

Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, 1977–82

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A.I.R. Gallery, New York

In 1978 Ana Mendieta joined Artists in Residence Inc (A.I.R. Gallery), the first gallery for women in the United States. With A.I.R.'s openness to experimental, ephemeral and often practically unsaleable artwork, the performative nature of Mendieta's self-named "earth-body" works found an appropriate and welcoming venue. Although, Mendieta only exhibited at the gallery until 1982, the association offered a unique opportunity to connect with other leading women artists, including Mary Beth Edelson and Nancy Spero, and with art professionals such as Lucy Lippard and Lowery Stokes Simms. The artist-run model, although time-consuming for those involved, allowed Mendieta to curate a successful exhibition, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, and to define the context in which she desired her work to be seen and understood. Overall, a closer look at the years when Mendieta was associated with A.I.R. offers up a deeper understanding of her short, yet significant, career and the nature of her ties to other professionals in the field.

Keywords: Ana Mendieta; A.I.R. Gallery; Artists in Residence; women; Nancy Spero; feminist art

On 17 May 1978, six years after the opening of the first all women's gallery, the members of Artists in Residence held a monthly meeting at the 97 Wooster Street gallery space. The evening's business included the review of five carousels of artists' slides in order to select a new member to join the now well-established artist-run gallery. A sixth name was written into the typed minutes – Ana Mendieta.¹ By June, after much discussion, particular advocacy by friend, colleague and mentor Mary Beth Edelson and a group studio visit, Ana was accepted by a unanimous vote. At age 29, she had arrived in New York just six months prior. With A.I.R.'s openness to experimental, ephemeral and often practically unsaleable artwork, the performative nature of Mendieta's self-named "earth-body" works found an appropriate and welcoming venue.

At A.I.R., Mendieta presented her first two solo exhibits – she would have only one other solo exhibit at a New York gallery during her lifetime. At a time when artist-curated shows were rare, Mendieta organized the groundbreaking exhibit, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*. Interestingly, the artist also came to know Carl Andre through the gallery.

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Organized by fellow member Nancy Spero, the panel *How Has the Women's Art Movement Affected Male Art Attitudes*, was scheduled to coincide with Mendieta's first solo exhibit in order to introduce her to the New York art world.² For these reasons, I present an account of what can be constructed of Mendieta's years at A.I.R. Gallery in hopes that this adds to the picture we have of the artist: not so much *where* she is – or is not – today, but *where* and *who* she was at the time.³

Initially, Mendieta took an active role in the gallery's artist-run structure. Among other responsibilities, she staffed the reception desk where her physical presence put her at the hub of the popular hang-out. In this way she came into contact with curators such as Lucy Lippard and Lowery Stokes Simms. At the same time, the office duties were not always a welcomed distraction. In May 1979 she wrote to her former teacher and partner Hans Breder: "I am sitting at AIR now and can't really write you a decent letter because I am constantly being interrupted."⁴

In addition to "gallery sitting," Mendieta served on three committees – one more than was required including the committee for the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) grant.⁵ With Nancy Spero and Pat Lasch, she planned the Monday Night Program Series.⁶ As A.I.R. was also looking to relocate, she worked with Sarah Draney, Edelson and Spero on the Search Committee (Figure 1).⁷

In part, Mendieta became an eager early participant due to her existing relationship with Edelson. While still living in Iowa, on her colleague's suggestion, Mendieta was invited to exhibit in *Out of New York*, a show that traveled from



Figure 1. A.I.R. Members, 1979. Left–right, top: Mary Beth Edelson, Nancy Spero, Donna Byars, Rachel bas-Cohain, Sarah Draney, Dotty Attie, Anne Healy, Pat Lasch, Clover Vail, Ana Mendieta, Daria Dorosh. Photo by Diane Church. Courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery and The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

A.I.R. to the Women's Building in Los Angeles (Figure 2). Her unpublished statement for the show illuminates additional reasons for her interest in the cooperative. She wrote: "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."⁸ From this statement one can easily imagine that the gallery's participatory model would have appealed to Mendieta as she was invested in determining the framework in which her art would be presented to the public. Fellow member, Pat Lasch, also recounted that Ana was searching for a sense of community because of the loss of homeland.⁹ For a period, A.I.R. would offer this temporary home. However, the ideals of the group's mission and model did not always match with the fiscal reality of operating a gallery.

