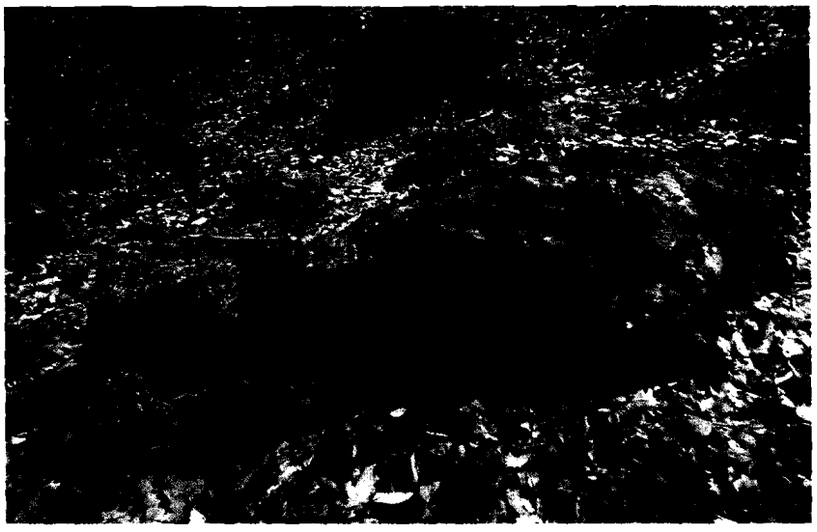
> *My exploration through my art of the relationship between myself and nature has been a clear result of my having been torn from my homeland during my adolescence. The making of my silueta in nature keeps (make) the transition between my homeland and my new home. It is a way of reclaiming my roots and becoming one with nature. Although the culture in which I live is part of me, my roots and cultural identity are a result of my Cuban heritage.*[63]



161. *Untitled*, Iowa, 1977. [cat. 36]

In the early summer of 1975 Mendieta made her first major autonomous silhouette piece entitled *Silueta de Yemayá.* She returned to her favorite site of Old Man's Creek on the outskirts of Iowa City where she constructed a wooden raft, and covered it with dark, red velvet and a silhouette of herself made of white flowers.[64] Setting it afloat the river, she then filmed, over a period of six minutes, the raft drifting downstream, caught in the flows and eddies of the current, bobbing in and out, and slowly merging as its form becomes one with the water. Similarly, the year before Mendieta had worked directly with water, filming herself floating in the water. Using a fixed camera, there is nothing more than this, nothing but the surrounding silence and stillness except for the constant movement of the water streaming over her body. The immersion in nature achieves the quality of an erotic encounter, suggesting, as in Octavio Paz's poem *El río* of 1955, a flowing back or return to the source.

While Mendieta's raft of flowers, *Silueta de Yemayá,* symbolized an offering of this kind, the figure also suggests iconographically that of the *Anima sola.* With the arms upraised and legs pinned together, the image of the *Anima sola* symbolizes the wandering soul and appropriately for Mendieta is represented by the figure of woman. Cast outside of society, she is standing in the flames of purgatory with her hands held up towards



162. *Untitled,* Iowa, 1979. [cat. 59]

the heavens, seeking redemption.[65] However, Mendieta has laid the figure down as if the figure returns to or is buried within the earth.

In these terms, Mendieta's work articulates what may be called the negative dialectics of exile. It occupies a borderland, homelessness, wandering, a solitude that yearns for an imagined community, yet yields to living out a community of absence. The land of exile becomes both a spectral land of absence and a place of a certain freedom. Such is the landscape of modernity, in which the language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present: shuttling between residual and emergent signs, seeking recovery in a repetition of the same or threatening to disrupt violently in incommensurate otherness. Rather than the association of women with the home and with the "earthbound mother", associations which contain woman, the place of exile is defined by what is missing, not by what it contains.

