

ARTFORUM FULLY LOADED

JOHANNA FATEMAN ON POWER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Ana Mendieta, *Rape Scene*, 1973, C-print, 10 × 8". © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

IN 1973, Ana Mendieta, then an art student at the University of Iowa enrolled in Hans Breder's Viennese Actionist-inspired Intermedia Program, staged an imprecise reenactment of the aftermath, as reported in the press, of the brutal rape and murder of her fellow student Sarah Ann Ottens. Mendieta invited her class to her small apartment, where she had left the door cracked open, so they could walk in and discover her tableau vivant of a corpse. You could say she wanted to trigger them.

Forty-five years later, it's not news that our culture is suffused with sexual violence, but, suddenly, the news is flooded with responsible, detailed reporting on it. The spectacular atrocities that have always made headlines now assume their place in the rich context of quotidian harassment associated with company culture, corporate hierarchy, and "the industry"—all the humdrum hostile environments of unremitting sexism and reverberating trauma of Trump's America. And for each powerful man who steps down, faces charges, pays settlements, apologizes, enters treatment, or goes away, we're left with a body of ugly information. Ours to keep are the allegations—the particulars of how people were cornered, humiliated, threatened, touched, texted, groped, punished, stalked, held down, held captive, or raped. As all my friends will tell you, it's triggering.

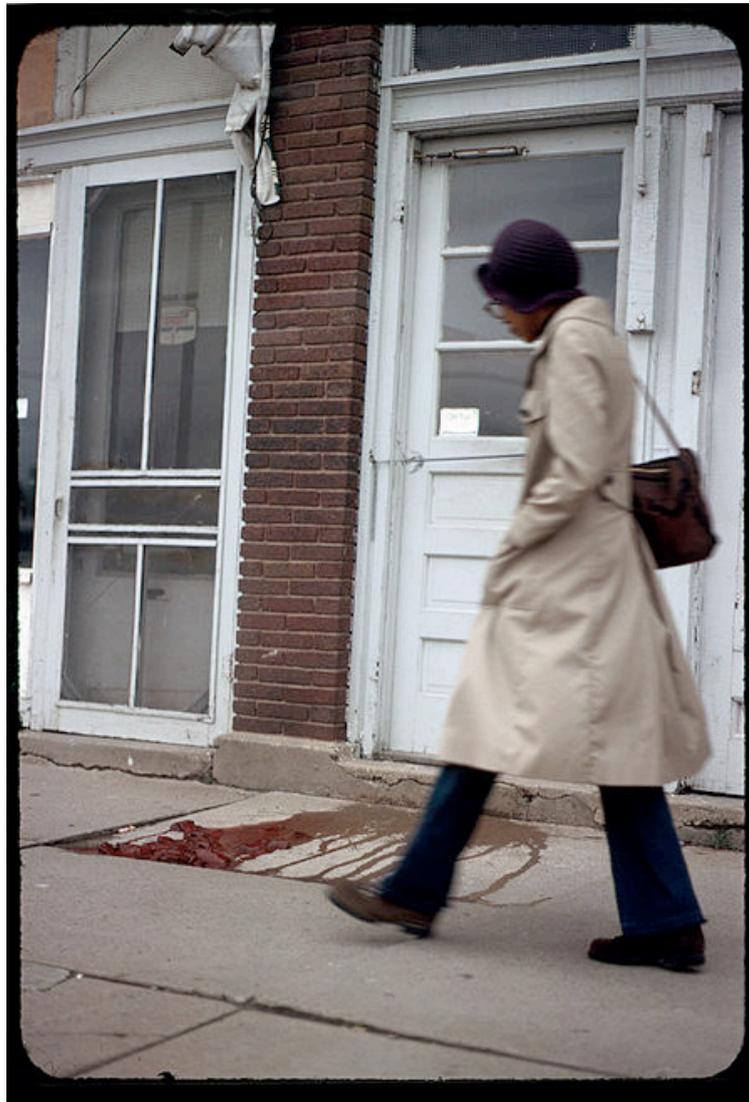
In the present war against "misconduct," we rely on victims to be our bravest soldiers, transfixed when they stand up, one by one, wielding accounts of their abuse. With the stories breaking daily as I write, I'm sickened, but also recommitted to a feminist first principle; reminded of the ethical imperative to distribute the profound personal, social, and economic costs of truth-telling and noncompliance among all of us through acts of support and solidarity. And I wonder: Could art help to relieve the accusers' burdens, the sheer weight of representation that they are asked to bear? As testimonial and journalistic accounts of sexual violence gain new prominence and legitimacy, what is the role of the symbolic, the metaphysical, the fantastic, the conceptual, and the abstract?

