

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

Flesh, Blood, and Power: Affective Operations in the Early Relational Artworks of Ana Mendieta

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BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

Abstract:

The early blood-based artworks analyzed in this paper demonstrate the development of Ana Mendieta's grasp on affective operations for their ability to provoke the experience of trauma. Mendieta shifted to relational sculpture while she explored producing an affective power that would ultimately disturb viewers through remnants of the aesthetic properties of trauma. Informed by Jill Bennett's analysis of the affective power of trauma related art, I argue Mendieta's eventual removal of self suspends her viewer's awareness of the experience as art and, because of it, the viewer is finally able to be disturbed by the prevalence of violence in everyday life. Consider Mendieta's early use of blood, not as the symbol of birth and renewal, but as an exploration of her use of blood as signifier of the remnants of sexual and gender based violence. Blood on the Body. Blood as the Body. Blood in absence of the Body.

Key Terms:

Affect, trauma, art, Ana Mendieta, Jill Bennett, affective power, blood

Introduction

Jill Bennett's analysis of the affective power in trauma-related art informs my reading of three early sanguine, or blood, based artworks by Ana Mendieta (1948-1985): *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973; *Moffitt Building Piece*, 1973; and *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*, 1973. These three artworks are often associated with performance art, body art, and video art. However, a contemporary reading requires that they are considered Mendieta's shift into relational aesthetics. I use the term 'relational' in the context French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud intended; relational describes the tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context.¹ By assuming the relational operations in these three artworks, I interrogate Mendieta's use of location, anonymity, and the body in relation to the sensations these artworks conjure. Moreover, it becomes apparent that Mendieta's relational work is not the materiality of the work but the reactions she provokes in others, whether that be introspection (*Untitled (Rape Scene)*), indifference (*Moffitt Building Piece*), or in distress (*Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*).

Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) was a Cuban-American artist known for her visual investigations into the abject, absence, and the body. At the age of twelve, she and her sister Raquelín, then fifteen, were relocated from Cuba to the US in what was called Operation Pedro Pan, a mass evacuation of thousands of unaccompanied minors between 1960-1962.² When Ana and Raquelín first arrived in Miami, they stayed in a refugee camp for a few weeks. They were then transferred to an orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa. After bouncing between residential

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 51.

² León, Christina A. "Trace Alignment: Object Relations After Ana Mendieta." *Someone Else's Objects*. Ed. Summer Kim Lee. (Post45, Dec 19, 2019), para 7.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

institutions and three foster homes, Ana eventually enrolled in the BFA program for painting at the University of Iowa in 1967.

Untitled (Rape Scene), *Moffitt Building Piece*, and *Untitled (Blood Mattresses)* were each created while Mendieta was an MFA candidate in Intermedia and Video Art at the University of Iowa between 1972-1977.³ Mendieta continued to use blood in her art long after this period of study. However, it is these early artworks that are often eclipsed by her career yet to come.

These artworks are not only some of her earliest explorations into the materiality of blood, but they also demonstrate Mendieta's desire to dictate the affective power of the body in her art. It is in these artworks that blood is still corporeal for Mendieta, before she begins studying blood as a spiritual conduit. Thus, I explore whether the body must be present for blood to be acutely referential. Does the traumatic aftermath—the byproducts of violence—retain affective power or is it the presence of the body? Is the violation of the body that disturbs or the perceived violation of consent? By focusing on these early explorations into blood as medium, I identify the foundations that substantiate her continued use of blood. I reveal Mendieta's use of blood *on* the body, blood *as* the body, and blood *in absence of* the body. Poignantly, blood as violence before blood was ever about 'birth and renewal.'⁴

Jill Bennett and Affective Power

Jill Bennett opens her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* with a brief introduction to a Deleuzian reading of the affective power in art. Affect exists as active exchanges between materials and humans, demanding meaning regardless of the viewer's

³ Jenna Sauers, "Portrait of the Artist, Ana Mendieta, Iowa City, 1973." *The Village Voice*, Sept. 19, 2017.

