



Lighting a Spark

BY MICHAEL WELLEN

In the 1970s and 1980s Ana Mendieta challenged traditional notions of sculpture, photography and film with her 'earth-body' works, for which she created outlines of her body in the landscape using natural elements such as earth, fire and flowers. But the development of her experimental approach was inseparable from her experiences of art education and her lesser-known work as a school art teacher, where she was part of a generation of artists, educators and philosophers driven by a radical new principle: to 'uneducate' yourself

'The interesting thing is that education is about uneducating yourself... always ... It's not about getting something but getting it and then dropping it. We spend the rest of our lives doing that.'

— Ana Mendieta, interview with Linda Montano, 1983–4, published in *Sulfur*, no.22, Spring 1988

SOMETIME AROUND AUTUMN 1973, DURING HER first term as a full-time art teacher at Henry Sabin Elementary School in Iowa City, Ana Mendieta gathered her class of children aged eight to ten, asked a question and recorded their string of answers on audio-cassette. 'Um, I think it's up in your brain,' the first boy begins. 'I think it's sort of all over you,' counters another. 'I think the colour of it is pink,' says a little girl, and later adds, 'Correction: I think it's pink with purple polka dots!' making some classmates giggle. We never hear Mendieta's opening prompt and it takes nearly a minute before anyone lets slip what they're talking about. Throughout the recording's eight or so minutes, most of the children carefully make sure they refer only to 'it' until the end, when one boy (no doubt pre-choreographed) says 'Want to know the answer, eh?' and the class in unison shout out 'S-O-U-L, Soul!' like a school cheer.

This sound piece — *Untitled (Soul)* c.1973 — is one of at least seven works that Mendieta made collaboratively with her students. She taught in the Iowa City School District from August 1973 until the beginning of 1978 when she moved to New York City. For the initial two years Mendieta taught at two different elementary schools — Henry Sabin Elementary and Kirkwood Elementary — dividing her week, and sometimes her workday, between them. Before that, she had earned an MA in painting from the University of Iowa in 1972 and immediately re-enrolled in an additional year of coursework in its Intermedia programme, one of the most experimental interdisciplinary programmes in the USA at the time. Throughout this time, there were important crossovers between the work Mendieta made in the Intermedia programme and her approach to artmaking at the elementary schools.

A work like *Untitled (Soul)* indicates that Mendieta was working through big questions with her young students, just as she was in her own work. Her artistic strategy was to set up a structure that makes space for impromptu things to happen. The children's different answers stretch us to think about the soul in surprising ways: 'I don't think it looks like you,' one child says; 'I think it changes shape each year,' says another. The setup is generous and open-ended, so that even the most outlandish answer becomes thought-provoking and possible. The idea that the soul 'changes shape each year' seems particularly resonant given that Mendieta spent subsequent years making films and photography works that make reference to the soul in ever-changing forms. Notably, with the works *Alma, Silueta en Fuego*, produced in November 1975 in Iowa City, and *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece)*, produced in the summer of 1976 in Oaxaca, Mendieta explores different images of a soul on fire. Although they may draw from the Catholic idea of the Anima Sola (lonely soul) burning in purgatory, these are open-ended images,



Still from Mendieta's
Super 8mm film
Alma, Silueta de Cohetes
(*Firework Piece*) 1976

not necessarily tied to penitence and suffering. Perhaps they are part of Mendieta's own 'uneducating' of herself, an emptying and reworking of the symbols gathered from her Catholic upbringing. In their chance outcomes and ephemerality these fiery *siluetas* convey a sense of life-affirming and enduring energy.

When Mendieta spoke of the importance of 'uneducating yourself' in an interview in the early 1980s, she had already spent more than a decade working to reshape arts education. She was part of a wave of artists, educators and philosophers working across the USA and Latin America in the 1970s who recognised that changing society begins with changing approaches to education. While some advocated the destruction of institutionalised learning, Mendieta worked to transform schools from within, both as grad student and as art teacher. While getting her own MA in painting, she had faced many challenges from professors who didn't like her work. 'They tried to get me to quit school for a long time,' she later told writer Judith Wilson. 'I would argue and say that I wanted to be within that context, and talking to other students. I wanted ... the discipline, and to be there.' She became increasingly interested in the conceptual art and performance-led practices encouraged by the Intermedia programme, which was established and led by artist Hans Breder. Even before completing her first graduate degree, she had left behind her painting practice. 'Through painting, I was not satisfied,' she explained in a lecture at Alfred University in 1981. 'The works that I was making were not real enough for me. They were not projecting this magic, this energy I wanted the works to have.' In the Intermedia programme, by contrast, she had access to a wide range of filmmaking equipment with which to experiment and take her work in a radically different direction.