In 1979, the organization had lost much needed funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Although the loss of National Endowment for the Arts funding was significant, NYSCA awarded the organization \$8,000, \$3,500 of which was budgeted for the exhibit of Third World women artists that Mendieta had proposed (Figure 3).¹⁰ Some of the remaining funds were earmarked for the Monday Evening Program series, which allowed the gallery to indirectly pay for general operating expenses.

Each year many artists and art professionals found a place to showcase new work and ideas as part of the program series. Some events, including a round-table on the Task Force on Discrimination against Women and Minority Artists, in which Mendieta was involved, were planned to discuss issues, identify solutions and offer new courses of action.¹¹ Workshops on practical aspects of art production and career development were also offered. More theoretical panels were an opportunity to see work produced by women artists and to dialogue with women who were active in the art world.

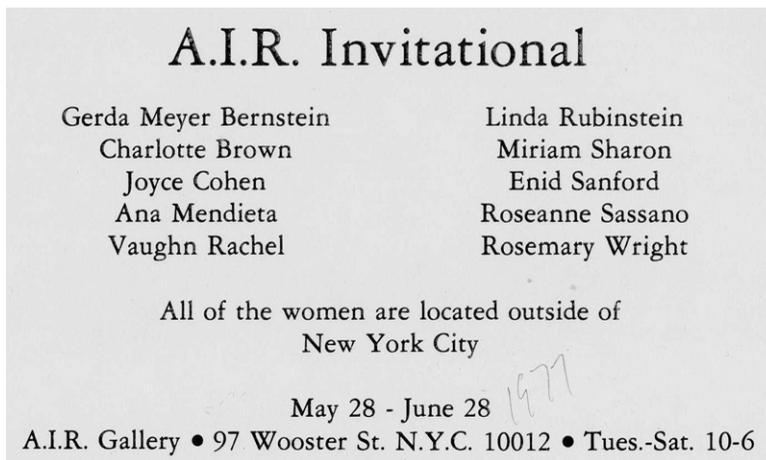


Figure 2. Exhibition invitation for *Out of New York, A.I.R. Invitational*, 28 May–28 June 1977.

THE		
THE DIALECTICS OF ISOLATION: THIRD WORLD ARTISTS OF THE UNITED STATES -		
<u>BUDGET</u>		
Expenses:		
Rent Overhead		
Rent	\$500	
Salary	550	
Telephone	50	
Utilities	60	
Maintenance	100	
sub-total		\$1,260
Exhibit Direct Costs		
Catalogue	2,750	
Advertising	815	
Announcements &		
Postage	475	
Shipping &		
Insurance	1,200	
sub-total		\$5,240
TOTAL EXPENSES		\$6,500
Income:		
New Yorks State Council on The Arts	\$3,500	
Catalogue Sales	500	
TOTAL ANTICIPATED INCOME		\$4,000
Amount Requested		\$2,500

Figure 3. Budget for the *Dialectics of Isolation* exhibition.

Regardless of her early interest in the Monday Evening Program committee, by late 1979 Mendieta had only agreed to stay on until a replacement was found.¹² In contrast to her early enthusiasm and regular attendance, she was not present at that month's meeting, also failing to be present for a number of others the following spring. The 1980 winter issue of the gallery's newsletter announced her Guggenheim Grant and noted that her seven week absence was due to a teaching position at the Art Institute of Chicago and the production of a sculpture for a show organized by Washington Projects for the Arts in DC.¹³ Increasingly, the creation of new pieces took Mendieta further from New York, as she traveled to Cuba to create site-specific works that would make up her 1981 exhibit, "Esculturas Rupestres/Rupestrian Sculptures."