While the concept of the shroud pieces had elaborated the idea of her imprint, the silhouette form now formalized a further step. By creating a template replicating the contour and scale of her own body, Mendieta was able to remove herself as the object of the work, and work directly on a form that could be used alternatively as a surface of inscription, transformed or be destroyed leaving only a residue or trace. It is evident from the work of this time that Mendieta recognized the power that could be achieved both through the process of the body's replication and its direct interaction with materials and the environment.[66]

Yielding to Nature

> *The one by whom the abjects exist is thus a deject who places herself, separates herself, situates herself, and therefore strays instead of getting [her] bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. (...) Instead of sounding herself as to her "being", she does so concerning her place: "Where I am?" rather than "Who I am?"*
>
> Kristeva [67]

In making mimetic forms of disembodiment and embodiment, through a replication of herself as a silhouette, central to her art, Mendieta arrived again at the subject of exteriority. Having constructed a way of representing herself as other the issue was not one of recuperation, but of dissolution. In recognizing language to be, as Shoshana Felman notes, "a principle of separation and division through which the self is at the same time constructed and decentered", the

challenge for Mendieta was to create an art that was not an aesthetics that "naturalized" woman as other.[68] Given that she viewed the purpose of art to break down the boundaries of containment, of going outside of the self, art's power was as much potentially threatening. For while it symbolized the restoration of order, it was also a movement of transgression that did not return as the same. Writing on the figure of the criminal, Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledged both Caillois' theory of mimeticism and Freud's on death instinct, in order to note that the idea of yielding is a "trend to lose oneself in the environment instead of playing an active role in it; the tendency to let oneself go and sink back into nature."[69] In such terms, there is the risk of not-belonging, of being *of* but not *in* the world.

Such is the danger of reproduction, where the embodiment, the doubling, becomes fixed in its place, outside of one, by another, a victim if you will, and therefore a kind of fetish, an object, disembodied, dead. This concept of being other as a movement towards exteriority or death, is the ground on which Mendieta defines herself, a destiny that is also the place of departure and address. The desire to commit a crime, to be found guilty, to lay waste or abandon oneself demanding a dissolution of the self, is a risky business. It is an expression of "alteration", as Bataille said in his formulation of figurative representation, that expresses a partial decomposition analogous to that of corpses and at the same time the passage towards a perfectly heterogeneous state corresponding to "(...) the totally other *(tout autre)*, that is to say, the sacred..."[70]

How, then, to attain a heterogeneous state as a place from which to begin? As Mendieta wrote at the time in relation to her work:

> *This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been capable of assimilating us but more towards a personal will to continue being "other."*[71]

From this perspective, it was the work of Robert Smithson that provided Mendieta with a tremendous sense of affiliation and source of inspiration for her new work.[72] Smithson had been fascinated with and worked extensively in Mexico and like Mendieta, had espoused a critique of society. The landscape was for Smithson both a site of potential renewal, but equally a place of abandonment where all that remained was the detritus of civilization's ruinous history. In his "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", Smithson wrote: "I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past..."[73] And elsewhere he wrote that:

Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the "death principle" (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remnants of art history, yet the "present" cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts.[74]

In this regard, Levi-Strauss' theory of entropy was extremely influential insofar as it argued that disintegration and decay were the consequence of highly developed cultures. Smithson, however, called for changing Levi-Strauss' anthropology into entropology and in turn, elaborated his theory of the "Non-site." The "Non-site" was a place where there had been something, but once excavated or quarried, had left nothing. This nothing was the sacrifice of matter, an entropic landscape surrounded by a horizon that stretched its way towards infinity.[75] It was this "nothing" which fascinated him as the material source for his work. As Kate Larson writes of Smithson, one feels "an indefinable uneasiness in the Nonsites, forever removed from the paradisical wholeness of the world, and filled with the anxiety of eviction."[76] It is precisely this "anxiety of eviction" linked to the idea that one begins *there* in that unaccomodated place of the outside, that shares an affinity with the ambition of Mendieta's work to be wholly heterogeneous, leaving behind only the incommensurate trace.

Ashes to Ashes

"great men, go to the outside, away from the Room,
and wrestle with the cinders."

