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**ANA MENDIETA  
EARTHBOUND  
25.05–22.09.2019**

Press release

#AnaMendietaMiddelheim

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**The exhibition *Ana Mendieta. Earthbound* is a collaboration with the Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection & Galerie Lelong & Co.**

**Curator: Pieter Boons**

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# ANA MENDIETA

## EARTHBOUND

*I wanted to send out an image of smoke  
into the atmosphere*  
(Ana Mendieta, 1981)<sup>i</sup>

**This solo-exhibition shows, for the first time in Belgium, a wider selection of works by the Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985). Forty-three years after she performed at the ICC (Internationaal Cultureel Centrum) on 24 April 1976, Antwerp welcomes her art again. Her sculptural filmworks and photographs position themselves effortlessly in today's international canon of contemporary works and will be shown for the first time ever in an outdoor sculpture park, here at the Middelheim Museum. *Earthbound* opens up perspectives on how we relate as human beings to our surrounding environment. Through a direct bodily connection with nature, Mendieta's works seek both a means of individual self-representation and a connection to universal ancestral power. In the context of the Middelheim Museum, where both the artist and the visitor are always subjected to the elements, Mendieta's artistic ideas resonate. It's absolutely clear that they not only raises fundamental questions about normative social systems, but that it also represents a shift in perspective on recent sculpture traditions, from a vision determined by figurative sculpture, to one connected with land art and performance.**

## ART AS REFUGE

Fleeing from Cuba to the US and displaced from her family as a young adolescent, Mendieta experienced an ongoing state of unrest. In her new environment she experienced being 'other', but marginality because of cultural or sexual differences can also become an active strategy and a liberating source. This is precisely how she developed her diverse, artistic oeuvre.<sup>ii</sup>

*I am overwhelmed by the feeling of being cast out from the womb (Nature)... My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that unite me to the Universe. It is a return to a maternal source. ( Ana Mendieta, 1983)*<sup>iii</sup>

Art critics have been connecting Mendieta's work with the idea of the great goddess or female figure. However, the use of the female silhouette originated from her interest in ancient and indigenous cultures. The search for maternal power and origin plays a central role in her early works, when her frequent travels to Mexico aroused her artistic inspiration. She recognized similarities between Mexican and Cuban culture in, for example, hybrid religious practices in which precolonial elements and Catholic rituals merged with one another. It was her interest in ancient civilizations that led her to Mexico, where the archaeological sites brought her into contact with an ancient, primitive culture. She was especially interested by their animistic world view and their direct connection with and respect for nature. In 1973, on one of these sites – Yagul in the Valley of Oaxaca – Mendieta created her first *Silueta* (Silhouette).

*I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). (Ana Mendieta, 1981)*<sup>iv</sup>

The artist lay down in an Aztec tomb and covered her body with white flowers, so that they seemed to grow out of her naked body. The flowers were those used for the Day of the Dead, the Mexican memorial festival. In this work, Mendieta

experienced an intense connection with the earth and the origins of civilization. From that moment on she created a large body of work, which she called the *Siluetas Series*, using her own body or its imprint in conjunction with natural materials such as clay, branches and gunpowder. She generally described her pieces as 'Earth-Body' works, interventions in the landscape that placed her body in a symbiotic relationship with its direct environment. Her works can be related to certain aspects of the land art tradition, where artists such as Richard Long create works in collaboration with nature in a non-invasive way<sup>v</sup>.

## EARTHBOUND

During her own lifetime, during the 1970s and '80s, Mendieta was already concerned about the fragility of our ecosystem: in 1981 she talked about the 'destructive effects of technological society on nature' in a lecture at Alfred State University, New York. In her work she strove to create a new kind of relationship with the nature that produced us<sup>vi</sup>.

Bruno Latour describes in his 2017 book *Facing Gaia* a radical strategy for realizing a 'new climatic regime' as a solution to the current climatological crisis. He calls upon Gaia, inspired by the primal image of Mother Earth, who rejects modern humans because, through the disrespectful plunder of the lifeless earth, they brought us to this general state of crisis. Latour proposes that we should change our relationship with our environment but that this change can only be realized by what he calls the 'Earthbound'. The Earthbound are occupied by the earth, in contrast to the Humans who occupy the earth disrespectfully. Crucial in this respect is recognizing that Gaia is active, just like the Earthbound, and that they both have agency. According to Latour, thinking beyond the boundaries of systems such as religion, politics and science is the only possibility for sustainable progress. We have to make new marks on the earth and to think beyond the imaginary realm of two-dimensional maps with highlighted borders. If anybody can help us develop our imagination and

courage necessary for these tasks, it might be artists<sup>vii</sup>.

