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Mythic Narratives: The Chronicling of Conceptual Art

Ana A. Iwataki
Pitzer College

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**Mythic Narratives:
The Chronicling of Conceptual Art**

by

Ana Iwataki

SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR ARTS

Professor Bill Anthes
Professor Mark Allen
Ciara Ennis

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Contents

| | |
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| Acknowledgments | iii |
| Introduction: Location, Location, Location: Conceptual Art Past, Present, and Future | 1 |
| Chapter One: Artist Biographies and the Mythologized Narrative | 14 |
| Chapter Two: The Visible Narrative: Photography and Conceptual Art | 32 |
| Chapter Three: Parafictional Narratives: The Art World's Oral Tradition | 54 |
| Conclusion: Beyond Conceptualism: The Capacity of Art's Chronicle | 73 |
| Bibliography | 77 |

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Introduction:

Location, Location, Location: Conceptual Art Past, Present, and Future

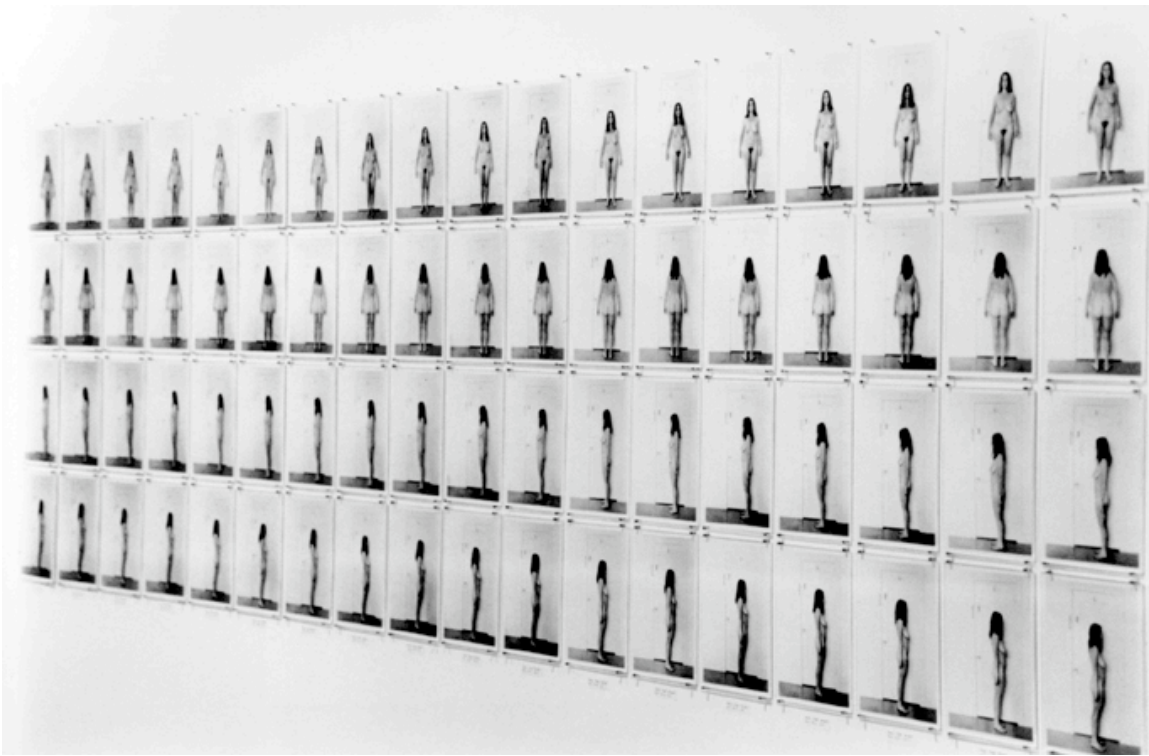
Sol LeWitt's 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" and 1969 "Sentences on Conceptual Art" have come to be widely regarded as de facto manifestos of the Conceptual Art movement. These two essays outlined an art that took the idea as paramount. In LeWitt's words: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art". LeWitt also wrote: "It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry...It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art."¹

From these descriptions, one comes away with the sense that Conceptual Art is a decidedly emotionless affair, with systems and methodology being the forefront of artistic interest. And indeed, there were many seminal works of this movement that beautifully represented this ideal. For instance, Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* is a classic example of the conceptualist strategy of executing a previously formulated idea, with the process being determined by strict guidelines, and subsequently repeated and documented. Antin's piece consisted of photographic documentation of a

¹ LeWitt, Sol. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 846-847. Print.

LeWitt, Sol. "Sentences on Conceptual Art." Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 849-51. Print.

36- day diet. During this time, she lost ten pounds in an effort to mold her body into classically held standards of feminine beauty. Each day, she photographed herself from front, back, and side views. These photos were displayed in a horizontal grid, allowing the viewer to visually track an otherwise indiscernible physical process.²



Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972, Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago

It is perhaps difficult to imagine the ability of this genre of work to become mentally interesting to the spectator. And the inclusion of an engaged viewer from an audience beyond the art world seems even less likely. Yet artists explicitly linked to the Conceptual movement continue to garner interest and praise from contemporary curators, historians, and other art world figures. Furthermore, some have even become known in more popular culture – a feat for any artist, not just those working in the tradition of conceptualism. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will use the examples of three

² Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003. Print.

Conceptual artists from slightly different generations: Bas Jan Ader, Ana Mendieta, and Francis Alÿs. To better understand their critical acclaim as well as popular reception, I will locate their practices within the history of Conceptual Art and the discourse addressing its inception, practice, and continued relevance. In addition to a critical analysis of their work, I will also discuss the implications of the mythic quality the artists' personalities and biographies have taken on. Although seemingly at odds with the widely accepted nature of Conceptualism, the role of the mythologized narrative has become increasingly important in the movement's contemporary prevalence. More specifically, the biographies of these artists, the fetishization of their personalities, the ways in which this anecdotal information can be read in their work, and the inclusion of these narratives in an oral tradition will be the focus of my discussion.

From the introduction to Lucy Lippard's book, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object: 1966 to 1972*, one can begin to put together the ideals conceptual artists were working towards, and what they were equally working against. The institutions were the enemy, which was in line with the radical politics of the time. Artists wanted to escape the commodification of the art world, which was effectively the New York art scene. Lippard said in 1969, "The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problems of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art. The people who are buying art they can't hang up or have in their garden are less interested in possession. They are patrons, rather than collectors."³ This quote shows the idealistic hope for not only the kind of art being made, but also for

³ Lippard, Lucy R. *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972; a Cross-reference Book of Information on Some Esthetic Boundaries ...* New York: Praeger, 1973. 8. Print.

changes in how other key players in the art world functioned. Greater emphasis was put on information and systems, rather than aesthetics. The objective of art was no longer about creating an art object, but instead sharing ideas. Speed, communication, and accessibility were also common themes, as they were part of the desire to democratize art. In this same spirit, artists were trying to break down the notions of the artist-genius and the “aura” of art. To sum it up neatly, art was dealing with its boundaries: those that existed in relation to the gallery, the art world itself, and previously accepted conventions and contexts of art.

The 1960’s and 1970’s saw an outbreak of diversified art practices, with emerging issues of temporality, site-specificity, and physicality being quite prevalent. Immediacy, phenomenology, and presence became the goals of artistic practice, as a struggle against the hegemonic interests of formalism and essence. Artists were creating more and more works that were made inaccessible to the viewer by time, geography, or both. No longer was the *objet d’art* the aim of art practice, as ideas and systems, as well as primacy and presence, became the primary areas of interest. These reconstructed views towards the nature of art created obvious logistical issues. In an attempt to cut ties with the commercial system of galleries, museums, and collectors, works in the conceptual vein created new dependencies as art now needed photography, film, and the written word. The necessity of documentation in understanding works of an ephemeral nature have caused an interesting phenomenon, as we often come to identify the documentation as the primary work, as the missing art object itself. The documentation of an ephemeral piece holds a somewhat tenuous position. By associating the documented material so closely

with the conceptual aspects of it, the documentation often becomes the *gestalt* of the work, whether that was the artist's intention or not.⁴

Artists of this generation were making an intended statement against the established art consensus of the time – namely that art was only concerned with its formal aspects and that it held a revered, mythical status as Art created by the Artist-Genius. As a result of this skepticism, Conceptual Art and its proponents were suspicious of expressive art. Joseph Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy" (1969)⁵ is helpful in its discussion of the new function of art as it was being practiced and theorized by Conceptual artists like himself. He stressed art as being distinct from aesthetics, claiming that art's historical connection with aesthetics was merely circumstantial, rather than inherent. The ideas of beauty and aesthetics had not conflicted with art's definition before, because it had been affected by its service to other spheres - religion, politics, and the aristocracy. In serving these interests, art had functioned in a pre-determined context, and it was only a force of habit that brought art and aesthetics into the same realm. In an argument against this tendency, Kosuth wrote that, "Aesthetic considerations are indeed *always* extraneous to an object's function or 'reason to be'. Unless of course, that object's 'reason to be' is strictly aesthetic." Modernism's championing of visual concerns like abstraction and illusion prompted Kosuth to label its artists and supporters the "vanguards of decoration" and "critics of taste".⁶

⁴ Buskirk. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*.

⁵ Kosuth, Joseph. "Art After Philosophy." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 852-60. Print.

⁶ See Fried, Michael. "Art and Objecthood." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. Print.

In opposition to this view, Kosuth outlined the function of art he and his contemporaries were making, as well as his broader definition of what art-making is. He defined the function of an artist as the questioning of the nature of art. If one is making paintings, one cannot be questioning art's nature, because paintings inherently accept a certain notion of art and a tradition that goes with it. To Kosuth, engaging in this genre of art is merely the creation of historical curiosity. He wrote that before Duchamp, art was using the same language to say new things. After Duchamp, artists realized another language could be used. Kosuth described a work of art as a "proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art".⁷ Art's success was located not in its veneration as an object, but rather in its influence on later works, in its ability to remain relevant for later generations.

Conceptual Art in the Era of Visual Culture

This issue of remaining living and relevant is outlined in Thomas Crow's "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art", published in 2006.⁸ Crow discusses the somewhat tenuous position of Conceptualism in a postmodern society beginning to engage in a historical and contemporary study of Visual Culture. Rather than focus on "high art" as is the traditional aim of Art History, the realm of visual culture is more inclusive, and spans several disciplines as well as the spheres of high and low culture. In this history of images, scholars would consider the cultural significance of a Picasso with the same consequence as a movie poster. Crow was concerned with difficulty of

⁷ Kosuth. 2003. 857.

