Forever Young: Five Lessons from the Creative Life of Ana Mendieta

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In September 2015, our exhibition *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta* opens at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery on the campus of the University of Minnesota. As co-curator Howard Oransky and I worked on the exhibition, going through the artist’s films over and over again, I wondered what her work might have to say to art students today. More precisely, what might art and art history students today learn from a close exploration of the creative life of Ana Mendieta and how might her work, created more than thirty years earlier, be relevant to their developing art practices and their concerns about the social conditions of today?

The question seemed an important one, considering that this exhibition was developed and will begin its national tour at the University of Minnesota, a large public educational and research institution. In the fall of 1985, just one week before I learned the news of Ana Mendieta’s death, I myself had begun an MFA program in the Photography Department of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Though I had only recently been introduced to her work, it had greatly influenced my own art practice and I learned that she had been a visiting artist at RISD the prior year and installed her work *Furrows* (1984) in the courtyard of the RISD Museum. (Fig. 1) Now, when I think of Mendieta, it is the sheer power of her artwork and its message of personal agency that resonates with me thirty years later. We are also every excited that, as a result of this exhibition’s focus on Mendieta’s film work, the Estate of Ana Mendieta has had the opportunity to transfer a number of films that have not been seen previously. For these reasons, I believe studying her life and her film work is more important now than it has ever been.

As part of the series of events held in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery, I will teach a film/video practice course in which students will study Mendieta’s films and make their own media works in response to her work in the show. Thinking about how to structure the course and what I want to communicate to my students about Mendieta’s art practice naturally brings me back to my earlier question, how is her work relevant to art students today? Beyond the obvious parallel that much of her important work was made while she herself was a student at the University of Iowa, there are deep and abiding lessons to be learned from Mendieta’s life and work that span generational divides and speak truthfully to today’s fledgling artists about their inchoate art practices.
In this essay, I will highlight five lessons from her creative life. These are not technical lessons; I won’t discuss how to make a correct exposure using a Super 8 camera or how to make a seamless edit. Nor are they art-historical lessons that seek to properly situate Mendieta within the pantheon of important artists through history. Instead, what follows are five lessons that should be learned from Mendieta’s creative life, which are focused on the day-to-day struggles of developing and living one’s art practice.

Lesson #1: Make a home in your art practice.
Home is a place where something or someone naturally lives.¹ It is a place where one can be as one, without need of explanation, defense, or affect. It is a place of familiarity and ease; a place where, in the most fundamental meaning of the word, one can simply be. In her book All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes, an acutely perceptive meditation on selfhood and identity, poet and writer Maya Angelou recounts her 1962 experience of returning to her ancestral home of Africa: “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”² As Angelou gracefully describes, home is a place where we are allowed to be vulnerable, to make mistakes, to be as we are—free of judgment. Likewise, being at home in one’s art practice allows an artist the freedom to be with her work—to test wild ideas, to make mistakes, to go off on artistic tangents, to explore hunches and fail over and over again until the work falls into place, or not. Making a home in one’s art practice provides an artist with a space in which she learns to trust her judgment and her creative abilities.

Ana Mendieta’s creative life has a great deal to teach us about making a home in one’s art practice. Throughout her life, she spoke of her early dislocation from her home and her family, an experience she described as an ache for home. Ana and her older sister, Raquelín, were exiled from their native Cuba to the United States at a young age. Much of their childhoods were spent with surrogate families in the United States, shuttling between group homes and foster homes. It would take Ana a great deal of time before finding stability with her last foster family in Dubuque, Iowa. As a result of this early trauma, much of her subsequent artwork was driven by a deep sense of loss and dislocation as well as a craving to reconnect not only with her family members who remained in Cuba but also with Cuba itself.

In his 1951 book Minima Moralia: Reflections from the Damaged Life, a collection of one hundred fifty-three aphorisms on how to live, Theodor Adorno speaks of the role of art for the exiled artist: “For the man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.”³ Like Adorno, Mendieta found a home in her creative life, or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that she found a home making art in the natural world.