⁴ Laura Elisa Pérez, "Decolonizing Self-Portraits of Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, and Yreina d. Cervántez." In *Eros Ideologies*, (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 117.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

intention.⁵ Thus, affect is the force that drives the human compulsion to seek meaning in sensation and, therefore, art. In order to appreciate mine and Bennett's application of Deleuze (1925-1995) and Guattari's (1930-1992) explanation of precept, affect, and concept to art, it is important to understand that in art a viewer first perceives before the affective operations drive the viewer to order the sensations they are experiencing into a communicable understanding—or concept.⁶

As Bennett indicates, the affective power in art depends on the viewer's awareness of these 'encountered signs.'⁷ Bennett explains, "The encountered sign describes the sign that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition."⁸ However, as Bennett continues to explain Deleuze's 'encountered signs', the feeling is not the end but "a catalyst for critical inquiry."⁹ That is why affective operations, or mechanisms in art that produce an affective experience, are a constructive artistic strategy in trauma-related art. As art historian Angelique Szymanek points out, we "have come to recognize rape as an image even when it isn't explicitly there." By identifying the affective operations it is possible to understand the sensation that compels inquiry and ultimately empathy or an empathic vision. Exposure to the precise incident is not required, for trauma is described as a non-linear experience and non-representational.¹⁰ This reading compliments Bourriaud's comments on relational aesthetics: "Art is a state of encounter."¹¹ Bennett refers to Geoffrey Hartmann who proposed a sort of "secondary

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Precept, Affect, and Concept," in *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 173.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, "Precept, Affect, and Concept," 177.

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 184.

⁸ Bennett, "On the Subject of Trauma," 7.

⁹ Bennett, 7.

¹⁰ Bennett, 6.

¹¹ Bourriaud, 7.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

trauma”, in which the viewer “experiences a milder version of the shock experienced by the primary witness of the tragedy...”¹² She does so to expand on the encountered sign as the impetus of critical inquiry. It is the catalyst for the affective experience that precedes and initiates the identification of trauma in art. Therefore, as Bennett further emphasizes the Deleuzian reading of affect in art, the question is not “‘what does it mean’ or ‘what trauma is depicted’ but ‘how does it work?’”¹³ Bennett applies this reading of the affective power in art to inform her identification of the affective operations in trauma-related art. According to Bennett, an interrogation of affective operations may reveal how trauma-related art can be read for its ability to draw upon the non-narrative sensation of memory. A sensation of memory that does not require subjectivity to be experienced. Rather, affect produces a unifying experience of empathy before language is used to codify the memory into commonality. Therefore, the affective operations in art serve as a “vehicle for the interpersonal transmission of experience.”¹⁴

At the center of interpersonal transmission is empathy. As Bennett continues, “The sense memory operates through the body to produce a kind of ‘seeing truth,’ rather than ‘thinking truth,’ registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect.”¹⁵ Trauma cannot be represented but the bodily sensations of trauma can be transmitted through affect. There is no need for an object of shared memory but the recital of a process. Before affect is codified into a concept it is outside commonality. Affective operations compel the drive to put that ‘outside’ in contact with the inside’. The inside being

¹² Bennett, 9

¹³ Bennett, “On the Subject of Trauma,” 19.

¹⁴ Bennett, “On the Subject of Trauma,” 7.

¹⁵ Bennett, “Outsides, Insides,” 26.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

the common memory society constructs as shared meaning.¹⁶ This experience can be singular or multiplied, and that is why “trauma-related art is best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*.”¹⁷ If, as Bourriaud suggests, art is an encounter, then art is in a state of becoming. If affect is experiential, then it retains agency and does not slip into passivity—or into the past. We write of art in the present tense because of the experience that is renewed through the affective operations and how they interact with each new viewer. Sense memory (the figment of memory that is the sensation that belongs ‘outside’ shared meaning) and common memory (or the memory that is shared that sense memory is then codified to agree with) are integral operations. The traumatic event does not need to be present for the sensation of trauma to be activated.

Trauma-related art does not produce a secondary trauma or traumatic event, but a *secondary image* of trauma. In “On the Subject of Trauma,” Bennett aligns her interrogation of the affective operations in trauma art with Deleuze; again, the question is not “What [the artwork] mean[s]’ or ‘What trauma is depicted’ but ‘How does it work?’”¹⁸ As Deleuze says in his analysis of Francis Bacon, “He paints the scream, not what causes the scream.”¹⁹ For Bennett’s readers to understand the complexities of interrogating trauma in art, she explains how trauma in art has been previously considered. For example, Dominick LaCapra proposes the concept of “*empathic unsettlement* to describe the aesthetic experience of simultaneously *feeling for* another and becoming aware of a distinction between one’s own perceptions and the experience of the other.”²⁰ Why is trauma so relevant to this day and age? According to Bennett,

¹⁶ Bennett, “Outsides, Insides,” 31.