The photograph *Rape Scene*, 1973, documents the two hours that Mendieta remained still, smeared with animal blood, bent over the kitchen table for her audience. The lurid tableau isn't a flash-illuminated Weegee; it's more of a Caravaggio, or a Gentileschi. The artist's figure, lit from below, recedes into baroque gloom; her head is swallowed by it. The glint of broken dishes on the floor moves your eye, for an instant, away from the blown-out shape at the photo's midline, and from the artist's adjacent, illuminated thighs.

Mendieta's performance "made real" not the crime, whose details were ultimately unimportant, but her own fear, externalizing that morbid exercise *What if it were me?* She photographed her experiment to find out if the shocking image could be disentangled from the lascivious visual economy of journalism, pornography, and art history. Or perhaps that's what I want to find out. I'm returning to Mendieta's early work now to ask: Are there, or can there be, politically and visually gratifying representations of rape, contra the life-imitating-art oeuvre of Harvey Weinstein et al.? And can the so-called trigger be a doorway, a portal, even something like a sacramental rite—a powerful tool in the hands of the antirape artist?

Mendieta didn't shy away from the distressing or retraumatizing potential of her work. She embraced it to violently merge two patriarchal conventions—the prurient depiction of rape and the romantic sadism of the woman-as-muse archetype. (Cross-reference Mendieta's macabre "self-portraits" with her teacher—and lover—Breder's contemporaneous photos of her, nude,

holding pieces of a mirror to produce fracturing and doubling effects that likewise disappear her head.)



Ana Mendieta, *Moffitt Building Piece (detail)*, 1973, thirty-five 35-mm slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

Mendieta was an early practitioner of the noble and maligned feminist tradition of putting your own body on the line, in the frame, rather than enlisting the body of another in the service of your art, but her strategies were not entirely unprecedented. In the late 1960s, the Actionist outsider VALIE EXPORT had performed, as part of her confrontational “expanded cinema,” public interventions that, with an attitude of barbed sexual congeniality, literalized film’s voyeuristic promise to serve up the female form. The ethical, practical, and pointed choice to “self-objectify” persists, even as it’s frequently mistaken for vanity, dismissed as an inability to transcend autobiography, or judged as a personal and sexual (rather than conceptual and rhetorical) masochism.

For Emma Sulkowicz’s famous Columbia University senior thesis, the highly publicized merging of artwork and allegation titled *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, 2014–15, she

brought a standard-issue, fifty-pound dorm mattress everywhere she went on campus. The work was a durational one of institutional critique that would last, she announced, as long her accused rapist, a fellow student, remained enrolled at Columbia. She wielded her banal, cumbersome prop not just as a souvenir of a particular traumatic event but as a generic site of sexual tyranny and a symbol of systemic administrative failure. By moving rape's mark off the body and dragging it into the light of day, she made reckoning and redress a public responsibility. What might have been, or still is, a personal trigger—the mattress—became something like a picket sign, or an inescapable monument, one found in every dorm room.