T.E. Hulme

Mendieta's work was not a wrestling with the cinders but being consumed by the cinders. After her return from Mexico in 1975, Mendieta produced a series of works that represent a stark contrast to her floating silhouette. Deciding to work on a new piece, Mendieta chose again a place alongside the Iowa River. Carving a concave silhouette into the earth, Mendieta recorded four actions on super-8 film. In the first, *Corazón de Roca con Sangre* (*Heart of Rock with Blood*), she knelt beside the open form, laying an animal heart at the corresponding place on the figure. She then poured blood over it from a bowl, lay naked and face down in the silhouette. The second action, *Genesis Buried in Mud,* of October is, without doubt, the most dramatic of all of these pieces. Focusing the fixed camera on the ground the viewer is aware of little else

but the landscape with the rich dark earth, occasional stones and falling Autumn leaves. Time passes, then suddenly we are witness to the earth moving before us. We watch, the earth appears almost as if it is palpitating, breathing, rising and falling more and more quickly. We continue to watch, as slowly the earth itself falls away to reveal the outline of a body, Mendieta herself.[77]

The third action in the following month, *Silueta Sangrienta (Bleeding Silhouette)*, opens onto her lying naked face up in the silhouette. It cuts then to an empty silhouette, then another cut to it filled with red blood and then again to her lying face down. The last of the four filmed actions was *Alma Silueta en Fuego* (*Soul Silhouette in Fire*) produced also in November. The film begins with the burning of a silhouette made of a white sheet. The white sheet that had wrapped and covered her as a shroud in a earlier work is now burnt and destroyed. Nothing is left but a darkened, scorched form of burning ashes in a hollowed out form, her former self. There is no corpse symbolic or otherwise, nothing but an empty grave or ashes. What is pointed onto is the disappearance and absence of the body through what remains, a trace. While the silhouette produced the idea of disembodiment, the ashes marked the trace of the body. In this sense, Mendieta's work posed the question of the trace in the way that Levinas will describe as "that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past."[78] That is, what is constitutive of the trace is its erasure, a lack of origin or originary presence, because the trace never refers back to an original marking. "Its inscription" Derrida writes, "occurs only by effacing it."[79]

More than that, with the disappearance of the work itself, Mendieta decided to exhibit only one photographic image, nothing that is more than a trace. Simply called *Silueta de Cenizas* (*Silhouette of Ashes)*, the image is of the burnt ashes of a silhouette form in the hollowed out image.[80] As Barthes writes of the ghostly nature of the photographic sign: "I am neither subject nor object, but rather a subject who feels itself become object , (...) I become truly a ghost."[81] What becomes clear from this time on is that, although the photographic image has always played an important role in Mendieta's work, the photographic reproduction now displaces the real altogether. These performances and actions were never seen by a public nor did they remain. They disappeared, reappropriated by the landscape. The photograph then dramatizes the distance between her body and her work. It marks a play of rupture and repetition, a space between experience and representation. And, while the

photographs carry something which is in excess of this distanciation, of a place of origin, they bear within the same movement its ephemerality, displacing the original work by an "after-life" of the image. This marks the baptism of sight. Photography, as itself a trace of something else, serves only then to heighten the sense of her work itself being about the trace, only able to capture its "spirit." The power of the image is its ability to usurp the real, leading us to a place where there is nothing, a void, a place which is the essential condition of the real, but which the real seeks to turn away from.

While the possibility of return becomes more and more prominent in the work of this period, the very image of burial haunts each piece. There is a sense of everything being pulled down, a gravity in the work, a closeness to the earth. The image of the silhouette appears as much a shallow grave as an image of a nurturing womb. However much we think of these pieces as a return to nature, to the earth as a way of regenerating life, the idea of being literally buried alive as much as symbolically being buried dead and returning, overwhelms the image. The focus on burial and the site of burial, notably the tomb or crypt, marks a liminal site of sacrifice and fertility, death and rebirth. This liminality, Victor Turner writes, "is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness..."[82] Woman's sexuality places her at the edge of culture.

