On February 8, 1985, Carl Andre wrote to his new bride: “Darling Ana: Your theme is the pregnant earth. My theme is the universe before the earth and after Yours is the jewel, mine is the setting.” In this note, the avatar of Minimalism posits his work as the universal structure offsetting the humanity of Ana Mendieta’s post-Minimalist work. As Minimalism informed post-Minimalism, so did Andre affect the direction of Mendieta’s last years personally and artistically. Their emotionally volatile relationship was one of aesthetic convergence as well as conflict, of mutual give-and-take. While recognized for her early performance-based work and earth-body series Siluetas, the object-making Mendieta began in the final years of her life has been shrouded in the same obscurity as her relationship with Andre. Yet an examination of their creative synergy offers insight into Mendieta’s intent as she searched for ways to bring her earth art into the gallery as permanent sculpture. Despite its deplorable end, their five-year partnership resulted in joint exhibitions, travels, shared friendships, political affinity, and artistic collaboration on a book of lithographs.

Critical assessment of Mendieta’s last phase of work from the 1980s has been clouded by the circumstances surrounding her violent death at age thirty-six. When she died in a fall from the thirty-fourth floor of a Greenwich Village apartment building, she was married to Carl Andre. He was the only other person in the apartment on the morning of September 8, 1985, when she fell. Though indicted for her murder, he was acquitted in 1988. The intrigue and mystery surrounding her death deeply polarized the art world between the powerful establishment loyal to Andre and the feminist and Latino art communities. Personal loyalty has continued to play a role in the critical appraisal of both artists. In an emperor’s-new-clothes situation, the points of comparison between their work are evident, but politically incorrect to discuss. Of essentially different generations artistically, they still found much to admire in each other’s work. A Minimalist aesthetic and preoccupation with issues of scale, materials, presentation, and

Laura Roulet

Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre: Duet of Leaf and Stone

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The information published in this article was obtained during the author’s work as the project researcher for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, on the exhibition and publication of Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972–1985. The exhibition was organized by Olga M. Viso, now deputy director of the Hirshhorn. It premiered at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (July 1–September 19, 2004) and travels to the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C. (October 14, 2004–January 6, 2005), the Des Moines Art Center (February 25–May 22, 2005), and the Miami Art Museum (October 7, 2005–January 15, 2006).

environment drew them together. Yet as post-Minimalism challenged many
tenets of the style it subverts, Mendieta’s gendered subjectivity distinguished her
art from Andre’s iconic Minimalism.

Mendieta met Andre in November 1979, but she was already well acquainted
with his work. The writer and curator John Perreault recalls using a slide of
Andre’s Spill (Scatter Piece) (1966/69) a decade earlier to illustrate the element of
chance in a seminar he taught on contemporary art, attended by Mendieta at the
University of Iowa.\(^2\) As well as seeing his work many times in art magazines, she
owned the catalogue from the Whitney Museum’s exhibition 200 Years of American
Sculpture, and probably saw the exhibition in 1976. Curator Marcia Tucker’s essay
on contemporary sculpture features Andre as heralding “for himself and others,
the end of art made in the studio.”\(^3\) His work is pictured seven times in the cata-
logue overall. Minimalism was no longer the avant-garde, but the established
paradigm to react against.

Minimalism had literally knocked sculpture off its pedestal. Artists such as
Andre, Donald Judd, and Dan Flavin challenged the traditional conventions of
sculpture: representation, illusionism, craftsmanship, permanence, and even
the object itself. Minimalism presented a new set of formal strategies: the grid,
seriality, identical modular units, geometric structure, industrial materials, and
fabrication. Post-Minimalists eagerly adopted these precepts as new jumping-off
points for sculptural invention: use of unorthodox materials, serial repetition,
and physicality, but with allusive references and sometimes whimsy or erotica
in their creations.

Termed “anti-form” by Robert Morris, “dematerialized” by Lucy Lippard,
and “post-Minimalist” by Robert Pincus-Witten, the sculpture that emerged in
the late 1960s and 1970s was a subversive response to Minimalism. Eva Hesse is
often cited as an influential iconoclast, as well as Mel Bochner, Lucas Samaras,
and Bruce Nauman.\(^4\) Because of her age and ethnicity, Mendieta has rarely been
placed in this category, but most of the movement’s characteristics apply to her
work as well.\(^5\) Adjectives such as anthropomorphic, biomorphic, handmade,
mixed-media, psychologically attenuated, and organic apply equally to Mendieta
and Hesse. Both accepted the pared-down, abstracted aesthetic of Minimalism,
and each used the style to convey her own subjective meaning.