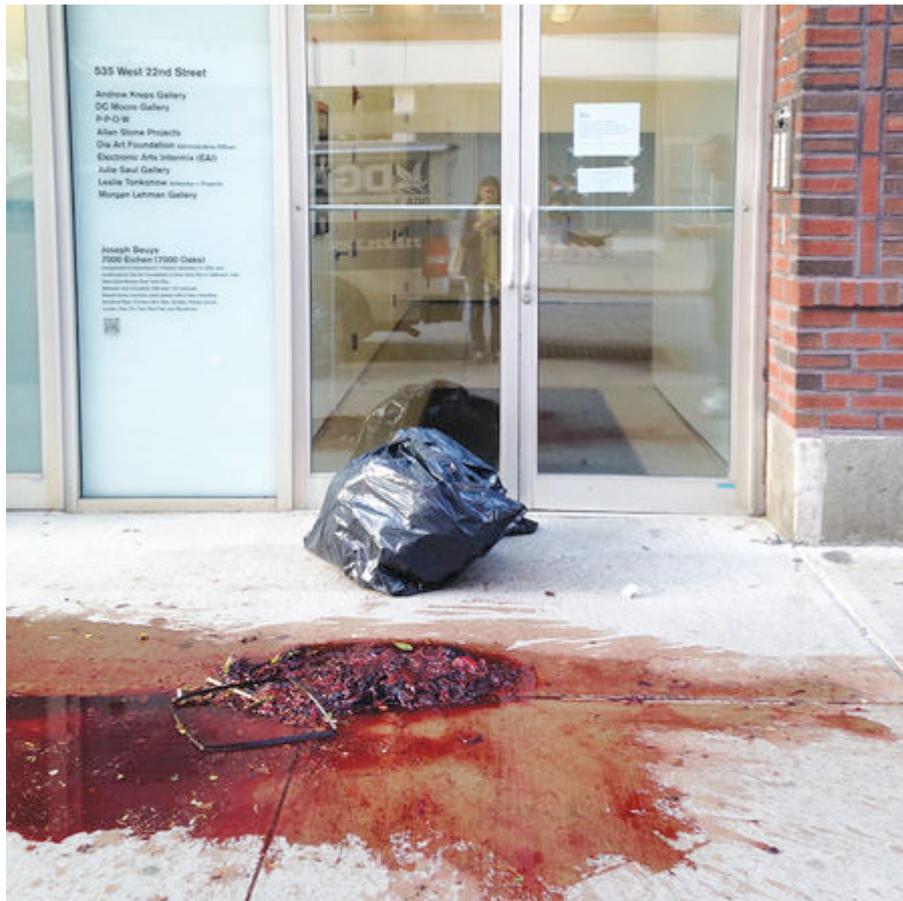
Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, 2014–15. Performance view, Columbia University, New York, September 5, 2014. Photo: Andrew Burton/Getty Images.

Mendieta similarly insisted that the violent sexual murder of her fellow student be remembered through a psychic remapping, or scarring, of school grounds. For performance-based photographs subsequent to *Rape Scene*, also taken the year of Ottens's death, the artist posed as if dead, unclothed and bloody, at the campus's pastoral edges. In related works, such as *Moffitt Building Piece*, 1973, Mendieta is conspicuous by her absence. Animal guts stain the sidewalk outside her apartment building, seeping beneath a door, literally crossing the threshold between private and public, confronting passersby with a gruesome if mundane moral question: What should we do?



