

The Body is Present Even if in Disguise: Tracing the Trace in the Artwork of Nancy Spero and Ana Mendieta

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In the early 1990s [Nancy Spero](#) composed a series of homages to her deceased friend, the Cuban artist [Ana Mendieta](#). This commemoration involved her staging a recreation of a performance she had seen Mendieta act out in 1982. Paying homage to one's female cultural forebears is a common trend in feminist practice, only in this case Spero was commemorating the work of a much younger artist. Mendieta – the second generation 'daughter' – is commemorated by the elder, first generation 'foremother', in a reversal of the usual matrilineal model. These two artists were linked by geographical location, friendship and, most importantly of all, a shared commitment to feminist politics and feminist art in the late 1970s. They admired one another's work as well as being 'comrades' or collaborators on various projects and protests in New York.¹

On the many occasions Spero and Mendieta participated in protest activities across the city, their bodies functioned as the site and agent of political protest. This physical agency directly entered the arena of the art works in this encounter as each artist performed her body as an artistic tool and a conceptual reference. However, on delving further into the implications of this bodily exchange, and situating it in the wider context of both artists' practice, it is possible to see that the body of each artist is distanced, mediated and cleverly disguised. This is especially the case in Spero's practice, and also in Mendieta's, when her art is examined from the perspective of Spero's personal interpretation of her oeuvre. While Mendieta often presented her body in an overt way in her work, especially in the early performance pieces, this direct display eventually declined as she became more and more interested in creating abstracted signs based loosely on the dimensions of her body. The reasons why these artists should feel the need to ensure this distance need to be elaborated in relation to the feminist context in which they worked, especially the debates concerning female representation.

Mendieta's performance entitled *Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales)* took place on the evening of 8 April 1982, in an intimate performance space known as Franklin Furnace in New York City. The press release for the event stated that the work had been performed previously in 1976 at the International Cultureel Centrum in Antwerp, Belgium, and involved 'white cloths and animal blood'. Aside from this brief description of the event, the audience was literally in the dark as to what might happen once the lights would be dimmed at 8.30pm.² Waiting in anticipation in a semi-circle directed away from the main area of the performance space, the small cross-section of the New York art community sat facing three blank pieces of paper attached to a softly lit wall. Suddenly, the sound of beating drums pierced the silence and Mendieta entered the room wearing a shapeless outfit of a baggy white shirt and pair of trousers. Without acknowledging her audience she walked in a purposeful stride up to the wall where a bowl of animal blood and tempera sat positioned on the floor.³ Dipping and thoroughly coating her hands and arms in the mixture, she walked up to the first sheet of paper and pressed her hands and arms firmly to its surface (fig.1).



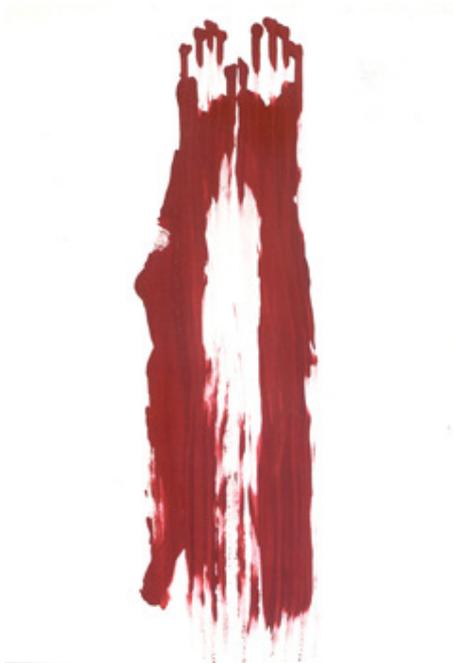
Fig.1
 Ana Mendieta
Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales) 1982
 Photograph taken during a performance at Franklin Furnace, New York City
 Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
 © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

The resulting hand-prints resembled the representation-by-touch that the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman describes in his discussion of the genealogy of the imprint. Published on the occasion of an exhibition entitled *L'Empreinte* at the Centre Pompidou in 1997, his essay explains how the hand-print is a tactile form of representation that closes the gap between the mimetic reflection and its model, thereby avoiding the dominance of the eye and mind, imitation and idea.⁴ In the 1970s this residual sign of presence was conceived as an 'index' in discourses describing conceptual and performance art. The term, drawn from C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory developed in the late nineteenth century, refers to a sign that is connected to its object by a concrete relationship of cause and effect. Common examples are foot prints, weathervanes and symptoms of disease which are signs that are materially acted upon by the objects they seek to identify.⁵



Fig.2
 Ana Mendieta
Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales) 1982
 Photograph taken during a performance at Franklin Furnace, New York City
 Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
 © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

Within Mendieta's performance, however, something happened to the sign which changed its status as a static and contained mark. Mendieta's clothed body began a slow and dramatic journey to the ground and, as she made her descent, her blood-soaked hands and arms were dragged down the surface of the paper as a visceral track of movement (fig.2). The arms moved down, leaving a corporeal trace, and the hands followed in a retracing of their action in what appeared to be a primitive and uncertain attempt at figuration. The finger marks journeyed through the tracks made by the arms and hands before them, voiding their status as an original trace, and in so doing this second trace re-presented and superimposed the first (fig.3). Mendieta went on to repeat this bloody gesture two more times before turning and walking out of the room, leaving her audience to contemplate three painted re-presentations of her body (fig.4–5).