Art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated. . . . For the past twelve years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools.⁴
Making art in the natural world provided Mendieta with the sense of belonging, an artistic language and the natural materials that led her to create an impressive body of work exploring her identity, her relationship to nature, and her longing for home. From 1970 to 1984, she created a series of artworks in the natural landscape. Scoring, burning, and rearranging the earth, she formed effigies of ancient female goddesses, identifying them as “earth-body works.” Leaving the imprint of a female body on the earth, she marked her presence in time and place, and, if only for a moment, she was one with the natural environment. Mendieta documented her actions in films and photographs; after completing a work, she would relinquish it to the natural world, allowing the elements to reclaim and inevitably erase it. The work itself was ephemeral and transitory. She formed it from the material of the Earth and allowed it to return back to its natural state. She was at home making art, at home with the Earth.

Mendieta developed the earth-body works, the pieces for which she is most known, while an MFA student in the Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa. Hans Breder, her professor, mentor, and lover, founded the program and provided her and his other students with an extremely permissive environment to explore and experiment with radical ideas and unconventional materials. While a student, Mendieta created several of her most notable works, including *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)* (1972), a Super 8 film in which a chicken is beheaded and handed to Mendieta as she stands nude before the camera. During the few minutes of the film, the flailing chicken bleeds out and dies. (Fig. 2) In *Body Tracks* (1974), another Super 8 film, Mendieta kneels before a white wall and drags her blood-covered hands across its surface, leaving two bloody parallel tracks. (Fig. 3) In her Super 8 film *Blood and Feathers* (2) (1974), we watch her standing near a creek as she pours blood over her naked body and rolls in chicken feathers. She then stands to display her feather-covered body as the viewer bears witness to her transformation from human being into bird. (Fig. 4) In this film, it appears that she takes on the role of the chicken she sacrificed in the earlier film. A recurring subject in Mendieta’s work of this period, chickens were often used as sacrificial animals in the rites and rituals of ancient peoples of her native Cuba.

Each of these three works reveals the radical approach to materials and unconventional methods nurtured in the Intermedia Program. By choosing direct actions—killing a living chicken and showing its death on camera, using her hands to paint with blood, and covering her naked body in blood and feathers—Mendieta rejected the capacity of conventional art materials such as paint, canvas, paper, or stone to convey her message. The environment of the program and its many cutting-edge guest artists encouraged Mendieta and other students to push beyond conventional materials and methods of making art. Under Breder’s influence, students were exposed to notable artists and critics of the day, among them Robert Wilson, Willoughby Sharp, Vito Acconci, Mary Beth Edelson, Scott Burton, Marjorie Strider and others who helped to define new modes of art-making that included performance art, body art, and land art. Mendieta would later come to identify work that she created in the natural environment as earth-body works.

In addition to creating earth-body works, performances, photographs, and films at the University of Iowa and in its surrounding...
Figure 2  Chicken Piece (Chicken Movie), 1972, Super 8 film, color, silent.

Figure 3  Body Tracks, 1974, Super 8 film, color, silent.

Figure 4  Blood and Feathers (2), 1974, Super 8 film, color, silent.
landscapes, Mendieta traveled each summer with Breder and his other students to Mexico, where she made several artworks in the natural landscape. One of the most arresting of these films is *Untitled* (1974), made in San Felipe, Mexico. In this work, Mendieta floats naked in the pristine waters of a creek, suspended between rocks and foliage with the front of her body immersed, her arms stretched above her, and her head turned to the side and resting just above the water's surface. In this short film, Mendieta's body is buoyed by the water as it ebbs and flows around her form. Because little action occurs in the film, we witness her being in, with and of the landscape. She is at home, consanguineous with the elements of the natural world.

Mendieta was finally given permission to return to her homeland for the first time in 1981, and she made several subsequent trips to the island. While in Cuba, she created the *Rupestrian Sculptures* in the Escaleras de Jaruco, a series of well known and historically significant caves in a national park outside of Havana. On the limestone walls of the caves, she carved the silhouettes of indigenous Taíno divinities, individually naming them *Iyare* (Mother), *Maroya* (Moon), *Gunaroca* (The First Woman) and *Bacayú* (Light of Day). The artist spent hours upon hours immersed in the landscape, carving female figures into the natural environment of her homeland. Her activity seems to compress the vast temporal distance between her and her female ancestors, drawing a direct lineage from the distant past to her present moment. In whatever locale she found herself—Iowa, Mexico, Cuba, or one of the many countries in which she made work as a visiting artist—Mendieta was at home making art in the natural world. Her art practice provided her with a means to express her ideas, thoughts, and feelings and a place from which to understand herself and to respond to her world. Ultimately, making art in the natural environment provided her with a home and a kinship to something larger than herself, to a sense of belonging and a connection to all of life.