The early video work *Freeze* 1973, made with Henry Sabin students, shows us something of the magic that video provided. Mendieta records a view of the elementary school yard as the children play. At several different points someone shouts 'Freeze', and the kids on screen suddenly halt mid-action. Their laughter and shouting – as well as the murmurs of teachers' conversations in the background – all stop, though the rumble of passing cars and trucks remains audible, emphasising the eerie stillness of the scene. For several minutes the children remain motionless – then, without warning, they break back into playing and shouting again. The work shows Mendieta's skill in crafting a scene: her use of black and white, the framing and the timing of the freeze means we do not see the children's jitteriness or any smaller movements that would break the illusion. Likewise, their instant return to play is significant – and likely took some instruction – in creating the unusual sensation that maybe we the viewers are hallucinating, that life never paused.

Still from Mendieta's Super 8mm film *Alma, Silueta en Fuego* 1975



© 2025 The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by DACS. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery

The Intermedia programme was a place for sharing ideas and techniques, for learning and unlearning, and Mendieta quickly gained an influential position within it. Helen Hoff (formerly Helen McGreevy) – her classmate in the graduate programme and her teaching assistant at both Kirkwood Elementary and Henry Sabin – remembers Mendieta playing an important teaching role among her peers. She describes Mendieta as 'Breder's protégé', and says: 'She pretty much ran his classes for him.' According to Hoff, Mendieta shared influential ideas with her fellow students, such as using the term 'piece' to describe work. 'She connected the freckles on my back with a marker, and she would call it a piece,' says Hoff, who explains that the concept was important because 'it didn't have to result in a pretty object'.

In her early years in Intermedia, Mendieta referred to a handful of her own works as pieces – among them *Door Piece* 1973 and *Moffitt Building Piece* 1973 – drawing on conceptual art and Fluxus practices that in the 1960s broke from the object-oriented traditions of artmaking. It was the philosophical approach towards a visual experience that mattered, and which underpinned works like *Freeze* – a version of which she shared at the university for the event *An Evening of Video, Film & Dance* in November 1973. Before the piece was screened, Mendieta passed out a text to the audience, reading:

Time passing and change are undeniable aspects of the world around us. For the artist of our day, time has an increasingly higher dignity. Often artistic creation results in the production of art objects. However when a concern for time is primary, an experience not an object may result. The 5th and 6th graders from Henry Sabin School participated in the creation of such an experience. Though the participants were young, the art ideas were not diluted.

The focus on experience through time rather than art as a fixed object was critical both in her own work and in the classroom.

At Kirkwood Elementary, as she had at Henry Sabin, Mendieta worked with children aged between six and 12. Kirkwood was a more traditional school than the experimental Henry Sabin, whose curriculum was based on the educational philosophy of 'open concept', which focused on student-centred learning. Nonetheless, Kirkwood did adapt some of the innovative teaching methods piloted at Henry Sabin, as both schools' principals judged the district's art programme as 'overly product-oriented', and Mendieta was able to create and use the same lesson plans for her art classes at both schools.

Those lesson plans show a range of exercises intended to develop students' motor skills while encouraging an understanding of art, not as the



'Mendieta was working through big questions with her young students, just as she was in her own work'

Following spread:
Untitled: Silueta Series
1978, originally created at the State University of New York, Old Westbury. Installation view at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2024

Above:
Untitled c.1972





'The mask is the first step in a transformation into a different creature, with the children inventing their own ways of moving and vocalising'