As Lippard foretold in her introduction to the Eccentric Abstraction exhibition
in 1966, “The future of sculpture may well lie in such non-sculptural styles.”\(^6\)
At the same time, as noted by feminist historians like Lippard and Whitney
Chadwick,\(^7\) women artists emerged as shapers of the art world, mirroring
the larger cultural phenomenon of the feminist movement. With Mendieta, we
include the impact of Black and Hispanic Power movements. These social forces
combined to shift artistic production and the critical debate toward recognition
of gender and ethnic identity.

As a student in the 1970s, Mendieta made earth-body works that exemplify
art made outside the studio, influenced by the contemporaneous and overlap-
ning movements of Conceptualism, body art, earth art, feminism, and Minimal-
ism. She was exceptionally quick to absorb the cultural zeitgeist and adopt it for
her own expressive purposes. The earth-body works were an inventive series of
variations on her silhouette (sileta in Spanish), created in media ranging from
the elemental earth, fire, and water to natural materials such as grass, flowers,

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2. For several years, I researched Mendieta for the retrospective exhibition organized by curator
Olga M. Viso. Together we interviewed dozens of Mendieta’s relatives, friends, and colleagues. This
information is from my telephone interview with John Perreault on August 1, 2002.
3. Marcia Tucker, “Shared Space: Contemporary Sculpture and Its Environment,” in 200 Years of
1976), 215.
4. See Robert Pincus-Witten, “Eva Hesse: Post-
Minimalism into Sublime,” Artforum 10, no. 3
5. A notable exception was the exhibition More
Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the ’70s,
organized by Susan L. Stoops at the Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massa-
chusetts, in 1996.
6. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, 37.
7. See More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstrac-
tion in the ’70s (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis
University, 1996). Both Lucy Lippard and Whitney
Chadwick contributed essays.
moss, and snow. An angry and powerful “volcano” series made between 1978 and 1980 depicts an attenuated female figure, gashed into the earth, with a seam of gunpowder running down the center of the form. After setting the works alight, Mendieta filmed the incendiary burst of flame, smoking conflagration, and finally the charred remains. Representing her body in a dialogue with nature, the Siluetas also evoked her state of exile, her void in the North American cultural landscape.

Adopting the reductive, Minimalist aesthetic, Mendieta ventured into post-Minimalist territory with her personal point of reference, allusive content, and hands-on techniques. At first using her own body as the basis of the silueta, she then shifted to a cutout body substitute and finally to the void of an outline, still scaled to her five-foot frame. Both her early performances and the earth-body works refer to her Cuban heritage by incorporating elements of Catholic iconography, Santería ritual, and Abakuá symbolism. Unlike Flavin’s factory fabrication of fluorescent tubes or Judd’s plexiglass boxes, Mendieta’s works are made from organic materials she found at sites in Iowa and Mexico; she conceived, shaped, and photographed them herself. In Minimalist style, she serially repeated an abstracted form and departed from the sculptural tradition of carving, casting, or assembling a permanent object. Yet, flaunting Minimalism’s negation of subjectivity, she imbued her abstracted form, in a myriad variety of media, with personal, gendered import.

Painter Nancy Spero pinpointed Mendieta and Andre’s first meeting, which took place on November 12, 1979, at the women’s cooperative gallery A.I.R. in SoHo, New York. Photographs of the Silueta series, Mendieta’s first solo show in New York, were affixed to the walls. Andre had been invited to participate in a panel discussion, moderated by Poppy Johnson, titled: “How has the women’s art movement affected male art attitudes?” As the temperature in the gallery rose from the body heat of the audience, Mendieta’s photographs began to pop off the walls and crash to the floor. Mortified by the disruption to both the artwork and the evening, Spero asked Andre to include Mendieta in the dinner he was hosting afterward. Thus began an on-again, off-again romantic relationship that culminated in their marriage on January 17, 1985. Like Mendieta’s former lover and professor Hans Breder, Andre was thirteen years older and far more established professionally. Small wonder that Mendieta was flattered by his interest,
confiding to her sister Raquelín that she was dating "an Olympic-caliber artist." \(^9\)

In the early flowering of their relationship, Mendieta and Andre participated together in several outdoor sculpture parks, and, indicative of their close collaboration, they exhibited jointly three times. \(^10\) Most surprising of these artistic joint ventures was an outdoor piece conceived in tandem for the Fourth Biennial of Medellín, Colombia, in May 1981. The fact that Andre was in Medellín at all must be credited to Mendieta’s influence. She was able to open worlds for him as well as vice versa.