⁸ Crow, Thomas. "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art." *Art after Conceptual Art*. Ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006. 53-64. Print.

historicizing Conceptual Art in such an academic environment, and saw this new tendency as a result of the assumed “triumph of visuality”. This privileging of the optical is long-standing in the history of art; its return seems to be accepted as Crow outlined the pessimism of some of the most important advocates of Conceptual Art. Critics and historians Benjamin Buchloh, Charles Harrison, and Jeff Wall, in slightly differentiated manners, have announced the conclusion of this short-lived episode in Art History. Citing the deadness of the practice, its lack of prolonged achievement, and its inability to produce work free from irony, these three critics have announced the end of Conceptualism and the re-claimed authority of the visual.⁹

While acknowledging their opinions, Crow provided a set of standards which, in his view, allow the history of Conceptual Art to remain critically relevant. He wrote:

“...it must meet the conditions implied in their judgment on its fate: 1) it must be living and available rather than concluded; 2) it must presuppose, at least in its imaginative reach, renewed contact with lay audiences; and 3) it must document a capacity for significant reference to the world beyond the most proximate institutions of artistic display and consumption.”¹⁰

The supposed triumph of the visual over the conceptual is an issue separate from the concerns that will be addressed in my discussion. However, Crow’s strictures for Conceptual Art’s contemporary viability are useful in addressing the importance of personalized narratives in the practices of artists working in the tradition of conceptualism. Although documentation of ephemeral arts have been elevated to art object status and imbued with aura, there still remains a certain lack of tangibility in

⁹ Crow cites: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique” in Gintz, *L’art conceptuel*, 53., Charles Harrison, “Art Object and Artwork,” in Gintz, *L’art conceptuel*, 63., and Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 19.

¹⁰ Crow. 2006. 53.

many works of a conceptual nature. This has made necessary a phenomenon which, like the notion of documentation as art object, lends itself to the survival of histories that do not fit into the realm of Visual Culture. The art world itself is a separate sphere of culture, with its own history, hierarchy, and ways of operating.¹¹ The emergence, then, of an oral tradition within the art world is perhaps not surprising. A study of the history of art includes not only a formal analysis of objects and work, but also the contextual information necessary for a more complete understanding. Including context such as the time period and sociopolitical environment is standard practice, as it is assumed that locating an artist historically will provide an understanding of his or her motivations, influences, and interests. As much of a biography as is available is also presented, as a supplement giving further insight into the development of the artist. However, as I will argue, this contextual knowledge does not always simply serve as a supplement, but as an essential element of analysis and understanding.

For some artists biographical information becomes more than a paragraph or two precluding a lengthier, separate discussion of their work. Historians and critics have become wary of analyzing work solely through a biographical lens, not wanting to reduce an artist to a shallow figure whose career can be completely attributed to certain events in their life. Erik Beekner, in his essay for Bas Jan Ader's *catalogue raisonné*, mentioned the fear of the artist becoming the "James Dean of visual art".¹² However, knowledge of their personal history can provide further layers of meaning in a critical perspective. In

¹¹ See Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," in *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Phillip Alperson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). 426-33; first pub. *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964). 571-84.

¹² Beekner, Erik. "The Man Who Wanted to Look beyond the Horizon." *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*. By Bas Jan Ader. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. 12. Print.

addition, a compelling personal narrative can be a powerful way in which to garner attention for an artist and his or her practice. A good story within any group will be shared, passed down, and re-told and become part of the collective memory. This is especially true of the art world, which although globalized, remains tight-knit and exclusive. This emergence of an oral tradition fulfills Crow's first regulation for a continued history of Conceptual Art, as it keeps artists and their work living metaphorically when they have ceased to do so literally.

The capacity of a compelling narrative goes beyond the confines of the art world as well. Crow's second and third strictures become fulfilled as these biographies incite interest beyond the academic. Someone unfamiliar with art history may not know how to discuss Van Gogh's work in formal terms, but will undoubtedly remember that he cut off his own ear. The Artist has long been a romanticized figure: a genius capable of sublime creation, separated from the masses, leading a passionate life. There is a very human curiosity inherent in this, separate from any academic concerns. A biographical anecdote transforms into myth, into rumor; new forms which lend themselves to staying power in the human mind.

Bas Jan Ader and Early California Conceptualism

Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975), an artist associated with the first wave of Conceptualism, entered into the art world's oral tradition through the interplay of his life and death, his personal history and his artistic practice. He was Dutch-born, but moved to the United States early in his career and lived and worked in California. He was lost at sea in 1975 in the process of carrying out one of his best-known works. Because of his

early death, he left behind a relatively small oeuvre, yet interest in his work has only increased in the decades since his death. This is evidenced by his numerous retrospectives organized in recent years.¹³

Perhaps it is fair to say that Ader worked in parallel to his contemporaries in Californian Conceptualism, such as Chris Burden, who is arguably best known for allowing his friend to shoot him through the arm for the now infamous *Shoot Piece* (1971).¹⁴ He and others of his generation were interested in physicality and the use of the body in creating work. Ader's work, however, was distinct in its influences, motivations, and the form it took. Much of his work deals with gravity, and is concerned with the notion of the fall.¹⁵ Although many of his pieces use his person as a medium, he did not make body-art. Rather, his body was the means to a different end. He strived to make personal statements with universal appeal through basic human acts with philosophical undertones. In addition to its metaphysical concerns, his work also included lighter aspects. He was heavily influenced by slapstick, in the tradition of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.¹⁶ His performative actions draw as much from these figures as from his art historical influences of Romanticism and de Stijl. When juxtaposed with the events of Ader's life, these art historical and other influences provide a well-rounded and more complete understanding of his practice.

¹³ *Suspended Between Laughters and Tears*. Pitzer Art Galleries. Claremont, California 2010.

Bas Jan Ader – Fall. Kunsthalle Basel. Basel, Switzerland. 2007.

Bas Jan Ader – All is Falling. Camden Arts Center. London, England. 2006.

¹⁴ "Chris Burden - Gagosian Gallery." *Current Exhibitions - Gagosian Gallery*. Web. 15 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.gagosian.com/artists/chris-burden/>>.

¹⁵ Beekner, Erik. 2006.

¹⁶ Heiser, Jörg. "Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader's Slapstick". *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*. By Bas Jan Ader. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. Print.

Gender and Identity, Land and Performance: Ana Mendieta's Conceptualism

Cuban-born Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) continued the discourse of Conceptualism in the context of a slightly younger generation of artists. She was most prolific in the 1970's and 1980's, and was progressively earning more attention as an artist at the time of her death in 1985. For most of her career, she had largely been labeled as a feminist or Latina artist. Though there is no doubt that her work was heavily influenced by her identity as a woman of Hispanic heritage, she was also very much engaged with a larger artistic discussion. Her body-earth installations brought together ideas from two prominent movements of her time. Her practice also included elements of Performance Art, as well as movements interested in ideas of gender, identity, and feminism. She was suspicious of formalist tendencies in art, and worked against these ideas in her practice. In addition to these artistic and academic interests, Mendieta was intrigued by ancient rituals, traditions, and religions, especially those of Pre-Columbian societies.¹⁷

And like Ader, Mendieta died early, unexpectedly, and sensationally. While acknowledging the significance of her contributions to art, her death has played no small part in bolstering the degree of recognition of her artistic endeavors. The shock of her death has long affected readings of her work, prompting historians and writers to condemn this over-simplified analysis and seek to contextualize her practice in a broader sense.¹⁸ And as her 2010 retrospective at the Galerie Lelong in New York proves,

¹⁷ Mendieta, Ana, Gloria Moure, and Donald B. Kuspit. *Ana Mendieta*. [Galicia, Spain]: Centro Galego De Arte Contemporanea, 1996. Print.

¹⁸ Sheets, Hilarie M. "Unraveling the Story of Ana Mendieta." ARTnews 2004. Art Full Text. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.

contemporary interest in Mendieta remains strong.¹⁹ Her status as an influential artist, as well as a figure in an art world myth, keeps her history alive.

The Globalized Artist: Francis Alÿs and Conceptual Art Today

Francis Alÿs (1959) is an artist working today in the tradition of conceptualism, and who has also benefited from the emergence of an oral tradition in the art world, albeit in a less tragic but equally sensational manner. Belgian-born, Alÿs lives and works in Mexico City. Sometimes called a modern-day *flâneur*, his practice is largely concerned with the urban landscape, exemplified by the Mexican capital he has adopted as his home. His work is performative, although he engages with other media, and often takes place in Mexico City, using its streets, sights, and people as medium, collaborator, and audience. These performances are of a nature that can be easily boiled down into an anecdote, into a simple one-line description of something extraordinary that happened. This is one of the aims of Alÿs's practice: to give further life to a piece by releasing it into the world.²⁰ This goes along with his reluctance to fully complete a work; an emphasis on rehearsal and open-endedness is also a motif of his practice.²¹ This method of art-making has attracted the attention and praise of the art world and he has been the subject of several retrospectives in recent years. However, his poetic gestures are universal in their appeal, which is evidenced by their appearance in local tabloid papers. As a contemporary artist, Alÿs continues the investigations prompted by the Conceptual

¹⁹ "Documentation and Artwork: 1972-1985." *Galerie Lelong and Petah Coyne, Ana Mendieta*. Web. 17 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/past>>.

²⁰ Alÿs, Francis, Mark Godfrey, Klaus Peter Biesenbach, and Kerry Greenberg. *Francis Alÿs: a Story of Deception*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Print.

²¹ Ferguson, Russell, and Francis Alÿs. *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal*. Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2007. Print.

artists of the 1960's and 1970's. For them, Presence was the key to a fruitful art experience, and the method through which they could escape the commodification of the art world. Alÿs, instead, seeks to eliminate objecthood through work that survives without physical form: modern day fables, urban myths, and rumors.

Conclusion

Though grounded in the tenets of Conceptual Art, the work of Bas Jan Ader, Ana Mendieta, and Francis Alÿs requires a broadened method of analysis in order to fully encapsulate what is readable in their art and what has rendered it fresh and interesting today. As artists, these three figures require a novel approach to understanding a movement which has been characterized and defined for several decades. And as personalities, Ader, Mendieta, and Alÿs further spark the imagination - creating newfound notions of the romanticized artist and a tradition of mythology for contemporary society.

Chapter One: Artist Biographies and the Mythologized Narrative

A Portrait of the Artist as A Romantic: The Life, Death, and Legacy of Bas Jan Ader

In June of 1965, Dutch-born artist Bas Jan Ader sailed from Cape Cod, Massachusetts in a thirteen-foot long boat. His intent was to break the world-record for a solo crossing of the Atlantic in the smallest craft to date. This voyage was intended to be the second element in a three-part artwork entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*. The work was meant to be a trilogy, of which the first part was photographic documentation of a nighttime stroll through Los Angeles, from downtown to the Pacific Ocean. On these black and white photographs were handwritten lyrics of a contemporary pop song: The Coaster's "Searchin'" (1957). These photographs were exhibited at the Claire S. Copley gallery in Los Angeles, and at the opening, the University of California at Irvine choir sang sea shanties. The second element of the piece was his solo voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, from Maine to Amsterdam. Upon his arrival, the third and final part would have been a show at the Groniger Museum, as well as a nighttime walk through Amsterdam meant to mirror its counterpart in Los Angeles. A school choir would have also been present at the Amsterdam opening, but Ader never made it to the Netherlands. Nine months later, his shipwrecked vessel was found and he was declared lost at sea.