Students at Henry Sabin Elementary School forming 'Totem Pole Masks', c.1975

creation of a product, but as an exploratory and creative investigation of the self, of society and of nature, and as a way of intellectual exchange. Several exercises stand out for the innovative way they use nature to rethink traditional art mediums, for instance 'Ice Painting' or 'Drawing with Light [Pinholes]'. Other lessons encourage students to relate to one another through collaborative making: 'Partner Portraits', for instance, pairs students and instructs them to begin drawing the other, then switch drawings and continue to make composite portraits. This type of facial swapping echoes Mendieta's own *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)* 1972, in which she glued a beard and moustache to her face using hair from her classmate Morty Sklar. 'She always took the lessons one step further,' says Hoff of Mendieta's teaching. She witnessed how Mendieta taught students to make cardboard masks, and then build on that, encouraging them to stand in formations to create 'Totem Pole Masks'. The creation of an object was not the completion of the work; rather, these objects would be repeatedly returned to and rethought. Mendieta's video *Mask Movement* 1973 shows students using cardboard masks another way: they congregate in the playground then march towards the camera roaring and making animal sounds, embodying different monsters. Midway through the video, a jump cut shows the children silently holding their poses before they again begin making noises and slowly storm the camera once more. Here, the mask is the first step in a transformation into a different creature, with the children inventing their own ways of moving and vocalising.

Mendieta ran the classroom in ways that cultivated student initiative and cooperation. 'I was amazed at the responsibility Ana gives the kids', Hoff writes in her 1975 teaching journal. She notes that Mendieta encouraged the children to take charge of different aspects of cleaning up. 'The way Ana dispenses responsibility', she observes, 'seems to serve a multi-purpose, it gives attention, gets work done, keeps the student body busy ... and eases the teachers' job some.' To close each class, Mendieta distributed large index cards she referred to as 'contracts', asking students to write about what they had done and how they felt about it. Hoff notes that Mendieta liked to hand these out 'since it settles them down after class some, let them digest what's happened.' The cards served as a way of taking attendance and as a tool for student reflection and teacher feedback. As Hoff wrote at the time: 'Ana is really into positive reinforcement. She said when she started the kids hated art. She constantly bombards them with it, both verbally and in the case of contract-cards, with written comments.'

In various cycles of action, reflection and reiteration, the camera and screen played an important part of the process. This is exemplified by the



Still from Mendieta's video *Parachute* 1973, created with students from Henry Sabin Elementary School

Still from Mendieta's video *Mask Movement* 1973, made with students from Henry Sabin Elementary School



activities that Mendieta carried out with her classes using parachutes, which resulted in the video work *Parachute* 1973 as well as a series of photographs from the same year she labelled 'Movement piece - making the parachute airborne'. In these works, Mendieta and her students stand in the schoolground holding a parachute, then rapidly move to the centre together to make the chute billow and deflate. In the video we can hear many of them laugh as they get close together. They also shake the parachute in waves, and sit down with the chute over their heads to make a low tent. What we're watching resembles physical education exercises that were popular in elementary schools across the USA from the 1970s until at least the 1990s. Mendieta translates them into an art context as a way to look at form, movement, light and air. She likely screened this video to the children after making it - a practice she also did with university students later. This way they not only experienced handling the material, but saw how their movements looked from outside themselves. Similarly, Mendieta's photographic series shows layers of mediation, not just a moment of activity, and considers how experiences change through the screen and into print.

Mendieta left her position in the public schools in 1978, but teaching remained important throughout her career. She taught at various universities as guest lecturer, often working with students who helped her on site-specific commissions. A telling exchange during her 1981 lecture at Alfred University captures her pedagogical approach. When a student asked if her slideshow images were 'proof' of the work she did in nature, Mendieta responded: 'I don't need to prove to people that I've done something or not done something, but they're sort of a record, you know, so I can show you ... so that you know that there's somebody out there doing something like this.' In that moment, she's not only teaching but also framing her work as a means of educating others. 'One very interesting thing about making art is that as you continue to make it ... you start learning from the work too, in levels you didn't know were there. You know, the work speaks to you too.' In looking at her work, we share an experience of Mendieta as teacher. There is a magic of exchange there - and it's up to us to pick it up.

TATE MODERN
Ana Mendieta, 15 July 2026 - 17 January 2027

Michael Wellen co-curated the *Ana Mendieta* exhibition at Tate Modern, where he was Senior Curator, International Art and in charge of free collection displays. He is currently Chief Curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. This article also appears in the *Ana Mendieta* exhibition book published by Tate Publishing.

Supported by the Ana Mendieta Exhibition Supporters Circle, Tate International Council, Tate Patrons, Tate Members and Tate Americas Foundation. Research supported by Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational in partnership with Hyundai Motor.