Notwithstanding her absence from the committee, participation in the Monday programs allowed Mendieta increased exposure. Early on she spoke on the panel, Latin American Women Artists. Later, Harmony Hammond also invited her to join Theoretical Concepts in Feminist Art, beside such significant colleagues as

Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Semmel and May Stevens. During her exhibit, *Siluetta Series*, Mendieta organized her own screening: *Ana Mendieta: Selected Films of Earth Sculptures* and later a program simply listed as *Recent films*. As the exhibitions were made up only of Mendieta's photographs, the evening series was a critical occasion to demonstrate other aspects of her work. For, as Gilbert Coker wrote for *Art in America*: "to really appreciate Mendieta's exploratory sensual drama, one has to see her documentary films."¹⁴

As the artist activated opportunities she also created new prospects for other marginalized artists. *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* would be Mendieta's most passionate and significant contribution to gallery's larger mission. Her initial proposal involved an unusual – and costly – suggestion that the show be curated by three New York-based art professionals from different backgrounds. As an alternative, three artists – Mendieta, Kazuko and Zarina – coordinated the project. Zarina designed the catalogue. Mendieta wrote the introductory essay and Kazuko contributed to other aspects of the installation. Like the work of the membership of A.I.R. overall, the show included a range of media but also reflected Mendieta's own sensibilities. Selena Whitefeather presented a nature-based piece and Lydia Okumura's catalogue statement alluded to her ties to the Earth.¹⁵ Judy Baca and A.I.R. member, Howardena Pindell, offered pieces that attested to racism within the United States in general and in the feminist movement in particular. Senga Negudi's installation and Janet Olivia Henry's photographs referenced the female body.

Furthermore, Mendieta's catalogue statement underscored her ambivalence to A.I.R. itself – an organization that could be a vehicle for this radical exhibition, but also a group that was not as politically motivated or as diverse as she would have liked (Figure 4).¹⁶ Still, *Dialectics* was a success by any standards. The Metropolitan Museum of Art bought two of Beverley Buchanan's sculptures and the critical reviews were good.¹⁷ A full-page September 1980 article in the *Village Voice* by Carrie Rickey titled, "The Passion of Ana," illustrated that despite the cooperative nature of the organizing process the show was seen as Mendieta's personal, "declarative" project.¹⁸

Besides serving as venue for the exposure of one's work and principles, A.I.R. had a social element as well. Potluck dinners and parties held by fellow members were important to the growth of Mendieta's network. On 14 March 1979, Edelson gave a costume party at her SoHo loft that was to be Ana's first introduction to a number of women in the New York art scene.¹⁹ With a blend of humor and social critique, Edelson asked the attendees to come dressed as their favorite woman artist. While Mendieta came as Frida Kahlo and Edelson as Leanor Fini, others choose unrelated costumes including six women – including Louise Bourgeois and former A.I.R. members Barbara Zucker and Judith Bernstein – who came as themselves (Figure 5).²⁰ By many accounts, the community that was fostered by such events made it possible to continue the hard work of running a successful gallery. This was particularly true in 1981 as A.I.R. was in the process of relocating to 63 Crosby Street.