This final artistic act entered Ader into the realm of myth, through a strange intersection of his life, death, and artistic practice. This glamorization of his personality has given way to a fascination that has catapulted him into a post-mortem stardom within the art world and in popular culture. Three decades after his death, the Dutch artist with a rather small oeuvre continues to be the subject of retrospectives and dissertations, of homage pieces

and documentaries.¹ While giving due notice to his artistic achievements, the role of his biography in the emergence of this phenomenon cannot be ignored.

As briefly discussed earlier, many of Ader's contemporaries in West Coast Conceptualism experimented with physicality in their work by pushing their bodies to the limit in the name of art. But only Ader's act culminated in a loss of life, forever framing him as a tragically romantic figure, an artist willing to sacrifice it all. Locating Ader in the broader context of the Conceptual Art has at times been difficult for historians. While undoubtedly engaged with the same theoretical concerns and artistic inquiries as other Conceptualist artists, there also existed an undeniably poetic aspect to his work, which is exemplified in but not limited to *In Search of the Miraculous*. With so many artists calling for a removal of the emotive and expressive and favoring instead systematic methodologies, Ader emerges as an anomaly, something that needs to be explained.

Critic and co-editor of *frieze* magazine, Jörg Heiser, has in recent years attempted to do just this. Ader is one artist who Heiser identified as consummate of what he calls "Romantic Conceptualism".² In his discussion, Heiser defined Romanticism as "not a synonym for the kitsch of love and desire, but an abbreviation for the cultural techniques of emotion and for ideas of the fragmentary and the open."³ However, he also discussed this phenomenon in terms of historical Romanticism, especially in conjunction with Ader

¹ See Christopher Williams' *Bouquet, for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D'Arcangelo*, 1991. Tate Collection. and *Here Is Always Somewhere Else*. Dir. Rene Daalder. American Scenes, 2007. DVD.

² Heiser curated an exhibition of the same name in 2007 at Kunsthalle Nürnberg, BAWAG Foundation Vienna.

See also: Heiser, Jörg. "Romantic Conceptualism and the Trouble with the Sublime." *Now Is the Time: Art & Theory in the 21st Century*. Rotterdam: Nai, 2009. Print.

Heiser, Jorg. "Emotional Rescue." *frieze* 11 Nov. 2002. *Art Full Text*. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.

³ Heiser. 2009.

whose work displayed overt influences from this movement. Ader's *Farewell to Faraway Friends* (1971) is an undeniable homage to the work of Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. The photograph shows Ader as a lone figure standing on a coastline across the water from a wooded area. The scene is quiet and still, and Ader is tiny in relation to the landscape surrounding him. It shares almost all its characteristics with Friedrich's landscapes, as well as the larger tradition of Romantic landscape painting. It evokes a poignant reaction at the smallness of Man when set against the elements of Nature. The forefront of the photograph is dominated by large and smaller rocks, which blend together to form dark, indiscernible shapes – monuments instead of individualized forms. The sky and sea both serve to extend the image beyond its frame and into the unknown. These are manifestations of classical methods used to evoke the Sublime in Romantic painting, and are outlined in Robert Rosenblum's text "The Abstract Sublime" from 1961. Rosenblum explained the Romantic notion of the Sublime, that which is awe-inspiring and frightening, and when faced with it, renders Man helpless and overwhelmed.⁴

⁴ Rosenblum, Robert. "The Abstract Sublime." *The Sublime*. Ed. Simon Morley. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010. 108-12. Print.



Bas Jan Ader, *Farewell to Faraway Friends*, 1971, Courtesy Patrick Painter Gallery



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above a Sea of Mist*, c.1818, Courtesy Kunsthalle Hamburg

Going beyond this art historical connection between Ader and Romanticism of the 19th century, Heiser further challenged the mutual exclusivity of Romanticism and Conceptualism. He attributed the notion of their separateness to Conceptual Art's unstable position in an art world still dominated by Modernist dogma. Because of this, emotions were steadfastly removed from the equation, as Conceptual Art sought to distance itself from expressionist art and claim a space within art history.

Heiser's interest in Romantic Conceptualism began upon viewing Andy Warhol's *The Kiss* (1963). The film immediately begins with black and white footage of a couple kissing for the duration of a 16mm film, and only stops when the film simply runs out. This is repeated with several other couples, including a gay male couple, and an interracial couple. His fascination with the piece stemmed from its "voluptuous bliss and lack of regulation (which) overwhelms the rigidity of the conceptual execution".⁵ In Heiser's Romantic Conceptualism, within the confines of systematic methodology there exists room for the emotional, for the romantic, and for the sublime. What makes this possible, for Heiser, is the lack of personalization in including the emotional. To him, it is a

"misconception...to think that Romantic Conceptualism is about injecting conceptual art with *narration* and the artist's *soul*. No, it confounds the false alternative between the subjective, narcissist inwardness on the one hand and, on the other, desubjectivised and cool discursive transmission that supposedly is selfless and engaged and thus emancipates the viewer."

Heiser also addressed the role of the sublime in Romantic Conceptualism. He says, "While it may involve the artist's own actual experience of the sublime, it refuses to

⁵ Heiser. 177. 2009.

translate that experience into a representation of magnitude. It does so for the sake of allowing the viewer to more actively *imagine* partaking in it, rather than just to *identify* with the artist representing it.” He cited Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (1969) as an example, which consists of photographs of a stretch of landscape in which Barry had released a liter of argon. Barry did not document himself releasing the gas, instead choosing to only photograph the landscape with the empty flask, and to inform the viewer of the process through a written description. According to Heiser, by literally removing himself from the scene, Barry allowed the experience to become depersonalized, and allowed the viewer more freedom in his interaction and understanding of the piece.

Heiser has done much to displace some of the “stigma” placed upon the emotional and the romantic by figures such as LeWitt and Kosuth. However, his discussion too quickly dismissed the importance of the personal and the narrative in this genre of work. Ader himself, who plays such a key role in Heiser’s argument, cannot be fully analyzed without the recognition of his biography’s affect on his practice and critical reception. *In Search of the Miraculous* is just one instance in which Ader’s personal life (and death) intersected with his work. Many in his relatively small oeuvre are gravity pieces, which referenced, among other things, notions of The Fall, falling, and failure. In *Broken Fall (organic) Amsterdamse Bos, Holland* (1971), Ader hung from a rather skinny tree branch, just over a ditch of water. He swung on the branch, moved his hands, kicked his legs, until eventually he lost his grip and fell. This piece, like most of his other work, exists in both film and photographic documentation. *Fall I, Los Angeles* (1970) features Ader seated in a chair on the roof of his house. He eventually slipped, and both he and the

chair fell from the roof onto the ground below. Another of his works is based on a *Reader's Digest* story about a boy who fell over Niagara Falls and survived.

There are several possible readings of Ader's fascination with falling. Both his parents were preachers, so there is the immediate connotation of the Biblical Fall of Man: Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. His family history also revealed another influence on his psyche and consequently, artistic practice. His father was shot by Nazis during World War II for his participation in the resistance by helping to hide Jewish families. This final "fall" of his father is read as having a lasting effect on Ader, in his attempts to live up to this tragic hero, as well as a more general interest in the tragic. He once commented:

"I have always been fascinated by the tragic. That is also contained in the act of falling; the fall is failure. Someone once said to me: I can well imagine that you are so obsessed with the fall; that's because your father was shot. That is obviously a far too anecdotal interpretation. Everything is tragic because people always lose control of processes, of matter, of their feelings. That is a much more universal tragedy, and that cannot be visualized from an anecdote."⁶

He later distanced himself from this comment, but it still gives insight into his motifs and thought process, as well as to conversations that were happening concerning his work. While *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls* may not be a specific allegory of his father's death, his personal history remains as an informing factor in his practice and its reception. Although his practice did very much incorporate the tragic, the romantic, and the sublime, there are lighter and other art historical elements present. His cultural background and his contemporaries were both undeniable influences in his work. This is arguably most evident in *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism, Westkapelle, Holland*

⁶ Ader, Bas Jan. Bas Jan Ader: *Please Don't Leave Me*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. Print.

(1971). In four color photographs, Ader is shown lying on a brick path in the countryside. In the background, one can see the Westkapelle lighthouse, which was the subject of several Piet Mondrian paintings, who was Ader's countryman of an older generation. Also in reference to Mondrian, the first photo shows Ader lying directly on the brick road, and in the next he has a rectangle of blue cloth under him. In the third photo, a yellow rectangular object has appeared, horizontally, over Ader's left arm. In the fourth and last photograph, a smaller rectangle has been placed vertically next to his right leg. This arrangement, as well as the title, was a deliberate allusion to Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism style of vertical black lines and primary colors. In this work, Ader was also referencing the more recent Minimalism movement, which often dealt with sculptures of geometric shapes and their interaction with the human body.⁷



Bas Jan Ader, *On the Road to a New Neo-Plasticism*, 1971, Courtesy Patrick Painter Gallery

⁷ See Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture 1-3." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007. 829-35. Print.

In briefly describing Ader's work and the references present in them, I hope to illustrate the importance of the personal in understanding his work. Ader was a true Conceptual artist, with his practice being founded in the conscious execution of ideas. However, unlike many others of his contemporaries, his motivation to create art did not stem from an interest in methodology or systems. Instead, his bitter personal history fostered yearnings in him that could only be addressed through the form of art. His end goal was not to simply create an artistic statement, but rather to use that statement to tackle a larger inquiry. Heiser was correct in his assertion that the personal can become universal when expressed through a conceptual practice. Ader's work often elicits a strong, emotional response in the viewer that stems from a basic human reaction. *I'm too sad to tell you* (1970) achieved this in a remarkable way. Ader's face is focused in on by the camera (still and film) and he sobs in a quietly violent manner, without theatricality or cliché. He cannot reveal why he feels this way, yet can share the emotion quite easily. While, like Heiser says, the personal is absent as we have no definitive answer on the source of Ader's sorrow, allowing for a more universal response, it is ludicrous to believe that the subjective has nothing to do with the work. One can assume that systems and methodology had relatively little to do with its creation, and it instead came into being as a result of a deeply ingrained inclination to perform this action.

His practice is an existential exploration; it is art in the service of a human fascination with the metaphysical and the sublime. Completing this romantic image is his early and sensationalized death. Although many speculations were made at the time of his disappearance, Ader wholeheartedly believed that he would survive the trip. It was not a suicide mission, nor a ploy in the service of faking his death, as some of his students

believed. It was simply an unfortunate occurrence, and one that made him an irresistible figure of art world myth. His pieces are compelling, human, romantic, cerebral, and speak to the imagination, and his life is equally intriguing. However, it is in the places where his work, his life, and his death overlap that a narrative appears. It is a myth that lends it itself to a human attraction to a mystery, to a scandalous disappearance, that then gives way to an intellectual curiosity in the creative production of such a romantic figure.