This framework might offer an interesting perspective for exploring the work of Mendieta. By acknowledging that nature and its elements all have agency, she was able to think beyond the boundaries of religion, history and identity. She did not just simply use the environment, but ensured cross-integration via mutual respect. Her worldview is not anthropocentric, and the relationship of man to his environment is crucial. Just as the Earthbound relate to a system, a network of other actors, Mendieta's work is an interaction between the land and the actions and traces of a woman. She addressed live relationships and the flux of all earthly elements, including the flesh of the human animal. In that respect her work is direct, sensitive and precise, but also uncompromising<sup>viii</sup>.

## THE FOUR ELEMENTS

*I believe in water, air, earth. They are all deities.* (Ana Mendieta)<sup>ix</sup>

The selection of works included in *Earthbound* focuses on Mendieta's fascination with the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. According to Mendieta, their agency is their purifying power of transformation, which enhances nature's regenerative quality: the land engulfs, water flows, fire consumes and the wind blows. The four elements directed the artist's approach in an extensive series of films and videos, with the result that of her 104 filmworks there are 38 that feature fire and 19 that feature water. In most of Mendieta's works one can distinguish more than one element, which goes to underline only the mutual coherence and symbiosis of the whole. This explains why her multilayered work cannot be easily classified into categories and why there always lingers a mysterious aspect beyond our understanding. For this reason, we have not structured the exhibition by simply arranging the works according to their use of a particular element.

For Mendieta, the four elements and the relationships between them have a spiritual power and universality that enable us all to connect with them. She was particularly fascinated by the rituals and iconography of Santería, the Afro-Cuban hybrid religion, and incorporated elements in her work. For example, in the performance *Blood + Feathers*, which took place on the sandy bank of a creek, she poured animal blood over her body and then plunged herself into a pile of white turkey feathers; in a similar vein was her 1976 performance at the ICC. Like these performance pieces, her filmworks and photographs in the current exhibition are clearly a personal response to both individual and collective memories<sup>x</sup>.

*Earthbound* represents the diversity of Mendieta's oeuvre and her inexhaustible artistic energy. In the film *Burial Pyramid*, 1974 (film no. 27), the artist is buried under a mound of stones – perhaps symbolizing the earth and its immemoriality – which, with the effort of her breathing, gradually roll off her, allowing her to appear uncovered and resuscitated by the end of the 3-minute piece. In *Creek*, 1974 (film no. 22), Mendieta achieves a fragile balance between vulnerability and security, as if her naked body merged with the shallow water and placed diagonally across the film's frame holds these two opposites in a perfect equilibrium. As present as the body is in *Creek*, it is equally absent in *Ochún*, 1981 (film no. 104).

*Ochún* – the final piece in a “trilogy about displacement, return and reconciliation” – is the last moving image work that Mendieta made. The body is represented by an open *Siluetta* shape,

so that the water can flow through it, while not erasing the body's connection with the water. Made in the sea at Key Biscayne, Florida, and oriented towards Cuba, the water that is now flowing through the *Siluetta* and bringing peace is the same stretch of water that first separated the artist from her homeland<sup>xi</sup>. In the Santería religion, Ochún is the goddess of water and has the power to bring unity. *Ochún* is an apt metaphor for Mendieta's separation and return to Cuba in later life during a period of intense artistic activity, the water also alluding to distance and the passing of time. This work is a pre-eminent example of Mendieta transforming her personal suffering into a powerful strategy in order to tackle the incompatible forces of her destiny<sup>xii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Ana Mendieta lecture at Alfred State University, New York, September 1981, Ana Mendieta Archives, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Quote © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> See: Charles Merewether, *Ana Mendieta*, published by Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, pp.111, 138.

<sup>iii</sup> Ana Mendieta, Application for Rome Prize Fellowship, 1983, Ana Mendieta Archives, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Quote © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

<sup>iv</sup> Ana Mendieta, Artist Statement, Ana Mendieta Archives, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Quote © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

<sup>v</sup> See: Olga Viso, *Mendieta, Earth Body*, Hatje Cantz publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004, pp.44-47.

<sup>vi</sup> See: *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.208.

<sup>vii</sup> See: Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> See: Adrian Heathfield in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.24.

<sup>ix</sup> Linda Montano, *An Interview with Ana Mendieta*, c. 1984 – 85. Ana Mendieta Archives, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Quote © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

<sup>x</sup> See: Olga Viso, *Mendieta, Earth Body*, Hatje Cantz publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004, p.65.

<sup>xi</sup> See: Hooward Oransky, *Covered in time and history : the films of Ana Mendieta*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2015, p.158.

<sup>xii</sup> See: Olga Viso, *Mendieta, Earth Body*, Hatje Cantz publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004, p.93.

