

**Abjecting Intersectionality:
The Early Interdisciplinary Work of
Ana Mendieta and Senga Nengudi**

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Introduction

The shocking and disturbing interdisciplinary work of artists Ana Mendieta and Senga Nengudi continues to grab the imagination through abjection with the distortion and disembodiment of the human form. These heinous acts can be seen in their performances, installations and subsequent photographic documentation. It is through these intriguing displays of horror that a door is opened for the reception of their egalitarian messages. While Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection has recently been applied to the work of Ana Mendieta by author Leticia Alvarado, it has yet to be applied to the work of Mendieta's contemporary Senga Nengudi. Alvarado argues that, despite essentialist claims made on her *Silueta Series* by poststructuralist feminists, Mendieta's use of the abject in her earlier works aimed to collapse boundaries imposed on women of color in the art world.¹

The shared ambitions between these two artists are further solidified through their participation in A.I.R Gallery's 1980 exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*. It is here that Ana Mendieta curated the work of eight other women of color artists in an effort to address the whiteness of American feminism by providing these artists a platform for embracing their "otherness". It is through further exploration of the undeniable connections between Mendieta and Nengudi that an advanced understanding of Nengudi's work can be understood. Through the lens of the abject, Nengudi's work persistently addresses social justice issues rooted in diversity and inclusivity. I aim to discuss the abject present in Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* from 1972 and Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Series*, which she began in 1976 and continues to produce today. I will first provide an understanding of the roles that essentialism, performativity and

¹ Julia Kristeva, "*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*"; Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), 53.

intersectionality have played in feminist theory followed by an overview of abjection and its relation to intersectionality with an application to Mendieta's work. It is here that I will then detail its application to Senga Nengudi's radical *R.S.V.P. Series*, which anticipates the vital concepts of Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw's utilized in today's intersectional lens.

Essentialism and Feminism

Before delving into abjection and its application to the work of Mendieta and Nengudi, an understanding of gender essentialism is required in order to contextualize essentialist interpretations of their work.² Ignited by innovative thinkers like author Betty Friedan and art historian Arlene Raven, a new era of feminism came to rise in the 1970s which focused on equal rights for women.³ While groundbreaking in its attempts to challenge patriarchal and systematic oppression, feminism during this time relied on a binary definition of gender and a complete ignorance to other identity factors. Essentialism is the claim that gender, or the experience of that gender, is in some way inherent and biologically determined. This is to say that before birth,

² In one review, Jane Blocker states, "Mendieta's earthwork (in which the earth is carved into a female body) becomes an embarrassing essentializing gesture that reinscribes patriarchal conceptions of the female while pretending to liberate woman through some vague conception of universal power."- Jane Blocker, "Ana Mendieta and the Politics of the *Venus Negra*," *Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 45; In another review, Miwon Kwon says, "Mendieta's work, especially the well-known projects from the 1970s, such as the *Silueta*, *Fetish*, and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series, veer strongly toward the essentialist pole in both intention and reception."- Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," *Inside the Visible*, ed. M Catherine de Segher (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 167.

³ The initial movement of feminism set out with the aim to secure women's right to vote and primarily had legal issues as its main agenda. Second-wave feminism took on a wider set of goals and aimed to see more equality in societal structures. The work of Betty Friedan was key in lighting the fire for second-wave feminism. In her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, author Betty Friedan proposed that women needed more than childrearing and homemaking to fulfill their identity. This movement however, failed to consider intersectionality and gender/race-specific aspects in which 3rd wave feminism attempts to incorporate. According to Friedan's *New York Times* obituary, her book "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: Norton, 1963).; *The New York Times*. "Betty Friedan Who Ignited Cause in Feminine Mystique Dies at Age 85"; Arlene Raven was a feminist art historian and co-founder of the California feminist art movements. Her definition of feminist assumes that all women artists are feminist artists and that anatomically male artists cannot be feminists. It is the "universal female experience" that defines a feminist.- Arlene Raven, "Feminist content in current female art," *Sister* vol. 6, no. 5 (Oct/Nov 1975), 10.

one's gender, sexual preference and levels of masculinity and femininity are all pre-determined. This view also maintains that all groups of a gender have a similar universal experience despite varying identity factors like race, class and ethnicity. It is during this era that Mendieta's *Silueta Series* gains positive recognition for their direct application of the female form and "earth goddess" qualities (Image 1).