**Lesson #2: Make your art practice a personal, passionate, and courageous exploration.**

I have a great deal of compassion as I watch my students struggle to find their artistic voices and to make art that is personal and authentic. In a world where images, sounds, and ideas travel through the ether, circumnavigating the globe in a nanosecond, and where long-held values of uniqueness and authenticity seem to be but quaint musings from a bygone era, coaching students to make personal artwork is fraught with problems and contradictions. What does it mean to make personal work? What does it mean to be authentic in a world in which digital technologies produce no original, where images, sounds, and texts are sampled from existing sources passed about, used, and reused again and again? What value do passion and courage hold in today's art world, where celebrity is more valuable and sought after than making a vital contribution to one's culture? Some would have it that we live in a deeply cynical world in which commitment to artistic ideals and to political and social action are but futile and naive attempts to change deeply flawed and intransigent social systems. For this reason, I argue that now, more than ever, it is deeply important for artists to engage with the world and use their role of artists as a bully pulpit, speaking
out through their art practices on the matters that affect their lives and
the lives of others around the world.

Mendieta made artwork that was deeply personal. She was passionate and courageous in her art practice and in the subjects she
took on. She created pieces that exposed her body and her innermost
feelings and thoughts to the world, pushing accepted norms and con-
ventions, and speaking out through her art about important events of
her time. In 1973, she made Untitled (Rape Scene), the first in a series
of works addressing violence against women. In this work, Mendieta
staged a scene meant to evoke the recent murder of a female student
on the campus of the University of Iowa. She constructed a crime scene
in her apartment and invited the members of her MFA program to
come there at a predetermined time. When they arrived, they found
Mendieta bloody and strapped to a table facedown. Evidence of a rape,
bloodied clothes, blood in the toilet and on furniture, and personal
belongings were scattered about the apartment. As noted by Julia
Herzberg, “the crime-scene subject matter of these pieces, which are
resolutely serious works, [are] poignant responses to a brutal act that
affected her very deeply.”

Mendieta identified herself as a “third-world woman,” working
in a predominately white, wealthy, and educated feminist movement
and art world. Rather than blend in, she used the resources and means
available to her as a member of these privileged social groups to speak
out about the social inequities she saw and experienced personally. In
1980, as a member of A.I.R. Gallery, Mendieta (together with New York
artist-curators Zarian and Kazuko) curated [[co-curated?]] the impor-
tant exhibition Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States, which served as a critical forum for ques-
tions of racial equality in the feminist art movement of the 1980s. In
the afterword to Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th
Century Artists in the Americas, critic and art historian Moira Roth writes
of the exhibition, “In retrospect Dialectics of Isolation constituted a pub-
lic pulse-taking moment in the U.S. woman’s art movement, at least in
New York City.” This was a pivotal exhibition in the consciousness of
the women’s art movement and an equally important exhibition for
Mendieta, both personally and professionally. The show gave her a pub-
lic forum to claim her identity and to air deeply ambivalent feelings
about the women’s movement. In the introduction to the accompany-
ing catalogue, she passionately outlines with whom she identifies, “We
of the Third World of the United States,” and continues to speak of the
neglect many women of color experienced in the feminist movement.

…as women in the United States politicized themselves and
came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose
to end the domination and exploitation by white male cul-
ture, they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it
stands is basically a white middle class movement.

Mendieta had just arrived in New York, and this exhibition
helped her to establish herself and her political identity within the
New York art world. Her commitment to her Latino identity and her
passion about issues of social equality were deeply ingrained in the
subject matter of her work. The female images she inscribed in the
landscape were intended to represent a particular kind of femaleness, one deeply rooted to the earth, harkening the mythology of her Afro-Cuban ancestors.