Judging from the official program, both were late entries. Andre’s name appears last on the list of U.S. artists, and Mendieta is listed last for the Cuban delegation (though she had become a U.S. citizen in 1971). The local newspaper coverage spotlights the two as an important couple. Reporter Juan José Hoyos observes "the man with the beard of a prophet and the petite, sweet woman," who appear to be “two gardeners, silently watering their piece of garden every afternoon.” He then identifies the incongruous pair as “really the famous North American artist Carl Andre and the Cuban sculptor Ana Mendieta.” \(^11\) According to journalistic accounts, the two were among the few Biennial artists to work outdoors, and, typical of Mendieta but unusual for Andre, they collaborated on two ephemeral earthworks. Mendieta’s piece is described as a female figure, a mound formed by grass she planted and probably enhanced by adding fertilizer, though that additive is not mentioned in the newspapers. She had made similar fertilizer pieces previously in Iowa, where the nutrients outlined in the grass caused her silhouette to grow more luxuriantly. However, this work included a new element: grass that Andre pulled out of the ground in creating his own nearby work, a pathway dug in the earth. In turn, he incorporated grass cut from her figure and sowed yellow flowers that were intended to grow with the rain.

In an apparent return to the playful sexual double entendres of the priapic Lever (1966) and Joint (1968), Andre told reporters that his work depicted “an arrow entering an egg.” He further explained: “All art has an agricultural origin. I’m very interested in seeing the process of transformation that my work will take as nature modifies it and as it disappears. Here, concretely I wanted to work with Colombian soil. More than a nostalgia for nature, I believe my work consists very much as a dialectical affirmation of the artist’s labor over nature.” Mendieta emphasized her native roots as intrinsic to her art; “if my branches are North American, my trunk is Cuban.” \(^12\) However, she also asserted a similar dialectical process, consistent in her work, in which her form would be assimilated by nature.

In this reciprocal collaboration, Mendieta and Andre remain true to their own paths but also coincide most closely. Mendieta perpetuates her Silueta series, still site-specific, using materials at hand. Andre creates a variation on his “sculpture as place,” “sculpture as road” credo, but his materials are earth, grass, and flowers, much closer to Mendieta’s stock-in-trade. The ineluctable qualities their works share are evident in the physical and temporal aspects of this joint outdoor piece. Minimalist sculpture asserts a relation to the viewer’s body that traditional sculpture does not. Andre’s work must be experienced physically by walking on a grid of shimmering, multicolored metal plates or entering the space of a field of boulders. Mendieta’s dynamic earth-body works and sculptures, scaled to her body, evoke our senses and desire to touch the richly textured surfaces.

10. Andre participated in the summer outdoor sculpture exhibition A.R.E.A. (Artists Representing Environmental Arts) at the Manhattan Psychiatric Center, Wards Island, New York, from 1979 to 1982. Mendieta was included in this annual exhibition in 1980 and 1981. Both exhibited at Wave Hill, in the Bronx, New York, in 1982, though in different shows. Andre was in New Perspectives and Mendieta in Projects in Nature. Both were included in Contemporary Outdoor Sculpture at the Guild, Guildwood Hall, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada (August 3–October 14, 1982).
11. Juan José Hoyos, “Obras de arte... de hierba” El Tiempo (Bogotá, Colombia, May 18, 1981): 6E. Quotes and descriptions were published in Spanish; I have translated.
The temporal act of walking along one of Andre’s sculptural “roads,” in this case an arrow, is meant to be a physical and metaphorical journey. Mendieta’s outdoor works, such as this living Silueta, as well as her performance-based work captured on film, trace a temporal arc. The grass and flowers took shape in the course of the week they were planted, fertilized, and watered. They continued to evolve for a few weeks or months, growing, blooming, and eventually disappearing.

In keeping with their affinity at this time, the two artists planned two joint exhibitions for October 1982 at the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Florida, and the University of New Mexico’s Art Museum in Albuquerque. In both cases, Andre’s work was shown in an indoor gallery while Mendieta chose an outdoor site. For the Lowe Museum, she carefully planned a variety of four pieces incorporating plant materials native to Florida. Mother of All Things (also titled Arból de la Vida (Tree of Life) in the brochure) consisted of a tripartite, shieldlike
framework on which she trained vines and sphagnum moss. Mendieta then attached these “shields” to a tree on the museum grounds for a female-shaped topiary effect. Taurus Mater (Root Mother) consisted of a curved ficus root hung in the branches of another tree. A pathway of burnt handprints led through the grass, scorched by a branding iron traced from her own hand. Adopting an earlier title, Body Tracks, this piece alluded to her performances in which she drenched her arms in a mixture of red tempera and blood and then dragged them down the wall. She first documented Body Tracks in 1974, during her Iowa student days, and re-created it in April 1982 at Franklin Furnace in New York. The fourth work, Anima (Soul in Purgatory), continued her Silueta series with a gunpowder-charred female figure shaped by rocks on the ground.