Still Searching: Ana Mendieta's Art as Healing and Transcendence

Another artist whose life and death have become important factors in understanding her work, as well in creating a fascination with her persona, is Ana Mendieta. Born in Cuba, she was raised in a family who had been politically prominent before the revolution. Her father had served in the government, but refused to cooperate with Castro after his alignment with Soviet Union. After running counterrevolutionary activities out of the house, he began to fear for the safety of his daughters. Mendieta was twelve when she was sent to the United States with her sister as part of Operation Pedro Pan, an initiative organized by the United States Government, in particular the Department of State and Central Intelligence Agency, as well as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Miami.⁸ The intent was to help protect the children of parents who were in opposition to the revolutionary government in Cuba. Most of these children had family to go to in the States, but Mendieta was placed in a Catholic orphanage. Along

⁸ "History." Pedro Pan. Web. 17 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.pedropan.org/category/history>>. H. Sheets, "Unraveling the Story of Ana Mendieta," ARTnews, Summer 2004, p. 48 (illustrated).

Mendieta, Ana, Gloria Moure, and Donald B. Kuspit. *Ana Mendieta*. [Galicia, Spain]: Centro Galego De Arte Contemporanea, 1996. Print

with her sister, Mendieta lived in Iowa until she was an adult, and these years of separation from her family, language, and culture had a profound effect on her psychological and emotional life, which in turn significantly informed her artwork.⁹

Most of her work was part of a larger attempt to find healing and transcendence from the psychological and spiritual damage of her past. Her sense of abandonment and displacement from her home country led to a profound interest in the history, religion, iconography, and rituals of ancient and modern Latin America, especially pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican cultures. The intersection of these cultures with the West and Catholicism was of great interest to her. Mendieta found the modern displacement from nature to be unsettling and tragic, also as a result of her sense of disconnect from her homeland. Unlike Ader, who reveled in highlighting his fragility in the face of greater forces, Mendieta sought to tap into and become a part of them.¹⁰ Through her work, she looked to blend elements of ancient and contemporary culture, both Western and non-Western, and access realms saturated with history, meaning and power.

Gender and identity were common themes for artists to be engaged with during Mendieta's time, and she was included in this without being defined by it. Reclaiming her sexuality and highlighting the violence that exists in gender relations were important to her. Her forced immigration to the United States placed her in a society in which she was looked down upon as a woman in a man's world, Hispanic in a white society, and a Cuban exile in the United States. One of her earlier performance pieces from her time at

⁹ Blocker, Jane. *Where is Ana Mendieta: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1999.

¹⁰ Ultan, Deborah K. "From the Personal to the Transpersonal: Self-Reclamation Through Ritual in Performance." *Art Documentation* 20.2 (2001). Art Full Text. Web. 11 Feb. 2011.

the University of Iowa addressed the larger issues of sexism and violence, but was prompted by an event from her own life: a fellow student's rape and murder on campus. Following this, unsuspecting artist friends were invited to Mendieta's apartment, where they found her bloody and naked from the waist-down, lying across a tabletop. This was the catalyst for her to begin using violent and provocative images and motifs regularly in her work. Blood became an often used medium, on which she once commented: "I started immediately using blood, I guess because I think it's a very powerful magical thing. I don't see it as a negative force."¹¹



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, Courtesy Galerie Lelong

¹¹ Mendieta, Ana, Petra Barreras Del. Rio, and John Perreault. *Ana Mendieta: a Retrospective*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987. Print.

Her work was perhaps not romantic in the sense that Ader's is, but does engage with the Sublime in a similar manner. Both artists sought to access the unknown, to address the metaphysical as artistic achievement but also to fulfill deep-seated and personal desires. And by virtue of this, Mendieta remains part of the discourse of the art of her time, yet her practice stands as its own. Her art belongs to the categories of institutional critique, site-specificity, feminism, body art, and land art; but statements on form, genre, materials, or movements were not her primary motivating factors. In the catalogue for her retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York John Perreault stated:

“Consistency is certainly a factor. No matter what the medium or format, there is an intensity of vision that is astounding. Mendieta did not dabble. Many artists have learned to imitate themselves in order to satisfy requirements of the art market. Mendieta was consistent because she had no choice; she made the art she had to make, which was the only art she could make and the only art she needed to make. Her single-mindedness was dictated by inner necessity.”¹²

The power of Mendieta's art largely comes from the intensely personal motivating factors of her childhood and history. Mendieta made the work she did because she simply had to – art was the means for her to reckon with the demons of her past and address internalized desires and interests. As a result, the personal cannot be separated from the academic with regard to Mendieta, the events of her life that make her a compelling character are also critical aspects of her artistic output.

¹² Ibid.,13.

Globalized and Mobilized: Francis Alÿs as the Contemporary Mythic Artist

The practice of Francis Alÿs is also closely tied to the social, political, and cultural life of Latin America. A contemporary artist of a younger generation working in the tradition of conceptualism, Alÿs was born in 1959 in Belgium, and studied architecture at the Institut Supérieur d'Architecture Saint-Luc in his home country, then subsequently received a Master's degree in urbanism from the Instituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice, Italy. In 1987, he moved to Mexico City to work as an architect and civil servant.¹³ Although relatively little is known about Alÿs's private life, especially in comparison to Ader and Mendieta, the mythologization of his persona is key in allowing the achievements of his artistic methods. Specifically, his identity as a renowned global artist makes possible Alÿs's ability to become involved in contentious situations and communicate its particular issues without didacticism to a separate and often uninformed audience. The globalized artist has the unusual position of being at once involved with and distanced from a community, and Alÿs takes this as both subject and method in his practice. The fetishization of the Artist has not yet been escaped, but Alÿs uses this privilege in the service of a more democratized purpose.

His training as an architect and in urban planning is evident in the nature of his practice. Solo walks through a city played a significant role in many of his pieces, which often encapsulated a commentary on the urban landscape and the individuals who inhabit it. *Ambulantes*, a photographic work that dates from 1992 to the present, reflects this interest quite overtly. Alÿs recorded various individuals who make up part of Mexico City's day-to-day scene, such as vendors pushing carts, or deliverymen toting their wares.

¹³ "Electronic Arts Intermix : Francis Alÿs : Biography." *Electronic Arts Intermix*. Web. 05 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.eai.org/artistBio.htm?id=10483>>.

Usually shown walking, Alÿs sought to create a photographic archive of the social dynamics of the city.

Although deeply engaged with the city in his work and social life, Alÿs remains acutely aware of his status as a foreigner. He was raised and educated elsewhere and his livelihood is not tied to the unstable socioeconomic system in Mexico. As T.J. Demos discussed in his text for the catalogue of Alÿs's *A Story of Deception* exhibition at MoMa in New York, he has the privileged status of "artist-nomad." The globalization of the art world has made this role a common one, yet it is Alÿs who has uniquely taken it as a tool in a powerfully poetic method of art-making. Demos quotes Alÿs as saying:

"I think also that my status as an immigrant freed me from my own cultural heritage – or my debt to it, if you like. It provided me with a kind of permanent disjunction...an enormous sense of freedom and an open-ended time frame to build a language, an attitude, away from a world and culture that I saw as saturated with information."¹⁴

Demos addressed the ethics of the mobilization of the artist: it is a rather elitist system that has more in common with privileged jet-setting and neo-liberal economic policy than the situation of the displaced and the oppressed. There is also an inherent danger in the lack of connectivity between the artist and the site; a work could become more style than substance if no real knowledge or empathy is involved. But he wrote that Alÿs uses this uncertainty to facilitate and mediate from a perspective that is at once double-sided and negated. He is assumed to have a highly sensitized position, with the bi-cultural knowledge of a displaced person. This can also be seen as its opposite: he is negated in the sense that he is

¹⁴ Demos, T.J. "Vanishing Mediator." Ed. Francis Alÿs, Mark Godfrey, Klaus Peter Biesenbach, and Kerry Greenberg. *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. 178. Print.

no longer European but cannot be identified as Mexican either. It is from this gray area that Alÿs acquires the poetic license that makes his work so successful.

Alÿs does not ignore the precariousness of his situation- he uses it as subject matter in his practice as a means to call attention to the system at large, as well as come to terms with it on a personal level. In this way, the personal narrative becomes as inseparable from his practice as it is in Ader's and Mendieta's. For *The Loop* (1997), Alÿs traveled from Tijuana, Mexico to San Diego, California by plane on a trip that took twenty-nine days. He used a route that took him all over the world in order to avoid crossing the contentious US-Mexico border. He has made similar statements within the country as well. On a daily basis, Mexican day laborers set up on city sidewalks with handmade signs advertising their services. One might see electricians, plumbers, house-painters, among many others. For *Turista* (1994), Alÿs joined their ranks with a sign identifying him as a tourist. In this way, he inserted himself into Mexico City's daily economic life, while also acknowledging his separateness from it. He offered further questions regarding the ethics of the act of observing others, whether as tourist or artist, in the context of a struggling society.¹⁵ With these works, and others with similar motivations, Alÿs used his position as a mobile artist to positively affect the sites he engages with. His identity as a celebrated artist allows him to garner increased awareness of situations he has become familiar with. Alÿs is not exploitative of the societies that he chooses to take as subject matter, but uses his privileged status to give voice to the oppressed and marginalized.

¹⁵ Alÿs. 2010. 61.



Francis Alÿs, *Turista*, 1994

Conclusion

Alÿs's work is of a different nature than that of Bas Jan Ader and Ana Mendieta in that he is still a living and practicing artist. His work cannot be regarded as a closed oeuvre, and there can be no definitive word on what it "means". However, Alÿs continues a discourse that uniquely includes Ader and Mendieta. Although not based on knowledge of his private life, his personal narrative is likewise inextricable from a consideration of his career. In his own way, he has been elevated to a mythic character – a nomadic artist belonging to everywhere and nowhere, in touch with the elite structures of the art world as well as the daily

struggles of Mexico City. The work he creates is only possible because of his distinctive identity as citizen and nomad, as familiar stranger. And while an overt interest in the sublime is absent from his practice, there exists a poetry that is undeniable. The tenuousness of his own role enables him to address controversial political environment with grace, translating volatile situations into compelling yet informative anecdotes. Conceptualism finds continued life in Alÿs's practice, using its traditions to make new statements within the art world and beyond.