Not only was Mendieta committed to addressing the social problems and conditions of her time, she was also interested in challenging traditional art practices and artistic norms. As a young artist in the early 1970s, she was aware of the work of artists of the previous decade and a half who laid the foundation for a new way of making art. Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, the Fluxus artists, and many others thought about art differently from their predecessors and developed new ways of making work that broke with the object-oriented art of the post–World War II generation, ultimately creating postmodern art practices. As Allan Kaprow explained in his influential text “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” from 1958: “Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, food, chairs, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists.”

The radical actions of the artists of late 1950s and 1960s allowed the artists of the 1970s and 1980s to think about art differently and to extend their predecessors' ideas and practices further. One of the ways that Mendieta broke from traditional practices was to work directly in the natural landscape. For most of her life, she made art in nature a context that provided her with a deep and meaningful connection to her subject matter and the home she lost when she became a political exile. From the beginning of her practice, she exhibited in galleries photographs documenting her performances and earth-body works. But though she worked in the natural environment, she also made performances in alternative art spaces. As the mainstream art world began to absorb new practices and to figure out new marketing strategies, such alternative practices became more common in museums as well as for-profit galleries. Today it is difficult to name a major museum that has not mounted an important exhibition of photographs, films, or performance-based artwork. Marina Abramović’s 2010 retrospective exhibition The Artist Is Present at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, featured numerous live re-performances covering more than four decades of Abramović’s work. This exhibition is but one recent example of the profound change the art world has undergone since the early 1970s.

Along with her contemporaries, Mendieta’s art practice changed over the years. At the time of her death, she had established an indoor studio and was developing a body of work intended for gallery and museum contexts. Because she died in the nascent stages of this new approach to art-making, we will never know if she would have returned to creating art in the natural world, a practice of revisiting evidenced in her earlier practice of making indoor artwork, or if she, like Abramović, would allow her practice to flow with the change of time.

The second lesson that Mendieta passes on to today’s young artists is not about the important issues of her day or the art forms in which she worked and helped to redefine. Rather, it is the example she has set as an artist who made her practice a personal, passionate and courageous exploration that remains important for young artists today and for future generations of artists yet to be born.
Lesson #3: Find no time.
Here we’ll look at three ways that Mendieta’s art practice engaged with time, (1) making art in the present moment, (2) looking to the past to understand her work in the present, and (3) embracing film to represent the passage of time and its resulting sense of loss. To grasp this lesson and its peculiar title, “Find no time,” it is necessary to examine what we mean by the present moment. The underlying question is really about the human perception of time and the nature of time itself. Our unreflective daily experience of time suggest that time is divided into a past, a present, and a future. We live in the present, which becomes our past while we move into the future. But what is the past, what is the present and what is the future? Are they actual temporal places as is suggested by the statement, “make art in the present moment”? Are they, as new research into the brain suggests, states of mind defined by the structure of the human brain itself? When we look closer at time and human perception, we see a snarly and difficult subject that presents a number of paradoxes and reveals a vast gulf between our human perception of the world and the way the world really is.

For the purposes of this essay, to understand the notion of the present moment as it relates to the task of developing one’s art practice, it is helpful to examine William James’s notion of the specious present, that increment of time we perceive as the present moment. James asserts, “We are constantly aware of a certain duration—the specious present—varying from a few seconds to probably not more than a minute, and this duration (with its content perceived as having one part earlier and another part later) is the original intuition of time.”¹¹ It is the awareness of being in the present moment while attending to the task at hand that is important for artists to grasp.

Making art in the present moment is similar to meditation, where one watches one’s thoughts flow in and flow out, making no judgment about them. They are simply labeled as thinking and one moves on in time to the next thought, with conscious attention taken along in time like a piece of driftwood bobbing on the surface of a river. When described in this way, it sounds much like the experience of flow identified by people involved in all types of creative activities.¹² Many people experience a convergence of thought, action, and being in the present moment, so much so that it may cause them to loose any sense of the passage of time. This deep engagement with one’s art practice in the moment is extremely important and allows an artist to develop a strong and intimate relationship with her practice on a day-to-day basis.

Mendieta found “no time” when making art in the natural world. She spent countless hours in the landscape (alone and with helpers) making carvings, performances, sculptures, photographs, and films. As a result, she developed a deeply engaged and on-going artistic practice producing sensitive and powerful artwork and forming an intimate knowledge of her materials and her subjects. Though she may not have explained what she was doing as a meditation or as flow, her focused engagement with her art most certainly involved these practices and acute attention.

