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Overlooked No More: Ana Mendieta, a Cuban Artist Who Pushed Boundaries

Monica Castillo | 19 September 18



Mendieta's art, sometimes violent, often unapologetically feminist and usually raw, left an indelible mark before her life was cut short.

Ana Mendieta's art was sometimes violent, often unapologetically feminist and usually raw.

She effortlessly incorporated unusual natural materials like blood, dirt, water and fire, and displayed her work through photography, film and live performances.

“Nothing that she did ever surprised me,” Mendieta’s sister, Raquelín, told *The New York Times* in 2016. “She was always very dramatic, even as a child — and liked to push the envelope, to give people a start, to shock them a little bit. It was who she was, and she enjoyed it very much. And she laughed about it sometimes when people got freaked out.”

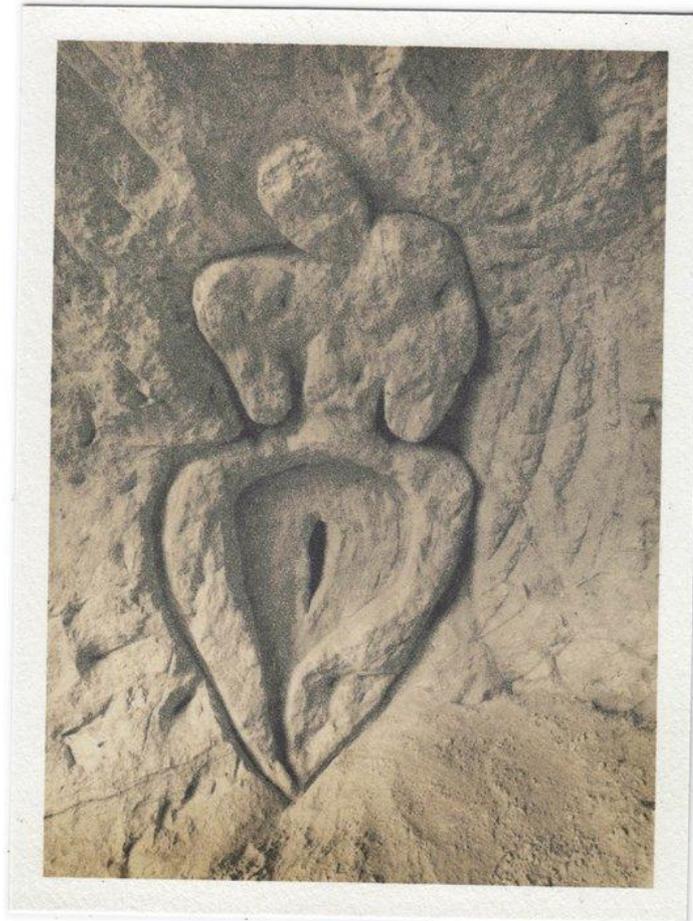
In the 1973 short film “Moffitt Building Piece,” Mendieta and her sister captured the reactions of strangers who walked by a puddle of pig’s blood that Mendieta had spilled outside her apartment. Some stared and most walked around the mess. Eventually someone washed it off the sidewalk. To Mendieta, the recording offered a thought-provoking experiment on people’s indifference to violence.

Mendieta’s stature as an artist was never fully recognized in her lifetime. She died in 1985 at 36; her husband, the sculptor Carl Andre, was accused of pushing her out of a window of their 34th-floor apartment in Greenwich Village but was acquitted of murder charges.

As an immigrant, Mendieta felt a disconnect in the United States. The trauma of being uprooted from her Cuban homeland as a girl would leave her with questions about her identity and make her more conscious of being a woman of color.

These questions would echo through her work, which explored themes that pushed ethnic, sexual, moral, religious and political boundaries. She urged viewers to disregard their gender, race or other defining societal factors and instead connect with the common humanity they share with others.