Inside the Lowe Museum galleries, Andre showed a sampling of old and new sculptures. Early works such as Tau and Threshold from the Element series (1960/1971) and Equivalent I (1966/1969), made in firebricks, were re-created, as well as a representative metal floor piece, 144 Tin Square (1975), and more recent works. The press coverage does not connect the two artists as a couple, giving them roughly equal weight in reviews. Greater reader familiarity is assumed for Andre’s work, while Mendieta’s is put in the context of feminist goddess art, as well as earthworks. However, according to friends, Mendieta strongly objected to critic Helen Kohen’s comment in the Miami Herald: “Without an Andre, there might never have been earthworks, or a Mendieta.”

She had become leery of comparison with Andre, to the extent that later the same month, the Albuquerque Journal reports the two are “companions who seldom exhibit jointly as they are doing here, the artists don’t like their work to be compared. They don’t think it is similar.” By this point, Mendieta began to bristle at the lack of subtlety and depth in the critical interpretation of her work. She had frequently allowed her work to be cast in the feminist or Latino context through thematic group exhibitions, which led to unidimensional pigeonholing. The opportunities offered by gender or ethnicity proved to be a double-edged sword. Now she realized the dangers of too close an association with Andre. While their work is aesthetically similar, Mendieta was frustrated by the critics’ failure to draw distinctions between Andre’s now-classic Minimalism and her departure from that standard. Andre connects identical, standard-size units of materials such as bricks or tin, which are arranged to reflect a Euclidean geometric sense of order. Mendieta has no such universal, mathematical concerns. She references her culture, her gender, and her own body. Both artists use natural materials, but Mendieta’s are ephemeral. Her fabrication exudes the personal touch, literally charring her handprint into the grass.

At the University of New Mexico’s Art Museum, Andre again occupied the interior gallery with an adobe brick work titled, as an insider joke, Pulano, the Spanish translation of Leer. Mendieta picked up the Southwestern flavor as well, carving two abstracted female figures into the clay banks of the Rio Grande. Separate interviews with the artists appear in the newspaper. Though the similarities remain—both create site-specific, temporary sculptures using local, organic materials, which are reductive in form and serial in nature—so do the differences. Andre references the work he created for Primary Structures, the first museum exhibition to focus on Minimalist art, organized at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966, whereas Mendieta’s goddess figures exemplify feminist art and

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13. Helen L. Kohen, “Mixed Bag at the Lowe,” Miami Herald (October 15, 1982): 7L. César Trasobares, one of Mendieta’s friends living in Miami, reported that she hated this review and excised it from her bibliography. He and his partner Juan Leczano helped Mendieta prepare for the Lowe Museum show by growing the plants for the shield armature in their backyard. Olga M. Viso interview, November 19, 2001.


embry herself. They are now unwilling to be compared. They did not collaborate again until two years later, in Rome.

Aside from art, one commonality, quickly evident, was their espousal of leftist politics. Mendieta’s family history and life had been crucially shaped by political events in Cuba, while Andre became a proponent of artists’ rights and Marxism in adulthood. Born into a privileged, politically elite family, she inherited an illustrious revolutionary pedigree, an aspect of her identity that would be unrecognized by almost all the North Americans she would meet.6 From an early age, she had been marooned by politics, the events of the 1959 Cuban Revolution causing her involuntary exile.

In September 1961, Ana, almost thirteen, and Raquelín, her fifteen-year-old sister, were sent to the United States under the auspices of Operation Peter Pan, a Catholic Church— and U.S. State Department—sponsored program. Eighteen years later, she would write: “At age thirteen, my parents sent me out of my homeland because they were opposed to the politics of the Cuban Revolution. This event totally affected my understanding of myself and of the world around me. I grew up in an orphanage in Iowa cut off from my land and culture.”6 Her abrupt
banishment meant that Mendieta was transformed from an upper-middle-class child grounded in her family and culture to an impoverished outsider living in white-bread, Iowa foster homes. In a 1983 interview, she comments on the effect this transformation had on her art: “To me art has been my salvation. I was sent to this country . . . at a time when it was not ‘in’ or ‘neat’ to be Hispanic. There were no programs in any schools to deal with people who did not speak English. It was a difficult time—I felt a lot of anger, I still do. . . . My art comes out of rage and displacement.” 17 Politics remained a highly personal issue for her entire life. Her art was galvanized by exile, and she sought out the “other” in her partners as well. Hans Breder was a German immigrant, Andre from New England stock. Both perpetuated her isolation, her displacement, contributing to a life unlike anything she would have had in Cuba. She was drawn to her homeland, yet she chose to live her adult life with the friction of separation.