¹⁷ Bennett, “On the Subject of Trauma,” 7.

¹⁸ Bennett, “Outsides, Insides,” 41.

¹⁹ Bennett, 44.

²⁰ Bennett, “On the Subject of Trauma,” 8.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

Mike Davis claims that in a post 2001 ('9/11') world, there is a 'globalization of fear'; meanwhile, Hal Foster calls it 'trauma culture'.²¹ The identification of terrorism as public-enemy-number-one means there is no longer a visual of the enemy; the enemy is no longer an individual, a nation, or a political party. It has been determined our greatest fear can be anyone anywhere at any time. The likelihood of a traumatic event, then, seems exponentially more material to one's daily routine.

1973

In the spring of 1973, the body of 20-year-old nursing student Sarah Ann Ottens was discovered on campus, abandoned in her dorm over Spring break.²² The news reported gruesome details of her assault, a reporting practice heavily criticized by feminists of the time including Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Labowitz, Susan Brownmiller, and Deena Metzger. Headlines announced how Ottens was 'mutilated' and 'molested' with a broom.²³ As students on campus explained, it was impossible for a woman to hear those words and not feel assaulted, humiliated, degraded.²⁴ Where some students responded to this horrific incident by starting the University's first rape crisis hotline,²⁵ Mendieta's activism took the form of the abjectness of violence displayed in plain sight. All three relational sculptures—*Rape Scene*, *Moffitt Building Piece*, and *Bloody Mattresses*—took place within the following nine months. Where earlier works of Mendieta had begun to challenge notions of the Body and Gender, the murder of Sarah Ann Ottens can be seen as the point of conception for Mendieta's exploration into

²¹ Bennett, 6.

²² Jenna Sauers, "Portrait of the Artist, Ana Mendieta, Iowa City, 1973," in *The Village Voice*, September 19, 2017, para 11.

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/09/19/how-ana-mendieta-made-art-out-of-the-things-we-try-not-to-see/>.

²³ Sauers, "Portrait of the Artist," para 16.

²⁴ Sauers, para 19.

²⁵ Sauers, para 19.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

violence and indifference. The Ottens murder galvanized the discussion of violence against women, an issue which Mendieta would tell the *Village Voice* in 1980, “I just can’t see being theoretical about.”²⁶

One month after Ottens was murdered, Mendieta staged *Untitled (Rape Scene)* off campus. She then invited her classmates over and did not mention a performance or any such activity. When they arrived, they were not prepared for the scene they were to discover. Mendieta’s door was slightly ajar. Whether mere negligence or the suggestion of something far more nefarious, the students were beckoned inside by curiosity. Soon enough, it was apparent not everything was as it seemed. Subtle suggestions of a struggle grew into explicit signals of violence. Mendieta staged her apartment with few similarities to Ottens’s. This scene did not require the specificity of an incident. Mendieta herself was staged so as to obscure her face, the body as material and not subject. When her peers entered the living room, they discovered Mendieta constrained, bloodied, and naked. She was tied face down to the kitchen table. She lay in a pool of her own blood. Her face was obscured by her arms tied above her head. Mendieta’s top was pulled above her head and her bottoms to her ankles. She appeared to be covered in blood and bruises. A mangled hanger lay on the floor nearby. What appeared to be blood and semen swirled in the toilet. Witnesses of the performance describe the unnerving level of detail.²⁷

The level of violent detail found throughout the apartment suggested an extended amount of uninterrupted time was spent on the violence that occurred. The traumatic event did

²⁶ Sauer, “Portrait of the Artist,” para 19.

²⁷ Angeliqe Szymanek, “Bloody Pleasures: Ana Mendieta’s Violent Tableaux” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 4 (2016): 901. <https://doi.org/10.1086/685503>.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

not need to be represented for the residue of trauma to evoke unsettling, affective sensations. Whatever Mendieta's classmates felt was now absent from the room retained its presence. This unnerving need to order the sensation of whether they were in danger or not was disquieting enough. However, the witnesses, classmates of Mendieta, could not suspend their disbelief long enough to be disturbed into action. Instead, according to the classmates that were interviewed, they sat there in the living room with Mendieta still tied up just a few feet away.