Chapter Two: The Visible Narrative: Photography and Conceptual Art

What Are You Referring To?: *Silueta Series* and Semiology

For a piece in the *Silueta Series*, “Imagen de Yagul” (1973), Ana Mendieta bought flowers at a market in Mexico, and then went alone to an Aztec tomb that was covered in weeds. Naked except for the white flowers which she covered herself with, Mendieta photographed herself almost lying down on the tomb. This work is representative of the first stage of her most extensive and arguably best-known work, the *Silueta Series* (1973-78). Mendieta began the series by creating ephemeral installations in the outdoors, most often in Iowa or Latin America, and especially in Cuba and Mexico. Using her body, as well as other natural materials, she would create a ritualistic bond with the land. As discussed before, her displacement from her home country and family was a prominent motivating factor in her work, as much of it is intimate and personal; in therapeutic and ritualistic fashion, she deals with issues of identity, gender, violence, history, and culture. "Having been torn from my homeland during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb. My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe."¹ This quote from Mendieta herself is useful in providing the viewer with two important ways of understanding her work. The quest for a connection with lost origins is a prominent theme, which can be seen in her many site-specific works. She spent time in both Mexico and Cuba, engaging with the land in very intimate and meaningful ways. Her comments about this particular piece

¹ Rauch, Heidi; Suro, Federico. "Ana Mendieta's primal scream" The Free Library 01 September 1992. 16 November 2010 <[http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ana Mendieta's primal scream-a013665466](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ana+Mendieta's+primal+scream-a013665466)>.

provides a little more information: the intended analogy is that she is covered by both time and history. The choice of the Aztec tomb is deliberate; it is a site marked by a specific cultural history, one that is wrought with the long-reaching effects of colonialism, yet still subject to the natural state of the land. The inherently impermanent nature of the piece also alludes to the power of the site - of deeper cultural truths, which transcend temporality. While admittedly this history is not precisely Mendieta's, it still brought her in closer connection to what she was denied by living in homogenous Iowa. The idea of the ritual was essential to the piece, as her deliberate actions perform the function of healing her wounds and building her identity.²



Ana Mendieta, "Imagen de Yagul" from the *Silueta Series*, 1973, Courtesy Galerie LeLong

² Jacobs, Mary Jane. *The "Silueta Series", 1973-1980*. New York: Galerie LeLong. Print.

The personal nature of Mendieta's work, as well as the importance of the specific sites she has chosen, makes the role of secondary documentation, namely photography, extremely important. Photography serves as tangible marker for all aspects key to the piece; it is an anchor on which critical analyses and anecdotal information can be grounded. Furthermore, it provides a necessary function as an object that can circulate the art world, accrue economic value, and symbolize the work in the classroom and in exhibition. The photograph is a visual trigger for the many avenues of discussion it can be associated with. The event itself is of course primary, in its ritualistic and therapeutic functions, but the aftermath and the visual experience must be important too. This is evident in the mere fact the Mendieta did photograph each manifestation of the *Silueta Series*. Martha Buskirk remarked that photography was the key to the portability of the work. It allowed Mendieta to travel to the sites that held meaning for her, perform the rituals alone, arrive and leave with little that needed to be carried, and still share the experience and what it meant for her. The photograph functioned as simple proof that this event happened, as well as the vehicle through which the meaning could be disseminated.³

Because of her interest in funerary rituals, as well as the prevalence of violence and blood in her work, *Silueta Series*, among other Mendieta works, are often read as an omen of her death. While perhaps one cannot argue that she was foretelling her early demise through these works, they now serve as a grisly representation of a troubled artist's life and death. The *Silueta Series* provides an excellent platform for a reading that includes both the critical and biographical approaches of finding meaning. The

³ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003. Print. 235-238.

photographic form that the series exists in today allows for the accessibility of this reading – photographs are visual indicators that usher information into the physical realm. This function also addresses the concerns of the longevity of work of a conceptual nature in the contentious environment it finds itself in today: a growing tendency to examine artistic and cultural production through the lens of Visual Culture. Students of art history born decades after Mendieta's death are able to have an immediate experience with at least part of the work, allowing for discourse to perpetuate and evolve.

Documentation of her site-specific events was important to Mendieta; this much is made clear by the large collection of slides that was released after her death. However, her intentions regarding how this work was to be organized and exhibited is left more vague, as her early and unexpected death did not allow enough time for her to leave any instructions. The overall intention was made obvious, although it was important for her to perform these actions alone and in faraway locations, it was also essential that they could be shared. The photograph gave meaning, longevity, and life to an emotionally charged ephemeral manifestation. It is, however, unclear what the photograph meant to Mendieta on a personal level. Were they simply for other people, to provide understanding and access to her work? Were they mementos, continuations of a ritual that had heavy significance to her personally? Or did they also constitute the work, and functioned as the second manifestation of an overall idea? It is, nonetheless, essential to recognize that these photographs are only one part of a larger entity, a primary work that we can no longer access. They are the documentation, not the piece itself, although this distinction has become dubious in the art world. Despite this possible disservice to the

artist's original intentions, documentary materials, like photographs, have become indispensable assets in the consideration and endurance of Conceptual Art.

Artist and historian Jeff Wall further discusses the relationship between photography and Conceptual Art in his essay from the publication *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1966-1975*, accompanying the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition of the same name. This relationship had profound effects on both, as Wall argues that the Conceptual Art movement was responsible for the reconstruction of photography as an avant-garde art practice in its own right. Before the 1960s, Wall says, photography aligned itself with modernism without partaking in it as other mediums did. Painting and sculpture had already gone through the processes of deconstruction, and moved away from traditional notions of aesthetics and depiction. Photography, on the other hand, by its very nature could not escape depiction, could not escape the idea of the *tableau*. Through conceptualism, however, photography could redefine itself through its functions, rather than making changes in its inherent qualities like painting and sculpture had done. Wall states that this happened in two distinct ways: the emergence of photodocumentation as an art form, and the amateurization of photography. Through photodocumentation, a photograph was no longer about an image created by an artist-photographer, a skilled craftsman, but rather the idea being disseminated by the image. The image now functioned as the vessel through which the idea could be shared. This re-imagining of photography is seen in works like Dan Graham's *Home for America*. This work, which took on the format of a photo-essay, presents cheaply made images of

suburban homes, what we would now call “track housing”. Without any knowledge of its context, this work could easily be taken for a serious, factual piece of photo-journalism.⁴



Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1966-67, Arts Magazine

The second way in which photography emerged as an avant-garde art practice, according to Wall, was its amateurization, or its de-skilling. Reductivism was the avenue through which painting and sculpture had redefined themselves as modern. Examining and critiquing what were seen as their inherent qualities, challenging the things that separated the artist-genius from everyone else, doubting the legitimacy of all these notions— these were the methods through which avant-garde practices emerged. Going along with these new ideas of “anti-art”, “anaesthetics”, and “the condition of no-art”, the

⁴ Wall, Jeff. "Marks of Indifference." *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*. Ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. Print.

photograph went through a similar transformation. While it could not escape its physical qualities, it could abandon the notions of a photographic practice as “high art”. The attempt to reach a pinnacle of modernist photography had been successful, and as with painting when it reached the same phase, photography looked to abandon this for something new. As Lucy Lippard stated in her essay “Escape Attempts”, from the 1973 book *Six Years*, Conceptual Art practices were associated with “work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or dematerialized.”⁵ Photography found a way to function in this manner, although of course it could not be dematerialized. Artists began to abandon the equipment used to make high-resolution images, in favor of cheaper and more widely available cameras. Ed Ruscha’s numerous books of photographs, like *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), exemplify this new kind of practice. Rejecting the genre of art-photography books, his photographs pay no attention to technical skill or strategies, often displaying amateur mistakes, as well as using readily available materials of lesser quality. There are other many other ways of understanding the functions of photography in a Conceptual Art practice. Rosalind Krauss, in her essay “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America”, attempts to find a common thread in the extremely diversified art practices of the 1970’s.⁶ She sees this commonality as stemming from semantic theory of the time, in the notion of the index. An index can be understood as a sign that is not arbitrary, because it has a direct relationship to its understood meaning. For instance, a shadow or a footprint would be an index, because it holds a tangible relationship to its

⁵ Lippard. vii. 1973.

⁶ Krauss, Rosalind. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 994-99. Print.

meaning, or referent. Therefore, a photograph can also be understood as an index, because it is a direct result of the physical imprint caused by the transfer of light reflections onto a sensitive surface. For Krauss, the Readymade and the photograph are similar in their functions as an index, because they are both physical objects that have been removed from the continuum of reality into an art context through the act of choice.

The role of the index can be seen in later manifestations of Mendieta's work. By 1975, the *Siluetas Series* evolved to simple marks of herself in the earth, silhouettes of her body. She would create these silhouettes using dirt, grass, gunpowder that would be lit on fire to leave a charred area, as well as hair and other natural materials. In the photographic documentation of these works, we can see the physical evidence that Mendieta was just there, and we can assume she is also somewhere behind the camera. Photographs of another installation made in Mexico show the outline of her body made with sand, water, and red pigment. Like many of her works, it is vaguely violent (while there are others that are overtly violent), and leaves the viewer wondering what happened before the photograph was taken. Others are more subtle, with only the imprint of Mendieta's body in fresh grass as a trace of her physical presence. These photographs that feature just the suggestion of the artist, and not her body itself, can be read through Krauss's terms as a "double index." The imprint is a visible indicator of Mendieta's body; it is clearly linked to her presence, which appears to have been there moments before. The photograph, in turn, is an index of this moment in time, of the physical action of capturing that area of land with a camera.



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Silueta Series* in Iowa, 1978, Courtesy SF MOMA

The physical aspects of the piece can be read as its referents, but not the only ones. Mendieta is drawing from a whole host of ideas, narratives, and histories that give her specific action meaning. Robert C. Morgan, in the essay “Mistaken Documents: Conceptual Art and Photography”, from his book *Art Into Ideas*, also discussed the different functions a photograph can take in works of a conceptual nature. He wrote that images can come into being as the result of a process, or they can come as a result of a feeling or ritual. These processes determine how the photograph will function, in either a literal way, as documentation, a poetic way, representing something metaphorical, or a rigid way, as a representation of social codes. Morgan also stated that the inherent structure of a work of a conceptual nature uses a set of criteria that is unrelated to visual

Formalism, and more closely related with structural dialectics. Through this view, the documentary function of an image can be seen as being inverted. It no longer functions as the sole representation of a set of historical events, but becomes one of many components of the work. He also used semiotics in understanding photography in conceptual art, and argued that the photograph becomes as a sign, with its referent being the iconography in the image.⁷

The idea of the referent is key in understanding photography in the context of Conceptual Art. Since the focus has shifted away from the visible image and issues of aesthetics, the visual aspects no longer provide us with adequate information for understanding the work. The referent could function in many ways, depending on how the artist treated the photograph and the larger ideas that were connected to the work. In this way, photography could be used to bring issues from the wider world into an art context. Social and political issues that were brushed aside by Modernists as being unrelated to art were brought in by their suggestion in photographs. Artist and critic Victor Burgin commented, "Photography offered a window on the world...a window through which you could punch a hole in the gallery wall and bring into the gallery issues that had previously been considered not proper within the gallery...I think its hard to imagine how shocking it was to see writing and photographs on the gallery walls in the late sixties."⁸

⁷ Morgan, Robert C. "Mistaken Documents: Conceptual Art and Photography." *Art Into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.

⁸ Burgin is quoted in: Kotz, Liz. "Image+Text: Reconsidering Photography in Contemporary Art." *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*. By Amelia Jones. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. Print.

As her practice evolved aesthetically, it also did so ideologically and referentially. The silhouettes in the *Silueta Series* moved away from being a reproduction of the outline of Mendieta's body, and became instead a universal archetype of woman. These goddess figures were the result of changes to Mendieta's interests and motivations. Going beyond personal healing and transformation, she turned her attention to the ability of art to transform the world around her. These later silhouettes are signs of ideas beyond the personal; they refer to Mendieta's attempt to heal the wounds of society: the separation between the modern world and nature. The photographs in *Silueta Series* were no longer just signs of Mendieta's struggle with her personal demons, but addressed larger issues of modern life, as well as long-standing archetypal notions.