The 1980s however brought a new layer to feminism and with it a new distaste for what was considered essentialist art. These new "anti-essentialists" or "poststructuralists" dissected identity politics and asserted that gender was in fact not an inherent biological trait, but rather a social construct, a product of societal influences.⁴ In return, art which was viewed as speaking to the essence of identity, most often connected to femininity, was now dismissed as essentialist and viewed as a contradiction to the fight for equality. With this new position on essentialism, Mendieta's *Silueta Series* was now equally criticized and seen as an oversimplification of the essence of the female gender and experience. Throughout the 70s and 80s however, Mendieta's earlier abject performance work, as well as that of Nengudi, continued to be overlooked and ignored.

In her piece *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* Mendieta has documented her solo performance with eight self-portrait photographs in which she altered her look with wigs and makeup (Figure 2). In addition, Mendieta has pulled ripped stockings over her head to distort her facial features, creating a certain level of racial ambiguity and aggressive deformations. Her use of ripped pantyhose calls for correlations to bank robbers and hair nets as well as violent

⁴ See Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" (Screen, 1975), reprinted in Amelia Jones, ed., *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 57–65; Freud, "Fetishism" (1927), tr. Joan Riviere in Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 214–19. Joan Scott critiques the reliance on visibility in determining gender experience in her article "The evidence of experience," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 17, no. 4 (1991), 773–797.

suffocation and ultimate death. With a breathy open mouth and the upturning of her nose we can literally see inside of Mendieta's body. This brutal distortion of her features relays a history of abuse, disfigurement and victimhood, bringing with it references to deeply rooted horrific minority experiences.

Comparatively gruesome is the slow gravitational pull of Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Series* (Figure 3). Again, referencing a violent historical past, these works echo bloody wrists tied to walls with dislocated arms. Vulnerably exposed buttocks with pried open legs center the composition here telling a story of victimhood and forceful conquer. Had these early works been considered, critics would have not only found inclusive explorations of the feminine experience, but ones that radically predated critical feminist theories yet to come. I argue it is the abject disfigurement in both of these early works which incorporates intersectionality and performance theory, overriding negative essentialist implications.⁵

The Roles of Performativity and Intersectionality in Feminism

In her 1988 essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", Judith Butler furthers Simon de Beauvoir's claim that sex does not determine gender. Butler's work added yet another piece to the puzzle of feminism with the concept that gender not only has no essence, but that it is merely a performative

⁵ I have yet to find reference to Nengudi's work being directly labeled as essentialist, yet I suspect one reason for the overlooking of her work is because of such interpretations. While acknowledging that Mendieta and Nengudi's work have broader application to an intersectional human existence, I accept that a certain level of essentialization may have been an interest in their expressions. I believe that artists have a right to explore essentialism while simultaneously addressing a wider experience with their body of work as a whole. The act of essentializing speaks to our thought process of identification and gives a comfortable categorization to works of art and their meanings. However, it should be noted that even as we point the finger at other feminists for essentializing we are ourselves by definition categorizing and excluding.

phenomenon, a product of social conditioning.⁶ With these new concepts, the fight for a complete comprehension of gender performativity and gender identities was beginning to be considered by some involved in the feminist movement. Even so, an encompassing understanding of intersectionality was still needed to accurately consider the work of Mendieta and Nengudi.

In 1989 critical race theory was finally introduced to feminist study after the publication of Kimberlé Crenshaw's paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics".⁷ This theory provided an understanding of how overlapping identity factors relate to systems of oppression, discrimination and experience. With this publication came an intersectional approach to feminism, one that considered a phenomenological understanding that the experiences of reality, and the conditions of those experiences, are all affected by varying categorizations such as race, class and gender. Additionally, other factors like privilege and discrimination were understood as playing a role in the ways in which we encounter, interpret and appreciate life. These experiences are as diverse as the people involved and are layered, complicated and many times divisive and outright ugly. It is this repulsive response by conventional society to the "outcasts" of our culture that is likened to Kristeva's theory on abjection and lived by Mendieta and Nengudi as brown women in a white America. It is these lived experiences that are visually harnessed in their early works.