On February 23, Mendieta opened her show *Ñáñigo Burial and Filmwork* at 112 Greene St, in Soho, New York. Presented in a darkened space, the principal piece, *The Burial of Ñáñigo,* was a silueta of herself made out of 47 lit black candles, and besides it a slide projection of other work.[83] One notes in her extensive documentation of the installation a fascination with the burning of the candles, the process of their disappearance and with the residue left as they burnt to the wick. While referencing again the Ñáñigo as she had in the work of 1973, there are significant changes. What is being buried is the Ñáñigo, but Ñáñigo here is the figure of woman symbolized by Mendieta. The power of secrecy of the Ñáñigo turns on the recognition and disavowal of woman as the sacred subject, a sacredness which depends on sacrifice and therefore the prohibition against the presence of the body.[84] In Mendieta's work the body is therefore absent and the space is void. Our gaze is focused upon an outline, which traces the unseen body of Mendieta herself. The candles both denote the burial of the body and ceremony of remembrance and honor. This recognition/disavowal hinges on a play between absence/presence, that is on the function

of the trace as marking both what is gone but somehow remains. To write and erase at the same time represents the movement of the trace or, as Blanchot offers:

> *Traces do not return to the moment of the mark, they are without origin, but not without end in the permanence that seems to perpetuate them, (...) as if there were not a trace but traces never the same and always repeated. The mark of writing.*[85]

Onto the wall, besides *Burial of Ñáñigo* Mendieta projected her *Silueta de Cenizas* (1975). However, in the existing photographic documentation of the slides projected, there is a significant choice made. For rather than choosing the "final" work of the hollowed out burnt silhouette, she projected the piece as it burnt in flames and turned it upright so that the figure appears to be standing. The change is dramatic because now besides the burial piece, the *Silueta de Cenizas* is transformed into a symbol of possible regeneration, a regeneration that is through fire. No longer ashes or remains, the use of fire, its consuming and symbolically regenerative power became the impetus and the beginning of work that will be explored until her death.[86]

Conclusion

> *The life of Spirit is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment...*
>
> Hegel[87]

To a greater, rather than lesser, degree, Mendieta's work is characterized by a refusal of aesthetic resolution. Her commitment to site, to materials and process was a way of bearing witness to a life made of a sequence of *nows*, of a lived intensity that always entailed a risk, an exception to the rule, a condition of exclusion, an unaccomodated being in the world. We might call her work an existential form, or better still, matter. Throughout this time, Mendieta's work crosses and erodes boundaries: the stained sheets, the bloody remains, the burial of the body, the burning of the silhouettes, the charred remains burnt in flame, made of ashes, dissolving beneath the rising tide, disappearing into sifting sands, eroded over time and photographs as nothing more than residues. As Paul de Man will say, the "form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion. The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work that could coincide with a sensorial or semantic dimension of the language."[88] There is always the risk of its disappearance.

The return to earth stands for a return to both the womb of birth and the grave of death, a release from life and its regeneration, and in this sense a form of freedom. In a sense two temporalities are at work here. One involves a conception of eternal return, a mythical cycle that appeals to a temporal process of existence, and the other, alternately contingent, whereby the idea of origin is ground without ground. In its relation to the past in terms of repetition and recollection, Mendieta's work strongly suggests a connection to Mircea Eliade's metaphysics of eternal return and Paz's epiphany of full presence. It is with a with a view to re-covering but disclosing. It is, as Kierkegaard defined, a "recollecting forward", where one is guided beyond the present by the

177. *Untitled*, Mexico, 1973-77. [cat. 14]

intimation of "spirit" residing as a trace of his or her memory.[89] As such, repetition is both a mnemonic and an anticipatory – a de-structive and pro-jective – movement. This recalls again the question of mimesis as a means of both embodiment and disembodiment: a becoming that is an anxious and open freedom. Rather than stasis or rest, becoming is restless, never free of temporality, but rather its contingent and abject subject. The work swings violently between these two ways of being in the world, because neither one can offer any real sense of emancipation without the other.