As soon as travel to Cuba opened up under the Carter administration, Mendieta began exploring the possibilities of returning to the island. 18 After moving to New York in 1978, she became acquainted for the first time with other left-wing exiles of her generation through groups like the Antonio Maceo Brigade (known as the Macías). In January 1980, she finally returned to Cuba under the auspices of the Circulo de Cultura Cubana (Cuban Cultural Circle). By July 1983, she would make seven trips to the island in all, becoming the first exile to receive permission from the Castro government to exhibit and create work on the island. When interviewed by a reporter for Granma, Cuba’s primary, officially sanctioned newspaper, about her first impressions of her homeland upon return, she replied, “I’m very proud of my Cuba, the Cuba of today.” 19

Andre’s ethnic and class origins were diametrically opposed to Mendieta’s. He proudly touted his Yankee, blue-collar roots. Growing up in Quincy, Massachusetts, he was the son of a designer of ship plumbing, and other male relatives were “Swedish contractors and bricklayers.” In a 1970 interview, he stated: “I consciously do not identify with an owning bourgeois class. I much more identify with a producing, literally, working class.” 20 Famously attired in workman’s overalls, he did not find his commercial success contradictory with his status as “artworker”: “I’ve never minded people buying my works at all. My social position really, in the classic Marxist analysis, is I’m an artisan.” In this same interview, Andre analyzes the politics of Minimalism: “My art will reflect not necessarily conscious politics but the unanalyzed politics of my life. Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position I think, essentially Marxist.”

Andre was a leading member of the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), founded in 1969. Sample issues were the still-unrealized goals of “moral rights” regarding disposition of artwork after sale and the demand for greater inclusion of women and minorities in museums. The AWC protest garnering the widest attention was an anti–Vietnam War demonstration at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. Gathering in front of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, protesters held up a poster of the Vietnamese civilians massacred at My Lai juxtaposed with the text: “Q: And babies? A: And babies.”

With these credentials, one would expect Andre to be interested in visiting Cuba when travel became possible during the 1980s, and he was. According to several Cubans, his first trip in the summer of 1981 was to visit Mendieta at the

18. In 1977, the Carter administration lifted the prohibition on travel between the United States and Cuba, which had been in place since the end of the “Freedom Flights” in 1973. As a result of diplomatic rapprochement and back-channel negotiations called el diálogo (the Dialogue), greater efforts were made in the late 1970s to grant exit visas to exchange political prisoners, reunite families, and allow expatriates to visit relatives in Cuba.
site of her Rupestrian carvings in the grottos of Jaruco Park, outside Havana. She had received permission from the Ministry of Culture to create an outdoor installation with Tainan goddesses as the theme. Financed with a Guggenheim fellowship, this series of sculptural reliefs carved into the soft limestone of the grottoes was a pivotal project, bringing her art back to her native land, exploring the mythology of the indigenous people, and replacing the voids of the Siluetas with sculptural solids.

Andre returned in a more official capacity as a member of an artist exchange organized by the Cuban Cultural Circle. Painters Rudolf Baranik and May Stevens were also part of the group led by Mendieta in May 1982. Cuban painter José Bedia remembers meeting Andre on this trip. Bedia had previously made Mendieta’s acquaintance when she attended the Volumen I (Volume 1) exhibition in 1981, a landmark debut of the first generation of artists educated under the revolution. He regards her as part of the first rapprochement between Latin and Anglo artists, eager to act as a connector among the various art communities to which she belonged. As evidence of her catalytic efforts, she arranged for the Volumen I artists to meet Andre alone for dinner one night in Havana. Bedia was excited at his first chance to meet a world-famous artist. The group was impressed by Andre’s polite, contained demeanor, but baffled, if not amused, by his avowed Marxism. As with other wealthy Americans who ventured down to the island for a quick immersion in Castro’s socialist experiment, the Cubans

22. Interview with José Bedia, conducted by Olga M. Viso and me, August 9, 2001, artist’s studio, Miami, Florida. My follow-up telephone interview with artist, October 30, 2003.
marveled at the naïveté of Andre and his compatriots in believing they understood the political reality. Bedia and his friends morosely joked, “We have to live inside la teoría (the theory).”

Bedia recalls a “tense” relationship between the two, in which Mendieta boisterously argued over whose work was better, hers or Andre’s, criticizing the “emptiness” of Minimalism. In explaining the machinations of the New York art world, she expressed jealousy over Andre’s fame vis-à-vis her own marginal position. Bedia, who now lives in Miami, also expressed his opinion on the evolution of Mendieta’s political convictions over the course of her many trips to Cuba. He believes Mendieta’s initial revolutionary fervor became tempered with subsequent visits and run-ins with the Cuban bureaucracy. After a threatening altercation with Cuban customs officials in 1983, she did not return.