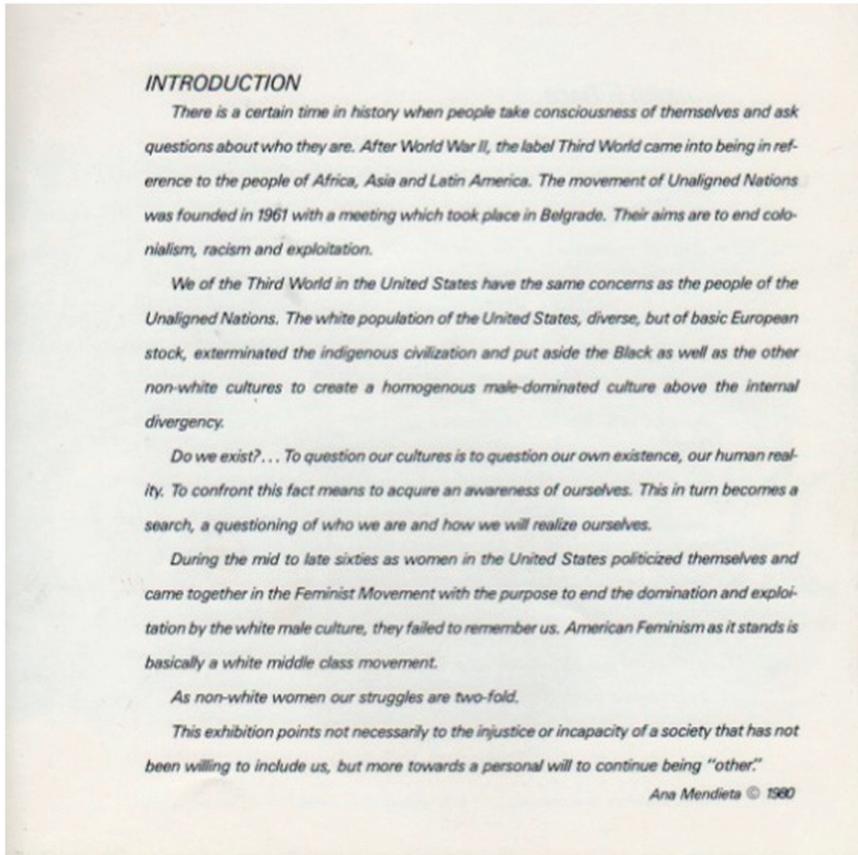


Figure 4. Introductory text for the *Dialectics of Isolation* catalog. Courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery and The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

In order to operate the new space a legal partnership was created in which the artists contributed between \$1,000 and \$3,000 per person, with Mendieta paying \$2,000.²¹ Although it is unclear what *income* Mendieta derived from sales at A.I.R., it is still worth noting how the financial side of the gallery operated for her and her colleagues. As a “viable alternative to the commercial system” instead of the traditional 50/50 split Mendieta paid monthly dues of \$35 and received 100% of the sale of her work.²² For a show of A.I.R. artists in Sweden, she priced her 10 color photographs at \$300 per print – the equivalent of about \$900 today (Figure 6).

Yet, according to A.I.R.’s particular not-for-profit model, exposure and new exhibition opportunities were considered to be of equal or greater significance to sales. If media attention was an important benchmark of her career, the critical response to Mendieta’s work demonstrated her growing success. The reviews in publications including the *Village Voice* were overwhelmingly positive. Janet Heit, wrote of her *Siluetta Series*: “A female figure built with arms outstretched, as though embracing the world, is both beautiful and frightening.”²³ In contrast, a few stalwart



Figure 5. “Come Dressed as Your Favourite Artist.” Costume Party honoring Louise Bourgeois given by Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta in Edelson’s loft. March 14, 1979. Photo credit: Mary Beth Edelson © 1979. Courtesy Mary Beth Edelson.

critics were openly hostile. In 1981 William Zimmerman wrote the article “Who Puts Women on a Pedestal?” for the *SoHo News*:

We’ve all use out bodies to make angels in the snow. . . It’s pretty trenchant stuff. It can also be sizzling stuff. . . Sometimes her handiwork is hard to detect, and I was reminded of trying to ferret out the rabbit hidden in the designs of *Playboy* covers. This sensation amid work that is so foursquare feminist is embarrassing.²⁴

Such flippant commentary from male critics likely left Mendieta – whom fellow artists described as “tough and ambitious” – unfazed.²⁵ By this point she had a growing number of opportunities outside A.I.R. and support from a broader network of friends and colleagues (Figure 7).

On 19 October 1982 Mendieta submitted a formal resignation letter, followed by an inquiry about selling her partnership.²⁶ 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. Even without this incident, according to another member, Pat Lasch, Mendieta’s association with the now legendary Andre surely played some