The second way that Mendieta’s art practice engaged with no time was through her deep interest in cultures of the distant past. As the first part of this exhibition title—Covered in Time and History—suggests, Mendieta sought to invest her artwork with the immediacy and primal energy she found in the art of ancient cultures of the Caribbean.
It was during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art and cultures. It seems if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created. This sense of magic, knowledge and power found in primitive art has influenced my personal attitude toward art-making.13

In her artwork, Mendieta collapsed time by creating a deeply personal conversation across time and space. She was engaged in an ongoing conversation with past cultures that, without the sophisticated technologies of contemporary life, were able to directly and simply make art that reflected the values and beliefs of the culture. Mendieta felt simpatico with the art and rituals of ancient Caribbean cultures, with their belief in the magical power of representation and their deep connection to natural processes; she infused her artwork with those qualities. Growing up in Cuba, Mendieta was aware of the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, an admixture of the Yoruba religion of African slaves, Catholicism, and Native American influences. She also studied the ancient Taíno people who populated the pre-Columbian Greater Antilles and Lesser Antilles. Mendieta’s early exposure to traditional Caribbean religions, along with her continued study of past cultures, showed up in nearly every aspect of her artistic practice.

In her video work Ochún (1981), named for a Santería goddess, Mendieta depicts the abstract silhouette of a female torso formed of sand on a Key Biscayne beach as it is washed away by the ocean tides. As with much of her artwork, Ochún was made of earth and suggests the impermanence of life as the primordial female figure is dissolved by the elements and processes of nature. Watching this and other films by Mendieta, I am deeply aware of the power of film to capture not only the passage of time but also the inevitable sense of loss that accompanies it. This pairing of the passage of time and loss is the third way in which her films engage a sense of no time. Unlike a photograph that freezes time, singling out a moment from the flow, film reveals the animation of life as we witness the passage of time unfurl in front of us. As we watch a film, we are not presented with real time, with the present. Rather, we are presented with events that have had their present moment and are now lost to the past. Like recalling memories of another time, one is aware of their past-ness remembered in the present. Though they are remembered in the present, they are never wholly of this moment but rather ciphers from a time gone by. [[Insert Note here, refer the reader to Plates Section Ana Mendieta, Ochún]]

I am reminded of a similar feeling of loss when I watch Ochún. It is a quiet film with little action. We see two long, thin curvilinear mounds of sand suggesting a female figure, resting in a glistening tide pool. As I watch, time slowly unfolds and I am reminded that I am witnessing two pasts, the past of Mendieta filming the figure in the sand and the ancient past suggested by the simple abstract female form. When watching Mendieta's films, we occupy a liminal temporal space; betwixt present and past, between present and future, we experience the ineffable passage of time. Time, history, and the magical power of the natural world were Mendieta’s enduring themes while elements of the natural world—earth, water, fire, flesh, blood, and time itself—were
her materials. By losing her self in time in her practice, by immersing herself in the creative and ritualistic practices of past cultures, and by embracing film—a medium that at its essence reveals the passage of time and its concomitant impressions of los—Mendieta found no time.

**Lesson #4: Belong.**

We hear the word “community” a lot today, so much so that it has become a cliché. It is used to define every social group, gathering of people or context with which one might even remotely affiliate. It is used as a euphemism to broadly identify racial groups, cultural association, religious belief, and gender affiliation. One could talk about Mendieta as a member of a community of post-revolution Cuban exiles, as a member of the Latino arts community, of the feminist arts community, as a member of several communities of contemporary artists, and as a member of an educational community as a student. But fixing her vis-à-vis a particular group leaves out the nuance and individual difference she might have experienced as part of these groups and narrows our understanding of her and her art practice. What is important is that throughout her career she belonged to number of groups and affiliated herself with others who shared similar worldviews. Through her affiliations, she developed her art practice and grew as an artist engaged in important social movements and artistic ideas.