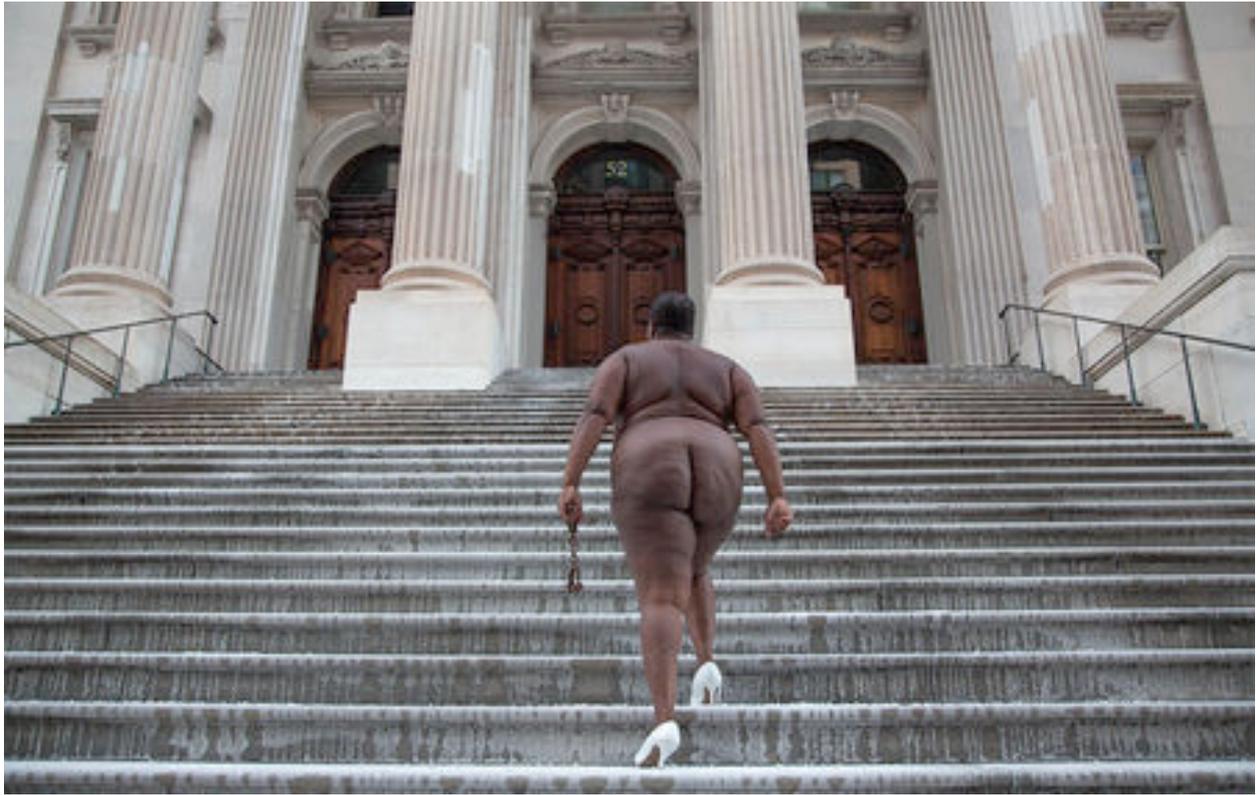
Ana Mendieta, *Moffitt Building Piece* (detail), 1973, thirty-five 35-mm slides. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

In 2014, the work was recalled through an act of protest in front of New York's Dia Art Foundation in Chelsea, as a means of remembering both Mendieta's art and the suspiciousness of her 1985 death—she fell thirty-four floors from a window during a domestic dispute with her husband, Carl Andre—on the occasion of his *Dia:Beacon* retrospective. Sulkowicz's work was also appropriated, in solidarity, by protesters. On an October day during her performance, students on more than 130 campuses across the world lugged mattresses around as the centerpieces of antirape demonstrations.



View of the No Wave Performance Task Force protest "We Wish Ana Mendieta Was Still Alive," Dia:Chelsea, New York, May 19, 2014. Photo: Jillian Steinhauer/ Hyperallergic.

Eroticized, naturalized, and done to death, rape is a lark, a metaphor, and a trope; it's an art-historical subject in a world where its traditional victims are not, and cannot be, artists. Over the past four decades, feminists have struggled with the representational dilemmas presented by an act that has been easily and frequently depicted by men, in all available media, for at least two thousand years. Which is to say, this artistic project—the truthful portrayal of sexual violence, its institutional life, and its effects—has barely begun.



Nona Faustine, *Over My Dead Body*, 2013, ink-jet print, 27 × 40". From the series "White Shoes," 2012–.

"MY COUNTRY," Nona Faustine's 2016–17 solo exhibition at the small Chinatown gallery Baxter Street at the Camera Club of New York, enjoyed a special, terrible relevance, when, in that postelection, preinauguration hell, sunnier shows hardly registered. For a new series of untitled photographs exhibited there, Faustine shot monuments such as the Statue of Liberty and the Lincoln Memorial through railings or fences, partially obscuring them with dark, blurred bars. The images speak to a history marred by exclusion, imprisonment, and violence, especially when hung alongside her performance-based series "White Shoes," 2012–, in which she appears at public sites whose connections to slavery are continually obfuscated. In *Over My Dead Body*, 2013, we see her from the back. Wearing nothing but white pumps and holding a shackle in one hand, she mounts the steps of the Tweed Courthouse in Manhattan, a storied edifice that overlooks the graves of the adjacent African Burial Ground, where both enslaved and free black people were interred in the eighteenth century. Faustine appears as a time traveler, an indictment, a raced and sexed body exposing a fundamental truth about our country and its vaunted landmarks.