Figs.3–5
 Ana Mendieta
Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales) 1982
 Blood and tempera on paper
 Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
 © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

These pieces of paper were taken down from the wall by the artist later that evening in an attempt to preserve some documentary evidence of the event. They appear now as works of art in their own right in the collection of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University. Other documents include the photographs commissioned by Franklin Furnace for its slide archive, and oral accounts of some of the audience. Nearly ten years after Mendieta's brief and powerful performance, and six years after the tragic death of the artist in 1985, a subjective recollection of the event was enacted as a staged recreation by one of the original audience members. Nancy Spero was creating a temporary wall installation based on the theme of female victimage at the Von der Heydt Museum in Wuppertal,

Germany. Entitled *Ballad to Marie Sanders, The Jew's Whore* 1991, from a ballad by Bertolt Brecht, Spero juxtaposed Brecht's tale of a woman punished for sleeping with a Jew with an image of a naked and bound female figure found in the possession of a member of the Gestapo. Hand-printed on the walls in German, the stanzas of the ballad ended each time with the hypnotic repetition of the words 'the drums are rolling' (fig.6). Spero recently recalled how, as these words were printed on the wall, she had an 'epiphany' and was transported back to 1982 to the sound of the *Santería* drums beating during Mendieta's *Body Tracks* performance.⁶



Fig.6
Nancy Spero
The Ballad of Marie Sanders, The Jew's Whore 1991
Hand-printing on wall
Temporary installation, Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal, Germany
© Nancy Spero



Fig.7
 Nancy Spero
Homage to Ana Mendieta 1991
 Ink on wall (temporary installation)
 Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal, Germany
 © Nancy Spero

On completion of the *Ballad* there was an unexpected area of wall left exposed, and with no additional printing plates at her disposal, Spero decided to make a spontaneous and improvised homage to Mendieta. Ink the colour of blood was mixed up in a bowl, and from the artist's memory of the Franklin Furnace performance which she recalls as being 'powerful and tremendous', she directed one of her assistants to retrace the marks that Mendieta's body had left on the paper, this time down the surface of a white wall (fig.7). She entitled the work *Homage to Ana Mendieta* 1991, and two years later she decided to recreate the piece with her own body as the 'brush', this time at the Whitney Museum Biennial in New York City (fig.8). This rehearsed and carefully documented version was repeated once more at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut in 1995 (fig.9).⁷ Paralleling the suite of three body tracks made during the Franklin Furnace performance, the third *Homage* brought to an end an artistic encounter that was dominated by re-tracing, re-presenting and re-telling.



Fig.8
Nancy Spero
Homage to Ana Mendieta 1993
Ink on wall (temporary installation)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
© Nancy Spero



Fig.9
Film still from Irene Sosa's documentary video *Nancy Spero: Homage to Ana Mendieta*, 2004, showing Spero creating her *Homage* at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut, 1995
© Irene Sosa

No critical attempt has been made to situate these two artists together, despite the fact that there is an important similarity in the way in which they chose to mediate their bodies in their art.⁸ This failure to compare their work can be linked to the issue of self-representation: Mendieta obsessively repeats the image of her body in her oeuvre, while Spero goes to equal lengths to avoid not only self-representation but any form of direct physical engagement in her practice. However, a piece of writing published by Spero in 1992 offers an interpretation of Mendieta's art as a representation of an archetypal female form. In Spero's reading, the body that Mendieta images so insistently in her work is wiped of its individual make-up to become an anonymous and malleable performer. Entitled 'Tracing Ana Mendieta' and composed as another form of tribute to the artist after Spero's first homage in 1991, the text de-emphasises the subjective nature of Mendieta's self-portraits. Focused primarily on the art which Mendieta produced in the landscape – where the dimensions of the artist's body were traced as a shape or silhouette in a variety of different natural materials – Spero describes these works as presenting 'the symbol of the female body' and 'an abstracted female form'.⁹

This concept of an abbreviated bodily sign can be seen in a photograph of a work by Mendieta which Spero acquired in the early 1990s, at a time when the artist was creating her series of tributes to her friend. Aside from her own work, and that of her late husband Leon Golub, which is contained in the studio by necessity, this photograph is a rare example of another artist's work which Spero has put on display in her personal space. *Untitled (Silueta Series)* 1973 shows Mendieta's dimensions marked out as a bloody stain on a piece of white cloth which the artist had attached to a stone niche in a wall in Mexico (fig.10).¹⁰ If we were to interpret this work in line with Spero's descriptions in 'Tracing Ana Mendieta', we would consider it to be a stylised symbol of a universal female form as opposed to a bloody 'index' of the artist's body. Perhaps it is the 'trace' of 'the shape of a woman' which Spero writes about in her tribute which she likens directly to 'the recessive mark left by a victim of the bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki'. This shadow image – an icon which has become emblematic of the ghostly human imprints left by nuclear genocide – has been adopted by Spero many times as a printed and collaged female figure, and which she imbues with symbolic significance as an archetypal sign of female suffering and endurance (fig.11).¹¹



Fig.10
Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico) 1976
35mm colour slide
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
© Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection



Fig.11
Nancy Spero
Mourning Women / Irradiated 1985
Hand-printing and collage on paper 50.8 x 134.6 cm
© Nancy Spero

