

Frieze

The Importance of Refusing to Look Away from Scenes of Violence

Olivia Laing | 13 August 2018

Indecency surrounds us, we must not look away



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, 1978, from the 'Silueta' series. Courtesy: © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York/Paris

At a party in south London, a man comes up to me. He's big, with close-cropped grey hair, bright blue eyes, a network of broken veins across his face. 'My dad was Irish,' he says, 'he worked on the building sites. London was built by the Irish. They all died young. No compensation. It was the asbestos, it got into their lungs.' He tells me about working on a demolition site as a teenager, bringing tea to a man who emerged from a tunnel the width of his body, which ran 40 metres beneath the ground. He had a handkerchief over his mouth. Pulled it off, grinning, his whole face pancaked in poisonous white dust.

Everything's seeping to the surface now, the slow or hidden violence of late capitalism, the concealed cruelties of immigration removal centres, the secret acts of racist police, all made inescapably visible by way of the scrying glass of social media. You can become an accidental connoisseur of snuff movies simply by scrolling through Twitter with a breakfast cup of tea. A young woman shot by her ex-boyfriend in a university hall of residence, the video of her final seconds

played on a loop on a British newspaper website. A black man looking at his phone in a parking lot, dragged from his car and beaten by three white police officers in what looks like riot gear, blow after blow after blow.

'I think it would be indecent these days for writers to talk of anything else but violence,' the French author Édouard Louis said in an interview about his new novel, *History of Violence* (2018), a fictionalized account of his rape and attempted murder by a stranger he met on the street. But actually grappling with this material often carries the charge of indecency, as if bringing a horror into view is perversely worse than the act it records. I'm thinking of two artists in particular, Kathy Acker and Ana Mendieta, who were born a year apart, who both died young and who were among the most unflinching chroniclers of 20th-century cruelties.

Acker's world is one of terrorist attacks and sexual degradation: it resembles the baroque imaginings of the Marquis de Sade, but also the tabloid fixations of *Fox News* and the *Daily Mail*. As for Mendieta, in 1973, while still a student at the University of Iowa, she recreated the recent rape and murder of a woman student in her photograph *Untitled (Rape Scene)*. Deploying her own half-naked body, blood dripping from her thighs, she made herself both perpetrator and victim, creating a shock zone of resistance as well as mourning.

If *Untitled (Rape Scene)* was about preserving and making visible a scene of horror, the work that followed was far more concerned with how violence ebbs away. For the 'Silueta' series (1973–80), Mendieta cut female silhouettes into the earth, pressed them into grass, traced them with flowers or burned them with fire. They look like traces of some unspeakable disaster, but at the same time they register a longing for connection, for dissolving or being subsumed into nature.

I find looking at these works comforting, as if the violence they attest to has been absorbed by an order of time that dwarfs any human act, no matter how vicious. And yet each time I see the seeping red shape of a woman's body carved into the ground I am reminded of a scene from Eichmann in *Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) by Hannah Arendt, another woman who looked at indecency and recorded what she saw.

Adolf Eichmann's trial testimony was marked by a constant refrain of not looking. He hadn't seen. He had turned his face away from the naked corpses in ditches. He had refused to look through a hole in the mobile gas van, though he had not been able to tune out the shrieking of the people trapped inside. It was all 'horrible ... horrible'. What he had seen, and what therefore must stand in for the many things he'd chosen to ignore, was a burial ditch that had already been filled with soil. A spring of blood was gushing from the earth: 'like a fountain', Eichmann said. The evidence is always there. The acts keep coming. What permits them is another kind of indecency: the indecency of the eye that turns away.

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