Mendieta’s longest and perhaps most formative affiliation was with the University of Iowa, where she spent several years and earned an undergraduate degree and two MFA degrees. It was while working on her second MFA in Hans Breder’s Intermedia Program that she began making the earth-body works, performances, photographs, and films she is known for today. As mentioned earlier, the open structure and permissive environment of the Intermedia Program gave Mendieta the freedom to explore the new and radical ideas of the time and to delve into her interest in ancient cultures of Mexico and her native Cuba. The close-knit community of students and her complex relationship with Breder provided her with the support and a sense of belonging that emboldened her to make daring and challenging art in the Intermedia Program and throughout her life. It was here that she formed the basis of her art practice and established relationships with New York–based artists who were visitors to the University of Iowa’s Center for New and Performing Arts, which helped her as she launched her art practice into the world.

In retrospect, it is difficult to imagine that the Intermedia Program and its anything-goes environment, which included intimate and sexual relationships between students and faculty and frequent drinking, would be permitted in today’s educational climate and litigious society. Moreover, as a teacher I wouldn’t suggest that this is the right educational model or environment for a young artist. As artist-educators, we hope that the departments of art and the institutions of higher learning we help to create provide vibrant and creative homes for young artists. The word “alma mater,” referring to the college or university one attended, literally means “bountiful mother” and reveals the surrogate family role educational institutions seek to provide for their students. If I were to suggest that Breder’s Intermedia Program provided a surrogate family for Mendieta, it would be a family rife with activities and practices not legally permitted or socially acceptable in families. But
this was a different time and a different educational context, one that focused less on the professionalization of the artist and more on art and life practices that encouraged, even challenged, students to question institutions and disturb the normative social and artistic practices they promote. Yet, from another perspective, one could argue that having a sexual relationship with one's professor actually upheld the normative social practices of the time rather than challenged them. Certainly, from a feminist perspective, the educational context of the University of Iowa's Intermedia Program of that period appears to be rife with contradictions, blurring personal and professional boundaries, and complicating power dynamics between student/lover and professor/lover.

Educational programs, like human beings, are imperfect. Eventually degrees are earned and with that a necessary move into the professional world. In 1980, Mendieta left Iowa and moved to New York. Over the next several months, she would end her relationship with Breder and begin to see conceptual artist Carl Andre. In 1978, while still living and working in Iowa, Mendieta joined the New York–based Artists in Residence Inc. (A.I.R. Gallery), the first women artist's collective in the United States. To this day, A.I.R. is one of the most vibrant and politically effective groups of feminist artists, providing women artists a network of feminist artists as well as national and international opportunities to help further their careers. The collective and self-governed organization suited Mendieta, who wanted direct control over the means by which her work was exhibited: “It is crucial for me to be a part of all my art works. As a result of my participation, my vision becomes a reality and part of my experiences.”

From this statement by the artist, one can easily imagine that the gallery's participatory model would have appealed to her due to her interest in determining the context in which her art would be presented to the public. She was introduced to A.I.R. Gallery through Mary Beth Edelson, who she met while Edelson was a visiting artist in Iowa at the Center for New and Performing Arts and with whom she shared interests in prehistoric goddess mythology and primordial female archetypes. Edelson supported Mendieta's membership in the feminist art collective and successfully advocated for her inclusion.

After moving to New York in 1980, Mendieta became a fully participating member of A.I.R. Thereby joining a second group that would prove to be important in her art practice and professional life by providing her with intellectual and artistic affiliation with other feminist artists and introductions to the New York art world from established and respected artists and critics. Mendieta presented her first two solo exhibitions at A.I.R. Gallery and also [co-?] curated the aforementioned exhibition Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States. As discussed earlier, the exhibition underscored her unsettled relationship to mainstream feminism, a movement she saw as negligent to the experiences and concerns of women artists of color. Mendieta's relationship with A.I.R Gallery was complicated from the beginning. Though the organization gave her a public forum and sense of belonging, she found it increasingly difficult throughout her time at A.I.R. to negotiate the demands of membership in a self-organized collective and to maintain her individual art practice and career. In a 1980 letter to Breder, she states, “I am sitting at A.I.R. now and can’t really write you a decent letter because I am
constantly being interrupted.”¹⁶ As her reputation grew and offers to participate in exhibitions and artists residencies came in from around the country, her day-to-day involvement with the organization lessened. She remained a member of the collective until 1982. In her essay on the artist’s experience at the A.I.R. Gallery, Kat Griefen describes the circumstances of Mendieta’s departure from the organization.

