

The Weeping Wall: The Mendieta Case

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The Weeping Wall: The Mendieta Case

Anaïs Castro

On September 8, 1985, nearly thirty years ago, Havana-born artist Ana Mendieta fell from her thirty-fourth-floor apartment in Greenwich Village onto the roof of the adjacent deli, where she met her demise. Her death stirred the art world. She had lived a tumultuous married life with minimalist artist Carl Andre, who, many believed, played a significant role in her tragic death. There were no eyewitnesses to testify to what had happened, and Andre was acquitted of the murder of his wife on grounds of reasonable doubt after a three-year no-jury trial that ended in 1988. Many were shocked by the support that Andre got from people in the art world who were far too invested in his career and who protected him, seemingly without caring whether or not he had committed the murder. To this day, people remain divided; in the view of many, including Mendieta's friends and family, Andre is accountable for the catastrophic turn of events.¹

Although Andre's reception in Europe appears to have remained generally unaffected by Mendieta's death, his exhibitions in the New York vicinity have been repeatedly hijacked and disrupted by groups of feminists and Mendieta fans. Whether Andre's contribution to art ought to be ignored or scorned by cultural institutions on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations is a debate that will leave us empty-handed. No one knows what truly happened on that late-summer morning in 1985. What remains unacceptable, however, is yet another example of a woman's career being defined by the relative success of her husband, of a female artist's legacy overshadowed by her tragic biography while her husband's work remains relatively untouched by it. The Mendieta/

Andre story follows a pattern of unfairness. This prejudicial paradigm is equally discriminatory if we consider its reverse in the case of Yoko Ono and John Lennon: over thirty years after Lennon's death, the reception of Ono's work is still far too often defined by the memory of her deceased husband.

In 2010, twenty-five years after Mendieta's death, New York University held a symposium called *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, which seemed to stimulate attention to her work and revive the desire to honour her memory. Mendieta has not been mentioned in the didactic material associated with the large retrospective exhibitions of Andre's work in recent years, including at the Dia Foundation spaces in Chelsea and Beacon.² In response to this absence, a group of women who go by the collective name of the No Wave Performance Task Force have put together a series of interventions that aim to reinstate a discussion about Mendieta by opposing her practice to Andre's elegant geometric sculptures. The interventions are innovative, radical, compelling, and quite potent for their recuperation of Mendieta's artistic legacy as a means of protestation, putting her and her work always at the forefront of these performative contestations.

According to its website, the No Wave Performance Task Force is a collective interested in producing "performative social sculptures" and responsible for a handful of projects since 2012.³ The group's first intervention with regard to Mendieta occurred in May 2014, in the context of Andre's retrospective at the Dia Art Foundation in Chelsea. A group gathered in front of the institution, wearing white jumpsuits on which was written "I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive," and unrolled a banner with the same message before proceeding to deposit a large pile of chicken blood and guts by the institution's entrance. This last action was meant as a direct reference to Mendieta's notorious use of blood in her earth-body performance art. In the view of Christen Clifford, who took part in the event, it was not a protest against Andre's work, but an opportunity to use his institutional recognition to turn attention to Mendieta, to stain Andre's retrospective with Mendieta's memory.⁴ While the staff of the prestigious institution rapidly discarded the rotting flesh, traces of blood and a scorching smell lingered, leaving a lasting smear.

In Jacques Derrida's view, according to the editors of his book *The Work of Mourning*, acts of mourning "consist in interiorizing the other and recognizing that if we are to give the dead anything it can now be only in us, the living."⁵ It is precisely within this framework that the actions of the No Wave Performance Task Force become most meaningful. Through its choreographed set of actions, the group is not frantically vilifying Andre and his work, but seeking to return to Mendieta what was prematurely taken away from her.

The group's most recent intervention took place at the Beacon branch of the Dia Art Foundation on March 7, 2015.



No Wave Performance Task Force

CRYING; A PROTEST, Dia:Beacon,
Beacon, March 7, 2015.