Mendieta becomes her own muse, rather than the material or matrix of another's creation, as with Paz. Mendieta's relation to her experience of cultural displacement from her homeland Cuba inscribes itself as a haunting estrangement of herself from herself, a detachment of the self. It is as if her art is the only way that she can construct a memory that otherwise cannot be recalled. Rather than re-enacting an

endless series of origin stories, as if to cover loss through an appeal to the paternal model (of Oedipus) of authorship, Mendieta's work evokes Eurydice as the muse, whose disappearance is the advent of inspiration, of poetry, of art. The destination of woman, in exile, dead, this is the beginning point. As Heidegger remarks: "But we do not repeat a beginning by reducing it to something past and now known, which need merely be initiated; no, the beginning must be begun again, more radically, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend a true beginning."[90] For this reason in Mendieta, as in other women artists and authors, the idea of death is always, already, perpetually present in life. Death is not left outside, although we need to go there in order that art and culture begin.

Footnotes

* This essay is based on research done for an unpublished book-length study on Mendieta's work. I should like to thank Raquel Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York, for their gererous assistance in making this possible.

1 One of the problems has been the critical reception both before and immediately following her death. In 1986 the New Museum of Contemporary Art hosted a retrospective exhibition, the focus of which was given to the years 1975-1985, making peripheral her early experimental film, video and performance work between 1972-75. Secondly, much of the critical writing that began to appear in the late Seventies subsumed the reflexive or critical dimension of Mendieta's work by reading it almost exclusively in the light of either the then current fascination with the goddess myth or in her relation to Cuba.

2 Felman, Shoshana, "Rereading Femininity", *Yale French Studies*, nº 62, 1981, p.156.

3 See Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1959 and *Interaction Ritual*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York,1971.

4 Enrique Sosa Rodriguez, writing on the use of animal sacrifice by the Cuban secret society of Abakua, notes that the blood on the head of the devotee purifies and bestows power. See *The Ñáñigos*, Ediciones Casa de las Américas, Havana, 1982. This relation is referred to also in the essay by Jacob, Mary Jane in *"The «Silueta» series 1973-1980"*, Galerie Lelong, New York, 1991, p. 10. The idea of purification corresponds with Mendieta's idea of blood as a positive rather than negative force.

5 In this sense, Mendieta's purpose distinguishes itself from the Viennese Actionists, whose incorporation of animal sacrifice into their work exemplifies the critique by Bataille and Caillois of the constitution of male virility through sacrifice and violence. For a commentary regarding this, see the "Foreword" by Hollier, Denis in *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, ed. Denis Hollier, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988.

6 It is at this point also that her work introduces references to other cultural traditions, notably Mexican and Afro-Cuban.

7 Naming in advance the action to be other serves to displace its inherent critical power. The question of naming has afflicted the scholarship and reception of Mendieta's work insofar as by naming it as Afro-Cuban, Mexican, even feminist, her work has been marginalized as peripheral to modernism, rather than central to the constitution of modernism itself. This marginalisation itself constitutes a form of sacrificial economy at the heart of modernism.

8 Wilson, Judith: "Ana Mendieta Plants Her Garden", *The Village Voice,* August 13-19, 1980, p. 71.

9 Artist statement. undated. It includes a further sentence: "I decided that for the images to have magic qualities I had to work directly with nature. I had to go to the source of life, to mother earth." See Mendieta: "A Selection of Statements and Notes," *Sulphur,* Eastern University Press, Michigan, nº 22, Spring 1988, p. 70. Although Mendieta suggests that she had begun to work "with nature" in 1972, it was not until the following year that she actually produced work in the landscape.

10 The second and third actions were produced outside on the perimeters of the campus as *tableaux* that were photographed. Both face up and down, she was seen lying semi-naked with blood splattered across her body. She also produced another "incident" as part of this series in which she used a severed foot and bones splattered by blood on the ground.