The letter of resignation did not site any reasons for her departure, but a number of fellow A.I.R. artists remember the related events. For a recent benefit Mendieta and Carl Andre had donated a collaborative piece. As was the policy, all works needed to be delivered by the artist. Edelson recalls that Andre took offense, instigating a disagreement, which, in part, led to Mendieta’s resignation.¹⁷

After her affiliation with A.I.R. Gallery ended, the artist continued her romantic involvement with Carl Andrea as her career sustained its steep upward trajectory; she was the recipient of a number of important awards and traveled across the country, serving as artist-in-residence at several schools and arts organizations.

In 1984, after receiving the prestigious American Academy in Rome’s Prix de Rome, Mendieta moved to Italy for a yearlong residency for which she set up her first indoor studio. In Rome she became a member of a third community of artists, including the thirty individuals with whom she shared the annual Prix de Rome. She remained in Rome for several months after the residency ended, keeping a studio and frequently traveling to the United States. As with all social groups, disagreements and personality conflicts were a part of each of the artistic communities of which Mendieta was involved. According to fellow 1984 Prix de Rome resident artist Chris Haub:

Ana was a tremendous gossip, and we used to get together and talk a lot about our impressions, speculations opinions, criticisms, things like that. She really didn’t care what people thought. She would just say outrageous things about people…. So she would show up in my studio, sit down and talk for three hours. We talked, but basically she talked. She would come in and get stuff off her chest. And I was interested and I liked her. It was curious: generally she was right in her criticism. She would criticize our friends. She would say things that you yourself wouldn’t say, but when she said them you knew there was a lot of truth in what she said. She called a spade a spade. She didn’t hold back. I liked her spark. She had this thing about being confident and projecting confidence. It was more important to be confident than to be right sometimes. And yet it wasn’t a flimsy confidence. She wasn’t afraid to speak in public. She wasn’t afraid to take control of the situation. She wasn’t afraid to be very vocal. She wasn’t confident and arrogant in private then shy in public. She was consistent.¹⁸

Haub paints an image of Mendieta as an immensely talented and ambitious woman with clear ideas about who she was, a woman who was not afraid to take her place in the world. Such forceful personalities can
be challenging in a group, often bringing the problems and conflicts into the open. The Prix de Rome residency came later in her career, after her art practice and her career had been established—by 1984, Mendieta was an artist to watch. It appears that her affiliation with Prix de Rome didn’t play the same formative role that the Intermedia Program and A.I.R. Gallery had earlier on in her career. Nonetheless, it was an important time in her art practice and the community provided her with a close group of artists and enlivened discussions about her work and that of her fellow residents.

In her short life, Mendieta belonged to a number of arts groups and communities and through her affiliations with others she grew as an artist, making work that stretched beyond her and engaged with important events and ideas of her time. The fourth lesson culled from Mendieta’s creative life is to belong. Because, as in the words of Virginia Woolf, “One of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them.”

**Lesson #5: Do it your way.**

I’ve just suggested that participating in human communities and cultivating a sense of belonging is essential to building a socially engaged and a personally meaningful art practice. Now I’m going to contradict myself a bit (in the way artists do) and suggest that the last lesson to be learned from Mendieta’s creative life it to do it your way.

Choreographer Twyla Tharp speaks of the importance of questioning the status quo and finding unique ways of saying what one needs to say through the work. Tharp frames creativity as a radical activity: “Creativity is an act of defiance. You’re challenging the status quo. You’re questioning accepted truths and principles. You’re asking three universal questions that mock conventional wisdom: ‘Why do I have to obey the rules?’ ‘Why can’t I be different?’ ‘Why can’t I do it my way?’” Tharp’s comments are a war cry to artists to defy social conventions and to remake the world in their image.

As discussed earlier in this essay, Mendieta was not the only artist of her generation who answered the call to radicalize their art practice and challenge the status quo. In many ways, Tharp’s comments are emblematic of the youth movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a cultural moment when baby boomers challenged nearly every cultural institution and bestowed authority and privileged on particular groups and individuals. This was a generation who remade the world in their image, and Mendieta is an excellent example of an artist of that time whose idiosyncratic point of view and artistic originality exemplifies Tharp’s philosophy.