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Silueta Series*, 1980, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Mendieta's *Siluetas Series*, although essentially ephemeral in nature, is an illuminating example of photography's suitability to the practices of Conceptual Art. The appearance of new approaches to creating art like Mendieta's and theorizing art, as seen in the arguments of Wall, Krauss, and Morgan, was the result of several factors. As Kosuth argued, the creation of art in recent history has been an attack on accepted notions of art and an attempt to redefine what art could be. The intent to establish an artistic statement that would enter into this discourse was, of course, a motivating factor for artists. Explorations with medium, methodology, and theory propelled art into new and exciting realms. However, these were not the only reasons why artists of this generation and beyond engaged in body art, earth art, performance, and other movements associated with this era. Some, like Mendieta, were prompted by deep-seated, internal drives to create the kind of art they did. They did not create art merely as an intellectual exercise, but as a way to address personal intrigues. Photography became an essential tool for these artists in particular, as it was well suited to the intimate nature of their practices.

Same End, Different Means: The Photographic Processes of Bas Jan Ader

All My Clothes (1970) is an example of Bas Jan Ader's frequent method of art-making: an action performed with the primary objective of creating a scene to be photographed. The scene depicted in this piece is a frontal view of Ader's home in Claremont, California. Various articles of clothing are strewn haphazardly on the roof, and Ader himself is nowhere to be found. The significance of this seemingly innocuous, if odd, photograph is only made apparent with knowledge of Ader's personal life. The appearance of all of Ader's clothing on the roof of his home is a reference to an episode

of family history during World War II. After the death of his father, his mother was made to leave her house by Nazi officers with no prior warning. Having no time to pack anything, she threw all the clothes she could reach out the window so that she might gather them up later.⁹



Bas Jan Ader, *All My Clothes*, 1970, Courtesy Patrick Painter

This anecdote partially constitutes the referent that gives meaning to the photograph, the sign. The architecture also provides another layer of meaning, functioning as a sign within the actual imagery of the photo. Ader's comfortable, Californian lifestyle was an issue he occasionally dealt with in his work, most notably in *The Artist as a Consumer of Extreme Comfort* (1968). The iconic Californian style of the

⁹ Beekner, Erik. "The Man Who Wanted to Look beyond the Horizon." *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*. By Bas Jan Ader. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. Print.

house makes reference to this, and offers a look into the life Ader led, one that was quite distanced from the chaos of Europe during the war. The photograph captures these ideas, simply by documenting the scene in front of the lens. There is little attention to the artistic or aesthetic merit of the image itself and in this way aligns itself with the attitude of Conceptual Art towards photography.

In addition to anecdotal and allusory referents, *All My Clothes* also functions indexically. Although Ader is not present in the photograph itself, his presence is implied. One can assume that the clothes were carefully arranged by the artist, and that perhaps he was behind the camera taking the photograph. However, someone with more knowledge of Ader's practice might assume that it was Mary Sue, his wife, behind the camera. Although the photograph is now an art object, a suspended moment that has been immortalized by art history, it also represents a specific instant in real time. It is representative and indexical of a particular moment in Ader's life when he was living in Claremont, making work, being married to and collaborating with Mary Sue. The photograph is a product of and embodies both Ader's past and present.

While *All My Clothes* is documentation of a scene arranged in order to be photographed, other works came about from slightly different processes. *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)* (1973), for instance, is photographic documentation of an action that had meaning in itself. Ader walked across Los Angeles, from dawn to dusk, downtown to the Pacific Ocean, while Mary Sue took photographs of him along the way. Perhaps the act of placing his clothes on his roof had meaning for Ader, but the photograph still seems to be the larger end to those means. On the other hand, while the photographs of *In Search of the Miraculous* were produced and

displayed, the ritualistic act of the walk retained more significance than its documentation.



Bas Jan Ader, From *In Search of the Miraculous: One Night in Los Angeles*, 1973, Courtesy Patrick Painter

As the first component of what was to be a trilogy, Ader's nightwalk across Los Angeles is only a fragment of a larger idea. However, it serves as a referent to several elements of Ader's philosophy and interests. Ader was greatly intrigued by the metaphysical and the insignificance of man when positioned against the forces of nature.

Ader saw this dichotomy in Los Angeles, as it evidenced in this comment:

"I really love Los Angeles. I love the surrounding wilderness of ocean, desert and mountains. I feel belittled by its enormous scale, I value more than anyone the solitary beauty of the Freeways by night. Even disasters, enormous bushfires and earthquakes have strengthened my attachment to the city rather than chased me away. I must admit to being fascinated by

the constant threat that nature has over us here. I love this wild romantic metropolis of extremes.”¹⁰

Ader’s walk was more than just a pretext for producing a series of photographs. It was a philosophic inquiry, a test, an exploration of man’s relationship with the elements. The title itself marks it as a search for something, a quest, and the handwritten lyrics on the photographs confirm this.

In addition to the intellectual aspects, personal elements of Ader’s life give further meaning to this work. In the photographs, Ader is always pictured alone - a solitary figure almost lost in the vastness of the city. However, someone else must be present, out of sight, behind the camera. This was, of course, Mary Sue, whose invisible presence was part of most of his works. Her position as the passive collaborator, the silent figure there to simply document, becomes more poignant when one is aware of the dynamics of their relationship. Theirs is a charming story: two young art students who fell in love and made art together. He, however, was dominant in all aspects of their lives. His work garnered much more attention; he had affairs yet still came home to her at night. And even now, after his death, his legacy dictates her life. She has primary control over his estate, and must be involved in all exhibitions including his work. Her home is incredibly cluttered, filled with fragments and memories of their life together. She has continued her own work as an artist, but it is his work that has continued to occupy her time and energy.

The role of Mary Sue in Ader’s life and work is not the only personal element that makes the photographs of *In Search of the Miraculous* painfully bittersweet. The event that is

¹⁰ Ibid.

forever referenced in these photos is the one that prevented the trilogy from being completed and cut Ader's life short: his disappearance at sea. While the photographs depict a physical journey that he did, in fact, survive, they are inextricably tied to the memory of the one that he did not. Present in the photographs are the second and third elements of the unfinished work: the sea voyage from which he did not return, and the walk's planned counterpart in Amsterdam which he could not begin.

In Search of the Miraculous takes photography as a convenient way to memorialize ephemeral acts of physical and intellectual significance. The portability of the camera allowed for Ader to embark on a voyage and appear to be doing it alone while actually being documented by an unseen partner. And as with *All My Clothes*, it manages to innocently represent reality, while simultaneously including external elements that augment its meaning.

Ritual, Protection, and Privilege: Francis Alÿs's Camera

The work of Francis Alÿs perpetuates the complicated relationship between conceptualism and photography. As discussed before, many of his works have consisted of strolls through the city, sometimes Mexico City, sometimes elsewhere, in an attempt to encounter something in a particular social landscape. However, the walk itself is not always, or even usually, the main embodiment of the piece. For Alÿs, the process of finding the piece is a central aspect, sometimes even the most important. He has described his methodology as almost non-existent; he will often begin with perfunctory notes and sketches, and let the rest come to him through these walks.

Despite this emphasis on process rather than production, documentation of various forms continues to play an important role in his work. His relationship to the camera can be understood through this quote from Alÿs:

“I do use the camera quite a bit whether it’s to take photos or do videos. And often the camera becomes a kind of filter with a situation I feel foreign to. Like when I’m...a kind of an outsider the camera offers a kind of...protection. A mix of protection and justification...of my presence in that place at that moment.”¹¹

One can grasp from this that for Alÿs, the notion of the photograph begins to play an important role from the beginning. The use of the camera is in itself a specific kind of action, a ritual that has meaning and puts a particular frame on a situation or experience. Again, his status as a global artist comes into play; the camera determines the context of his action, protecting him from questions or attacks that he might otherwise be susceptible to. This privileging of the role of the artist was made abundantly clear in *Re-enactments*, 2000. Alÿs bought a 9mm Berette handgun at a gunshop in downtown Mexico City, and then walked around the city with it loaded in his hand. He did not attract much attention from the passerbys, but was eventually arrested by the police. However, after simply explaining that he was an artist doing a performance piece, they not only let him go, but agreed to repeat their actions the next day so it could be enacted again, only this time with a fake gun. This was all filmed and photographed by his longtime collaborator Rafael Cortez, who then became the bearer of the protection that the camera provided.

As seen in *Re-enactments*, Alÿs’s work seemed to favor the physical action, the ephemeral situation which he hopes will have meaning in the real world. Documentation

¹¹ Ferguson, Russell, and Francis Alÿs. *Francis Alÿs: The Politics of Rehearsal*. Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2007. Print.

is not the primary goal, but it subsequently becomes imbued with importance. The photograph (or video) serves to share the meaning of the action, if not the action itself, with an audience who does not have the privilege of being present. (Although it can be said that this audience is privileged in their distance from the oppressed situations Alÿs engages with.) *Sleepers*, an ongoing project that began in 1999, consists of photographs of people and dogs sleeping in the urban, public environment – on sidewalks, benches, underpasses. Following a conceptual methodology, the photographs are created based on the guidelines of being on a horizontal plane and being framed level to the subject. These strictures serve the purpose of providing continuity in a long-standing and unfinished project through similarity in aesthetics and subject matter. However, in placing the viewer level with the subject, Alÿs strives to remove any sense of hierarchy in dealing with the homeless: a community that is marginalized and looked down upon.¹²



Francis Alÿs, From *Sleepers*, 1999-Present, Courtesy PS1

¹² Alÿs, Francis, Mark Godfrey, Klaus Peter Biesenbach, and Kerry Greenberg. *Francis Alÿs: a Story of Deception*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Print. 96.

This desire to destabilize a societal hierarchy is perhaps an attempt to counter the dominance inherent in Alÿs's position as the artist with the camera, observing and capturing the very personal act of sleep as well as the painful situation of a homeless individual. As in *Turista*, Alÿs was cognizant of his position of power, of the difficulty of watching and documenting others as an occupation. However, Alÿs used his status in an attempt to ameliorate this issue of modern society. Alÿs endeavored to frame the urban landscape as a domestic environment, which has been imposed upon by the man-made additions of traffic and civic regulations. In using both people and animals, he sought to highlight the natural in the urban environment. Humans and animals alike are subordinate to biological needs; it is the urban that is an intrusion on the natural act of sleep, rather than the other way around.

