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PERFORMANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE: ANA MENDIETA'S WORK AS FEMINIST-DECOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY?

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NOTA SOBRE LA AUTORA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the biography and work of Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), a Cuban-born artist exiled in the United States, through the lens of gender-based violence and historical memory in Latin America. The text highlights her early displacement during the Cuban Revolution – particularly after the Bay of Pigs incident (1961), which led to her father's imprisonment and the separation from her family – as a foundational trauma that permeated her practice. Mendieta used performance art to explore the violence endured by women, especially racialized and migrant bodies, as seen in her iconic works like *Rape Scene* (1973) and the *Silueta Series* (1973-1980). Her *oeuvre* echoes broader concerns in Latin American feminist performance and rethinks how women artists negotiate history (and history of art). The work argues that Mendieta not only exposed historical colonial wounds, but transformed them into sites of poetic, feminist resistance.

Keywords: Ana Mendieta, Feminism, Performance art, Women's art, Latin America, Memory

PERFORMANCES DE DESAPARICIÓN: ¿LA OBRA DE ANA MENDIETA COMO HISTORIOGRAFÍA FEMINISTA DECOLONIAL?

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la biografía y la obra de Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), una artista nacida en Cuba y exiliada en Estados Unidos, a través de la lente de la violencia de género y de la memoria histórica en América Latina. El texto destaca su desplazamiento temprano durante la Revolución Cubana, particularmente tras la invasión de Bahía de Cochinos (1961), que llevó al encarcelamiento de su padre y a la separación de su familia, como un trauma fundacional que impregnó su obra. Mendieta utilizó el arte de la performance para explorar la violencia sufrida por las mujeres, especialmente los cuerpos racializados y migrantes, como se aprecia en obras icónicas como Rape Scene (1973) y la Serie Silueta (1973-1980). Su producción expone preocupaciones más amplias en la performance feminista latinoamericana y replantea la forma en que las artistas mujeres negocian la historia (y la historia del arte). El trabajo sostiene que Mendieta no solo puso al descubierto las heridas coloniales históricas, sino que también las transformó en lugares de resistencia poética y feminista.

Palabras clave: Ana Mendieta, Feminismo, Performance, Arte de mujeres, América Latina, Memoria.

PERFORMANCES DE DESAPARECIMENTO: O TRABALHO DE ANA MENDIETA COMO HISTORIOGRAFIA FEMINISTA DECOLONIAL?

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a biografia e obra de Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), uma artista nascida em Cuba e exilada nos Estados Unidos, através da lente da violência de gênero e da memória histórica latino-americana. O texto destaca seu desenraizamento precoce durante a Revolução Cubana, particularmente após o incidente da Baía dos Porcos (1961), que levou ao encarceramento de seu pai e à separação de sua família, como um trauma fundamental que permeou sua obra. Mendieta utilizou a arte de performance para explorar a violência sofrida pelas mulheres, especialmente os corpos racializados e migrantes, como evidenciado em suas obras icônicas como Rape Scene (1973) e a Série Silueta (1973-1980). Sua obra expõe preocupações mais amplas na performance feminista latino-americana e repensa a forma como as artistas mulheres negociam a história (e a história da arte). O trabalho argumenta que Mendieta não apenas expôs as feridas coloniais históricas, mas as transformou em locais de resistência poética e feminista.

Palavras-chave: Ana Mendieta, Feminismo, Performance, Arte de Mulheres, América Latina, Memória.

PERFORMANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE: ANA MENDIETA'S WORK AS FEMINIST-DECOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Pain of Cuba
body I am
my orphanhood I live
(Ana Mendieta, 1981)[1]

INTRODUCTION

The intersection between history and performance has become a fertile ground for rethinking the past from the perspectives of the margins. In Latin America, where histories of colonialism, political violence, and cultural silencing remain unresolved, the work of Ana Mendieta offers a critical lens to explore these issues through performance art. Born in Cuba and forced into exile after the Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961), Mendieta's life and works reflect the continent's broader experience of displacement and erasure. Through works such as *Rape Scene* (1973) and the *Silueta Series* (1973-1980), Mendieta combines feminist and ecological aesthetics with ancestral memory, positioning performance as historical resistance from the South.

