A Reflection of Binary Disruption in the Photographs of Ana Mendieta

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It is easy to discuss artists who have been given a place inside the museum/moratorium of capitalism—what is more challenging is the rupture of complacent histories. It is from this Foucauldian logic that Critical Theory and Social Justice: Journal of Undergraduate Research is proud to (re)present two images from the corpus of the late artist, Ana Mendieta. The typical form of knowledge production compels the critic to point out the present, the Real, and the figures dotting the landscape of the American Dream; Mendieta’s pieces (which follow this reflection) do not constitute a return to that analytic nightmare, instead, they accomplish the unspeakable rupture of the binaries of animal/non-animal, subject/object, and phallus/vagina.

In these works, Mendieta makes herself the subject and spectacle of the photographs. She breaks the imaginary boundary of what is subject to the gaze. Her art exposes the sensibilities at work in separating humans and animals. She is always already human and animal. By making herself the animal that is led and caged by others, she highlights the treatment of those labeled as different, strange, and (ultimately) non-human. Not interested in recreating the spectacle that is the animal, her work deconstructs our understandings of the normative spectacle: the seemingly simple reversal of an individual’s agency within a binary. What is most implicated in this event is the concept of humanness: In Mendieta’s ‘putting-on’ of animalism, the viewer can begin to recognize the colonial sensibility at work in the construction of the Self as upstanding, dexterous, and strategic—the most brittle instance of a will to power.

For Mendieta, the relationship between the subject and the object (and even their definitional possibilities) is not sacred; rather, this deliberate separation is only the weakest linkage in the apparent Great Chain of Being. Through her continuous insistence upon the depiction of juxtaposition as a grotesque epistemology, Mendieta pushes viewers towards a world where the Law is not a transcendentally immanent telos—that is to say, the Law can no longer be both loomingly ever-present and the just completion of the life of a (mis)named subject. As the ape, Mendieta accesses a range of active possibilities that are blurred by the sovereignty of colonial logic; for instance, her leisure in the image of a solitary ape upon a fence evokes both a longing and a thinking of that which can never happen within the colonial understanding of the Other. Otherization is prevented at the moment an ontology of strangeness emerges around and within the no-longer-subject; important for the actualization of this new plateau of possibilities, though, is the gendered condition this praxis operates.

The question and power of strangeness is tied to the failures of the masculine gaze: an ocularcentrism that must strip away all things that might obscure a full accounting of objects within its view. Hair, muscular definition, and even flesh are made into sacrifice for the reconciliation of the Lacanian fascination of lack. Strangeness (as it is encountered by the masculine colonial) is necessarily, then, the anxiety of interacting with a being that functions completely, even though it exists in a state of infinite, apparent lack—lack of a phallus. Feminized bodies move powerfully in this state of masculine psychic death; Mendieta, again, marks the stupid distance between the shaven beauty and the hairy ape by connecting these two symbols with a thin beam which demonstrates how weak of a system is at work to prevent these two positionalities from functioning in relation with each other, as opposed to or for each other.
*Untitled (Ape Piece), 1975*
**Ana Mendieta**
Lifetime black and white photograph
8 x 10 inches (20.3 x 25.4 cm)
(GL5467)

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Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York
Untitled (Ape Piece), 1975
Ana Mendieta
Lifetime black and white photograph
8 x 10 inches (20.3 x 25.4 cm)
(GL5469)

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