⁶ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics". *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. University of Chicago Law School. 1989: 139-168. Other contributors to the development of the concept of intersectionality include Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Angela Davis, Deborah King and many others.

How Abjection Speaks to Intersectionality

As described by Julia Kristeva in her 1982 book *Powers of Horror*, abjection is a subjective horror that is felt both physically and mentally during an experience of “corporeal reality” when the distinction between what is self and what is other is blurred.⁸ This experience is often compared to that of looking at a corpse and identifying with the body while simultaneously feeling revolted and separated from that which is not you; often to protect one’s sanity. This experience is not unlike that which encompasses and engages the viewers, particularly white viewers, in the work of Mendieta and Nengudi. These experiences of horror in relation to the visual can also be applied to the understanding of our societal rings, aiding in the explanation of discriminatory behavior such as misogyny, homophobia and racism with categorizations and dismissals of certain groups of people as “other”.⁹

The abject, a painful and ugly truth, is in opposition to Immanuel Kant’s “Sublime”, yet they are coexistent and contingent upon one another.¹⁰ The sublime exists on the outer edges of the abject. One can think of the abject as sublime’s unwanted sibling; a reflection of their mother’s ugly truth hidden away to provide a kind of pristine genealogical outward appearance. Abjection is the weapon thwarted against narcissism, which aims to crush the ego and purify corruption.¹¹ If abjection is the weapon, then the artist is the soldier. According to Kristeva, “the artist who, even if he does not know it, is an undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity.”¹² Although art is rooted in the abject, it is also the one thing that can purify and expose the abject.¹³

⁸ Julia Kristeva, “*Powers of Horror*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. 1970 Trans. J.H. Bernard. Macmillan, 1951.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, “*Powers of Horror*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Alvarado's Abjected Mendieta

Leticia Alvarado also acknowledged this expanded social application to the abject in regard to Mendieta. She explains that Mendieta's cultural context and societal displacement equally placed Mendieta's existence into the context of the abject. Mendieta's artistic visualization of the abject blurs identity categories and supports an ambivalence reflective of Butler's imminent theoretical standings, highlighting the trouble caused by such categorizations.¹⁴

Born in Cuba during Fidel Castro's socialist takeover to a wealthy and politically active family, at the age of twelve Ana Mendieta and her sister were forced to move to the United States for their protection. Bouncing between foster homes and boarding schools in central Iowa, the freezing temperatures and isolated landscape left the Mendieta sisters feeling cut off and abandoned.¹⁵ In an area predominantly white and culturally underexposed, Ana found herself a minority for the first time. According to Alvarado, "The Mendieta sisters entered into a matrix where they were marked by their Cubanness, an illegitimate otherness within a racialized society."¹⁶ What was intended as a short-lived solution for the girls' safety, became a permanent and defining moment in Mendieta's self-identity. During the pursuit of her MFA degree in painting at the University of Iowa, Mendieta began producing work in the early 1970s. She continued to produce until her untimely death at the age of thirty-six when she mysteriously fell from the thirty-fourth floor of her New York apartment during a dispute with her husband and fellow artist Carl Andre.

¹⁴ Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 2018), 39.

¹⁵ Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985* (Washington D.C.: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), 181.

¹⁶ Leticia Alvarado, "Towards a Personal Will to Continue Being Other: Ana Mendieta's Abject Performances," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), 68.

While many reviews exist on Mendieta throughout the years, it wasn't until the 2000s that reviews of Mendieta's work began to emerge embracing a direct refusal of essentialization with the consideration of her earlier work.¹⁷ In more recent scholarship, Alvarado focuses primarily on Mendieta's earlier performances and argues that Mendieta uses abjection specifically to destabilize ideas of race and gender, referencing Kristeva.¹⁸ The abject component of Mendieta's art not only challenges the viewer to think of race and gender, but to also think beyond those categories. While Alvarado's argument negotiates gender throughout, she contextualizes that concern with Mendieta's Latin@ identity and places her work specifically within that framework.¹⁹

Alvarado argues that by altering her appearances in *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* to such a degree, Mendieta is forcing the familiar to become unfamiliar and claims that the resulting distortions utilizes the abject to break down identity. This forceful act distorts the body and implicates the viewer in this brutality, something that Nengudi also successfully accomplishes with her work. Here, Mendieta confronts the viewer with close proximity and questions their notions of identity, be that racial, gender or another. Alvarado states:

“The runs in the stocking make one think not only of a working-class femininity aspiring to sartorial dignity and failing, but also of the violence of beauty standards which most women will fail to meet, especially women of color. . . . Considered together, all eight portraits present

¹⁷ Jennifer Douglas argues that Mendieta never essentializes gender. She states “The body becomes an image of itself and a sign of other bodies. Rather than referring directly to her, these pieces make ‘her’ an ephemeral, unstable idea”, suggesting that Mendieta uses her body as a site of discipline to subvert various categories that have been violently imposed on women, including gender.” This idea of escaping identity politics to represent a broader human existence is what I argue directly connects to the definition and function of abjection.- Jennifer Darlene Douglas, *Like a Natural Woman: Constructing Gender from Performance to Performativity* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 88.

¹⁸ Leticia Alvarado, “Towards a Personal Will to Continue Being Other: Ana Mendieta's Abject Performances,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), 65-85.

¹⁹ Leticia Alvarado, “Towards a Personal Will to Continue Being Other: Ana Mendieta's Abject Performances,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), 65-85.

women who are familiar yet unidentifiable. Sightlines are approached but never aligned with or matched. The spectator is indeed ‘hurled,’ in Kristeva’s sense, no longer just taunted, to imagine ‘beyond the scope of the possible’ knowable racialized subjects. Ambiguous in their identitarian performance, Mendieta’s vignettes represent women who are only recognizable as Other.”²⁰

By utilizing the abject, Mendieta defies gender essentialist interpretations and shows that class, race and gender are merely social constructs that do not inherently define us yet exist among the traditional sublime outline of society.

Dialectics of Isolation

This concept of the outline of society is further addressed by Ana Mendieta in 1980 through the curation of the exhibition titled *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York. While Mendieta did not include her own work in this show, she highlighted the work of eight other women of color artists.²¹ The purpose of this exhibition was to address the exclusion of women of color in the feminist movement. However, rather than soapbox about the injustices being done to women of color amongst the feminist movement, Mendieta writes in the catalogue introduction that the exhibition focuses “towards a personal will to continue being ‘other’”.²² This embrace of being

²⁰ Leticia Alvarado, “Towards a Personal Will to Continue Being Other: Ana Mendieta’s Abject Performances,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), 74-5.

²¹ The list of participating artists includes Judith Baca, Beverly Buchanan, Janet Olivia Henry, Senga Nengudi, Lydia Okumura, Howardena Pindell, Selena W. Persico, and Zarina.

²² Ana Mendieta’s full introductory essay for the catalogue for “Dialectics of Isolation”: “There is a certain time in history when people take consciousness of themselves and ask questions about who they are. After World War II, the label Third World came into being in reference to the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The movement of Unaligned Nations was founded in 1961 with a meeting which took place in Belgrade. Their aims are to end colonialism, racism and exploitation.

We of the Third World in the United States have the same concerns as the people of the Unaligned Nations. The white population of the United States, diverse, but of basic European stock, exterminated the indigenous civilization

categorized as ‘other’ is precisely the argument for the application of the abject in this discussion.

It comes as no surprise however that Mendieta doesn’t specifically utilize the term “abject” in her essay given that Kristeva’s essay “Powers of Horror” had only just been published that same year.²³ Regardless, similar to *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)*, many of the pieces in the show employed this not-yet-named instrument in an aim to address their frustrations with racist feminism and its adverse consequences.²⁴ One such piece was by artist Senga Nengudi. Her statement in the catalogue reads “I am concerned with the way life experiences pull and tug on the human body and psyche. And the body’s ability to cope with it. Nylon mesh serves my needs in reflecting this elasticity.”²⁵

Utilizing the abject in a similar way as Mendieta’s 1972 piece, Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* piece *Swing Low* gives visual representation to vexations with inequalities and societal eviction (Figure 4).²⁶ Suspended in close proximity to the ceiling, this specific piece dangles itself at eye level

and put aside the Black as well as the other non-white cultures to create a homogenous male-dominated culture above the internal divergency.

Do we exist?...To question our cultures is to question our own existence our human reality. To confront this fact means to acquire an awareness of ourselves. This in turn becomes a search, a questioning of who we are and how we will realize ourselves.