Therefore, this study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from performance studies, decolonial feminist theory, and embodied epistemologies. The analysis focuses on Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1973-1980) and *Rape Scene* (1973), utilizing visual and textual analysis to explore how her performances function as critical interventions in history and collective memory. Central to this investigation is Jane Blocker's (1999) discussions on identity, performativity, and exile in Mendieta's work, as well as contemporary studies examining the body as a site of meaning-making and resistance (Taylor, 2003). Methodologically, the study incorporates a literature review of academic sources, critical analysis of visual records of performances, and historical-cultural contextualization of Mendieta's oeuvre. This approach aims to reveal how the artist employs performance to re-inscribe collective and individual memories, particularly those related to Latin American female experiences and the legacies of coloniality.

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ANA MENDIETA: DISAPPEARANCE AND TRANSGRESSION

According to Laura Meyer (2006), in the 1970s, women artists, along with feminist theory, would start to reexamine female stereotypes in art, while also questioning the representation of the female body as an ideal of beauty or inspiration. This was a necessary path to reclaim the "dignity" of the female body and sexuality beyond its usual objectification in art. As Jane Blocker states in her book *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (1999), experimentation, feminist consciousness, and the discussion of female and racial identity are central themes in Mendieta's work during this period. Thus, we have chosen Mendieta's work here for its paradigmatic nature: as a woman and as a "Latina" artist.

1 Quoted by Kaira Cabañas in her seminal paper on Mendieta's work from 1999: "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am", published at Woman's Art Journal, 20(1).

Mendieta was part of the *Body Art* movement, which, as Goldberg (2011, p. 153) notes, "while some body artists used their own persons as art material, others positioned themselves against walls, in corners, or in open fields, making human sculptural forms in space." Ana Mendieta would explore the limits of her body until her disappearance. Mendieta made her body the primary object of her work or, in other words: "By repeatedly turning her own body into an art object, Mendieta took part in the 1970s trend in which the artist's physical self became both image and medium." (Blocker, 1999, p. 10).

From her first performance, as a student at the University of Iowa, Mendieta used her body as an instrument and material to question (the violence of) gender and what it means to be a woman. The performance titled *Rape Scene* (1973) reconstructs the scene of a rape that violently occurred on the university campus three years earlier, as sensationalistically narrated by the press. In this performance, in which she remained nude, tied, and completely motionless for an hour, she produced a series of three photographs, now part of the *Tate Gallery*'s collection.

Her body was the subject and object of the work. She used it to emphasize the societal conditions by which the female body is colonized as the object of male desire and ravaged under masculine aggression. Mendieta's corporeal presence demanded the recognition of a female subject. The previously invisible, unnamed victim of rape gained an identity. The audience was forced to reflect on its responsibility; its empathy was elicited and translated to the space of awareness in which sexual violence could be addressed. (Cabañas, 1999, p. 12)

In 1977, Mendieta joined the exhibition *What is Feminist Art?*, organized by activists Ruth Iskin, Lucy Lippard, and Arlene Raven, who invited over 200 artists to respond to this question. Mendieta's contribution was a mixed-media piece called *Microscopic view of the umbilical cord* (1976). Feminist art of the 1970s sought to reclaim women's control over their own bodies, as pointed out by Peg Brand (2008), even if it meant problematizing the violence historically suffered by women, as Mendieta did in *Rape Scene* (1973). It is important to emphasize that a woman using her body as a medium can be considered transgressive in itself, as it implies an autonomous refusal to be merely a model for male artists. After all, the eroticization and objectification of the female body, whether in art history or in sensationalist media, strips the female body of its own history and subjectivity—what feminist artists of the 1970s, like Mendieta, fought to reclaim.