Rape Scene is representative of Mendieta's inclination toward Body and performance art. Her study into the body as medium is present but rather than a performance, the staging of this experience most resembles "violent 'tableaux,'" as Mendieta called them.²⁸ One can account for time in a performance – be aware of it ticking away. There is always a beginning and an end. Unlike performance art, this visual attack had no timeline. As a relational sculpture, the tableaux was a space to be occupied, an encounter waiting to happen. The grotesque violence depicted was indeed disturbing. However, her classmates were unnerved because they felt implicated as witnesses.²⁹ The disquieting sensation revealed more about the viewer's relationship to violence than Mendieta's.³⁰ Mendieta's viewers (classmates) stayed for over an hour and discussed what they were witnessing but, more importantly, they sat and discussed how they felt about the murder of Sarah Ann Ottens. Mendieta successfully initiated discussion, but her participants were no longer disturbed. The affective power is the disquieting sensation the observers experienced that demanded to be ordered through logic. That is why, perhaps, in Mendieta's eyes this performance could be deemed a failed exercise. For her peers/viewers,

²⁸ Angelique Szymanek, "Bloody Pleasures: Ana Mendieta's," 905.

²⁹ Szymanek, 901.

³⁰ Szymanek, 903.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

there was a reason for this violence; it was a form of catharsis, a space where they could reason with the ghosts of violence in their present space and what was left on campus by Ottens' murderer. One month later, Mendieta would take this exploration into the public's tolerance for violence off campus once again.

Fortunately, *Moffitt Building Piece* (also known as *People Looking at Blood, Moffitt*) 1973, is preserved in film. Outside Mendieta's apartment building, The Moffitt, Mendieta laid blood and viscera, an obvious signal for severe violence. It was as if the building itself leaked private violence, or violence that was seen as reserved for the private sphere of life: "battering and rape."³¹ Mendieta then grabbed her sister's hand and hopped into a vehicle nearby. From this foreign vehicle, the Mendieta sisters were able to watch and record the reactions of those walking by. Over two dozen passersby are documented, their body language revealing various levels of awareness. Even as the film begins, the viewer is not entirely aware of the blood on the sidewalk. From scene one of this three-minute film, the blood is seen in the body language of the individuals walking by before it is recognized for what it is on the floor. Shoulders tighten; steps become precarious and cautiously watched. The viewer is able to identify the gestural representations of curiosity, disgust, and ultimately, indifference. The passerby's disregard was the unintentional subject of the work, a demonstration of the public's indifference to violence.

Sarah Ann Ottens was found in her dorm over spring break, one month before Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, two months before Mendieta's *Moffitt Building Piece*, and nine months before *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*. Whatever catharsis Mendieta found with her first two performances was quickly disturbed once again when, that August, Mendieta finally

³¹ Crenshaw, " Mapping the Margins," 1241.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

witnessed the violence with which her sister and her nieces lived. One month later, in September of 1973, a fellow student and former player on Iowa's football team was arrested for Ottens' murder. The perpetrators of this private violence were not monsters. They were merely men. Later that fall, Mendieta dragged some dirty mattresses to an abandoned farmhouse near campus and staged *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*.³² What is, potentially, the most successful affective operation in *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)* is how secluded the artwork was. For one, there was no opportunity for the Bystander Effect to kick in. One could argue the apathy witnessed in the *Moffitt Building Piece* was partially due to the bystander effect, or bystander apathy, a psychosocial theory first identified in 1964 after the public murder of Kitty Genovese. Kitty Genovese was a twenty-eight year old bartender that was raped and murdered outside her apartment building in 1964. Two weeks after her murder, *The New York Times* claimed thirty-eight people had witnessed her murder but had not come forward to the police or stopped to help her.³³ Whether this information was accurate or not, it inspired countless studies into this supposed phenomenon where people do not help someone noticeably in need. The many studies that explore this phenomenon account for correlations between the number of bystanders, ambiguity—or whether the bystanders can be readily identified or not—and diffusion of responsibility. Each of these factors can be accounted for in Mendieta's *Moffitt Building Piece*. Over two dozen pedestrians were accounted for; plenty of bystanders and plenty of opportunities for one's responsibility to be diffused and displaced onto another.³⁴ When sculptor Charles Ray, a fellow Iowa student, happened upon the *Bloody Mattresses* while out

³² Sauer, "Portrait of the Artist," para 30.