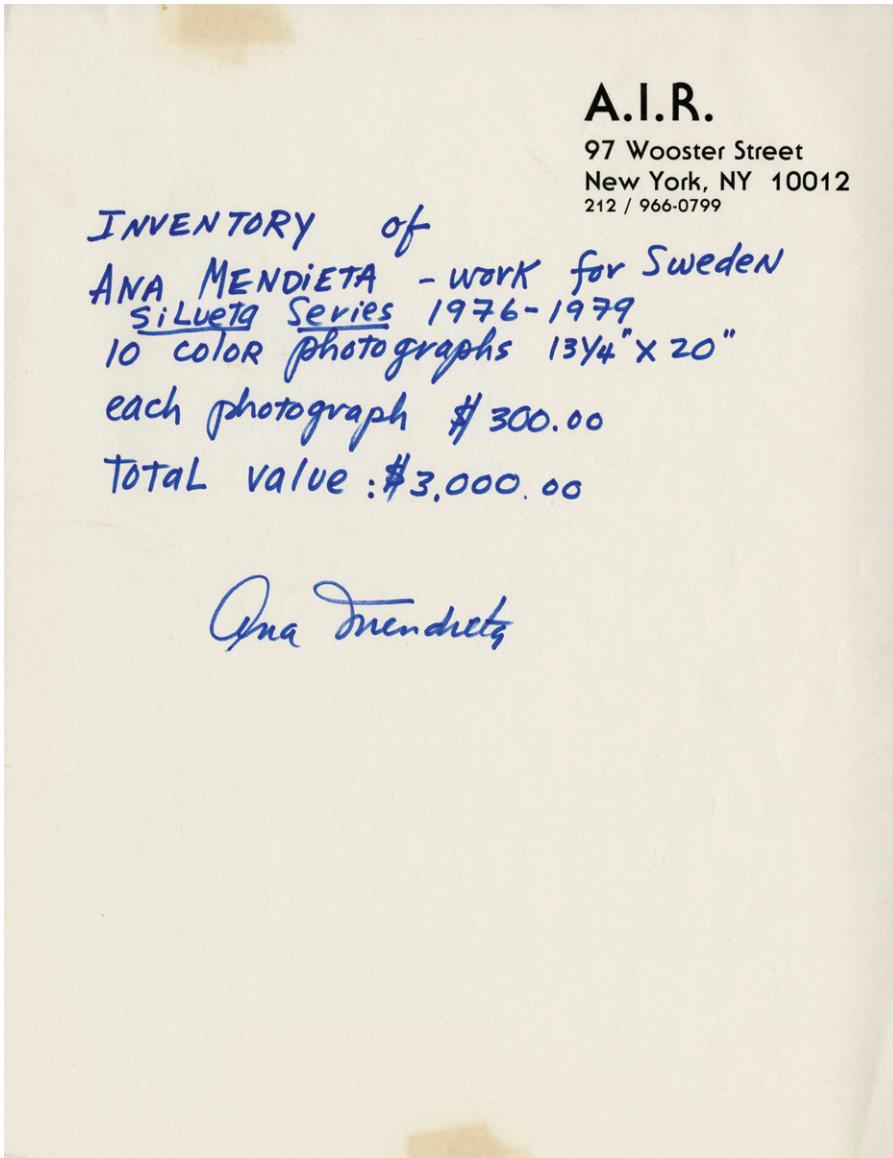


Figure 6. Ana Mendeita's inventory list for exhibition of A.I.R. artists at Lunds Kunsthalle, Sweden, 3 October–1 November 1981.

role in her decision.²⁷ Still, no matter the circumstances of her departure, Ana Mendieta's mark on A.I.R. is unquestionably significant.

However, this is only a snapshot of Mendieta's years with the first all women's gallery in the United States. Further questions regarding *Who* and *where* Mendieta

A.I.R. GALLERY

ANA MENDIETA will be having her first exhibition at A.I.R. GALLERY November 6-24, 1979. The show entitled "Silueta Series 1979" is an ongoing dialogue between the artist and nature.

Cuban born Mendieta states that the making of her earth-body sculptures is not the final stage of a ritual, but a way of asserting her emotional ties with the earth as well as conceptualizing culture. The series of color photographs which will be exhibited are a way of capturing the spirit of the work, as the actual sculptures left on sites are eventually reclaimed by the earth.

On Monday, November 19, the artist will show a selection of recent films documenting the pieces which exist in time. Screening will be at 8:00 P.M.

This year her work on this series has included installations at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York. Her work was also included in the "Exchanges I" exhibition at the Henry Street Settlement, New York. Next year Mendieta's "Silueta Series" will be featured in a one-woman exhibition at the Museu de Arte Contemporanea, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Mendieta is a 1979 C.A.P.S. Sculpture recipient.