During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement. As non-white women our struggles are two-fold.

This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being “other.” –Ana Mendieta, Introduction, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, exhibition catalogue, September 2–20, 1980, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY.

²³ Kristeva’s “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection” was published in 1980 in French. It was not until 1982 that it was translated into English by Leon S. Roudiez.

²⁴ I am specifically referencing not only the work of Nengudi, but also that of Howardena Pindell. Her piece *Free, White and 21* from 1980 incorporates similar abjected ambiguity in its presentation of the black female experience.

²⁵ A.I.R. Gallery. “Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States”, exhibition catalogue, September 2–20, 1980, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY.

²⁶ *Swing Low* is part of her continued *R.S.V.P.* series. At this time, it is unclear if *Swing Low* was the piece installed in the *Dialectics of Isolation* exhibition, or if it was just an image supplied to the producers of the catalogue for publication before the exhibition was installed.

and challenges its audience to acknowledge its existence and to contemplate the meanings behind its flayed, outstretched and swinging body.

Abjection and Senga Nengudi

Born in Chicago in 1943, the experiences of living in Southern California, Japan and New York, and that of her pregnancy in 1974, all provided Nengudi with inspiration for her *R.S.V.P Series*.²⁷

This series explores the body, specifically brown bodies, and studies its natural capacity to stretch and return to form. Nengudi found that by filling nylon stockings with sand and other found objects, they replicated the form, stretch and durability of the human body. In addition, Nengudi's pieces are activated through choreographed or improvisational dance routines in which the performer entangles their body within the sculpture and allows the piece to become an extension of themselves (Figures 5). Nengudi's work was not only overlooked by second-wave feminists, but it was also minimally acknowledged by the black arts movement. In a time when feminist art, as well as the black power movement, was known for being wild and in your face, Nengudi's nylon sculptures were discounted for being too soft, too subtle and ironically too feminine; presumably causing suspicion with anti-essentialists.²⁸

Similar to Mendieta's *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)*, Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Series* utilizes the ambiguity of nylon stockings to force the viewer to think about the instability and

²⁷ Nengudi grew up in Southern California and has lived in Japan and New York and currently resides in Colorado. In 1967, Nengudi graduated from California State University-Los Angeles with a major in art and a minor in dance. After spending a year at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan studying under the Avant-garde artist collective Gutai, Nengudi returned to CSULA and attended graduate level courses in sculpture.

²⁸ Because of this disregard, little to no scholarship exists on Nengudi's work before the 2000s. The first and only major writing on Nengudi before 2015 is from the 1978 exhibition catalogue *Contextures* which analyses Afro-American artists of the 1970s, working in the American Abstract tradition. It will take another twenty years before Nengudi begins to receive any form of recognition again by critics and scholars. Even so, they continually categorize her work as representative of an overarching human consciousness or spiritual experience and rarely make a direct feminist correlation or reference to the black female experience. It is this idea of racial and gender ambiguity that I argue directly connects to the definition and function of abjection.

mutability of identity. Stretched limb to limb, Nengudi's work reflects the violent United States' history of black bodies chained and outstretched in anticipation for the end of a whip. They echo the tragedies of the toxic male gaze and an oversexualization of the naked black and brown female body. Embodying the use of the abject, Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Series* exposes used breasts, flattened butts, stretched scrotums, and disjointed arms and legs. Parallels can be made to medieval torture mechanisms and martyrdom with visual correlations to the horrors of displayed intestines and flayed skin. In an art historical comparison, the gravity of these draped casings disturbingly echoes Michael Angelo's *St. Bartholomew* from *The Last Judgment* as he bares his own skinned hide for exhibit (Figure 5). It is this ambiguous terror of the distorted human figure that allows the viewer to be drawn in while simultaneously shuttering with disgust. In regard to her own work, Nengudi states:

“I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging. . . The body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape. After giving birth to my own son, I thought of black wet nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others—until their breasts rested upon their knees, their energies drained.”²⁹

Abstractly biomorphic, Nengudi's *R.S.V.P* sculptures can be compared to “withered testicles” and “sagging breasts”.³⁰ It is not only this idea of the body being pushed and pulled to a point of ambiguity that I argue is faithfully abject in nature, but also Nengudi's own experiences living in a society that condemns her as “other”.