11 Later in an interview, Mendieta recalled of the people who came to the apartment that "they all sat down, and started talking about it. I didn't move. I stayed in position about an hour. It really jolted them." cited in Kitredge, Cherry: "Mendieta incorporates herself, earth and art", *The Daily Iowan,* Iowa City, December 1977, p. 7.

12 Cited in Wilson, Judith op. cit., p. 71.

13 Lippard referred to the piece as a "shocking, bloody *rape tableau*" performed by Ana Mendieta with herself as a victim (...) [among] a growing number of artworks by women with the self as subject matter." Lippard, Lucy : "Transformation Art", *Ms.* 4, New York, nº 4, October 1975, p. 33. In a recent discussion of this work, Hannah Kruse has argued that Mendieta's "identification" with the victim barred the stereotyped notion of "victim" by negating her status as an anonymous object." See Kruse, Hannah: "A Shift in Strategies: Depicting Rape in Feminist Art" in *The Subject of Rape,* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 23-August 29, 1993, p. 56.

14 Fascism unleashed the power of the heterogeneous, ridding the nation of all that it deemed impure: filth, the deviant, the subversive. See Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39.* ed. Allan Soekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985. For a discussion of the *Collège de Sociologie,* see Hollier, op. cit.

15 Cockcroft, Eva: "Culture and Survival: Interview with Mendieta, Willie Birch and Juan Sánchez,." *Art and Artists,* New York, February 1984, p. 16, in association with the exhibition *Ritual and Rhythm: Visual Forces For Survival,* Kenkeleba House, New York,1982.

16 Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Continuum Books, New York, 1991, p. 227.

17 This is the thesis of Bataille's *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality,* City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1986; and his *Lascaux or the Birt of Art,* Skira, Geneva, 1955.

18 Paz, Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* Grove Press, New York, 1961.

19 See, in particular, Roger Bartra's book *The Cage of Melancholy,* Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1992.

20 Within the Aztec society, each person had *tonalli* or an energy source that gave them a vital autonomy. Christian Duverger, "The Meaning of Sacrifice" in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body. vol.3,* Zone Books, New York, 1989, p. 367-385. *Tonalli* could be understood as an equivalent to the Afro-Cuban concept of *ashe.*

21 Paz, op. cit. pp. 50ff. and 332. See also Bataille's discussion of this concept in "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess.* op. cit., pp. 116-129. Moreover, Bataille's theories drew on ethnographic studies of Aztec sacrifice and Haitian voodoo. For both Bataille and Caillois, sacrifice, as festival, make repression evident through overturning the law of prohibition, therefore blurring the boundaries between the profane and sacred.

22 Bataille, Georges, *Eroticism,* op. cit., p. 12.

23 Caillois, Roger, "Festival", in Hollier, Denis, op. cit., p. 281.

24 Paz, ibid., pp. 51-52.

25 Paz, ibid., p. 64

26 Paz, Octavio, *Las Peras del Olmo*, Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México, Mexico, 1965, p. 24.

27 For an elaboration of these ideas see Paz, Octavio, *Convergences: Essays on art and Literature*, Bloomsbury, London, 1987.

28 Mendieta, unpublished notes written sometime between1973-75. The passage from which this is drawn can be found in Paz, Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, op. cit. p. 64.

29 The remaining works in this series involved the placement of a heart on a stone platform, in the bare branches of a thorn tree, in a monastery niche, another in a water niche and a final placement on the bough of a forked tree.

30 As recalled by Breder, *Sulphur*, op. cit., p. 75, although he dates the work as 1976, the original slide places it as August 1973. This work provides the basis around which Mendieta will subsequently do a series of other works over the next ten years, that move away from the body, especially her *Tree of Life* series.

31 Interview with Montano, Linda, *Sulphur*, op. cit., p. 66.

32 See Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978; and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987.

33 ibid.

34 Bataille, Georges, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, op. cit., 41.

35 see Tape #1-18, undated, 1974-75.