It was not that Mendieta was hostile toward the art world or to other artists of her time. She was deeply influenced by her contemporaries and interested in making a contribution to the art world and to the larger culture. Making artwork in the natural world rather than in a studio wasn’t her attempt to snub for-profit galleries or more traditional art contexts; in fact, she showed her work in galleries early on and continued to do so throughout her career. In the later part of her life, she began to make work intended specifically for gallery contexts. As discussed earlier, Mendieta felt at home in the natural world and developed a vibrant practice making art that was deeply connected to the earth. It was her idiom, her mother tongue, and she simply remained
true to what was natural to her. That takes a bit of bravery in a profession for which public critical response is part of the discipline.

Mendieta trusted her artistic vision and she did not accept the disparaging comments about her work leveled by some critics. In the context of a white male art world, comments that revealed her status as doubly other could be particularly nasty. Two such examples are discussed in Luis Camnitzer’s *New Art of Cuba*.

...the comments of two New York critics are revealing. Both quotes are taken from *New York Magazine* after her death. One is by Kay Larson critic for the magazine: “The remarkable thing to me was that Ana had been given a fellowship at the American Academy, considering the quality of her work, which is not that extraordinary.” Barbara Rose, *Vogue*’s critic, comments, “[I] later went to a show of hers because she was Carl’s wife, I asked a friend why anybody should show her and they [sic] said, “Because she’s Carl Andre’s wife.” There was an opinion that she married Carl to gain entree into the art world.

In her 2011 article, Kat Griefen offers another example of the hostility Mendieta experienced from some critics and her stalwart focus on her artistic vision. In 1981 William Zimmerman wrote the article “Who Puts Women on a Pedestal?” for the *SoHo News*:

“We’ve all used our bodies to make angels in the snow . . . It’s pretty trenchant stuff. . . . Sometimes her handiwork is hard to detect, and I as reminded of trying to ferret out the rabbit hidden in the designs of *Playboy* covers. This sensation amid work that is so four-square feminism is embarrassing.”

Such flippant commentary from male critics likely left Mendieta—whom fellow artists described as—“tough and ambitious”—unfazed.

Perhaps, as the artist’s friend Chris Haub suggests, Mendieta simply didn’t care what others thought of her. That may have been the case. Regardless, it takes courage and belief in one’s self, in one’s abilities, and in one’s artistic vision to persist unfazed in the face of the disparaging and very public opinions of others.

Perhaps it was her need to make the artwork she made regardless of what others expected or thought. Perhaps it was to perform, photograph, and film some of the most powerful artwork of the 20th century. She didn’t obey the rules, she didn’t sublimate her difference, and she made art and lived her artistic practice authentically, the way she wanted to. For that reason, Mendieta is wonderful role model for young artists today searching to find their way in their art practice and in their professional lives.

**Conclusion**

While writing this essay, I have imagined what Ana Mendieta, the sixty-six-year-old artist of today, might say to art students. What wisdom might she pass on or what cautionary tales might she impart to future generations of artists? Sadly, this question can never be answered. But
I imagine that the Ana Mendieta of 2015 may have a different message to deliver to young artists than the one she may have delivered during her lifetime. As an artist in her sixties, she would have lived through the passages of midlife that would have more than likely reshaped her views on art-making and on life. She would have experienced the death of her mother and of her good friends Nancy Spero and Leon Golub; she would have watched her brother’s and sister’s children grow up, and perhaps she may have become a parent herself; she would have experienced her body (a primary subject in her work) ageing; and she may have been confronted with the art-world stigma experienced by many older women artists. She would have lived through the rise of religious and political fundamentalism throughout the world. She would have witnessed the attacks of September 11, 2001, two wars in the Persian Gulf, the election and re-election of the first African American president of the United States. And she would have witnessed the ever-increasing erosion of the natural environment she so dearly loved. Those experiences would likely have altered her as they have altered everyone who has experienced them. But for those of us looking at her life and work at a thirty-plus-year distance, Ana Mendieta will be forever young. She will be known to future artists through her altogether original, truly powerful, and incisive creative practice. Her legacy lives on in a challenge to young artists to press beyond conventional wisdom and to set and live up to personal standards of commitment to their artistic practices, demanding of themselves the same courage and unwavering belief in their creative power that we witness in Mendieta’s films.

15 Ibid., 176.
18 Katz, Naked by the Window, 113.