With Spero's interpretation of these works in mind, should we conceive Mendieta's *Body Tracks* and also Spero's *Homage to Ana Mendieta* in a similar manner? Are these bloody tracks indicative of something other than the physical form which composed them? If this is indeed the case, then the title 'Tracing Ana Mendieta' is relevant only to Spero 'tracing' the tracks made by another body. It does not

apply to Mendieta's own work if the artist can be said to convey something much more general and impersonal in character than her own individual frame ('the imagery, strength, mystery and sexuality of the female human form').¹² Yet, to some extent, the title describes the subjective aspect of Mendieta inscribing the dimensions of her body, and it is the object and focus of this article to propose that it is possible to think of Spero 'tracing' her own corporeality in her art. By framing the interpretation of this encounter around Spero's staged readings of Mendieta's work, we learn as much about her own practice as we do about the subject of her remembrance. 'Tracing Ana Mendieta' and the three 'homages' conducted in 1991, 1993 and 1995 are personal accounts of a body of work which Spero interprets in line with her own agendas of self-representation and commemoration.

For this reason, it is important to examine how Spero's recreation of *Body Tracks* and her writing on the earth-body sculptures functions as a filter through which to examine her own art. Using Mendieta in this comparative sense is not repressive or inaccurate as it also allows for an interesting discussion of her art in the context of a body of work which she is known to have greatly admired.¹³ The investigative terms are reciprocal and thereby sympathetic to a feminist code of ethics which both artists were committed to endorsing in their art and in their politics. Looking first at the situation of the *Body Tracks/Homage* relationship, and then relating it to Spero's hand-printing technique and vocal mimicry from the perspective of a continuing dialogue with Mendieta's art, we can begin to understand how Spero develops a complex and highly mediated form of artistic expression. Whether her 'substitute' is a printing plate, a retraced body or a voice which is not her own, Spero ensures that she is able to speak and affirm her identity as a woman and as an artist ('My body, my presence mediated by the mark on the paper, is no longer absent. I speak.')

¹⁴

The most significant point to emerge from this dialogic engagement is Spero's emphasis on the de-individualised nature of many of Mendieta's earthen portraits – there are, according to Spero, no 'accidents of individuality'.¹⁵ Her description of the works focuses on those examples which display an earthen substitute of the artist, as evidenced by the selection of photographs included in the article. The art historian Susan Best has recently shown how this 'classic' emphasis on absence in Mendieta's art was made in order to rescue her work from the critique of essentialism proposed in 1980s feminism.¹⁶ Women artists who displayed their bodies in their art were shown to be at risk of endorsing a narcissistic and biologically reductive image of womanhood. Aware of this criticism, Spero emphasised Mendieta's absence in order to position the younger artist's work as similar to her own art, which is characterised by an iconography of stylised and symbolic female forms divorced from the mimetic and tactile signs of her own body. Or so we think, until we go back to 1988 to an earlier piece of writing composed by Spero which describes how her body is mediated by her entourage of iconic female figures. Entitled 'Sky-Goddess – Egyptian Acrobat', the text explains how Spero adopts a 'symbolic' as opposed to indexical or iconic self-representation. She writes: 'The artefact (artist's product) is a symbolic embodiment of the visual artist. Expression may be abstracted, but the body is present even if in disguise.'¹⁷ The agency shown in the physical creation of Spero's printed and collaged iconography, and also, by implication, in Mendieta's earth-body sculptures, is a sign or mediator of the artist's corporeal presence.

Spero allows us to see that both she and Mendieta share a strategy which enables them to be both present and absent in their work; present in the sense of a tangible and empowering artistic agency, and absent in how they refer to a self which is distanced and oblique – a 'self-portrait in ruins' which avoids the authenticating markers of mimetic similitude or indexical presence. Adapted from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's catalogue essay on drawing – *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and other Ruins* (1990) – this concept is key to the idea of how these artists appear to develop a method of representing and expressing the self *differently*.¹⁸ As a feminist-inspired task, this method of self-representation is not grounded in naive essentialism or a playful masquerade as it evades the imposed and clichéd categories of a first and second 'wave' politics of the self. Rather, what these

artists aim to achieve is to exercise their right and desire to confirm and consolidate their identities as female artists.

If we go back to the first instance of retracing in Mendieta's performance, we can see how it can be related to the *transcendental retrace* that Jacques Derrida describes in his theory of drawing.¹⁹ Mendieta's original *trait* – the imprint of her hand on the paper – was superimposed by the destructive tracks made by the fingers and so this *retracement* was a memorial to the tactile origin. In attempting to record where her body touched a surface Mendieta voided the indexicality of her tracks, just as Butades' daughter, in the Plinian account of the origin of drawing, voided the indexicality of her lover's shadow when she traced a contour around it. The moment of touch and the aura of presence it encapsulates were radically lost in this palimpsest of retracings.²⁰ With this in mind, Spero's *Homages* increase this distance from the 'original' trace already instigated in Mendieta's performance. The younger artist's drawn *trait* retreated in the act of Spero's *retracement*, and so the *Homage* became a memorialisation to this absent 'other'.