Therefore, we suggest that Mendieta's feminist art is marked by a strong tension with the gender colonialities that crossed her. Her work calls us to confront the violence experienced by migrant women living in the USA. The performance *Rape Scene* and the *Silueta Series* are also autobiographical, updating social temporalities and intertwining with processes of subjectivation, memory and historical comprehension in their sedimentary and creative lines.

Born in Havana in 1948, she was sent to the United States at around the age of 12, after the Bay of Pigs incident (1961). This incident catalyzed her displacement, framing exile not merely as personal loss, but as a geopolitical rupture that would shape her entire practice. This severed her connection to her Cuban roots—though she never fully became American. She was raised in orphanages and foster homes in Iowa and experienced what can be considered a racialized youth, as, being of Latin origin, she was defined as non-white and non-American, an identity considered subaltern in 1960s USA, also a time of intense struggles by the African American civil rights movement.

> Ana and Raquel [her sister] became targets of racism. During high school in the late 1960s, their classmates called Ana "nigger" and told her, "Go back to Cuba, you whore". These experiences exacerbated their feelings of alienation and displacement, and, accordingly, both women later began identifying themselves as "non-white." (Cabañas, 1999, p. 12)

According to Blocker (1999), the issue of exile and statelessness permeates Mendieta's entire body of work, whether as a longing for lost roots or, more importantly, as a feeling of foreignness and non-belonging that never left her throughout her life. Coloniality strongly marked her body as subordinate and non-resident, a body that did not belong—a dissident body.

She needed to cross the border into Mexico, where the Silueta (Silhouette) Series was first conceived, and where, in her words "where everybody was my height and had dark skin" (Blocker, 1999, p. 103), to begin locating her body in a sense of belonging. She would return to Mexico several times between 1973 and 1977, marking the Mexican soil with numerous silhouettes.

Her first performance in the *Silueta (Silhouette) Series*, titled *Flowers on Body or Imagen de Yagul* in Spanish, was done during her first visit to Mexico in 1973. In this piece, we see Mendieta lying on a tomb at the Zapotec archaeological ruins, with white flower branches scattered across her body, as if they were blooming in contact with the land of one of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Unlike the vast majority of her *siluetas*, here we see her own body rather than its traces or contours, which would signify the gradual disappearance of her body throughout the series. In this piece, however, Mendieta acknowledges her body's presence in that space, even though it begins to disappear beneath the flowers as it seems to merge with the earth.

> Particularly in Imagen de Yagul, time feels like a form of corporal-permeability. The earth was a canvas for Mendieta to make an incision of recognition—or societal lack of it—as a disappearance that seems to be the only intersubjective relationality ripe for her agency. (Nestor, 2021)

Her *Silueta Series*, as it would come to be known, initiated in 1973, would accompany much of her artistic trajectory. It consists of a series of images of her body inscribed into the landscape—her body as a medium to create art, in dialogue with the landscape. Her body silhouette is imprinted (through paint, blood, fire, and other natural elements) onto various materials and terrains, and captured through photography and film, in an attempt to portray the cultural experiences of Cuba and the Americas.

Mendieta's body, in its search for connection with the earth, is at the center of her artistic research, simultaneously a symbol of identity and a tool for protest. A woman in exile, without roots, but in search for a soil to belong. A female body connecting with nature: thus, the artist seemed to shift from Body Art to Land Art, some might say, as she sought to create a link between the human body and some kind of primordial nature. Through ritualistic gestures, Mendieta sought to reconnect body and earth. Mendieta started defining herself as an "Ear-

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th-body artist." Therefore, her *siluetas* can be seen not only as bodily expressions of identity and belonging, but also as acts of memory-making: counter-archives that challenge historical erasure and reclaim a visual narrative of women's pain and survival in the Americas.