When first lady Michelle Obama famously proclaimed, "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves," she evoked the hauling of wood and the pounding of nails. But slavery in this country, of course, also relied on the labor of forced sex and forced childbearing—a practice whose brutal legacy explains her unrelenting, public, acutely gendered denigration, as an African American woman of accomplishment and social standing, by proud racists like the current president. His avowed practice of sexual assault, confirmed by the accounts of his sixteen accusers, and his particularly obscene contempt for women of color, go hand in glove

with his joyful hailing of a white-nativist neverland. There, the restoration of a quasi-antebellum social order promises a prosperity predicated on white men's sexual dominion.



Nona Faustine, *Land of Freedoms Heaven Defended Race*, 2016, ink-jet print, 27 × 40".

Faustine's counter-monuments resonated throughout this poisonous year, as the president defended Confederate statues and the neo-Nazis who rallied around them; as his chief of staff suggested the Civil War might have been averted by compromise; and as protesters, adopting visual and performance strategies not unlike hers—or Mendieta's or Sulkowicz's—used their living bodies to pry open history's closed books. In August, women from the activist group Black Youth Project 100 stood in New York's Central Park before a statue of J. Marion Sims, the so-called father of modern gynecology, who performed surgical experiments on unanesthetized enslaved women. Wearing hospital gowns, their abdomens splashed with red paint, these activists proposed another way to remember the Alabamian inventor of the speculum. Other groups, inspired by Hulu's harrowing 2017 adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), appeared at state capitols and legislatures wearing the ominous robes and face-concealing bonnets of the tale's reproductive servants, silently conjuring the monthly rape rites and mutilation of lesbian "gender traitors" as lawmakers entertained grotesque new abortion restrictions and bathroom bills.

Force is the sexuality of fascism, of slavery. Gender is one of its most formidable weapons—can it be deployed by the other side?



Simone Leigh performing with her *Cupboard VII*, 2017, on the opening night of “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” New Museum, New York, September 26, 2017. Photo: Scott Rudd.

IN THE EXAMPLES ALREADY CITED, artists and protesters use caricatures of race and gender to rebuke white—patriarchal crimes and norms, and their work floats easily, or moves restlessly, between the very categories of art and protest. But this would not, for the most part, describe the works of “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” the New Museum’s eagerly anticipated three-floor exhibition, curated by Johanna Burton with Natalie Bell and Sara O’Keeffe. The show curiously lacks the guns-blazing, burn-the-house-down energy you might expect—particularly given the title—in the first major survey of LGBTQ+ contemporary art under Trump. Instead, it metabolizes the ferment of intersectional queer and trans feminisms, championing a new philosophical and aesthetic context for forging identity and community, in which gender is but one facet, inherent or artificial, of the expansive, nuanced condition of having a body and a self. “Trigger” invokes trauma with its title, but that’s something of a feint. The show does not engage with it urgently or directly as a theme, but instead takes as a given that we live in a world shaped by sexual violence, whether or not harassment and assault are in

the spotlight, and regardless of who holds the highest office in the land. Here, if gender is a weapon, it's a ceremonial one—unsuited to the front lines, but impressive and absorbing.



Simone Leigh, *Dunham II*, 2017, terra-cotta, graphite, steel. Installation view, New Museum, New York.

Consider Simone Leigh's raffia dome *Cupboard VII*, 2017, which resembles a grass hut but is titled after a Mississippi restaurant where customers dine inside the massive red hoopskirt of a racist archetype. The grand work folds time and space, morphing the skirt into a pre-diaspora structure to illuminate how architecture—in this case, a family-friendly roadside attraction—can blithely embody the leering humor and sexual violation endemic and instrumental to plantation order. *Dunham II*, 2017, a sculpture commissioned by the museum, is a truncated female figure, nude and bent at the waist into the wall. Her abdomen merges with, or is replaced by, a large water vessel, a succinct symbol of colonial brutality and reproductive labor—one that might better memorialize an antebellum past than do Confederate bronzes. Leigh evokes such statues, but her use of terra-cotta, and the palm fiber of her "hut," refers to African craft and sculptural traditions.