Artists in Residence, Inc. 97 Wooster Street, New York 10012 (212)966-0799

Figure 7. Press release for Ana Mendieta's first exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery. Courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery and The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

was naturally surface: What might it mean in terms of location or dislocation that “Mendieta” was misspelled in at least five different ways by fellow artists and outside critics, suggesting a range of alternate nationalities? And on the other hand, what did the feminist structure of the gallery, the administrative work involved and the community of supportive colleagues mean to Mendieta’s overall career? These are only some of the unanswered questions that a larger study of Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. could shed light upon.

Notes on contributor

Kat Griefen, has been the Director of A.I.R. Gallery since 2006. She is an independent curator and the New York Coordinator and a National Committee member for the Feminist Art Project. In 2008 she co-curated *A.I.R. Gallery: The History Show, archival materials from 1972 to the present*, with Dena Muller and Carey Lovelace at A.I.R. and New York University’s Tracey/Barry Gallery. Ms Griefen has lectured widely at conferences and institutions including the College Art Association Annual Conference, the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, the Brooklyn Museum, and New York University. In September 2011 she will open Accola Griefen Gallery in Chelsea, New York, with Kristen Accola.

Notes

1. A.I.R. Members Meeting Minutes, 17 May 1978, The A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 2, folder 67, New York University Libraries. All archival materials cited courtesy of Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.
2. Katz 1990, 238.
3. This paper was original presented on the occasion of *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Donde esta Ana Mendieta? 25 Years Later – An Exhibition and Symposium*, which opened on 1 August 2010 and ran through 8 October 2010 at NYU Bobst Library. The symposium was organized by Richard Move and took place on 7 October 2010 at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.
4. Katz 1990, 270.
5. A.I.R. Gallery Committee List, 1978–1979, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 2, folder 67, New York University Libraries.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ana Mendieta, “Unpublished Statement,” 1977, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 10, folder 406, New York University Libraries.
9. Interview by the author with Pat Lasch, 20 September 2010.
10. A.I.R. Gallery Members Meeting Minutes, 4 February 1980, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 2, folder 67, New York University Libraries. In addition to NYSCA, Mendieta sought funding for the show’s budget of \$6,500 from ConEd, Phillip Morris and the Mobil Foundation. While the first two corporations did not provide any support, a stamp that was added to the printed exhibition cards confirms that the Mobil Foundation eventually funded the project.
11. Although the program announcement for the 26 June 1978 meeting of the group at A.I.R. does not list Mendieta as an organizer or moderator, she was likely in attendance as Jane Blocker, author of “Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile,” writes that after 1978 Ana was “heavily involved” in the group (Blocker 1999, 48).
12. A.I.R. Gallery Members Meeting Minutes, 6 December 1979, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 2, folder 67, New York University Libraries.

13. A.I.R. Gallery Newsletter, December 1980–January 1981, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 4, folder 164, New York University Libraries.
14. Coker 1980, 133–4.
15. Born in a certain space and time, carrying a certain color in the face, learning about lines and borders of those spaces, in different languages, every one having a personal history, obviously belongs to the same space – The Earth. Lydia Okumura, “Untitled Statement,” the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 11, folder 440, New York University Libraries; repr. Okumura 1980, 12.
16. Mendieta 1980, 1.
17. A.I.R. Gallery Newsletter, fall 1980, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 4, folder 164, New York University Libraries.
18. Rickey 1980, 75.
19. Edelson 2002, 43–4.
20. Ibid.
21. A.I.R. Gallery Partnership Agreement, 1981, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 1, folder 41, New York University Libraries.
22. A.I.R. Gallery Proposal, 1972, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 2, folder 64, New York University Libraries.
23. Coker 1980, 134.
24. Zimmerman 1981, 25. One year later, as Mendieta’s career developed, Zimmerman wrote her a much more positive review, although for very similar works, on the occasion of an exhibit at Yvonne Seguy Gallery. The review was published in *ARTgallery Guide* in November 1982, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 8, folder 228, New York University Libraries.
25. Interview by the author with Lasch.
26. Ana Mendieta, “Resignation Letter,” 19 October 1982, the A.I.R. Gallery Archive, MSS 184, box 11, folder 440, New York University Libraries.
27. Interview by the author with Mary Beth Edelson, 20 September 2010.

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