> Returning to Mendieta's Siluetas Series, it is notable that the shape of her body references archetypal symbols of female goddesses; this […] converged with feminist theories at the time that encouraged a rediscovery of the "goddess archetype" and the "universal female" as a way to empower women and counter their exclusion from historical canons. (Siegler, 2018, p. 6)

The ecofeminist movement, which combined aspects of both feminism and environmentalism, played an even more significant role in shaping Mendieta's work. Emerging in the United States during the 1970s, at the same time as Mendieta's career began to flourish, ecofeminism explored the connections between the oppression, degradation, and exploitation of women and the Earth. According to Mendieta, "the analogy was that I was covered with time and history" (apud Cabañas, 1999, p. 14).

In her analysis of the *Silueta (Silhouette) Series*, Blocker (1999) argues that Mendieta uses her work as a means to establish a "sense of being" and to heal the "wound" of separation. Having felt exiled, she used her art as a form of self-healing, and perhaps to heal others as well. This interpretation is revisited by Nestor (2021), who emphasizes the intentional transitory nature of the works. The incision of the body into the landscape is fleeting, despite being documented in video and photographs.

> Therefore, throughout the Silueta Series, the incision of the body into the land generates a mark-making that is undone by the earth's materiality and temporal transformations. When The Siluetas appear on the beach, their trace is removed by the ocean; when sculptures of the body are set on fire, they turn to ash, symbolizing cremation and cinders. When a figure is made of ice, it slowly dissipates and absolves through its temporal erasure. Therefore, in The Siluetas, there seems to be a double bind (be alive, but stay dead) at play; both in the inscription of her subjectivity as a trace, and as a dwelling, a temporary inscription of the body into the land. (Nestor, 2021, n/p).

In the piece *Alma, Silueta en Fuego* (Silueta de Cenizas) from 1975, a silent color film shot in Super-8 lasting 3 minutes, for instance, we witness the figure subject to its own dissolution by fire, while glimpses of its form appear. Thus, we see that the dematerialization of the artwork, in Mendieta's case, truly meant placing her own body in the process of mediation and artistic creation, *thereby destabilizing the normative categories of art history as a strategy.* Her body, shaped by various forms of colonialism, can still return and reclaim the earth. There may be a significant symbolic element of fire in Santeria, with candles always being lit for the deceased in abundance: fire as an element of communication and volatilization between worlds. The fire transforms the figure into ashes, which return to the earth, blending with the earth.

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For Blocker (1999, p. 79), the earth for Mendieta becomes the dissolution of all boundaries—she, who could not return home to the Cuba of her childhood due to an extreme geopolitical context—would see, in the earth, this vast planet with its ancestral and mythical force as the mother of all, the "futility of all borders." The author reminds us that the earth can be interpreted as the antithesis of the nation, a domain free of its politics and ideologies, existing prior to patriarchy and already present before the arrival of the colonizers. The researcher connects Mendieta's work to colonial resistance, as for her,

> Mendieta invokes the earth precisely because of its antithetical relation with the nation, precisely as a tool to combat its ideologies. [...] To the extent that earth and nation form a binary, each stands at the top of a lengthy list of related concepts. The earth is prehistorical, female, primitive, of the body; the nation is historical, male, colonial, of the mind. That is, the nation is the entity that (although at times invisible) gives meaning and urgency to those components forming Mendieta's conception of earth. Earth and nation also stand for two opposing philosophies of identity: the earth is essential, unified, and natural; the nation is constructed, multifarious, and artificial. By invoking the earth, the essential, the female, the primitive, and the colonized, Mendieta appears to display, draw power from, and then disavow the ideas to which these notions are opposed. But I believe that she did more than simply validate the category earth (and all the notions that line up neatly behind it) and invalidate nation. Rather, by working with the conventions of the binary to represent identity, but being unable herself to fit their regulatory practices, her work exposes their untenability. (Blocker, 1999, p. 48)

As Siegler complements,

> By acknowledging Mendieta's earth-body works as channels of resistance, the medium of the earth takes on significance as a power that endures and outlasts cultural discrimination based on constructs of identity and difference, particularly in regard to gender, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, by tying issues of gender to those of race and ethnicity, Mendieta included her own agenda into the white dominated feminist movement. (Siegler, 2018, p. 4)