# ANA MENDIETA

## IN 5 POINTS

### 1. ANA MENDIETA WAS A CUBAN EXILE

Ana Mendieta (Havana, 1948 – New York, 1985) arrived in the US from Cuba in 1961 at the age of twelve, with her fifteen-year-old sister Raquelín. They entered via Miami, as did 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors transported by Operation Peter Pan, a program run by the US government and Catholic charities. Having spent a happy childhood in Havana and Varadero, as members of a middle-class family prominent in Cuba's political life and society, Ana and Raquelín were now fleeing the communist regime of Fidel Castro. Their father, based in the Mendieta family home, devoted himself to clandestine counterrevolutionary activities and was later imprisoned as a political dissident. The girls would not see their mother and brother again until 1966, and it was 1979 before they were able to see their father.

Ana and her sister spent their first weeks in a camp before moving between various institutions and foster homes in Iowa. After finishing secondary education in the Iowa Catholic school system, Ana discovered a special interest in art in high school. At the University of Iowa, she earned bachelor and master degrees in painting. There she met professor and artist Hans Breder, who had founded the university's Intermedia programme, his aim being to activate the space between disciplines, media and art forms. In 1973 she began to visit pre-Columbian sites in Mexico. During this time the natural landscape took on increasing importance in her work. In 1978 Mendieta moved to New York. From 1980 onwards Mendieta started making return visits to Cuba and in 1981 created her *Rupestrian Sculptures* in grottos outside Havana. In 1983 she was awarded the Prix de Rome and started a one-year residency in Rome. In 1985, at the age of

thirty-six, Mendieta died in a fall from the window of her New York apartment.

'Ana Mendieta also felt that an individual's identity is linked to a larger community, and shaped by prevailing cultural and historical events, which are often oppressive and anti-humanistic. She and Raquelín were sent to the US in 1961 and for years suffered [...] the rude shock of being "Other", thus discriminated against and denied membership in their adopted homeland. But even in physical exile, Mendieta's memories of the vitality of Cuba and the strength of her family life, allowed her to heal the schism that exile caused by actively forming her own character out of the old and the new culture.'<sup>xiii</sup>

### 2. ANA MENDIETA WAS A PIONEER IN FORM AND CONTENT

Mendieta's particular way of merging performance, earth art and sculpture resulted in a unique and remarkable form of artistic expression; "earth-body", as she terms it. Her work crossed many borders, including geographical and political, and acknowledged investigations of history, gender and culture. In her short but intense artistic career Mendieta developed a very personal artistic language and produced an exceptional body of work that included performances, films, installations, sculptures, photographs and drawings. She also produced 104 films and videos<sup>xiv</sup>, of which 8 are included in the exhibition *Earthbound*. 'Mendieta's works exist always on 2 levels: as a sculpture in nature and as a documentation of that sculpture in the form of photography and/or film. The photographs or film footage also had their own artistic meaning.'<sup>xv</sup> They function as an accomplice of the (performative) sculpture. During her lifetime, her works developed in a very personal way through diverse media, raising 'a question that draws nearly all the major tendencies of contemporary art into play.'<sup>xvi</sup> 'We might call her work an existential form, or better still, matter [...] Form is never anything but a process on the way to its

completion. [...] There is always the risk of disappearing.<sup>xvii</sup>

### 3. ANA MENDIETA WAS A SCULPTOR

When experiencing Mendieta's works, understanding her approach to conceiving them is crucial. When we are looking at her photographs and films, she intended that these represent her sculptures. In actual fact, Mendieta considered herself a sculptor above all, rather than a performance artist and a creator of 'earth art' or 'process art'.

'My work is basically in the tradition of a Neolithic artist. [...] I'm not interested in the formal qualities of my materials, but their emotional and sensual ones.'<sup>xviii</sup> (Ana Mendieta, 1984)

*I don't consider my work to be a process art. I consider it to be a sculpture at this point.* (Ana Mendieta, 1981)<sup>xix</sup>

Mendieta made a particular point of distancing herself from what was then perceived as (male-dominated) land art, such as the practice of, for example, Robert Smithson. According to Mendieta, '[...] he brutalized nature. He used it.'<sup>xx</sup> (Ana Mendieta, 1985) In contrast, Mendieta saw her own work as being on a human scale, in connection to nature and in opposition to the industrial spirit<sup>xxi</sup>. She realized her work through putting her own body in physical contact with the ground, which was crucial for her: she often referred to her works as 'earth-body' sculptures (and used this term in her lists of works for exhibitions)<sup>xxii</sup>.