36 Dated by Jacob, Mary Jane, op. cit., 1991, p. 12.

37 Earlier Mendieta had shot a film of painting with blood/paint directly onto her body rather than the wall. In a studio barely lit, and with a bowl of blood/paint besides her on a table, she performed naked three actions in front of the camera. In the first she marks her torso, forehead and eyes with crosses. In the second, she drew with the blood/paint a heart shape around her breasts and the word BÉSAME (kiss me) in-between, and in the third she drew a skeletal form down the body. See Tape #6, 66-81N, 1974 Filmworks.

38 See Tape #6, 66-81N. 1972-74.

39 This became the prototype for a series of three works, *Blood Tracks*, produced on paper at Franklin Furnace in 1982. This was part of an exhibition by Mendieta called *Isla and Other Works*. See Tape 1-18, undated, 1974-1975. By late 1974 she repeated these actions on different colored material and titled them *Blood Writing*.

40 Caillois, Roger, in *The College of Sociology*, op. cit., p. 200.

41 In November 1974, at Old Man's Creek, Iowa, Mendieta performed and filmed a work, *Bird Transformation*, that explores these ideas and the idea of death giving way to renewal and life. Spreading white feathers on the ground besides the river, she pours blood over her naked body, lies down and rolls in the bed of feathers, then stands up and slowly lifts her head and arms, like the wings of a bird raising itself to take flight. It is no longer a sacrificial image, but one of transformation through death, of being taken out of herself through the spirit of the bird.

42 Mendieta, excerpt from unpublished note, undated.

43 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit., p. 71.

44 Interview with Montano, Linda, op. cit., p. 67.

45 Bataille, Georges, *Eroticism*, op. cit., p. 11.

46 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, op. cit., p. 23. Cited in Mendieta, unpublished notes, undated.

47 Bataille, *Eroticism*, op. cit., p. 16.

48 Bataille, Georges, *The Tears of Eros*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1989, p. 199.

49 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 127. Writing on feminine masochism, Jessica Benjamin suggests that "the torture and outrage to which [the masochist] submits is a kind of martyrdom. (...) Her desire to be known is like that of the sinner who wants to be known by God." See Benjamin, Jessica, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Pantheon, New York, 1988, p. 60.

50 The other work produced at this time was a "burial piece" where she wrapped herself in white bandages, buried part of herself in the earth and had herself photographed. The effect was to create an illusion of discovering a part of a body or body part wrapped and partially buried.

51 The "stained sheet" recalls a tradition in this region of Mexico where the virginity and consummation of marriage of the newly-wed bride is declared by an examination of the wedding bed following the first night of marriage.

52 Two years later one of these works was reproduced in an article by Lucy Lippard on women's use of their own bodies in their art. She refers to it as a "rape piece". See Lippard, Lucy: "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art." *Art in America*, New York, May-June 1976, vol. 64, nº 3, pp. 74-81.

53 Klein, Yves: "The Trace of the Immediate", *Dimánche, the Newspaper of a Single Day*, Paris Festival d'Art d'Avant-garde, November 27, 1960, 4, ibid., p. 121.

54 Bataille, *Lascaux.*, op. cit., p. 38.

55 The phrases "baptism of sight" and "index of the absent wound " come from an article of the same name by Didi-Huberman, Georges, *October magazine*, nº 29, 1984, pp. 63-81.

56 A work such as *The Broken Column* (1944) by Kahlo also appropriates the figure of Christ and San Sebastian.

57 See Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

58 Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p. 34.

59 This was story was recounted in Levy-Bruhl, *The Primitive Mentality*, and cited in Paz. Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Grove Press, New York, 1961, p. 206.

60 Cited in Mendieta, unpublished notes. She refers to this African custom as analogous to her work.

61 ibid.

62 ibid.

63 Mendieta, unpublished notes, written for exhibition of work done in Mexico, undated.

64 Yemayá is the Afro-Atlantic deity of love. Water is her sacred domain and devotees place flowers and other objects in the water as a form of offering. Mendieta, too, had been raised by an Afro-Cuban nanny who was a daughter of Yemayá and, like for all Cubans and people of the Caribbean, water had always held a significance for her. In Brazil, on Yemayá's day women initiated into the religion of Umbanda dress in white and enter the sea, holding hands and throwing flowers into the sea as an offering.