According to Heartney (2004), Mendieta's work is also imbued with a "mixed spirituality," a legacy of Spanish-colonial Catholicism, Afro-Cuban religious practices such as Santería, and the cult of the "indigenous nature of the Caribbean," activating a powerful dialogue between different artistic languages within a profound sense of respect for the American continent and its ancestry. We can also highlight those references to ancestral roots of cultures now considered subalterns by official history that marked the work of Ana Mendieta. The *Silueta Series* presents a strong gesture, connecting her own female body to the wounded body of Latin America – devouring and incorporating her/our traumas and themes such as violence, displacement, and cultural, spiritual, racial, and gender identity. Galeano, author of the famous *Open Veins of Latin America* (1997), wrote a book of short stories titled *Mujeres ("Women"*, 1995), which brings to the forefront the silencing and violence suffered by women in Latin America. There

are resonances here—even if involuntary. Throughout the *Silueta Series*, there is also a radical questioning of the colonialist discourse of the white-western-European-heterosexual-man as the matrix from which the experiences of women, especially women living on the borders and peripheries, can be read.

The performance artist and Mendieta's friend, Carolee Schneemann (as quoted in Siegler, 2018, p. 6), would later say, years after Mendieta's first performance, *Rape Scene* (1973), that they both shared the opinion that "the violence against women relates to the whole patriarchal sense of violence against the natural world, and resistance to gendered interrogations." What is interesting about this statement is that it places her first performance within the same interpretative framework as her later work, the *Silueta (Silhouette) Series* (1973-1980), grounded in the connection between the female body and nature. The invaded land of the Americas, forcibly divided into colonies and nation-states, is a violent appropriation, the rape of the land. Mendieta's critique of patriarchy and its official history is broad. And using her own body as a medium during this time was indeed an act of transgression. In this sense, Mendieta's performances may be interpreted as counter-historical gestures—feminist interventions that work through trauma, giving presence to the untold stories of Latin American women shaped by political violence and displacement.

A DECOLONIAL TURN AND THE BODY: TOWARDS INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM IN PERFORMANCE ART – OR DISPLACEMENT AND RAPE AS COLONIAL WOUNDS

Echoing decolonial thinkers, we could say that Art History, Art Theory, and Aesthetics urgently need their own "decolonial turn"—a term coined by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), which refers to a theoretical and practical resistance to the logic of modernity/coloniality. As Mignolo (2003) states, coloniality is constitutive of modernity: there is no modernity without coloniality. Modernity and its aesthetic values are deeply marked by colonial worldviews, with inherent tensions and contradictions in the colonial project, which classified everything outside the Eurocentric art historiography as "other," "exotic," or "inferior." Modernity colonized us all: not only our bodies but also our creations and ways of making art. This debate is gaining increasing importance in contemporary discussions about the hegemonic model of knowledge production that modernity constructed, opening up to alternative epistemologies and traditions. Numerous voices now question the hegemonic ways of making and thinking about art, challenging the notion of a universal canon and a neutral aesthetic theory.

Several key figures in decolonial thought, such as Walter Mignolo (2010, 2013) and Palermo (2010), have proposed revising traditional aesthetics through the concept of a *decolonial aisthesis*. This concept seeks to rethink art beyond colonial conceptions and beyond modern, universalizing notions in Art History, since, for them, modern concepts are inseparable from colonial ones. This assertion becomes clearer when we consider how art history, defined as a singular narrative about what is or is not art, was constructed through the lens of a "universal history" that systematically marginalized or excluded histories, peoples, cultures, and artistic practices others than those from Europe—often through the separation of art from "craft"—where the products of subalternized cultures were always the ones considered lesser—never the "higher" or erudite forms of art. This categorization has been used to marginalize Latin American art for centuries.

