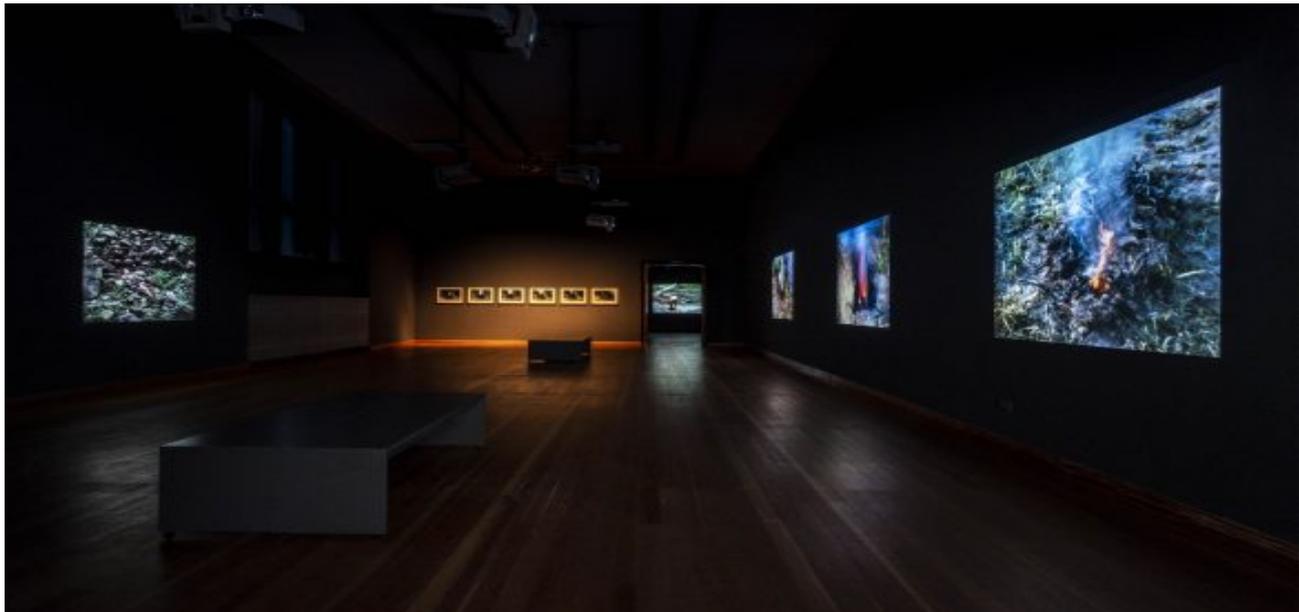


Ana Mendieta: Beyond Boundaries, in the Midst of Radical Change

Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy | 6 June 2018



Exhibition view "Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta" © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC., Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., photo: Mathias Völzke

Clare Molloy: *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta* is the first exhibition in your new programme at Gropius Bau. Why did you just choose to start with this exhibition?

Stephanie Rosenthal: It was very important for me to begin my programme with Ana Mendieta. In my view, she is an artist who is highly relevant in our current times. Ana Mendieta created ephemeral works and often captured them using various media including film. Central here, for me, is the fact that radical artistic approaches can also be established through ephemeral and performative works. In terms of themes, throughout her entire work Ana Mendieta addressed reconnecting the body to nature and the land, and an inner turmoil associated with this. These are concerns that will be present in various exhibitions at Gropius Bau over the next several years. But ultimately a factor is also the fact that Ana Mendieta is an artist whose work has not yet been adequately shown in Germany.

Previously you curated *Traces*, an exhibition of Ana Mendieta's work presented at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2013 and at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg in 2014. How does *Covered in Time and History* differ?

The exhibition Covered in Time and History presents Ana Mendieta's film works. She worked mostly with Super 8, a medium perfectly suited to documenting the private rituals of her art. Video cameras, on the other hand, were still very unwieldy at the time and usually needed a second person to change cassettes. Using Super 8 meant that Ana Mendieta could work more independently. She used a Bolex camera among other models. The Super 8 film cartridges were lightproof and the camera's daylight filters were ideal for filming outdoors. By necessity, sometimes other people operated the camera, for instance Jane Noble for *Corazon de Roca con Sangre* (1975) or Raquelín Mendieta for *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973); with the latter work, for example, Ana Mendieta was simultaneously photographing what unfolded. With the passage of time, however, Super 8 films become increasingly fragile and archiving them is a complex process.

The exhibition Covered in Time and History is quite extraordinary due to the fact that her films have only now been digitised and we can see them for the first time in this scope and also in this quality. Gropius Bau presents a selection of 23 films from her body of work comprising over 100 films. The selection is therefore very specific and gives us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the various themes of her film works. The exhibition *Traces*, on the other hand, focused on Ana Mendieta's working methods and presented within this framework excerpts from her entire body of work, beginning with her photographs, and including her films, drawings and sculptures, as well as reconstructions of her major exhibitions.



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At the time of *Traces*, Ana Mendieta's films were not fully restored and the artist's extensive filmography didn't yet exist. This was only made possible through research over the past several years. Now that you have been involved in two very different exhibitions examining Ana Mendieta's work, what interests you about Ana Mendieta and her artistic practice in particular?