Yet this idea of an archival trace of absence conflicts with the sense of positive agency generated in this act of homage. While on the one hand Spero described this method of repetition as a way of keeping Mendieta's work alive, at the same time she insisted that her homage was a subjective 'recreation' as opposed to a passive mirror act or imitation.²¹ Whether it was her own body making the mark or that of her assistant, the gesture spoke a personal message of commemoration. She mediated the trace of another, retelling it in her own story, and each time she repeated the gesture she slightly altered its emphasis. Mendieta, for example, used her hands and arms in her performance while Spero used only the former, and in the case when Spero used her hands as a brush, the markings signified an older body contorted with the pain of arthritis. The traces of her frail hands – unsteady, uncertain, stunted as the creaky fingers mark their stiff and slow trajectory – retrace and commemorate the marks of a more able body. Likewise, Mendieta made subtle variations in the tracks left by her body in 1982, positioning her hands and arms at slightly different points on the paper in order to individualise each marking.²²

Each work therefore had its own distinct identity and the model of generative reproduction implied in this encounter suggests a positive and insistent sense of remembering. The *Homage* is a body-to-body remembering of Mendieta's performance at Franklin Furnace, just as the two later *Homages* at the Whitney and the Aldrich are body-to-body recordings of Spero's first spontaneous recreation at Wuppertal. This idea of an 'embodied remembering' is introduced by the performance art historian Rebecca Schneider in her formulation of an alternative form of documenting performance art. Discounting the logic of the archive which she sees as being dominated by the privileging of sight and the value of the object, she promotes a form of remembering that short-circuits the emphasis on disappearance usually associated with performance art and its documentation.²³ Spero's *Homage* is an embodied remembering of another's body, and it is through this mediation that she achieves an empowered sense of artistic agency. Even though she does not use her own body in her first recreation, there is a sense of her presence exerted in her vicarious occupation of Mendieta's gesture.²⁴ A dialogic meeting occurs between these two female artists which enables them to co-exist in a mutual exchange of artistic empowerment. Spero allows Mendieta's work and memory to 'stay alive', while Mendieta provides a medium or vessel – a suitable cover – by which the older artist can exert her artistic identity.²⁵

There is a resulting play of presence and absence in how Spero mediates the 'voice' of another in a gesture that is not her own. She is a 'conduit' – a word she has used to describe her role in this piece and also in her earlier paper scroll entitled *Codex Artaud 1971*.²⁶ The Latin origin of 'conduit' is *conductus* or 'conduct', and it is interesting to note that its principle denotation is to lead or guide. One thinks of the orchestral conductor, divorced from the physical creation of sound yet crucial to its mode of expression. The gesture of *Body Tracks* becomes a language or a voice that enables Spero to

articulate her homage to Mendieta. She is both active mediator and passive receptacle in this complex display of presence and absence. This encounter is pivotal as it epitomises the ventriloquial manner in which Spero chooses to ‘speak’ in her art. Beginning with her adoption of the voice of the French poet Antonin Artaud in her *Artaud Paintings* 1969, she has developed a highly mediated form of self-expression that has evolved from a passive ventriloquism into a more empowered sense of speaking through another. In 1988 she described her work in the following terms: ‘I can speak most directly (though often, by necessity, obliquely) through painting or printing, articulating by hand, by brush – rather than by word, by mouth’.²⁷ To speak ‘obliquely’ suggests that one cannot speak directly – that one needs to channel one’s voice through the mediation of another. Spero’s art is the medium through which she gains a voice, but the dialogue is conducted with her in disguise. Rejecting the optical and tactile self-portrait, she exerts her presence at a distance from the eye and the hand. She is not imaged or indexically traced in her hand-printed and collaged works from the 1970s, but rather like the conductor or choreographer, she is present in a mediated form of self-expression.

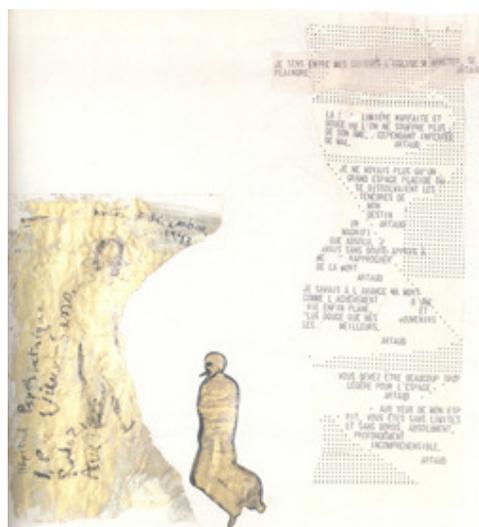


Fig.12
 Nancy Spero
Codex Artaud, 1971
 Panel 6 (detail)
 Typewriting collage, cut-out painting, metallic paint and ink on paper
 © Nancy Spero

Codex Artaud 1971 encapsulates this form of abstract communication. Cinematic in its spatial dimensions, the scroll spans twenty-nine panels made in gouache, painting and typewriting collage on paper.²⁸ Through the medium of Artaud’s writing – a personal account of alienation, disempowerment and physical pain – Spero voiced her own feelings of anger at being exiled as a female artist on the peripheries of the New York art world. Artaud’s existential statements are interspersed across the panels in conjunction with painted and collaged forms that are apocalyptic in appearance. Three-headed serpents, hermaphroditic bodies and ambiguous forms with heads and phallic tongues share the white expanse of paper with bulletin-typed letters collaged to the surface. In panel six, for example (fig.12), Artaud’s voice is captured in collaged bulletin-type and reads: ‘Vous êtes sans limites et sans bords, absolument, profondément incompréhensibles. Artaud’ (You are without limits and boundaries, absolutely and profoundly incomprehensible). This anguished account of isolation translated Spero’s own exiled and silenced position, and somewhere behind these tortured words her presence was exerted, albeit in disguise.