This reading of *Sleepers* can be seen as the intended referent of the work. By infusing a visual signifier, the index of the photograph, with this meaning, Alÿs sought to communicate his viewpoint on a delicate subject. He is able to bring attention to this often-ignored community, making its plight a key referent. The visible presence of the sleeping people and dogs holds this meaning, but it is the invisible presence of Alÿs, the respected artist who is making and sharing the image, that makes possible the photograph's effect. The documentation of his work allowed for the productivity of his artistic actions, as they live on and are brought into an art context through the photograph that now embodies the piece. In *Sleepers*, the referent is not only the action depicted, but also the wider social and economic issues at hand. This is the *studium*, the thing that

takes the viewer's interest beyond the mere curiosity of someone sleeping in the streets.¹³ Through his role as an outsider who lives on the inside, Alÿs is able to create awareness in the wider society about the realities of Mexican socioeconomic struggles. Alÿs functions, to some degree, as an informed facilitator of exchanges between worlds. Like in Mendieta's work, photography is essential for this dissemination of knowledge. Alÿs practice generally occurs outside of the boundaries of the art world, although those boundaries are steadily expanding. With photography, he is able to keep the mobility of a global *flâneur*, and give his actions, and their referents, life beyond his personal radius.

Conclusion

Through the examples of Ader, Mendieta, and Alÿs's work, one can begin to see the diverse functions of photography in a Conceptual practice. Photography allows for an artistic practice that is at once intimate and site-specific, widely regarded and globalized. An artist can follow an inspiration to secluded tombs in Mexico, and exhibit the experience in New York. Documentary materials, especially photography, provide the sought-after tangible connection to a work of an ephemeral nature. Later generations of art history students and historians can attempt to gain a meaningful understanding of an installation or performance that has long ceased to exist in its original state. An artist can perform a simple walk across Los Angeles and have this remain relevant thirty years after the fact. The ability of photography to give life to an otherwise dematerialized work is becoming increasingly important with the emergence of a study of Visual Culture. In addition to providing longevity, the imagery of a photograph can function as a sign that

¹³ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.

allows for layers of meaning beyond what is immediately discernable. Biographical information, personal anecdotes, or foreign socioeconomic issues can be communicated in a concise manner. Since the 1970s, photography has proved to be a worthy companion to Conceptual Art, and continues to do so in a contemporary setting that is increasingly globalized, mobilized, and diverse. As visual indicators, photographs encapsulate what has been discussed, what is discussed, and what can be discussed, and usher this knowledge into the present day, becoming a part of an ever-evolving discourse.

Chapter Three: Parafictional Narratives: The Art World's Oral Tradition

From Documentation to Anecdote: Francis Alÿs and the Dematerialization of Art

Once, Francis Alÿs walked around Copenhagen for one week, under the influence of a different drug each day. Once, he pushed a block of ice around Mexico City until it melted away. Once, he carried a loaded gun around until somebody finally noticed. Once, he sent a peacock to take his place at the Venice Biennial. Once, he convinced five hundred people to help him move a mountain.¹

In April of 2002, five hundred volunteers were lined up in Ventanilla, Peru, equipped with shovels, prepared to move an enormous sand dune. Spread out across the mountain, displacing a shovelful at a time, they eventually succeeded in moving the dune a few inches to the left. Their faith had moved a mountain.

This poetic, powerful, and ridiculous event happened under the orchestration of Alÿs for a piece he called, among other things, *When Faith Moves Mountains*. It was also conceived to illustrate the aphorism “Maximum effort, minimum result.” And indeed it was. Five hundred people had toiled to move the 1600 foot-long dune a distance so small it could not really be measured. The wind would also quickly undo their efforts, and blow the sand from the spots it had been so carefully placed upon.

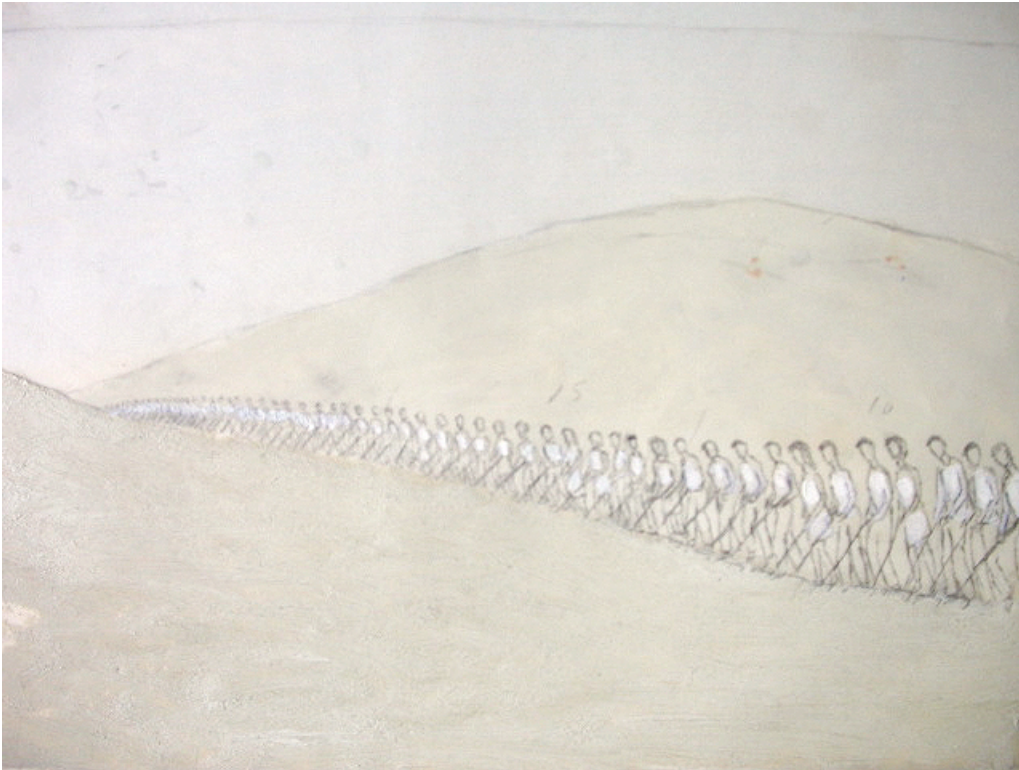
¹ Alÿs, Francis, Mark Godfrey, Klaus Peter Biesenbach, and Kerry Greenberg. *Francis Alÿs: a Story of Deception*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Print.



Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, Courtesy of the Tate Museum

The overall artwork consists of several different elements. One is, of course, the action itself; the fleeting, one-time event that brought Alÿs's idea into life in the real world. When exhibited, *When Faith Moves Mountains* is usually represented by a 36-minute long video, as well as another shorter "making of" video, documenting various aspects of the preparation and planning for the project in Lima. There also exists photographic documentation, as well as other kinds planning materials, such as a pencil and oil drawing study on tracing paper. (The use of tracing paper is a remnant of Alÿs's training as an architect.) This variety of media is typical of Alÿs's practice, as most of his works exist in several forms, including Alÿs's notes and drawings from his

formulation of the idea. Some have multiple titles, and many have a subtitle, as the aphorism functions as in this work.²



Francis Alÿs, From *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, Courtesy David Zwirner

However, most people don't know the work because of the pencil and oil drawing, or even the video that was displayed at the Tate, the Hammer, and other major art world institutions. They know it because it is a great story, one that makes you want to tell it to someone else once you've heard it. And this is Alÿs's intention. As is evident from the collaborative nature of *When Faith Moves Mountains*, he is interested in social interactions, and uninterested in upholding the myth of the solo, genius artist. Once he is struck with an idea, he seeks to find the most effective way of releasing it into the world so it might have its own life, and be recreated and retold. He has said,

"I'm looking for a very simple way of telling a piece, reducing it to almost nothing. My most successful pieces are those that just tell a story, without

² Ibid.

any need to refer the documentation. One of the few criteria I apply when I'm working on a script is exactly that, to simplify its structure until it becomes just a story, a joke, a fable. In other words, something that goes against the power of the media and, to some extent, against the reproduction of the artwork being more important than the artwork itself. If the idea can be reduced to an easily transmitted anecdote then it no longer belongs to anyone; it is socialized and can spread like an oil stain. It can be reproduced an infinite number of times."³

The action in Peru led to a successful example of this kind of simplification, as it brought to life the saying "Maximum effort, minimum result", an aphorism that succinctly captures the essence of the piece. However, there are deeper, political and social allusions that add layers of meaning and significance to the work. The location, Ventanilla, was not an arbitrary choice based on Alÿs's invitation to the Lima Biennial but rather the result of careful consideration after Alÿs visited various parts of Peru. Ventanilla is one of many shantytowns that have sprung up near Lima, where seventy thousand people live without electricity or running water. Alÿs had visited Peru two years before, just when protest and resistance was rising up against the country's dictatorship. He felt it was the right time to insert a grand gesture into the country's social and political scene, to turn social tensions into a narrative that could be widely shared. In doing so, he hoped to create a modern myth that would be inserted into Peru's rich history.⁴

As well as being specific to the site's history and current situation, the work also functioned as a way to address Alÿs's relationship to art history. Describing the project as "land art for the landless," Alÿs called attention to the romanticized, aloof, and elitist

³ Torres, David. "Francis Alÿs: Just Walking the Dog." *Art Press* 263 (2000): 18-23. *Art Full Text*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

⁴ Alÿs, Francis. "A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs Talks about When Faith Moves Mountains." *Artforum* (2002). *Findarticles.com*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

nature of older generations of land art practices. Given the desperate living situation of most of the participants in the project, this comparison was made especially poignant and clear. This interest in the democratization of art is reinforced by Alÿs's emphasis on the anecdote. In the retelling, his practice becomes folkloric, drawing on specific local history to create a compelling narrative that is easily transmissible. The poetic nature of the action transformed a complicated history into an easily communicable idea. The mobility gained through the anecdotal form allows for its exposure to wider audiences, prompting an interaction that would not be otherwise possible. In this way, the story serves a prompt for further exploration of the situations of marginalized groups and societies.

In the exhibition catalogue for Alÿs's solo show at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, curator Russell Ferguson discussed Alÿs's practice as being a contemporary emergence of the ancient tradition of the chronicle.⁵ According to Ferguson, the stories Alÿs creates cannot be regarded as histories, as they lack an identifiable conclusion and are instead a series of events that may or not be related to each other. The chronicle is composed of these individual stories, and does not include an end, as the possibility of further events is always implied.

Ferguson is not alone in his discussion of the fluidity of an oral tradition and its place in the art world of today. The use of mythologized narratives and their effectiveness in contemporary art is discussed by Carrie Lambert-Beatty in her essay

⁵ Ferguson, Russell, and Francis Alÿs. *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal*. Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2007. Print. 103-106.

“Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility”.⁶ In this text, Lambert-Beatty introduced and illustrated the parafiction, a growing tendency in contemporary art, which she described as “related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art.” A parafiction is the insertion of fictionalized characters and narratives into reality. Lambert-Beatty took care to distinguish the parafiction from the simulacrum, as explained by Jean Baudrillard.⁷ She wrote, “post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust...Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact [by the viewer].” Parafictions are also, by nature, largely performative – meaning that they are meant to be productive and effective, rather than descriptive. As a first example of a parafiction, Lambert-Beatty recounted an installation at the Ninth International Biennial in Istanbul. Artist Michael Blum reappropriated an apartment building in the city that had belonged to Safiye Behar, a Turkish Jew who lived during the first half of the 20th century. A teacher, communist, and feminist, Behar had a long-standing relationship with the founder of the Turkish Republic, and by evidence of their correspondence, had much influence on the leader during his most important political period. Using various historical and archival materials, Blum arranged the apartment to illustrate the woman’s remarkable life and its sociopolitical implications. Given its place in an article about parafictions, one might guess that Safiye Behar never actually existed, a fact only subtly

⁶ Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility." *October* 2009: 51-84. Art Full Text. Web.