There are two aspects about Ana Mendieta that I'm especially interested in. On the one hand, I think she has a very unique approach to nature and a very special relationship with it. It's not a romanticised approach but one that is powerful and passionate, where you also get a sense of her artistic urgency. Ana Mendieta is an artist with an incredible presence, and this is

communicated in her films in a very direct way. On the other hand, I'm very interested in how Ana Mendieta deals with performance. Her "Earth Body" works are private performances that she captured as images using different media. I see this as a question that is also absolutely relevant today. How do you present works when you specifically work ephemerally? Ana Mendieta made a decision very early on not to make her performances in front of an audience, but to make them so that they could be experienced through documentation. It's amazing how she manages to translate a relatively long performance into short, impressive and very moving films.

A few of Ana Mendieta's performances did take place in front of an audience, for example when she was part of the Intermedia Programme at the University of Iowa or the performance *La Noche, Yemaya* at Franklin Furnace, New York in 1978. For the most part, however, it was the camera that accompanied her performances as a silent witness. The artist used the term "film works" for her moving images. She created her film works between 1971 and 1981, but it's remarkable how topical they are. Why is Ana Mendieta's work still so relevant? How does she achieve this?

It's really fascinating how timeless Ana Mendieta's work is. This certainly has to do with the fact that she decided to create most of her actions in nature. In most cases, therefore, we have no context, like clothing, to identify the decade in which the works were created. Nature is timeless. This also demonstrates how the themes that Ana Mendieta addressed, such as the question of belonging, being uprooted from your homeland, but also a connection to nature, speak to us at all times. Of course, her themes such as migration and belonging are also relevant to our reality and current world situation. In addition, we live in the digital age. Ana Mendieta's work focuses on the body, not in a voyeuristic sense, but in a very natural understanding of physicality.



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The body plays a very particular role in Ana Mendieta's work. Using the term "Earth Body" for her works she creates not only her own terminology, but also her very own aesthetic. What exactly did she mean with Earth Body?

Earth Body actually stems from her interest in distancing herself from prevailing art forms. She tried to differentiate herself from the categories existing at that time in art, such as Land Art or Performance Art. I think she always felt she occupied a spot in between. She didn't feel a sense of belonging to either, and thus created her own terminology within which to situate her work. Very influential for Ana Mendieta is also the term "Silueta". She often worked with silhouettes of the female figure, which became increasingly abstract. She created these forms on the ground with soil or at the beach, where these Siluetas gradually disappear through the movement of water, or with Silueta de Cohetes (Fireworks Piece) the night sky is illuminated with fireworks in the form of a Silueta with its arms raised upwards. Silueta de Cohetes (Fireworks Piece) was created in Mexico in 1976 and was inspired by fiesta traditions and Holy Week celebrations. As was so often the case, Ana Mendieta documented this work in more than one medium, on 35-mm slides and with Super 8 film. The references in her work range from the iconography of Catholicism to Afro-Cuban Santería or goddess representations of the Táiino.

Ana Mendieta created works in many locations, in Iowa, Mexico, Italy, Cuba. Which geographical parameters were significant for her and what role does nature play in her work?

Of paramount importance to her body of work is that she was born in Cuba and sent from Cuba to America in 1961 at the age of 12, first to Miami and then to Iowa, she first returned back to Cuba much later in the 1980s. The separation from her homeland certainly had a strong influence on her work, but she would have, at least I think, been able to work anywhere, figuratively speaking. She was essentially interested in dealing with nature or the landscape. It was not necessarily about reconnecting with her native land, but more generally about the fact that nature is all-encompassing and present everywhere. Ana Mendieta worked wherever she found herself, whether in the United States, Mexico, or Italy. The ground on which she stood always served as an ideal starting point for her work.



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An interesting question with artists like Ana Mendieta is, of course, which technology they were using.

Absolutely, Ana Mendieta made Super 8 movies without sound. In the work now on view at Gropius Bau, Ana Mendieta also decided to use primarily single film cartridges. Each film is therefore roughly only three minutes long. This also establishes the exhibition's temporal dimension. If you watch each film in its entirety, you'll spend about 90 minutes in the exhibition. Mendieta's work also features films that are longer or even much shorter and she didn't only work in Super 8 alone. The last work in her oeuvre *Ochún* (1981), for example, was recorded with a 19mm Umatic video cassette and, unlike the other works in the exhibition, also has a sound. The work *Energy Charge* (1975) presented in the fifth room of the exhibition is a 16mm film, but she also used a video processor when making the work in order to achieve a different aesthetic.

What awaits visitors to the exhibition? How was the exhibition Covered in Time and History conceived and what criteria was used to select the films?

The layout of the exhibition is not strictly chronological but arranged according to theme. Ana Mendieta always returned to certain places – for example, she spent almost every summer in Mexico in the 1970s – and dealt with similar themes or elements such as water, fire, earth, blood. In the first room of the exhibition you can see, for example, how Ana Mendieta worked with the volcano and smoke in relation to the earth. This arrangement of the works also intensifies the poetic quality of the exhibition, because in any particular room you feel like you're surrounded by a specific element.

What awaits visitors is an artistic position of crucial importance to the 1970s and 80s, and one which is still utterly relevant today. Ana Mendieta is an artist who refuses to be pigeonholed and created her own categories for herself. She presents us with filmworks that to this day address the performative in a decisive and pioneering way.

Stephanie Rosenthal is director of Gropius Bau.

Clare Molloy is a curatorial fellow.