At first there appears to be a major difference in the way in which she pays homage to Mendieta and vocalises Artaud. In the former case she has the active role as a ‘conduit’ of Mendieta’s original *Body Tracks*, while in the latter, she is more passively mediated by a voice or presence that is not her own. This is partly reflected in the way in which the artist inscribes the names of each artist; in her *Homage* she writes in paint across the tracks ‘Homage to Ana Mendieta’ – an act and statement which

clearly designates herself as the subjective centre of the work. However, in the *Codex*, she appears to obsessively write ‘Artaud’ after nearly every citation which suggests that she confers authorship solely on the writer. It is Artaud who takes on the role of the ‘conduit’ here as he mediates the message that Spero is unable to voice directly in a male-dominated art world. This oblique way of articulating the self is reminiscent of a playful ventriloquism, the child-like associations of which are distinctly lost in the context of Artaud’s dark and torrid rantings. Here the disembodied nature of the voice takes on a suspicious and uneasy connotation as it extends and strengthens the message of disempowerment already instigated in the content of the words.

Artaud writes of being profoundly incomprehensible as a body without limits or boundaries and, while Spero can relate to this experience of silence and powerlessness, at the same time her disembodied voice enables her to be comprehensible. She can speak and exert her presence while at the same time avoiding what she calls the ‘accidents of individuality’ which would be a result of her taking on board the more traditional avenues of self-representation and self-expression.²⁹ Instead, what she does is emulate the mediation that is involved in the act of ventriloquism; just as the ventriloquist takes centre stage as (s)he manipulates the surrogate dummy, so in this case Spero directs and controls her detached mouthpiece. The cultural historian Steven Connor, in his study of ventriloquism published in 2000, describes how the ventriloquial voice can have both an active and passive form in accordance with whether it is viewed as the power to speak through others, or the experience of being spoken through by others.³⁰ In the homages and *Codex Artaud*, Spero takes it upon herself to act as the person who is in charge. She speaks a personal message of reverence to Mendieta in her retracing of *Body Tracks*, whereas in *Codex Artaud*, she uses the French artist’s tortured prose as an elaborate cover for her own expressive purpose. While her agency may at first appear compromised as a disembodied voice, she is nonetheless powerfully present as she performs a subjective twist of Artaud’s words. Not only does she display her agency in the way in which she makes a personal selection from the writer’s work, she also performs a double mimicry in her fragmentation of the prose. Breaking the text up, repeating it, and mis-spelling some of the words function as a formal mime of Artaud’s fractured and incoherent voice (fig.13).³¹

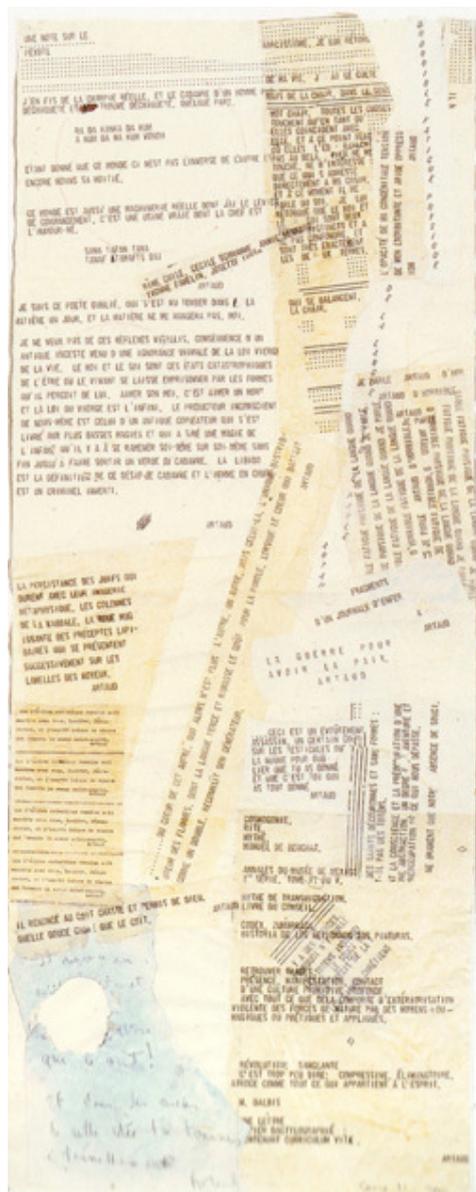


Fig.13
 Nancy Spero
 Codex Artaud 1971
 Panel 27
 Typewriting, gouache collage on paper
 © Nancy Spero

This ‘oblique’ mode of speaking and imaging the self reveals an intentional distancing that Spero and Mendieta share in their retracing. Presenting the self as ‘other’ – representing the self – is a significant aspect of both artists’ practice, and it is formed from a political agenda that aims to dislodge the accepted modes of self-representation. In particular, the artists attempt to avoid the pitfalls that transpire from imaging the self in an essentialist endorsement of the female body. The ‘hand-touch sensibility’ adopted by many feminist artists working in performance and body art in the late 1960s and 1970s was regressive in the sense that it proposed a naïve essentialism, with the female body once again on show as a visually consumable object.³² Similarly, the empty simulacrum displayed in postmodern accounts of the performativity of gender is discounted in Spero’s and Mendieta’s embrace of an authentic sense of self.³³ Rather than accept the limitations imposed by both constructivist and essentialist conceptions of identity, they propose a model of self-contained being that is at the same time playfully unstable. In artistic terms, this is imaged and expressed in a substitute form that resists visual, tactile or spoken mediation. We have seen this in the retracing and retelling that mobilise this encounter, and it is continued elsewhere in each artist’s adoption of an external form to mediate her presence. For Mendieta this is a template of her body which she adopted occasionally in her *Siluetas Series* of

1973–1980.³⁴ For Spero, it is in the painted and printed images that act as ‘substitutes’ for her body. In each case, an effigy of the artist is adopted to *represent* them in a masquerade form that constantly changes throughout their work.