²⁹ Amy Sherlock, “Senga Nengudi: White Cube, London, UK,” *Frieze* Editorial, February (2015), 46.

³⁰ Stephanie Cash, “Senga Nengudi at Thomas Erben,” *Art in America*, March (2004), 123.

Conclusion: *Dialectics of Entanglement*

The evolving nature of Nengudi's interdisciplinary work continues to prove relevant in today's divisive and violent society. The United States' hostile political climate continues to trigger a rise in bigotry, prejudice and blatant racism. In 2018, the A.I.R. Gallery hosted a retrospective exhibition looking back at *Dialectics of Isolation* titled *Dialectics of Entanglement: Do We Exist Together*. Incorporating some of the original artists with some new, this exhibition presented contemporary works speaking to the continued themes of social justice and inclusivity. Nengudi's work was once again embraced for its applicability in today's abjected society. Installed as a foundational piece to the message of the exhibition, her work brings a voice to those who continue to be silenced and labeled 'other' in today's society. Nengudi's new catalogue statement reads:

“My approach to art has changed and expanded over the years, but my concern with the way life experiences pull and tug on the human body and psyche has remained steady, now with more of a focus on cultural and universal human ways of coping. . . My piece gives a voice to those with no tongue to speak about their fragile selves. My work says yes to all those who have been told no by the majority.”³¹

³¹ Nengudi's full artist statement: “My approach to art has changed and expanded over the years, but my concern with the way life experiences pull and tug on the human body and psyche has remained steady, now with more of a focus on cultural and universal human ways of coping.

In my work I often use humble, discarded, castaway materials — tape, plastics, pantyhose, etc. — as well as nature's own sand and water as part of performances and thought actions as a means to express the belief, which is the same one I hold regarding disenfranchised humans, that materials that are often dismissed may be transformed into poetic entities. With an improvisational impulse, I gather and work my materials. The elements of my pieces are like individuals: fragmented, confused, straightforward, full, empty, misunderstood, frayed, titillating, bland, slick — radiating infinite possibilities, when combined with one another, this way and that. Like Alice going through the w(hole), being on the other side of real, my pieces give voice to those with no tongue to speak about their fragile selves. My work says yes to all those who have been told no by the majority.” — Senga Nengudi, Artist Statement, “*Dialectics of Entanglement: Do We Exist Together?*”, exhibition catalogue, 2018, A.I.R. Gallery New York, NY, 17.

Nengudi's nylon work maintains relevancy and speaks to society's continued need for introspection. Now more than ever, society's narcissism needs balancing out, a job in which the abject was made for. Interestingly, this latest exhibition completely overlooks the concept of abjection and its advantageous application to intersectional feminism yet again, leaving an opportunity for future scholarship.

Both Mendieta and Nengudi helped to build and shape the feminist movements of the 70s and 80s while simultaneously suffering blatant exclusion by them. Instead of recognition, their work was categorized as gender-essentialist, if acknowledged at all. The complex issues addressed in the early work of Mendieta and Nengudi are better understood under an intersectional lens of feminism speaking to a myriad of conditions including racism, capitalism, sexism, homophobia, poverty and colonization.³² It is through the use of the abject that Mendieta and Nengudi combat continued labels of essentialism and rightfully establish themselves in art historical scholarship. By addressing broader concerns and experiences, their work continues to speak for a silenced population, a population outside the traditional scope of CIS, white, and Western women.

³² Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta," *Traces: Ana Mendieta*. (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 34.

Figures:



Figure 1:

Mendieta, Ana, *Silüeta Works in Mexico*, 1973-77/1991, photographs. Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art. Accessed April 21, 2020.