65 Sometimes the *ánima sola* is reproduced alone or, if not, surrounded by other souls seeking the divine intervention of the Virgin who appears above. These images circulate throughout Spanish-speaking countries in postcard or small print form.

66 In making a copy of herself, she was also able to introduce Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices that, while she would have been aware of (at least to some degree) in her childhood, she begun to read about through the writings of contemporary anthropologists, notably the work of Lydia Cabrera and Fernando Ortiz. (Interview with Hans Breder by the author, November 1993). According to Afro-Cuban religious principles the replication of the body could be, through its mediation with the human form, imbued with a deity or spirit's power, and therefore reunited with the forces of nature.

67 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, op. cit., p. 8. I have taken the liberty of changing the gender of this text where possible in order to bring it into closer proximity to Mendieta.

68 Felman, Shoshana, *What Does a Woman Want?*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1993, p. 156.

69 Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 227. For reference to Caillois" ideas on mimeticism, see his "Mimicry and Legendary Psychaesthenia", *Minotaure* 7 (1935), pp. 4-10. Reprinted in *October* 31, Winter 1984, pp. 17-32.

70 Bataille, "L'Art Primitif", *Documents* nº 7, (1930), Editions Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 1991, pp. 397, Nº 2.

71 Mendieta, unpublished notes.

72 Mendieta's introduction to the work of Robert Smithson by both John Perrault and Hans Breder. Smithson had worked in the Mayan region, not far from where Mendieta herself had first gone. Her former teacher, John Perrault, had written about Smithson's work in the year when he was teaching at Iowa and Breder had known him through Max Kansas' in New York. On July 20th of 1973, the summer of Mendieta's return to Mexico, Smithson died in a plane crash.

73 "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 74.

74 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", *Collected Writings*, op. cit., pp. 261-62. This idea of the future meeting the past was also a preoccupation of Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, op. cit., p. 48.

75 See various writings by Smithson, ibid.

76 Kay Larson: "Robert Smithson's Geological Rambles" in *Robert Smithson El Paisaje Entrópico*, IVAM, Valencia, 1993, p. 268.

77 The films are dated 1974, but were more likely produced in 1975 at the time of *Silueta de Cenizas*. Document #6.66-81N.

78 Levinas, Emmanuel, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Vrin, Paris, 1949, p. 201.

79 Derrida, Jacques, *Psyche: Inventions de l'autre*, Galilee, Paris, 1987, pp. 88-89.

80 According to Raquel Mendieta the origin of this work came specifically from dreams she had of being walking through Pompei at the time of the volcanic eruption. Interview conducted by author, May 1993.

81 Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, New York, 1981, pp. 13-14

82 Victor Turner, "Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process", *Religious Encounters with Death*, ed. Frank E.Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh, University Park, Pennsylvania State University, 1977, pp. 24-39.

83 The use of 47 black candles, the number symbolizing "bird" in the Cuban numbers-game of *charada*. This is related in Raquel Mendieta's catalogue note "Homage to Skan and Ana, For the Burial of Ñáñigo", written to accompany a proposed recreation of the work for an exhibition in Antwerp: *America: Bride of the Sun*, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 1991.

84 For reference to the symbolic place of woman in Abakua, see Sosa Rodríguez, op. cit.

85 Blanchot, Maurice, *The Infinite Conversation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p. 225.

86 We can also see this movement of her work in a short 16mm film she made during 1975, *Energy Charge*. Lasting approximately two minutes, the film depicts a landscape at the end of a day in which a tree is illuminated in red in which suddenly appears a small silhouette figure with upraised arms. Tape 1, 1-18, Nº 15, 1975.

87 Hegel, G.W.F., *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 19.

88 De Man, Paul, *Blindness and Insight*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, p. 31.

89 See Kierkegaard, Søren, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1964.

90 Heidegger, Martin, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1961, p. 32.