Mendieta’s template was based directly on the dimensions of her body, in a stylised pose that was reminiscent of the Great Goddess with her arms raised in the air. It was made by her lying on a piece of foam core board and having her contours traced and then cut out from the material.³⁵ Carrying this effigy of herself into the landscape and using it to either trace her dimensions in the earth, imprint her image on a surface, or directly stand in for her body, Mendieta voided the essentialism contained in the feminist ideal of a tactile union with nature.³⁶ With her actual body distanced from her practice, this embrace with nature became an act of symbolisation rather than an essentialising expression of the maternal female body. Moreover, the varied ways in which the template was used in Mendieta’s work dramatically differed from its usual function of multiple reproduction. Each time it was used it *represented* Mendieta’s body in a different form, thereby negating the vacuous reproducibility associated with the archival trace.



Fig. 14
Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Silueta Series) 1978
Wooden template mud silueta, Iowa
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
© Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection



Fig. 15
Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Silueta Series) 1978
Silueta in mud, Iowa
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
© Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

In one *Siluetta* from 1978 (fig.14) we see the wooden template covered in mud and sand and positioned in a watery Iowan landscape, while in another *Siluetta*, again from 1978 (fig.15), the template has been used to imprint the negative impression of Mendieta's body in the earth. The fact that these interventions in nature were recorded and reproduced photographically might suggest that they end up operating as a mass-producible 'souvenir' of absence.³⁷ Yet, Mendieta spared herself this fate of disappearance by avoiding a direct representation of her body in the first place. No matter how many times these photographs are reproduced, they will always refer to a body that is already absent. Even in those instances where her body was traced literally in the earth, this tactile mark operated in the same vein as her *Body Tracks* – as a stylised *re*-presentation. Avoiding the narcissistic mirror image, Mendieta adopted various disguises in order to mediate a presence that was in essence oblique and the *Siluetas* evolve as a single self-portrait composed of constantly changing elements. This is not a repetition based on a memory of what is absent or lost, and neither is it a chaotic, groundless simulacrum operating in a vacuous *mise-en-abyme* of difference. The varying 'phantasms' that Mendieta adopted still function as a relaxed form of icon, maintaining the Platonic binary of model and copy in a mobile, additive process of self-representation that insists on presence. Identity is in the making in these different ways of remembering Mendieta's body, and it is through this radical manipulation of the template that she achieved a powerful sense of artistic agency.



Fig.16
Nancy Spero
The First Language 1981
Hand-printing, printing, painted collage on paper
22 panels
© Nancy Spero

This political strategy of distancing is shared by Spero in her own equivalent of a template form, except here the effigy is based on a ready-made icon rather than the dimensions of her own body. Cloned from prehistorical, mythical, and contemporary sources found in an assortment of literary publications, this 'alphabet' of female forms is represented and repeated across her entire oeuvre.³⁸ In panels seven and nine of her scroll entitled *The First Language* 1982, for example, her figural lexicon is handprinted directly onto the paper, or printed and cut out and collaged to the surface (fig.16). Both techniques displace the temporal and spatial moment of origin, just as Mendieta's drawn and photographic retracing distances us from the moment of touch. Indeed, what is interesting about Spero's female forms is that there is rarely a moment of origin or touch one can trace back to. The printing plate references a source that is often unlocatable, and so there is very little point in trying to determine the origin of her wide-ranging iconography. Her methodology comprises of research in visual source material, and when she finds an image of interest, she traces it or has it copied and directly transferred to a printing plate without her mediation. Even when her hand is engaged in the initial tracing process, this preliminary stage of drawing is made inaccessible by the process of transplanting (as in the case of collage) and translating (as in the case of the printing plate).³⁹

Yet we would be mistaken to interpret this iconic and indexical disconnection from the artist's body as an empty simulation of presence and identity. Spero has described her printing plates as substitutes for her body, just as Mendieta's template acts as an effigy of her frame. While they are not based directly on her body, they mediate her presence via the artistic agency that is reflected in their manipulation by hand and their choreographic positioning on paper. Hand-printing is peculiarly bound to

and separate from the hand and it affords the freedom and physical engagement that one finds in painting and drawing. While the printing plate cannot relay the physical or conceptual directness of the drawn or painted mark, the hand is in constant contact with the plate, rubbing it, moving it, and pressing down on it. The repetition of the running figure in panel seven, for example, reveals how the handprinting method ensures difference even if the template of the figure remains the same. Each print registers the changes produced by varying the speed and pressure applied to the plate, and the colour and manner in which the paint is applied.⁴⁰ The emphasis constantly changes, just as it did in the series of body tracks and homages that began this encounter, and which continue in the ever-changing masquerade that Mendieta's silhouette and Spero's ventriloquial voice and printed alphabet perform.