In this way, she gained footing as an ambitious and audacious artist who, “if not naturally fearless, used fear well, transmuting a profound sense of psychological and cultural displacement into an experience of merging with the natural world and its history through art,” the *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote in 2004 about a retrospective of her work at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

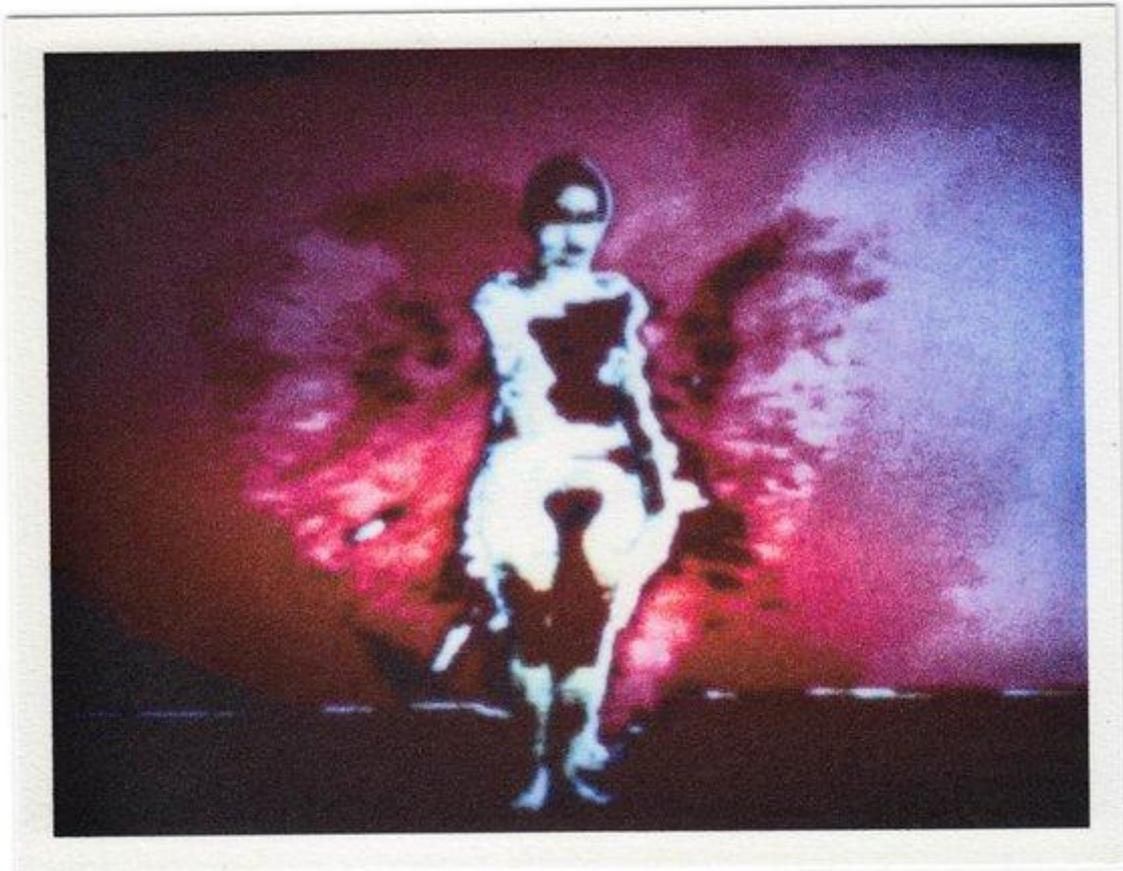


Ana Mendieta, Guanaroca (Esculturas Rupestres), 1981, [First Woman (Rupestrian Sculptures)]. Credit: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, via Galerie Lelong & Co.

Ana Maria Mendieta was born into a middle-class family in Havana on Nov. 18, 1948. Her father, Ignacio, was a prominent political figure who ran afoul of Fidel Castro's government; her mother, Raquel, was a chemistry teacher.

She and her sister attended a Roman Catholic school on the island before their parents sent them to the United States through Operation Pedro Pan, a secret program run by the church with the aid of the State Department to smuggle thousands of children out of Cuba at the start of Castro's regime. The experience would leave Ana, who was 12 at the time, and Raquelín, who was 14, with a feeling of loss as they moved through group and foster homes in Florida and then Iowa. Mendieta would not see her mother for 5 years, her father for 18.

She found refuge in painting and pursued her interests in the arts at the University of Iowa, where she studied under the German artist Hans Breder, who made video and performance art and encouraged students to move back and forth across artistic frontiers. Mendieta adopted those forms and added her own style, mixing elements of performance, body and land art into one work, then capturing it through photography or Super-8 film.



A still from "Butterfly" (1975), a Super-8 film in the 2016 exhibition "Ana Mendieta: Experimental and Interactive Films," at Galerie Lelong. Credit: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, via Galerie Lelong & Co.