While Andre was outspoken politically in the 1970s, Mendieta became so in the 1980s. As Andre faded publicly from the activist scene, she became an energetic participant in the second feminist wave. A member of A.I.R. Gallery from 1978 to 1982, she also contributed to several issues of the feminist journal Heresies. Mendieta’s contributions, a Silueta photograph in the “Third World Women” issue and a photograph with retold Cuban “Venus Negra” legend in “Feminism & Ecology,” were both in the postcolonial vein then gaining prominence in academia. 23 As a vanguard artist of multiculturalism, she criticized American feminism for being “basically a white middle class movement,” which failed to recognize women of color. 24 This ethnic isolation may have been a contributing factor in her resigning from membership in the A.I.R. Gallery. Another reason was her growing sense of conflict over being tokenized as either Latina or feminist.

While sharing a political radicalism, Mendieta and Andre were nonetheless divided by class, culture, and age. A generational shift had occurred in a brief period of time. Andre’s rhetoric reflects a Eurocentric, post–World War II Marxism, while Mendieta was an early proponent of the “politics of difference.” Artistically, the “matter as matter rather than matter as symbol” of Minimalism, classified as Marxist by Andre, becomes the post-Minimalist, personally symbolic work of Mendieta.

In March 1983, Mendieta received the Prix de Rome, giving her a residency at the American Academy in Rome, along with the opportunity to work indoors with new materials in her first actual studio space. Though initially opposed to her moving to Europe (they broke up twice during the year), Andre reconciled himself to the idea and applied for a D.A.A.D. residency in Berlin himself. She moved to a studio on the Academy grounds in October. He visited in December. Reunited, they spent Christmas with Carol and Sol LeWitt at their home in Spoleto, Italy. During their European sojourn, Andre offered Mendieta opportunities and contacts otherwise unavailable, which were a source of growth and some tension. In a series of postcards, he writes of talking up her art to curators and dealers across France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. They would both exhibit at the Primo Piano gallery in Rome.

The next year was a blur of peregrination, with Mendieta and Andre visiting each other, pursuing mutual interests, and finding favorable responses to their artworks. Beginning in January, their travels took them from Rome to Milan, Turin, and Basel, Switzerland, where Andre had an exhibition scheduled for June.

In February, they spent several days in Malta before flying to Amsterdam for Sol LeWitt’s opening at the Stedelijk Museum. On top of her own business travel to Rhode Island and California that year, she supported Andre in his endeavors in Zürich, Düsseldorf, Berlin, and Münster. In early July, they visited Ireland. Andre had an exhibition to install at the Guinness Hop Store in Dublin, and they were eager to explore the nearby Neolithic complex of Newgrange.

Both shared a fascination with prehistoric, particularly Neolithic, culture and independently described themselves as working in that tradition. Andre frequently cited Stonehenge, which he visited on his first trip to Europe at age nineteen, as a seminal influence on his sculpture. In discussing his sculptural progression from form to structure to place in a 1970 interview, he draws a comparison: “I began with form—or woodcutting, essentially . . . coming to a kind of structural position which was probably new to the 20th century but also was persistent or had existed in neolithic works (Stonehenge and Avebury, etc., of which I have always been a great admirer) which were structural. Then passing through that into place which was also a neolithic property, I think, in the countrysides of southern England, Indian mounds, and things like that . . . ”

Mendieta also made a pilgrimage to Stonehenge on her first trip to Europe in 1976. In an interview with the Providence Journal-Bulletin while installing Furrows, an outdoor work at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), she commented, “My work is basically in the tradition of a Neolithic artist. It has very little to do

25. Curator Olga M. Viso visited this location in Ireland and observed the connections between the passage-grave structures and work Mendieta had done at RISD. I’m indebted to her insights.
with most earth art. I’m not interested in the formal qualities of my materials, but their emotional and sensual ones.”

Thus he defines his formal, structural considerations as being in the Neolithic tradition, while she identifies her visceral approach to earthworks the same way. In this quote she seems to be deliberately and somewhat disingenuously distinguishing her concept of “formal qualities” from his, using the other to define oneself in contrast. Furrows, two parallel, wavy ridges shaped from raised sod situated along a pathway on the RISD campus, bears a resemblance to a miniaturized ancient burial mound. As with all of her and his outdoor work, it was site-specific, used local, organic materials, and was meant to eventually revert to the elements. The two artists separately identify the centrality of place as a Neolithic quality, which they share.

The megalithic sites of Malta and Newgrange were Meccas for both artists. Predating Stonehenge and the pyramids of Giza by a thousand years, the temples of Malta are associated with a Neolithic goddess cult because of the female fertility figures uncovered there and the twin-lobed, rounded structures themselves. Mendieta’s photographs of the island focus on the circular architecture and the double-spiral patterns carved into the stone, thought to represent the oculi, or eyes, of the goddess. The spiral is also universally associated with the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, a theme found throughout Mendieta’s work. She incorporated this double spiral as the breasts and body of one of her untitled floor sculptures from this year, and it appears in many of her drawings. Similar carvings

appear at Newgrange, a megalithic passage grave near Dublin in County Meath, which also dates from the fourth millennium B.C.E. The parallels between the two unconnected, coeval sites would have fascinated her.