<https://www.icaboston.org/art/ana-mendieta/silüeta-works-mexico>



Figure 2:
Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)*, January-February 1972 Performance,
Photographs: Each 19 ¼ x 12 ¾". Wall Street International. Accessed May 7, 2020.
<https://wsimag.com/art/6185-ana-mendieta-traces>



Figure 3:

Nengudi, Senga. *R.S.V.P. Series*, 1976-present, includes performances, films, photographs and installations. Photograph. Accessed May 7, 2020.
<https://africanah.org/collection-senga-nengudi/>

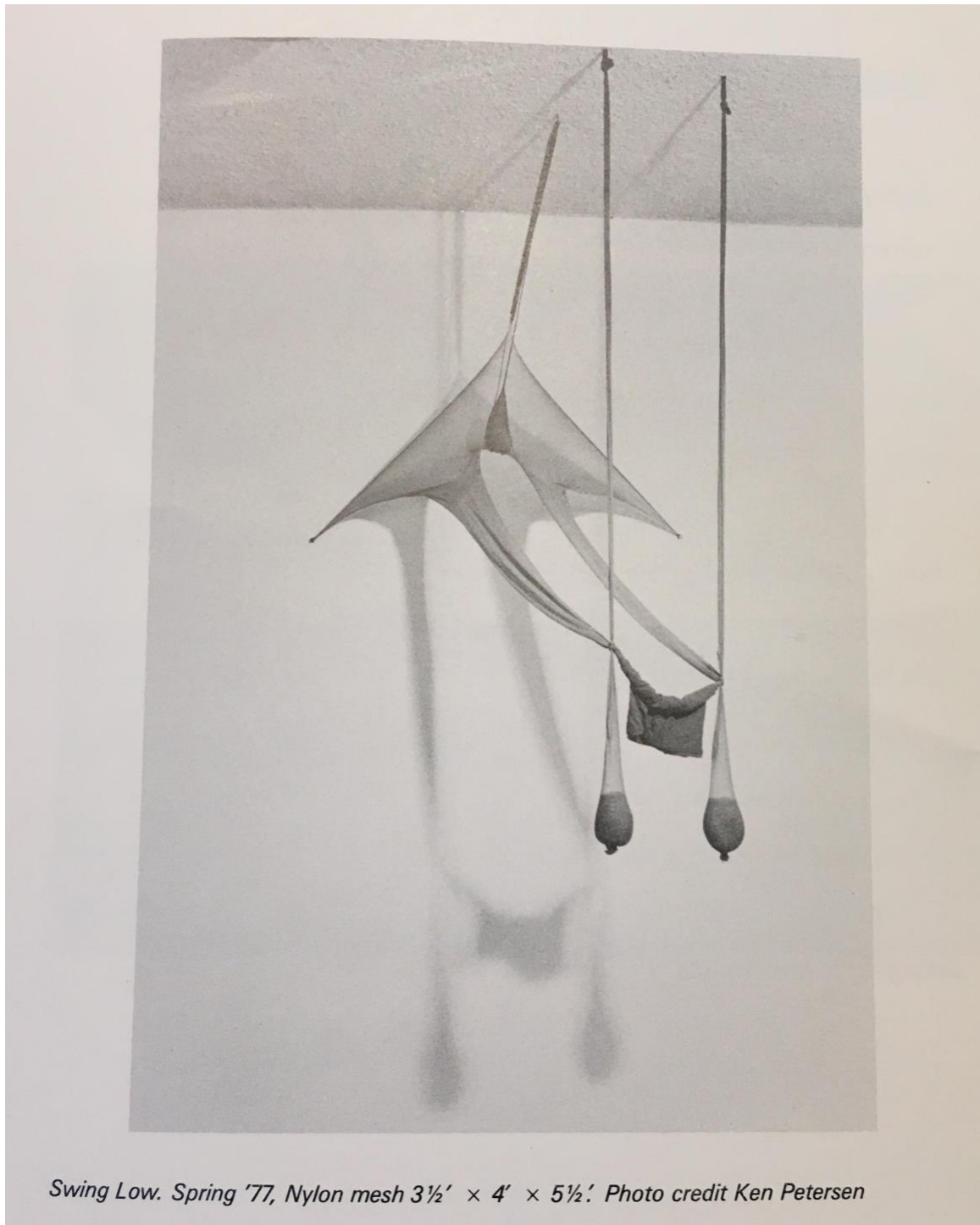


Figure 4: Nengudi, Senga. *Swing Low*, Spring 1977, Nylon Mesh 3 1/2' X 4' X 5 1/2'. Photo credit Ken Peterson. A.I.R. Gallery. "Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States", exhibition catalogue, September 2–20, 1980, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY.