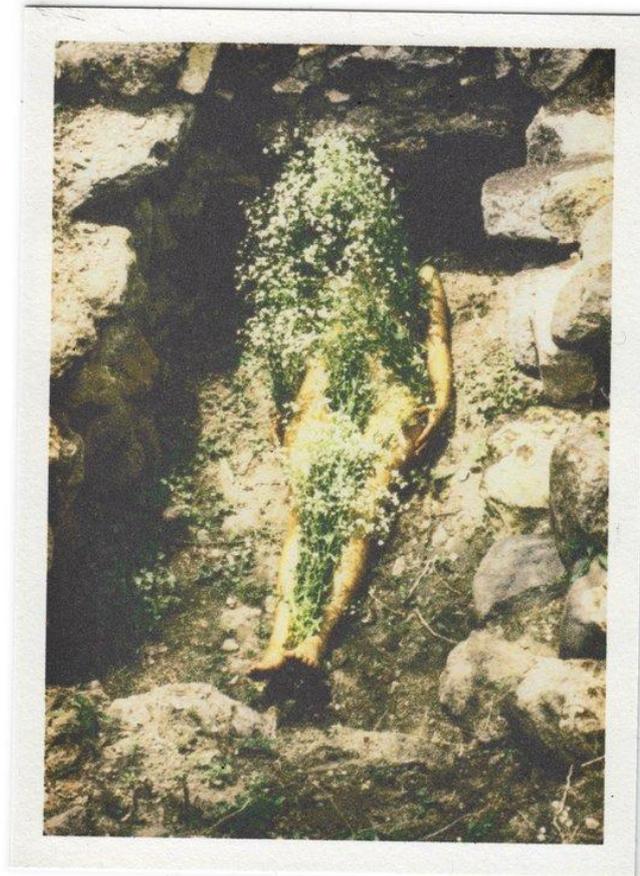
In 1973, while she was in college, Mendieta learned about the on-campus rape and murder of a nursing student named Sarah Ann Ottens. Her outrage over the incident drove her to stage one of her most confrontational and violent pieces, "Rape Scene."

For the piece, Mendieta upended her apartment, covered herself with blood and tied herself to a table to recreate the aftermath of brutal sexual assault. She invited an audience to the made-up crime scene, where she remained bent over the table with blood dripping down her legs and pooling at her feet as they discussed the incident. Photographs of the scene are still displayed in museum exhibits around the world, most recently at the Brooklyn Museum earlier this year.

"There's a way in which her work is about performance," Catherine Morris, a senior curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the museum, said in a telephone interview. "It's about theater. It's about kind of capturing moments through various forms of

documentation. And she takes all of these things to the world at large that might not be considered fine arts. She turns them into something intelligent, harrowing and emotional.”

Mendieta exemplified this best through a series called “Siluetas,” or “Silhouettes,” which focused on sculptured figures made out of earthy materials like grass, flowers, branches and mud and incorporating themes like creation, faith and womanhood.



“Imagen de Yagul” (“Image from Yagul”) from 1973, one of Mendieta’s best known “Siluetas,” or “Silhouettes.” Credit: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, via Galerie Lelong & Co.

In one of her best known “Siluetas,” “Imagen de Yagul” (“Image from Yagul”) from 1973, Mendieta incorporated her body into the piece by lying down nude in an old neglected stone tomb in Mexico. She then strategically placed white flowers over her, as if they were growing out of her body.

In all, about 200 pieces make up the series, which she worked on throughout the 1970s and early ’80s.

“The making of my ‘Silueta’ in nature keeps the transition between my homeland and my new home,” she once said. “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.”

Moving to New York City in the late 1970s, Mendieta quickly found a community of fellow artists, including Andre, a sculptor who, like Mendieta, often worked with natural materials. She married him in 1985 despite a tempestuous relationship.

The circumstances of Mendieta’s death later that year remain a mystery. What is certain is that she fell out of her apartment window in the early hours of Sept. 8, and that her husband was charged with her murder.

Over three years of court proceedings, Andre denied the charges. He said that he and Mendieta had argued about his recognition in the art world as surpassing hers. When he walked into their bedroom, he said, she was gone and the window was open. But a passer-by who testified said he had heard cries of a struggle. Andre was acquitted for lack of evidence.

To this day, Andre’s shows draw protesters who blame him for Mendieta’s death.

In recent years, awareness of Mendieta’s work has grown considerably, a sign that “the world has caught up,” said Morris, the Brooklyn Museum curator.

“They understand her as a pioneer, a maverick and as a great artist,” she said.