Another sculpture from 1984, *Figura con Nganga* (*Figure with Nganga*), was influenced by the bulbous shapes of the Maltese goddesses, which she relates to Afro-Cuban culture with her title. A *nganga* (or prenda) is a Palo Monte term for a receptacle of power, often a round pot containing an arrangement of materials such as herbs, earth, stones, or animal remains that are imbued with spiritual, even cosmic, portent. This abstract, cracked-mud relief of two rounded forms, each with raised edges, connected with fragments of a spine, is meant to lie flush with the floor like one of Andre’s pieces of metal squares. Unlike Andre’s work, *Figure with Nganga* is meant to evoke associations with goddesses, Palo Monte, spiritual power, and Mendieta’s own gender and ethnicity, as well as the earth from which it was drawn.

Andre’s and Mendieta’s contrasting perspectives on Malta are recorded in a postcard jointly written to the writer Lucy Lippard, a mutual friend.28 Dated 26 February 1984, Andre combines wry travelogue, “Malta is the marriage of the Neolithic with English pub life,” with descriptive detail, “The countryside resembles a honey-colored gravel pit,” and arch commentary, “The archaeologists agree that the monuments really memorialized the backwardness and isolation of the Paleomaltese.” Mendieta, on the other hand, has a far more visceral response. She adds: “Being inside the prehistoric temples is like being inside a womb. They really are about nurturing and are very powerful in their human scale, more dramatic than bigger monuments because they are about inner space.” The qualities she identifies, of nurturing, power in human scale, and drama of inner space, all describe her own work as well. While he remains a detached, intellectual observer, she homes in on the metaphorical and gendered significance of the structures. Her emotional connection with the site reflects many years of learning about archetypal forms and goddess cultures throughout the world. Mendieta’s earliest attraction to ancient fertility figures can be traced back to her student days, when she assisted in archeological fieldwork on her first trip to Mexico in 1971.
Puerto Rican artist Juan Sanchez, who became a friend of Mendieta’s in the early 1980s, notes that at the time they were both exploring the indigenous culture and imagery of the Caribbean. 29 While Sanchez used ideographs as originally carved on Taíno artifacts, Mendieta adapted the symbols as personifications of herself. He comments that she was fascinated with recurrent imagery from the ancient cultures of Africa, the Americas, and Europe. She pointed out to him the similarities in petroglyph motifs from Ireland to Cuba. In ever-more-abstracted form and diverse media, these elemental shapes, such as spirals, labyrinths, lozenges, and goddesses, recurred in her work.

Similarly, feminist historians and artists had explored the universal theme of the Great Goddess in the 1970s. In the issue of Heresies devoted to this topic, an essay by Gloria Feman Orenstein positions Mendieta among the contemporary women artists exploring the Great Goddess archetype, along with then-better-known Mary Beth Edelson, Carolee Schneemann, Donna Henes, and others. 30 In the exuberant rhetoric of the day, Orenstein delineates this feminist phenomenon: “In its modern transformed meaning, it is about the mysteries of woman’s rebirth from the womb of historical darkness, in which her powers were so long enshrouded, into a new era where a culture of her own making will come about as a result of a new Earth Alchemy.” 31 In the same issue, Mimi Lobell lists eighteen of the world’s “Temples of the Great Goddess,” from the Catal Huyuk Shrine of Anatolia to the Ise Shrine of Japan. 32 At the time, Mendieta had already visited Stonehenge on England’s Salisbury Plain (temples 7 and 8). Of the remaining sixteen sites, she would travel to five with Andre: the temples of Malta and Egypt. While not following it as a strict itinerary, she seemed to keep Lobell’s essay in mind and had long aspired to visit Egypt, a dream realized on her honeymoon with Andre in February 1985. One of her travel photos from the trip exactly duplicates the article’s illustration of the sky goddess Nut overarching the cow goddess Hathor from the Temple of Dendera. She and Andre also toured the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae, which is described by Lobell as a center of healing.

During the year before her honeymoon, Mendieta had created a sculpture, Nile Born (1984), incorporating soil brought back from Egypt by a friend. In an interview with artist Linda Montano, she speaks of her materials and the challenges of working in a studio: “So I’ve given this problem to myself, to work indoors. . . . I was working and working and not sure if anything was there and then one day, I came into the studio and saw that the sculptures had a presence. All of them have a ‘charge’ in them. A friend of mine brought me sand from Egypt and so one of them has an ‘Egyptian charge.’ Each one is different.” 33 Mendieta’s sister disclosed that bags of earth labeled “Nile” and “Red Sea” were found in her studio after her death. She had also collected soil from Pompeii and Malta. Significantly, what is crucial to Mendieta is the intangible spirituality embedded in her materials, their connection with place. The challenge had been to convey the powerful energy of her outdoor earth-body works, with the implied ritual of their creation, into permanent sculptures.