Tracing the history of feminist art in Latin America requires moving beyond Euro-American feminist canons and rigid academic narratives. From the 1960s to the 1980s, many Latin American countries experienced dictatorships or civil wars, often amid resistance to US intervention,

while Chicana and Latina artists in North America faced systemic marginalization. Their work responded not only to gender oppression but also to broader political struggles. Feminist movements in Latin America have long addressed gender-based violence through art, linking it to colonial histories of sexualization and racialization. These activist practices have shaped transnational understandings of violence against women. Mendieta's life and art encapsulate these concerns, offering a powerful lens through which to reflect on the intersectional legacies of colonial violence across the Americas.

To understand this further, we must revisit gender as a mechanism by which global colonial capitalism has structured asymmetries of power. As Lugones (2007) points out, race, gender, and class cannot be considered separately, as this would turn invisible those dominated by multiple intersecting categories—such as Black, Indigenous, and Latin women. The coloniality of power, as described by Quijano, is expanded by Lugones (2007) who sees how its logic is grounded in a binary, biological understanding of sex and a heteronormative, patriarchal conception of power. This framework helps explain how gender functions within the power struggles over control of sexuality and reproduction, creating a reductionist race- and gender-based hierarchy that naturalizes and hierarchizes bodies.

Preciado, in the essay *Feminism is not a humanism* (2014), critiques humanism—a conception from modernity—as the invention of a standard human (male white, heterosexual, Christian, etc.) opposed to those of non-humans (basically everyone/everybody that does not fit such description), pointing out that the "first machines" were actually enslaved humans (seen, therefore, as non-human from a modern "humanist" perspective) for agricultural work and sexual reproduction. Federici (2004) discussed sexual reproduction on modern times as rape, since it restrained women compulsorily to reproduction, under the rule of Christian cisheteropatriarchy—responsible for the domination/exploitation of non-standard bodies through colonial expansion on the Americas. Heteronormativity, capitalism, and racial classification are necessarily interrelated. It is all of the Modernity's biopolitics, the power mechanism of domination and exploitation that allowed the "conquest" of colonized countries.

As Lugones (2007) argues, gender binary hierarchization, as a category of domination, is itself a form of colonization—serving as a foundation for the "civilized" West. Rape and domination of racialized women were also a key strategy of domination in colonial contexts and remains fundamental in shaping the history of Latin America as a shared background for all the countries that integrate it. As so, Mendieta's performances arise from a Latin American context shaped by conquest and forced Christianization, in which female agency was erased. Her return to the land and ancestral practices reflects a critique of this colonial legacy.

This debate has gained increasing prominence in contemporary times, with growing challenges to the hegemonic model of knowledge production that modernity built, trying to open up to other epistemic configurations and traditions. Many voices have emerged questioning hegemonic models of making and thinking about art, questioning the idea of a universal canon and a neutral aesthetic theory. For example, Mendieta, as seen, questions in her work both her place as a woman and her place as a Latin American woman. And, I could add, the very place of Latin America in the history of art. The very concept of art history, as shaped by modernity, is marked by the categorization of non-Western creations and women artists (as inferior) through the coloniality of power. Racism and sexism, as direct legacies of colonialism,

continue to shape art history: while museums are filled with representations of the female body, often sexualized, female artists—particularly non-white women—rarely receive space or the recognition they deserve.

For instance, in *Body Tracks* (1982), Mendieta engages with feminist body politics through a performance rooted in ritualistic and cultural symbolism. Drawing inspiration from Santería, an Afro-Cuban religion, Mendieta employs animal blood and tempera paint to create hand imprints on white paper. Repeating this silent, meditative gesture, she produces variations of her bloody hands mainly, emphasizing the physical and spiritual traces of her presence. At the conclusion of the performance, Mendieta exits the gallery space, leaving behind her body prints for the audience to confront the visceral red markings in her absence. This interplay between presence and absence can be understood as a poignant political statement, *addressing the violence historically and systematically inflicted upon women.*

Mendieta also questioned the white bourgeois feminist narrative by addressing the inclusion of women of color and non-white female artists, an issue often sidelined in feminist discourse. During her time at the *A.I.R. Gallery*, Mendieta curated the exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (1980) to raise awareness of the struggles faced by women of color who were excluded from feminist discussions at that time.