Tuesday Smillie, *Street Transvestites* 1973, 2015, textile, beads, buttons, jewelry, thread, 48 × 83".

The rejection of heroic materials and the embrace of crafts and other feminized creative activities—intentionally recalling and updating a key triumph of the '70s feminist art movement—is a through line of "Trigger." Tuesday Smillie's ornate, meticulously sewn and painted trans-liberation banners could not get their radical point across more lovingly. *Street Transvestites* 1973, 2015, is based on a banner that appears in an archival photo of the New York precursor to Pride parades, Christopher Street Liberation Day, instituted after the Stonewall riots of 1969. STREET TRANSVESTITES ACTION REVOLUTIONARIES, reads the red lettering, identifying the activist group known as star founded by trans icons of color Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. Smillie inlays her version with jagged panels of black lace, in shapes corresponding to the folds of the banner in the old photo, infusing her tribute with the delicate fabric's associations with glamour and mourning.



Three stills from Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel's *Lost in the Music*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 20 seconds.

Johnson died tragically in 1992 at age forty-six; her body was found floating in the Hudson River near the West Village piers. She is the lambent subject of the mesmerizing, melancholic short video *Lost in the Music*, 2017, by Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, which deftly combines archival footage and original material. Related to the directors' forthcoming film on Johnson, this work, which plays on a loop in a large-scale projection on the New Museum's third floor, imagines a pivotal scene at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, just before Johnson, wearing a red dress and a hat heavy with flowers, throws the shot glass—not the apocryphal brick—said to have started the riots. Gossett and Wortzel achieve a glittering and portentous ambience in this

condensed portrait, with actress Mya Taylor as Johnson onstage delivering her “Saint’s Poem,” an inspirational cri de coeur whose imagery foreshadowed her suspicious death. “If I wanted to be a saint / I’d just give ’em my damn clothes,” she reads, referring to the police. “Instead, I’ll throw them in the Hudson / , toss daddy neptune my panty hoes . . .”

Formally, the film exemplifies a prominent impulse in “Trigger”: to locate and assert forebears. The artists work from interrupted, partial, and marginal lineages to critically recuperate imperfect figures and “remember” erased ones with personal, politically urgent research and fantasy. It’s an impulse I share. It’s why, for example, I return to Mendieta. Or why I find underlined, in my notes, that Emma Sulkowicz must appear in the art magazine of record as an artist with luminous precursors, not just as a news item. My only lingering dissatisfaction with the show is that it is not the militant, brawling, shocking thing my heart desires. I want to be triggered.



Members of Black Youth Project 100 protesting J. Marion Sims statue, New York, August 19, 2017. Photo: Eduardo Munoz/Reuters.

I don’t mean to belittle those who might want to be warned of a trigger; nor would I want to dismiss the term’s clinical significance as it relates to post-traumatic stress disorder. To

be triggered, rather, in the sense of the term's vernacular use, is to experience a political condition, to exist in a continuous, nauseated state of malaise and vigilance, one that involves knowing, recognizing, remembering. It's not—at least not necessarily—to feel defeat. Both the horrific and the not-so-horrific stories, variations on a tragic theme articulated and circulated in the #MeToo revolt, foster and illuminate this condition, focused as they are on pervasive, ongoing, gendered abuses of power. These violations retain their enraging, familiar (that is, triggering) quality whether scaled up or down. To want to be triggered by art is perhaps as simple as wanting objects and images that cut through, that synthesize the evidence in jolting ways, or that distill our era's dreadful background hum into compelling new symbols.

As the Right inveighs against forgetting "our" history, outraged that people might act to remove, adjust, or replace monuments to American fascism, and as the accused patriarchs of entertainment, tech, journalism, politics, and publishing leave astonishing empty places at the top, we wonder how consequential the changes to public space, cultural mores, and corporate structure will be. In the art world as well as in the realm of art itself, there is work to be done. Rape, broadly speaking, must still figure in antirape culture, so let it be represented in gratifying new ways. Let rape be rape as well as, at last, an honest metaphor. Rape should be a trope, an art-historical subject belonging to the people fallen men have traditionally fucked over.