Identity is insisted upon rather than simply repeated or *represented* in these artists' work. There is a humanist element in the way in which Spero and Mendieta see their art as performing their subjectivity, even if this personal reference is veiled and unconnected from the body in a literal sense. In Spero's case there is no physical resemblance to anchor this humanistic project as her ventriloquised voices and borrowed printed icons are purely symbolic substitutes. But does this mean that they are any less affirmatory or meaningful? One could argue that this idea of an 'oblique' self-expression is far-fetched and ineffectual, dangerously cut off from the vessel that enacts its agency and authenticity. The body and the tongue are swapped for another body and another tongue, whether this is Mendieta, Artaud, or her female 'alphabet'. Spero does, however, locate her agency and identity as a woman artist through her acts of borrowing and disguise, and it is an agency which is not only realised through her critical mimicry of artistic precedents set by men. As we have seen in her creative dialogue with Mendieta's *Body Tracks*, there is another form of mimicry which positions Spero's art within a feminist practice. Her role as a 'conduit' of the messages and artistic works composed by and centred on women is political in its scope. As she ensures that her own voice is given significance and power from the creative inter-changes she sets up, she also ensures that the material and voices she cites are rescued from their exclusion and given the recognition they deserve.

Notes

1. Spero was a member of WAR (Women Artists in Revolution), a splinter group of the Art Workers' Coalition. She also helped found the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Group and contributed to, and featured in, the feminist art publication *Heresies*, as did Mendieta. The Cuban artist's feminism took a slightly different turn in the early 1980s when she became interested in the issue of race as well as gender. This originated from her own sense of being 'other' in terms of her Cuban identity, which conflicted with the dominantly white, middle class bias of 1970s feminist politics.
2. Franklin Furnace was a progressive exhibition and performance space founded in 1976. It was closed down in 1990 owing to fire-safety issues and was relocated at a new site where it continues to present, preserve and interpret avant-garde art. The Founder and Director is the performance artist Martha Wilson who witnessed Mendieta's performance in 1982. My narrative of the event is based on first-hand accounts provided by Wilson (interview with the author, 14 September 2004) and Nancy Spero (interviews with the author, 4 April 2004 and 10 September 2004). Literary material related to Mendieta's performance was accessed at the Franklin Furnace Archive, located at 45 John Street, New York.
3. Wilson believes that there may have been a bowl of cow's milk present on the floor next to the blood, but the slides of the performance do not appear to show this.
4. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1997.
5. For an account of Peirce's theories, see Robert S. Corrington, *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce, Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist*, Maryland 1993. Peirce differentiates between three dimensions of the sign: 'index', 'icon' and 'symbol'. Rosalind Krauss, in her essay 'II Toward Postmodernism, Notes on the Index, Part I and Part II', uses the term 'index' to characterise certain

conceptual and performance-related art practices of the 1970s. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA, and London 1985.

6. *Santería* is a syncretic religion practiced in Cuba. It is based on Catholicism and certain West African religions that were brought to the Caribbean at the time of the Slave Trade. Interview with the author, 10 September 2004.

7. *Ibid.* A similar situation occurred with the Whitney version. The last two homages (1993, 1995) were documented in a film directed by Irene Sosa entitled *Nancy Spero: Homage to Ana Mendieta*, New York 2004.

8. These two artists do however feature as key figures in the 'canon' of 1970s feminist art practice in the U.S. and this is reflected in their joint inclusion in survey group exhibitions. A recent example is *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (4 March – 16 July 2007) at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

9. Nancy Spero, 'Tracing Ana Mendieta', *Artforum*, New York, vol.30, no.8, April 1992, pp.75–7.

10. Mary Sabbatino has confirmed that the work is a posthumous photograph printed in 1991 (email correspondence with the author, 11 October 2007). Samm Kunce, Spero's assistant, recalls that Spero expressed to Galerie Lelong an interest in purchasing this particular print in the early 1990s (email correspondence with the author, 10 October 2007).

11. Spero, 'Tracing Ana Mendieta', p.77.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Spero explains: 'She (Mendieta) liked my work well enough, and Leon's, and it became mutual.' Interview with the author, 4 April 2004.

14. Nancy Spero, 'Sky Goddess – Egyptian Acrobat', *Artforum*, vol.26, no.7, 1988, pp.103–5

15. Spero, 'Tracing Ana Mendieta', p.77.

16. In her recent article, Best aims to reconsider the meaning of Mendieta's 'essentialism' by examining the relationship between the female body and the gendered 'feminine' space in her art. She reveals how the artist affirms her identity via an 'eco-feminist' and phenomenological relationship with nature. Her argument involves her widening the remit of the *Siluetas* series to include *The Tree of Life* series and *The Fetish* series of 1976–9. See Susan Best, 'The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta', *Art History*, vol.30, no.1, 2007, p.61, pp.63–4.

17. Spero, 'Sky Goddess', pp.103–5. In the same piece of writing, she differentiates between performance art where the artist's body is the 'vehicle', and the symbolic embodiment of the artist as a more abstracted presence in the art object or 'artefact'.

18. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* 1990, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London, 1993.

19. *Ibid.*

20. For an interesting discussion of the indexical aura surrounding the concept of touch, see Georges Didi-Huberman's essay on the Turin Shroud, 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)', trans. Thomas Repensek in *October*, Summer 1984, pp.63–81. Mendieta had explored this idea of the religious relic in her early performances of 1973 and 1974, creating her own shrouds by imprinting her naked, bloody form on fabric. After contact had been made, the fabric was lifted to reveal the imprint of this moment of touch. The Christian doctrine of Thomas Aquinas instigated this worship of the relic, proposing that the mind and body are one, the soul manifest in every cell in the body. Attendant with this theory is the importance of touch over all the senses, the moment of contact a process of mediation between the self and other, the self and the world.