> in this exhibition she critiqued American feminism, which she viewed as "basically a white middle class movement," proving her growing disillusionment with feminist agendas, despite the progress she had initiated. (Siegler, 2018, p. 8)

Art history and its categories must also be revisited through a post-colonial critique that places the body, and specifically the female body in all its multiplicities, at the center—not as an object of sexualization, but as a poetic matrix of meanings and creativity that attempts to escape the coloniality of gender. Significant efforts have been made in this direction, such as those by Brand (2007) in her chapter titled Feminism and Aesthetics, which traces how women artists in the 1970s reshaped performance art, moving away from male-centered practices towards their own bodies to explore issues like female sexuality, spirituality, gender roles, and race. She mentions the pioneering work of Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Orlan, among others, who contributed to this shift:

> Although not directly engaged in a dialogue with philosophers, these artists were repeatedly challenging deeply held traditions of the concepts of "art" and "aesthetic experience" as they had been defined by white, European or American, middle-to upper- class, self-proclaimed men of taste; men who considered women's proper role to be restricted to appearing in art, not to be creators of art. (Brand, 2007, p. 255)

It is also worth mentioning the text Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism by Forte (1988), which discusses performance art created by women in light of feminist theory and postmodern critique. For the author,

> Feminist theory, having discovered in postmodern theory fertile ground both for critical and ideological strategies, thus also discovers a vivid and active voice in woman's performance art. In deconstructing

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> the system of representation, this performance practice is paradigmatic as a powerful strategy of intervention into dominant culture. Eminently political regardless of intent, the activity pursues an awareness of the phallocentrism of our signifying systems and instigates the demolition of genderized identities. Not merely a reflection of feminist theory, women's performance art provides a visible basis for the construction of a feminist frame of reference, articulating alternatives for power and resistance. (Forte, 1988, pp. 234-235)

It is worth noting that the 1960s and 1970s were the time of the second wave of feminism[2], influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. In this wave, the major discussion revolved around feminine nature, historically subjugated, and the right to the body and pleasure. In other words, in the 1960s and 1970s, gender and race[3] issues emerged strongly in the world, though not necessarily associated, but through multiple intersections capable of questioning the dominant narrative. Particularly, the art made by women, with the female body at its center, positioned itself as a practice of freedom gained in parallel with and through the feminist movement, both of which fueled each other.

On the other hand, in Mendieta's work, there are traces of what would later be considered intersectional feminism, as, being a racialized woman, she could not be satisfied with the first or second wave of white, bourgeois American feminism. It is also worth noting that Mendieta, despite being affiliated with feminist spaces such as the A.I.R. Gallery and contributing to publications like *Ms.* and *Heresies*, avoided explicitly identifying as a feminist. This resistance likely arose from her critique of "white feminism" and themes like colonialism, Santeria, racism altogether with misogyny could precursory be found throughout her oeuvre. Mainstream feminist discourse of the 1970s in USA, often referred to as the Second Wave, largely excluded women of color, poor women, and immigrant women. Such a criticism—and actions like the exhibition she organized—would be fundamental for feminism to revisit its own foundations and become more inclusive, incorporating the intersectionality[4] of issues such as race and gender.

It is a pity that Mendieta did not live long enough to witness the growth of feminisms (in the plural) and how they are built from a post-colonial and intersectional perspective nowadays. Intersectionality occurs when we start from the premise that there is no universal woman, but rather groups of different women, with diverse experiences and issues, affected by various oppressions to varying degrees, beyond gender. This perspective must consider race, social class, origin, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, among other factors, for instance. Currently, feminism is open to a plurality of voices, and Mendieta was one of those pioneering voices that questioned feminism itself.

2 The first wave is marked by the suffragist movement at the end of the 19th century.
3 The Black movement was also gaining strength, but despite its relevance, it will not be discussed here.
4 The term "intersectionality" was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989); i.e., four years after Mendieta's death. Intersectional thinking is a framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. These identities can include race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity.