This acquisition of spiritually significant materials began even before Europe. Her cousin Kaky recalled that as a forbidden souvenir, she took “earth from Cuba and sand from Varadero. Those were the two things she took back from her first trip. Later on she used to tell how she kept them in her apartment...

in New York as one of the most important things she had in her life, that is, earth from Cuba and sand from Varadero.”34 While materials are also of paramount consideration in André’s sculpture, her transportation of soil as a symbolic talisman may be linked more closely to Richard Long’s works. Mendieta had admired the Ur-British earth artist since her student days. André, a friend and contemporary of Long’s, introduced them in Bristol, England. Recalling that meeting, Long states that “they were a strong double act.” He was unfamiliar with her work then, but came to admire “her free spirit and originality.”35 His subtle interventions into nature, ephemeral gestures such as transporting a stone from one place to another, recorded by camera, bore an affinity for Mendieta. Also, like André, his transference of natural objects into the gallery space, as an evocation of place, provided a model for Mendieta on how to move her own work indoors.

Consistent with Minimalist strictures, André advocated truth to materials, “wood as wood and steel as steel, aluminum as aluminum, a bale of hay as a bale of hay.”36 However, his works frequently have ancillary meanings associated with their titles or materials. Massiciata (Ballast), a sculpture done in the Primo Piano gallery in Rome that year, was created in travertine, a stone identified with Rome, seemingly used in homage to place, as the adobe bricks were in New Mexico and the soil in Colombia. His preoccupation with the intrinsic physical properties of such media contrasts with Mendieta’s spiritual and metaphorical concerns. Earth was not just earth to her. Materials such as earth, water, blood, and gunpowder also have symbolic value in Afro-Cuban ritual, a dimension of her work that has been extensively discussed in previous essays.37 The shallow relief sculptures, made of a mixture of earth or sand with polyurethane resin or other binders, were meant to lie flush with the floor, bearing an unmistakable resemblance to André’s floor pieces, an association that has not been extensively discussed. As the artist most often credited with opening up the horizontal as a plane for sculpture, he must have provided an example of how to transfer her environmental earthworks into the gallery as permanent sculpture. Like the generation of Conceptual and environmental artists before her, she had reached the determination that she wanted to leave more of a legacy. Like André (or Long or Robert Smithson), she concluded that object-making and the modernist white box of the gallery were not incompatible with her artistic expression.

On the day of their civil wedding ceremony, Mendieta and André also celebrated the publication of their jointly produced book of lithographs titled Duetto Pietre Foglie (Duet of Stone and Leaf) in an exhibition at AAM (Architettura Arte Moderna) in Rome. This final collaboration rather perfectly exemplifies both their creative synergy and divergence. Intending a duet of complementary forms, both artists used organic materials to create compositions that are spare and reductive, without overlapping or extraneous elements. Printed by Romolo and Rosalba Bolla in an edition of forty, the exquisitely crafted twenty-page volume alternates ten pages designed by each artist. They are separate, but equal. As in Colombia, they remain true to their own paths but coincide closely. André used square, unevenly shaped paving stones to create variations on closely grouped patterns forming a larger rectangle. The geometric, mathematical basis of his aesthetic is clearly evident, as is the biomorphic root of hers. Mendieta arranged a variety of oval leaves on a zinc plate. In her last conversation with artist and friend May Stevens, Mendieta confided that she had found “her shape,” and it
Her art expression had evolved in the 1970s from earth-body works using her own body to earthworks scaled by her body. In the 1980s, her embodiment shifts from the goddess sculptures to the truncated, fragile form of a leaf. While Andre allows a slight instability and irregularity to creep into his composition of the stones, Mendieta’s leaf lithographs are her most simple, structured forms.

As in their personal relationship, a comparison of Andre and Mendieta’s Minimalist and post-Minimalist sculpture reveals a collegial, if contentious coexistence. The styles are complementary, yet one challenges and subverts the other. The masculine authority of Minimalism, identified by Anna Chave with “markers of industry and technology,”39 with its mathematically based universals, was undermined by the gendered, multicultural art emerging in the 1970s as exemplified by Mendieta’s post-Minimalism. Mendieta made her art feminine and culture-specific. She used Spanish titles, alluded to Santería, the Abakuá, and the Taíno, incorporated actual earth and sand from Cuba, and maintained always that her work represented the embodiment of her state of exile. As Andre recognized, her theme was “the pregnant earth,” nature incarnate, while his art provided the structure, “the setting,” that engendered it. They are entwined, not as theme and variation, but as point and counterpoint.

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38. This conversation was related to me by the artist’s sister, Raquelin Mendieta, telephone interview, May 16, 2003.