³³ "Bystander Effect," in *Psychology Today*. Accessed April 9, 2023.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/bystander-effect>.

³⁴ Szymanek, "Bloody Pleasures", 908.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

walking on his own he was greatly disturbed. When Mendieta overheard Charles in the arts building discussing whether it was real with fellow students, Mendieta was 'gratified'.³⁵

After dragging those filthy mattresses to the abandoned farmhouse, she once again used blood to paint the scene. The site was visibly disturbed. Mendieta smeared blood all over the mattresses and splattered it across the walls. She staged sense memory signals that would be ordered by common memory and thought to mean a violent rape and murder. Once again, she made it appear as if an extended amount of time was spent on the violence that occurred here, uninterrupted. If the isolation of the space was not unsettling enough, the absence of a body was disturbing. It made the crime and, more importantly, its perpetrator more elusive. It also signaled how much of this sort of violence occurs without witnesses, behind closed doors.³⁶ This time, Mendieta was not hiding with a camera or staged within the composition. She installed the stage and waited to hear of its completion, for the work does not exist without the affective power experienced by the viewer. This is when Mendieta actualized the privacy in 'private violence'.

What is not commonly discussed about this artwork is how likely this artwork was not only a critique of the domestication of violence but a means for Mendieta to cope with the private violence (battering) she witnessed her sister suffer at the hands of her husband. Her film *Moffitt Building Piece* has already been described as a building leaking 'private violence'.³⁷ This time, Mendieta took the isolation of violence behind closed doors and inflicted it upon her viewer. Why might Mendieta have shifted the focus from 'private' to 'public'? On August 9,

³⁵ Sauers, "Portrait of the Artist," para 30.

³⁶ Szymanek, "Bloody Pleasures," 921.

³⁷ Sauers, "Portrait of the Artist," para 31.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

1973, private violence took on a new meaning.³⁸ It was not just some student on campus – it was her own sister. Mendieta, her teen brother Ignacio, her two young nieces, and her sister were there when Raquelín’s husband went into another one of his drunken rampages. When the police got there, they relocated Raquelín and her daughters to Mendieta’s apartment in the Moffitt Building. Ana and Raquelín sent the children off to a friend’s place for their safety, and Raquelín and Ana stayed indoors. The next day Raquelín’s husband came pounding on the door. Mendieta did not often speak of the event but she remembered two details: the precise date of the incident and the sound of the shotgun blast.³⁹ That day, she and her sister hid under the bed and said to each other: “This is the scariest movie we’ve ever been in.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

In *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, *Moffitt Building Piece*, and *Untitled (Bloody Mattresses)*, Mendieta relies on an uninformed spectator. She does not warn her viewers, intentionally capturing their unmitigated reactions. It is not the unidentifiable pile of blood and viscera in *Moffitt Building Piece* or the uncanny simulation of a crime scene in either *Rape Scene* or *Bloody Mattresses* but the relational experience of her audience that creates the artwork; how they react to these intermedia environments Mendieta has subjected them to. Shock was an affective operation of Mendieta’s use of blood and the specificity of environmental context. Whether intended or not, *Moffitt Building Piece* depicted society’s indifference to violence. *Rape Scene* initiated discussion but the centrality of Mendieta signaled the environment was in

³⁸ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *The Public Nature of Private Violence: The Discovery of Domestic Abuse*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1241.

³⁹ Sauers, para 29.

⁴⁰ Sauers, para 29.

BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

fact an artwork, mediating the reception of the 'violent tableaux'.⁴¹ It was not until Mendieta abandoned her work to be discovered without intervention (in *Bloody Mattresses*) that she obtained the reaction she wanted; her viewer was finally disturbed by the violence. *Bloody Mattresses* required Mendieta to remove herself from the documentarian role she had played in her last works. As much as she may have wanted to observe the affective experience her work produced, the only way she could obtain unmitigated affect was to remove the viewer from their perception of the art object and isolate the viewer for them to genuinely experience the full affective power of the encountered signs.

⁴¹ Syzmanek, "Bloody Pleasures", 905.

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BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

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BLOOD, FLESH, AND POWER

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