

Ana Mendieta: Traces, text

by Mary Mattingly

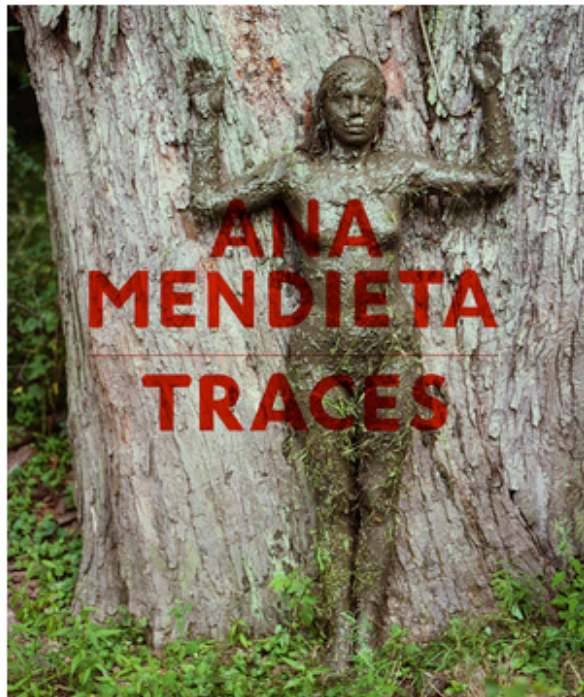
Julia Bryan-Wilson, Adrian Heathfield, and Stephanie Rosenthal
Ana Mendieta: Traces
(Hayward Publishing, 2014)

“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

This quote describes one of the many dichotomies in Ana Mendieta’s work, that of spiritual transcendence and material accumulation. If material accumulation represents the proceeds from an extended thievery of the commons, might a spiritualism restore them? Throughout her work, Mendieta provokes us to value transformation, loss, and decay.

The title of *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, which catalogs her exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, indicates the protean wanderings, vagaries, and mutability found in her art, which inhabits an impermanent, profane, and connected body. The monograph details her better-known work, as well as rarely seen ephemera, notes, and letters which together present a complex view of her positions within feminism and the political sphere. At 240 pages, this thorough catalogue is contextualized by the scholarship of art historians Julia Bryan-Wilson and Adrian Heathfield, as well as Stephanie Rosenthal, chief curator at the Hayward Gallery, and a foreword by Ralph Rugoff, in essays that explore Mendieta’s relationship to gender, race, class, land, and their political connections in her work and life.



Born in Havana, Mendieta arrived in the United States when she was 12, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. Her art speaks against the colonizing engine that seeks to subjugate, conquer, and collect everything of speculated value—a process of occupation that resists natural decay and relies on expansion. Through the spiritual weight of earthy materials that veil, camouflage, spoil, and rot, Mendieta's most well-known work is framed by a human connectivity with the natural world. While it is clear that Mendieta suffered from the loss of her home in Cuba, she made work in between the fractures of her own displacement, between an identification with Cuba, her time in Iowa, and her home in New York, in what Martin Heidegger would consider a condition of “existential homelessness.”

Her work is less about the production of objects reliant on alterity (a principal activity for the expansion of capital) and more about being in between places, politics, and bodies. In evoking humans' interdependence with the natural world, Mendieta was careful to eschew categorization and the kind of compartmentalized thought that disguises a fuller picture. She therefore disputed the classification of her own work into rote categories that can commodify, entrap, and separate their subjects. She perceived Land Art as a kind of Modernism associated with the brutalization of nature that glorifies industry and, in turn, the hierarchies of the modernist tradition. By portraying marks left by her own body on the land's geography in her *Siluetas* series and “earth-body” sculptures, she embodied the traumas inherent in unbalanced power relationships wherein humans dominate nature and the inhuman. First using her body and later invoking it through temporary yet iconic earthen sculpture or voids, she contended with associations to performance art and reframed her work as tableau.

“My work is basically in the tradition of a Neolithic artist,” she said. “It has very little to do with most earth art. I’m not interested in the formal qualities of my materials, but the emotional and sensual ones.” Contextualizing these hybrid works within traditions of Neolithic artists, she relied on the indistinct territory between nature and society, one described by Bruno Latour as non-modern. Reflecting on Mendieta’s work, artist and friend Carolee Schneemann stated, “We have forgotten about the dangers of depicting the explicit female body, how much anger and resistance that inspired.” Mendieta’s work is uncomfortably in between. Pushing categorical boundaries within the art world evokes current conditions in art practices to extend boundaries outside of the art world, so as to influence and learn from other disciplines. Both go against a specialization that industrialization has depended on.

Mendieta seemed to want us to collect and take with us her ephemeral stories of nature and gendered memory. She acknowledged the need for a lasting image, if only for context and proof of its importance. It is here that we find a juncture in her work between the quest for permanence through photographic inscription and the need to act out the momentary. On the one hand, there is a deep link to the spiritual, and on the other, an awareness of how memory and history work within a capitalist system that relies in part on collecting. Contained in the photographic record are not only latent images but also the dangerous labor of mining and producing the cameras, films, and light-sensitive paper, their distribution to stores, and the environmental ramifications these processes have, which affect all of us. As artists, we often play by these rules: we describe life outside of capitalism while working inside of it. We have come to believe that we need to do this in order for our work to be considered, amassed, and recorded, and this contradiction creates tension. In “Rastros Corporales” (“Body Tracks”), 1982, the blood on Mendieta’s hands implicates her role in this system while also expressing her own pain through the marred connection to the world that is exploited because of it. “Rastros Corporales” invokes associations of religious emblems like the Shroud of Turin and the bodily violence of the Viennese Actionists.

Whether drawing on amate bark paper or using sacred earth from Cuba, Mendieta used the body as a site connected to ritual to reinforce the natural laws of impermanence that point to renewal, rebirth, and reuse. Through temporary gestures that imprint varied connecting histories, Mendieta’s work contains a kind of resistance that, through photography as a form of mass media, can multiply and proliferate like a fable.