21. Quoted from the Sosa documentary, New York, 1993. Spero stresses that this act of homage was a positive commemoration of Mendieta's life and work, even though it was often presented alongside works that focused on the theme of female victimage.

22. Mendieta's performance at Franklin Furnace was itself a retracing of several earlier versions of

Body Tracks made in 1974. Like Spero's series of homages, these were made specifically for the camera rather than a direct audience.

23. Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', lecture presented at the College Art Association Conference, New York, February 2000. Featured in Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, Minneapolis and London, 2004, p.106. Peggy Phelan has aptly described performance as disappearing in the very moment it comes into being. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York, 1993, p.146.

24 Nancy Spero, interview with the author, 10 September 2004.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Spero, 'Sky Goddess', pp.103–5.

28. Each panel is roughly 52 x 200 cm.

29. Spero, 'Tracing Ana Mendieta', p.77.

30. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford and New York, 2000, p.14.

31. For a discussion of Spero's strategy of mimicry in this work, see Amy Schlegel, *Codex Spero: Feminist Art and Activist Practices in New York Since the Late 1960s* (Ph.D Thesis, Columbia University, 1997), esp. Chapter Three, 'Reading the *Codex Artaud* "as a Woman"', pp.147–207. Schlegel addresses the crucial issues of mimicry, agency and performance in the *Codex* as she examines how the work is indicative of a reading and re-writing 'as a woman'. The interesting point Schlegel makes about Spero's excessive mimicry – her mime of a mime in terms of her occupation of Artaud's 'feminine' mask, and also her mime of his fragmented prose in her formal montage of his text – is important to think about in terms of the technical strategies of mediation she adopts elsewhere in her art.

32. This idea of a 'hand-touch sensibility' was introduced by the performance artist Carolee Schneemann in a work entitled *Interior Scroll* 1975. Schneemann wrote the term on a long piece of paper which she inserted in her vagina. As she pulled the scroll from her body, she read aloud a critique of the male rejection of women's art. This emphasis on tactility is a distinguishing feature of women's performance and body art practice in the 1960s and 1970s. See Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy*, New York 1979, pp.234–9. Amelia Jones has attempted to rescue body art from the critiques of essentialism and narcissism put forward by feminists such as Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly in the 1980s. In her discussion of the work of Schneemann and Mendieta, she describes how these artists engage in narcissism in order to expose the intersubjective nature of selfhood: 'Body art splinters rather than coheres the self; far from assuring some presocial coherence of the self, body art enacts narcissism as contingency.' See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis and London, 1998, p.51.

33. For a philosophical account of the performativity of gender, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York and London, 1993. Cindy Sherman's photographs from the late 1970s to the present explore this idea of a constructed gender in her 'feminine' masquerades.

34. Mendieta made approximately one hundred subtle interventions in nature in the form of a series of self-portraits modelled on a silhouette. She traced, she sculpted, she chiselled, she dug, and she burnt the shape of her body in the landscape in the U.S. and Mexico. When these *Siluetas* were complete, they were documented by photography and film and then left to be reclaimed by nature.

35. Hans Breder, Mendieta's tutor at the University of Iowa where she completed her BA and MA in Fine Art in the 1970s, assisted Mendieta in the creation of this template. He has confirmed that she used it to trace the contours of her body in the landscape when he was unavailable to do this himself (Hans Breder, email correspondence with the author, 17 October 2004). Mendieta would then work with this trace of her body, sculpting, digging, or setting light to her shape. The first example of a template form

used in Mendieta's *Siluetas* is *Ánima Silueta de Cohetes* 1976. This work consisted of a wood and rope frame of her body which was made by a Cohetero in Mexico. Mendieta positioned fireworks around this frame, which she set alight against the background of a night sky. The rapid explosion of the firework effigy is captured by both photography and Super-8 film.

36. Lucy Lippard, for example, described her as discovering new ways to be 'in touch with the earth', and she used examples of Mendieta branding the shape of her hand into the landscape to emphasise this. See Lucy Lippard, *Exchanges I*, exhibition catalogue, Henry Street Settlement, Louis Abrams Arts for Living Centre, 1979, unpaginated.

37. Miwon Kwon describes Mendieta's *Siluetas* as photographic souvenirs, thereby emphasising the aesthetics of absence they appear to convey. See Miwon Kwon, 'Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta', *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, Cambridge, MA, 1994, pp.165–71.

38. Spero described her printing plates as an 'alphabet' in an interview with the author, 30 March 2004.

39. Zinc printing plates are made up from her drawings of figures, and for her wall installations a flexible polymer version is used. In accordance with the more recent advances in computer technology, a source is often made directly into a plate without any mediation by Spero. She has one of her assistants scan a source and then have it transferred to a printing plate by a plate manufacturer in New Jersey, USA. Confirmed by Spero's assistant, Samm Kuncze, in an interview with the author, 30 March 2004.

40. In this respect, Spero's handprinting process resembles the monotype print. This is a single print made by using oil-paint or printer's ink on an untouched copper plate. The pressure from printing produces a quality of texture that is unattainable with painting.

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