During the last five years of her life, Mendieta's approach shifted to focusing on building up the form of her earth-body works in a more sculptural way, rather than creating them as experienced moments in the landscape, like performances. She presented these later works – floor sculptures in clay and sand, and a series of tree sculptures on which she had burned, using gunpowder, the form of a female body – as objects in themselves. She also printed photographic works in larger formats and mounted them on masonite, so that these

operated as a kind of hybrid of photograph and object. She received several outdoor sculpture commissions in Miami and New York, plus one for MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, which was never realized<sup>xxiii</sup>.

### 4. ANA MENDIETA'S SILUETA SERIES

Mendieta's most well-known body of works is the *Silueta (Silhouette) Series*, where she used her own body, or a shape representing the female body, to merge into nature. She realized her first *Silueta* work (1973) by lying naked, covered with flowers, in an Aztec tomb in the archeological site of Yagul in Oaxaca, Mexico.

*The making of my Silueta in nature keeps the transition between my homeland and my new home. It is a way of reclaiming my roots and becoming one with nature.* (Ana Mendieta, undated)<sup>xxiv</sup>

Mendieta's earth and body works, which she titled *Siluetas*, started as a series of self-portraits where she literally inscribed her body into the natural environment – whether it be earth, water or other material – sometimes in synchrony with her own rituals for healing and transcendence. The *Siluetas* fused elements from her birthplace with those from her adopted culture. Later, Mendieta developed freestanding sculptural works where her individual identity became subsumed within an archetypal female form and the performative and ritualistic aspect became less dominant.<sup>xxv</sup> 'The silueta works encompassed an extensive spectrum of media, materials and method, and are documented with meticulous thoroughness in color and black and white photographs and super 8 films. Mendieta's seemingly obvious inscription of a female form in the landscape resulted in a stunning variety of visual perceptions, sensibilities and emotions; the form is built up in mud, rocks or earth, assembled with leaves, moss or flowers, stained in blood, etched in fire or ash and washed away by water or smoke.'<sup>xxvi</sup>

All the *Siluetas* carry a vital tension between the absence and presence of the body, while the merging of body(shape) and nature

represents our universal connection to our genesis and the power of civilization's essential foundations.

## 5. ANA MENDIETA IN ANTWERP, 1976/2019

The *Earthbound* exhibition starts with Mendieta's visit to Antwerp on 24 April 1976. She was invited by curator Flor Bex to give a performance as part of a newly developed performance programme at the ICC (Internationaal Cultureel Centrum). This was the same year that James Lee Byars performed there and named the ICC *Europe's hottest spot*. Bex was put in touch with Mendieta through the artist Gordon Matta Clark, who was also based in New York. Being a completely new art form, performance happened 'here and now' and was not always recorded.

Forty-three years later, we are showing Mendieta's works in Antwerp again, in a selection of fourteen works featuring Mendieta's interest in the four elements: air, water, fire and earth. This project, the first solo show in Belgium, will act as an enlightening introduction to Mendieta's oeuvre in Belgium, where she is not represented in public collections and her art is little known by the general public. The works will be shown in Middelheim Museum's exhibition pavilion, designed in 1970 by architect Renaat Braem, who with its stunning organic design sought a visionary symbiosis between nature, art and architecture. The unique natural park environment around the pavilion will provide a new viewing experience of the works of Mendieta.

Mendieta's work is not only inspiring for the contemporary challenges of today's society but also persistently tests the definition of contemporary sculpture. *Earthbound* offers a plurality of voices in the museum, where Mendieta's works will be shown alongside those of present-day artists. The Middelheim Museum's ambition is to show temporary presentations like this to highlight relatively unknown aspects of the recent history of contemporary sculpture and to contextualize such work within the broader Western art-historical canon, which has been

dominated by male artists such as Carl Andre, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Bruce Nauman (all represented in the Middelheim Museum collection). The exhibition will show that interpretations also form in the specific moment we look at the work, influenced by our own individual experiences and cultural priorities.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Mary Sabbatino, in *Ana Mendieta*, published by Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p.137.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Howard Oransky, exhibition brochure *Ana Mendieta, Covered in time and history*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2018.

<sup>xv</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, pp.15.

<sup>xvi</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, pp.15-16.

<sup>xvii</sup> Charles Merewether, in *Ana Mendieta*, published by Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p.120.

<sup>xviii</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.13.

<sup>xix</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.14.

<sup>xx</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.13.

<sup>xxi</sup> See: Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.13.

<sup>xxii</sup> See: Stephanie Rosenthal in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward publishing, London, 2013, p.14.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See: Mary Sabbatino, in *Ana Mendieta*, published by Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p.164.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ana Mendieta, Notes written for an exhibition of work done in Mexico, Undated. Ana Mendieta Archives, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

<sup>xxv</sup> Charles Merewether, in *Ana Mendieta*, published by Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p.136.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See: Mary Sabbatino, in *Ana Mendieta*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p. 136.