Figure 5:
Nengudi, Senga. *R.S.V.P.*, 1977, sculpture activated by performance of Maren Hassinger, dimensions variable. USC Fisher Museum of Art. Accessed May 7, 2020.
<https://fisher.usc.edu/senga/>

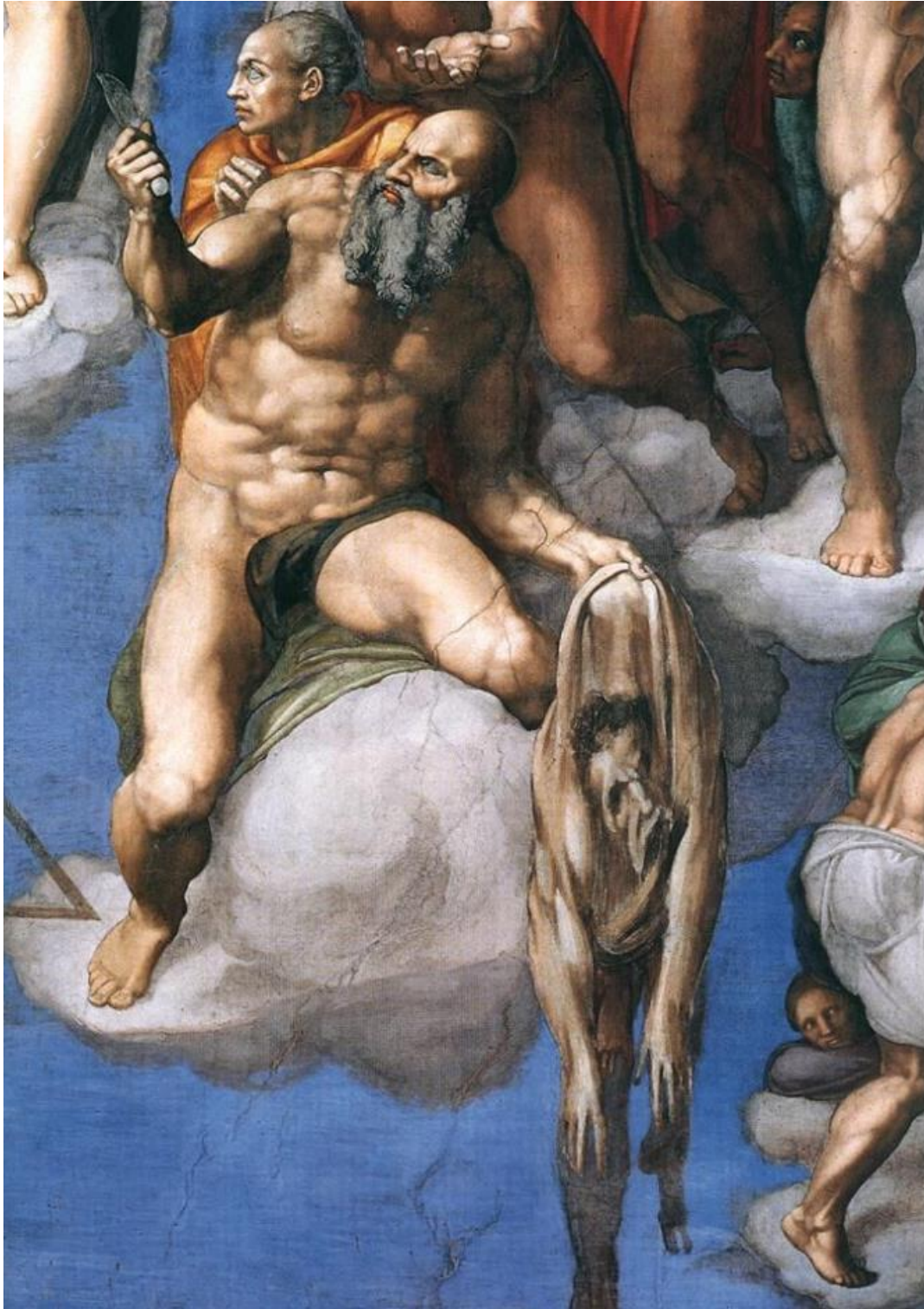


Figure 6:
Detail of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, 1536-1541, Fresco. The Web Gallery of Art.
Accessed May 7, 2020.
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