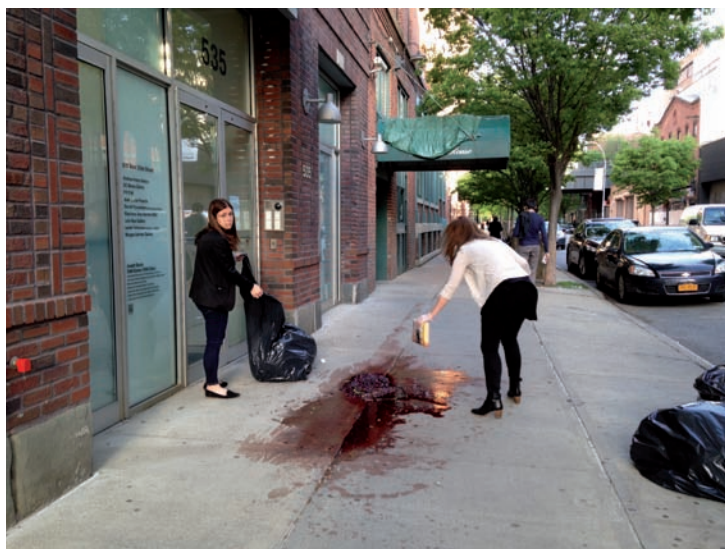
Photo : Sean Cain

No Wave Performance Task Force

We Wish Ana Mendieta Was Still Alive,
outside Dia Art Foundation, New York,
May 19, 2014.

Photo : © Jillian Steinhauer (first published on
Hyperallergic)





No Wave Performance Task Force

We Wish Ana Mendieta Was Still Alive,
outside Dia Art Foundation, New York,
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In an action titled *CRYING; A PROTEST*, fifteen feminist artists, poets, and activists joined together in the museum's galleries to cry the memory of Ana Mendieta. Divided into two groups, the sobbing women navigated through the space of Andre's retrospective exhibition and then reconvened in the museum's main room for the performance's climax, a chorus of lurid wails. Contrasting with Andre's "tasteful" geometric lines and shapes, these unwanted visitors' overwhelming emotional responses must have appeared all the more turbulent to other visitors and gallery guards. In an article written following the performance/intervention, Marisa Crawford remembers, "The space filled with a cacophony of sobs and wails and sniffing snot and choking back tears and gasping for air. It was stunning, and I started crying more intensely immediately, glancing from the artwork to the museum booklet and back again."⁶

Precipitously, guards escorted the performers outside as some started shouting "We wish Ana Mendieta was still alive!" Others began scattering pieces of paper bearing the same message, an allusion to the Women's Action Coalition protest at the opening reception of an exhibition featuring Andre at the short-lived Guggenheim Museum SoHo in 1992, during which images of Mendieta's work were disseminated.

In her article, Crawford eloquently explains the motivation for the performance: "Crying is often seen as a sign of weakness, of emotional excess, and coded as feminine. As a group, though, our tears were seen as a disruption—a threat. Like much of Ana Mendieta's art, our performance was ephemeral."⁷ *CRYING; A PROTEST* reconfigured the weakness associated with emotionalism as a powerful tool for contestation and established a haunting feminist shadow over the presentation of Andre's aesthetic, one historically described as masculine.

In *Making Memory Matter*, Lisa Saltzman criticizes a contemporary culture in which grief is a public and a performative ritual, a "culture in which any loss has the potential to elicit a public outpouring of grief and in which any site has the potential to become a shrine, an impromptu site of mourning, even if not often of remembrance."⁸ The *CRYING; A PROTEST* intervention at Dia:Beacon was successful precisely because it cashed in on a culture of grief. The feminist group successfully turned the apathetic aestheticism of Andre's minimalism into an emotional site of mourning. His geometric structures became memorials to Mendieta. Although brief and neither supported nor tolerated by the institution, the crying protest became inscribed within the

history of the Andre retrospective; it became inseparable from the reception of his work. From a "performative ritual," the feminist group made a poetic demonstration and turned the hallowed space of the art institution into one that blended the spiritual and the political. By performing actions both disturbing and endearing, hopeless and effective, provisional and persisting, the No Wave Performance Task Force is rehabilitating the potential of performance art and activism within a contemporary culture in which remembrance is selective and often used to overshadow matters that were central to Mendieta's art. ●

1 — Sean O' Hagan, "Ana Mendieta: Death of an Artist Foretold in Blood," *The Guardian*, accessed March 26, 2015, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/sep/22/ana-mendieta-artist-work-foretold-death.

2 — I believe that this was subsequently adjusted following the protests of groups of feminist artists and activists.

3 — "What is the No Wave Performance Task Force?" on No Wave Task Force website, accessed March 26, 2015, www.nowavetaskforce.org/.

4 — Jillian Steinhauer, "Artists Protest Carl Andre Retrospective with Blood Outside of Dia: Chelsea," in *Hyperallergic* (May 20, 2014), accessed March 26, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/127500/artists-protest-carl-andre-retrospective-with-blood-outside-of-dia-chelsea/>.

5 — Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, "Editors' Introduction," in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 9.

6 — Marisa Crawford, "Crying for Ana Mendieta at the Carl Andre Retrospective," *Hyperallergic* (March 10, 2015), accessed March 26, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/189315/crying-for-ana-mendieta-at-the-carl-andre-retrospective/>.

7 — Ibid.

8 — Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 11.