

USES OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: LISA FITZGERALD

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Uses of Environmental Humanities

The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with the Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of the Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“Earth Bodies: Ana Mendieta, Performance Art, and the Environmental Humanities”

By **Lisa FitzGerald**

My art is grounded on the belief in one universal energy which runs through everything; from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy.

My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid (Ana Mendieta).

The emergence of the environmental humanities discourse in recent years has instigated a review of conventional methodologies for cultural analysis. Re-reading a text or image can, in many ways, reveal (or at least reconfigure) an insight that speaks as much to contemporary environmental discourse as it does to its historical context. If we apply this point to the images and narratives of the past, we can see, through our (hopefully) more nuanced and objective stance, the undercurrents that made certain artists so relevant. The body art that emerged as a part of the growing feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s broke with convention to forge new ways of representing women's bodies and is widely recognized for the political and social upheavals it instigated. However, looking at the movement and the artworks within it from the perspective of the environmental humanities also unveils more nuanced relationships to the nonhuman

world such as the matter (blood, earth, and fire, for example) that forms the bedrock of the work of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta.

Foregrounding the body in the feminist and performative art of the late 1960s and 1970s proved to be a decisive intervention in conventional depictions of the body in the environment. Lived experience and its repercussions for gendered and marked bodies foregrounded the immersive quality of new forms of representation. This type of representation sought to uncover the issues of inequality that went into so much of the dominant narratives of woman and landscape. This inequality is often centred on the body and its relationship with the networks within which it is entangled. These issues of embodiment have also come to the fore in performance-based artworks and this perspective—that intersection between performance studies and the environmental humanities—is what informs new perspectives on Ana Mendieta (some of which I have outlined in the further reading section).

Much of Mendieta's art touches on her status as a foreigner. At the age of twelve, Mendieta left her parents and moved to the United States as an unaccompanied minor in the wake of the Cuban Revolution.^[1] Her refugee status shaped her development as an artist, infusing her work with a self-awareness of the othered body: one that circulated on the margins of what was acceptable, or even wanted. A love of Cuba permeates her work, which explores environmental embeddedness as well as sudden ruptures or violence visited on that land. These ruptures are torn in the fabric of belonging, both in a landscape and to a community. Current issues of bodily autonomy and environmental pollution in many ways emerge from the insights that new materialists (such as Alaimo, Barad, Haraway, etc.) have raised regarding issues of environmental justice. Women and performance—in particular the indexing of certain bodies as female, with associated (and clearly false) traits of passivity—were a potent mix when Mendieta first emerged on the art scene. Her embodied experience was a central theme in her work:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette) I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. (Quoted in del Rio and Perreault, 10)

Countering the traditional framing of the body, artists such as Mendieta explore the constraining aspect of the body on the one hand but also the dynamic and forceful ability

of the body to intercede in the environment on the other.

The body was not a form that could be disentangled from the space around it; immersion was a natural state and one that empowered rather than enveloped. Fire, smoke, and other fundamental elements form the central motifs in Mendieta's work. They reoccur, juxtaposed with the viscera (such as the blood) that challenge the viewer to be repulsed by the physicality of the artist's action pieces. Her use of film and photography was, in many ways, a means to capture the ephemeral performance work that she had focused upon. Issues of violence and abuse, particularly towards women, are evident, but so also is a mournful poignancy of loss: loss of homeland and loss of autonomy, as her work congregated around issues of gender violence, (in)dependence, and freedom.

Mendieta's *Silueta* series is one of her most iconic artworks. Her first *Silueta* (*Imagen de Yagul*) was made in 1973 at the Mesoamerican site of Yagul where she lay down in an open Zapotec tomb covered in white flowers. Her body's mergence with the natural world is indicative of the ritualistic motifs and mythologies that are threaded through Mendieta (such as the influence of Santería beliefs), evident in her body, her actions, and her art. There is often a point in Mendieta's work where the figure in the landscape is obscured as if the concealment speaks to the future absence of the physical body. Its internment in the earth becomes an inevitable part of the passage of time that Mendieta frames as potent because it continuously engages with the landscape in a way that highlights the politicized gendered or marked body.

Revisiting past events, be they cultural or environmental, can be trepidatious for historians and something I do not undertake lightly. Many a study has fallen under the weight of the intervening accolades that have been accrued by the subject at hand. But Mendieta's work begs to be seen in the light of the advances that environmental studies (and new materialist theory) have made in accessing the work of writers, painters, and performers working in direct partnership with the natural world. Imbued with a fatalistic sense of the materiality of the body and its regression into the surrounding environment, Mendieta's work does not portray the human body as the exceptional subject but an immersed one; her points of contact with the environment betray the multiplicities that suffuse her work.

Works Cited

Barreras del Rio, Petra, and John Perreault. *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988, 10.

Further Reading

Esteban Muñoz, Jose. 'Vitalism's After-burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta.' *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 2 (July 2011): 191–98.

Hawkins, Harriet. 'Points of Contact: The Geographies of Ana Mendieta's Earth-Body Works.' Chap. 7 in *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds*. Abingdon: Routledgs, 2014, 217–37.

[1] She and her older sister were moved as a part of Operation Peter Pan, which was responsible for the migration of 14,000 Cuban minors in the two years following the Revolution.