EMBODIED ARCHIVES? REPERFORMING HISTORY THROUGH LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S BODIES AND MEMORIES

Ana Mendieta's artistic trajectory engages with identity, exile, and the historiographic potential of performance. Her body, deployed as both medium and message, challenges dominant narratives and performs a counter-archive of colonial and patriarchal violence. In her works, Mendieta reframes personal trauma and collective memory as historical material through, mainly, disappearance. Her performances do not merely reference historical violence—they enact it, transform it, and re-inscribe it on a live, racialized, and gendered body that serves as both witness and document.

By tracing outlines in earth or filming her own form in states of ritualistic dissolution, Mendieta employs what Taylor (2003) terms the repertoire: acts of memory transmitted through physical presence, gesture, and ritual, rather than through official documentation. Her ephemeral performances function as embodied inscriptions, archiving histories that were never written—histories of marginalized women, forced displacement, disappearance, erasure… and silenced resistance.

This approach aligns with Benjamin's perspective that history is not a linear continuum, but a constellation of moments that can be seized to challenge dominant narratives. According to Benjamin (2012, p. 255), the task of the historian is to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," suggesting that the archive is not defined solely by its contents, but by the relations subjects establish with objects, images, and words. Silva further expands on this by asserting that the archive should not be confined to the dichotomies of public and private or collective and individual memory. Instead, the archive operates in close negotiation with fields such as sexuality, gender, class, and race. Silva argues that,

> to think of the archive as traces which construct other experiences and not as documents which fix those is to breathe life into it, to bring back, even if only as a spectral presence, something which haunted the archive and was hitherto unmediated. (2021, n/p)

Mendieta's return to the body, the land, and non-Western vanished women and cultures signals a decolonial aesthetics that confronts the erasures of official histories. Her performances are not only artistic acts, but historiographic interventions: they reperform the past to unsettle the present and open possibilities for more inclusive, embodied futures.

SOME FINAL REMARKS

In this final section, I would like to underline more explicitly how Mendieta's performances operate as decolonial interventions in the field of art history. By inscribing her body into the land, she not only reclaims a space for Latin American women within a history that systematically erased them, but also unsettles the very epistemic grounds of the canon. Her work dialogues with decolonial thinkers such as Mignolo (2003; 2010) and Lugones (2007), as it exposes the coloniality of gender and proposes embodied ways of knowing and remembering.

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Thus, Mendieta's contribution is not limited to a feminist critique of representation; it is also a reconfiguration of historiography from the South. Her performances propose what can be called embodied counter-archives: ephemeral gestures that challenge dominant historical narratives and, at the same time, generate new possibilities of memory and belonging.

In conclusion, it can be said that Mendieta's art is deeply connected to her own life, which, in a sense, serves as a microcosm of a macro historical experience of displacement—and maybe of otherness and erasure—experienced by a multitude of Latin American women in the last centuries. Mendieta's artistic legacy reveals how performance can become a method of historical reconstruction and cultural re-inscription. Her life, marked by the trauma of forced exile and gender-based violence, mirrors the collective experience of many Latin American women. Through her body and ephemeral artistic gestures, Mendieta reclaims the land as a site of memory, mourning, and healing. Rather than offering linear narratives, her work proposes fragmented, embodied histories that confront dominant versions of the past. In this way, she contributes not only to a decolonial critique of art history, but to a poetics of memory that is at once political and affective. As Latin American artists and scholars continue to confront the legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism, Mendieta's work remains a foundational reference for performing historiography otherwise—from the ground, from the body, and from the South.

Ana Mendieta's marginal, ephemeral, and partially unknown work still remains an enigma and a guiding light for women artists today, as well as a breath of fresh air within an art history that, if viewed as universalizing, can indeed be suffocating for women artists who feel having no place within it. But historiography is currently being revisited, opening up to other possibilities of narratives and voices. And if this is possible, it is thanks to pioneers like Mendieta.

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