⁷ Baudrillard, Jean. "The Hyper-realism of Simulation." *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 1018-020. Print.

revealed in the exhibition. However, despite the fictive nature of the project, Blum's installation had very real effects – in both the artistic and political spheres.

The effectiveness of parafictional art like *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* comes from its plausibility, its ability to reach truth-status, if only briefly. Blum's installation was read as history, and revealed ugly truths about Turkish gender politics, while simultaneously inserting a hopeful revelation – an influential feminist figure. This is where the potency of the parafiction is located – in its capacity to reveal both what is and what could be. While not unique to this period of art history, parafiction is appropriate to our times. Art institutions regularly invite artists to create site-specific projects tailored to a location's particular history and issues. An engagement with the real world is desired, as the notion of art's autonomy is regarded as elitist and outdated, somewhat of a parafiction in itself. Despite a stated desire for democracy, the art world continues to exist as a separate sphere, a community with a unique history, hierarchy, set of values, and citizenry. The parafiction is well suited to this dichotomy – the contradiction between art's ability to affect change in the world and its purely symbolic relevance.

The parafiction also lends itself to the problems of approaching the contemporary with the objective of historicizing. Contemporary art was largely ignored as a discipline until recent years, as it is and remains to be difficult to locate within art history. The oral tradition has always functioned as a way for society to remember its past, as well as include the present as it occurs. The consideration of contemporary art often relies on memories and stories, anecdotes and gossip – parafictions created by the tiny community interested in these things: the art world.

Upon first consideration, *When Faith Moves Mountains* does not appear to contain elements of the parafictional as the anecdote it created is based on a physical action, one that was ephemeral but occupied a real time and place in history. However, the broader implications imbued in this anecdote create a parafiction of their own. Against the backdrop of a country in turmoil, with social tensions running high almost everywhere, and especially in the poor shantytown Alÿs engaged with, the act of uniting hundreds of people in carrying out a poetically enormous yet futile task becomes a social allegory. This parafiction holds the plausibility of a cohesive and productive community - it is a glimpse of what their society could be, made especially poignant when juxtaposed with reality.

This work, as stated before, is based on reality, on a physical act that occurred in time and space. The affinity of Alÿs's work with anecdote includes further instances of parafiction created through other, less concrete methods. In 1999, Alÿs, with the help of three collaborators, set off a rumor in Mexico City that someone had left a hotel for walk, and had yet to return. This simple anecdote was the basis of the work and began to quickly circulate. Alÿs relied on human nature and the power of a story to do the rest and he was not disappointed. Details were added as the rumor began to spread; the person's sex, age, and description were imagined, as well as an added back-story. After three days, a poster with a sketch portrait of the missing person was released by the local police. With *The Rumor*, Alÿs succeeded in conjuring up physical creation through a bit of fabricated gossip. The parafiction was enough to produce evidence of itself.⁸

⁸ Ferguson. 2007.

Alÿs uses a very fluid method of art-making, with many works left open-ended and changeable. One idea will give way to another, a piece will be left untouched until it finds new form in a different site, titles are adaptable and transposable. *The Story of Deception* (2003-06) came to fruition by-way of a previously conceived work. Like *The Rumor* it began with an anecdote, but this time not one of Alÿ's making. He traveled to Patagonia after learning of a native tribe that would hunt the *nandu* bird by following it until it collapsed of exhaustion. His initial footage of the *nandu* did not appeal to him; it was aesthetically and conceptually too similar to a conventional nature documentary. However, he was interested in shots he had captured while walking down long, dusty roads as they contained footage of shimmering mirages that were always in the distance but never approachable. Alÿs was attracted by the deception of the image, the unattainable place only brought into existence by the viewer's vain progression towards it. Alÿs commented, "As it is the struggle that defines utopia, it is the vanity of our intent that animates the mirage, it is in the obstinancy of our intent that the mirage comes to life, and that is the space that interests me." Although beginning with an anecdote about birds, Alÿs went on to create a separate narrative – one that imagined a determined traveller on his way to nowhere, as well as that figure's function as an allegory of society.⁹

The use of anecdote, rumor, folklore, and other forms of the narrative is arguably the central element of Francis Alÿs's practice. In varying manners, the parafictions created become the essence of the piece. As a finished product, the parafictional anecdote allows meaning to be shared at dizzying speeds, ensuring longevity and life

⁹ Ibid.

beyond Alÿs's capacity. The parafiction also functions as a method for art to be created, with stories and rumors becoming at once subject and material. In some ways, Alÿs has achieved the sought-after dematerialization of art, with anecdote replacing documentation as the necessary means for a conceptual work's survival. Although his shows continue to include photos and videos, paintings and drawings, what is truly being exhibited is his ability as a storyteller. With anecdotes as part of critical discussion as well as a broader cultural dialogue, the chronicle continues to expand and evolve.

From Fact to Gossip, Person to Persona: The Parafiction of Bas Jan Ader

Lambert-Beatty locates the parafiction in the contemporary and the many ways in which it lends itself to post-modern society. However, older generations of artists were aware of the possibilities that existed for fictionalized narratives in their art. And for some artists, the mythologizing of the intersection of their life, career, and death has become the key component in their contemporary relevance and critical understanding.

Bas Jan Ader did not survive his attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean for his piece entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*, and it is impossible to separate this from the work as a whole. It was not discovered that Ader had indeed perished at sea until some nine months after he lost contact. He was to have arrived in Europe in record time; he estimated it would take sixty to eighty days but had enough water for a trip three times as long, and food for a trip twice as long. After some time went by with no word or sign of Ader, his loved ones began to worry and rumors, as they always do, began to surface. The exhibition was cancelled and his brother, also a boatman, attempted to find information on his whereabouts. Ader's students began to speculate that he had not in fact, been

shipwrecked or lost, but instead faked his death, changed his identity, and started over elsewhere. They said he had pondered doing this and were convinced that that was the reason for his disappearance. There were “sightings” of Ader in various places but especially near Goa, India, which at the time was a mecca for hippie travelers.¹⁰ Others believed he committed suicide. His wife Mary-Sue was forced to endure the speculation that her husband had willingly abandoned her, while simultaneously agonizing over the waiting and uncertainty. She refused to believe the rumors, and to this day steadfastly holds that suicide was not Ader’s intention. The knowledge that Ader had often had extra-marital affairs makes Mary-Sue’s plight even more painful.

Finally, in April of 1976 his boat was found by Spanish fisherman somewhere off the coast of Ireland. Most parts of the boat were missing, including the mast, handrails, and hatch. Ader had been attached to the boat by a lifeline, and it looked like it had been violently ripped from the boat. The fisherman brought the vessel to their homeport in La Coruña, where it was photographed and published in a local newspaper. In this way, Mary Sue discovered Ader’s fate, and she traveled to La Coruña with Erik, his brother. After examining the boat, the Spanish authorities determined there had been an on-board explosion. Erik, however, disagreed with this after learning of their discoveries. His guess was that a side-hitting wave had carried Ader overboard, with enough force to tear the lifeline. When the boat was being made seaworthy, he had noticed a defect in the ship’s construction that would have allowed this. Neither of these theories could be proved, and the actual events of Ader’s final moments remain a mystery.

¹⁰ Lamm, A. E. “The Art of Disappearing.” *Art Review* (London, England) v. 3 no. 8 (August 2005) p. 72-5

It was determined from the algae and barnacles present on the boat that it had been in the position it was found for about six months, meaning he had capsized in approximately mid-October.¹¹ One of the most poignant anecdotes from this tragic bit of art world lore is one that comes from Ader's mother. She writes that she felt his death in October. She woke up one morning with a poem in mind, which had come to her in a dream, in English, the language she and Bas Jan had often used to communicate with each other. On October 12, 1975, this is the poem that came to her:

From the deep waters of sleep

From the deep waters of sleep I wake up to consciousness.
In the distance I hear a train rumbling in the early morning.
It is going East and passes the border. Then it will stop.
I feel my heart beating too. It will go on beating for some time.
Then it will stop.
I wonder if the little heart that has beaten with mine, has stopped.
When he passed the border of birth, I laid him at my breast,
Rocked him in my arms.
He was very small then.
A white body of a man, rocked in the arms of the waves,
Is very small too.
What are we in the infinity of ocean and sky?
A small baby at the breast of eternity.
Have you ever heard of happiness
Springing from a deep well of sorrow?
Of love, springing from pain and despondency, agony and death?
Such is mine.

The romanticized view of *In Search of the Miraculous* has already been discussed at length. The work cannot be separated from, and actually consists of, Ader's fatal disappearance at sea. His tragic death helps to create a parafiction of his personality, as a character has been created in the collective mind but may or may not be who he *was* - the person who lived and breathed, created and existed in the real world. The details of his

¹¹ Beekner, Erik. "The Man Who Wanted to Look beyond the Horizon." *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me*. By Bas Jan Ader. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. Print.

death have much to do with this; it is a very human curiosity that propels one to learn every sordid aspect of a tragedy or scandal. Yet even before his disappearance, Ader inspired a cult of personality. He was good-looking, European, and unabashedly self-confident. He had a beautiful wife, who was also the daughter of the Otis College of Art and Design's director. This marriage did not stop him from being very attractive to women, leading to his afore-mentioned affairs. Knowledge of his personal life, namely his romantic adventures, also helps to foster interest in his persona and create it. The facts, rumors, gossip, and speculation collectively create a parafiction of who Bas Jan Ader was that belongs to the folklore of art history and far outlives the real.

Death of an Artist, Birth of a Parafiction: Ana Mendieta's Entrance into Myth

The power of a scandal to incite interest, speculation, and eventually widely shared stories is evidenced also in the death of Ana Mendieta. In the early hours of September 8, 1985, Mendieta and her husband, the Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, had an argument, which resulted in her somehow "going out of the window." She fell 270 feet onto the roof of a delicatessen, and died on impact. Andre's subsequent call to 911 includes this statement: "My wife is an artist, and I'm an artist, and we had a quarrel about the fact that I was more, eh, exposed to the public than she was. And she went to the bedroom, and I went after her, and she went out the window."¹²

Over the next three years, Andre underwent a well-publicized trial that divided the art world, riling the feminists, and forcing the old boys' club on the defensive. The portrait of Mendieta and Andre painted during the trial, and in various accounts of their

¹² Tully, Judd. "Andre Acquitted." *New Art Examiner* 15 (1988): 22-24. *Art Full Text*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

lives, is not one of a typical married couple. Both were high-profile artists; as Andre's statement to 911 shows some considered him to have greater art world significance, while others hold that her career was on the rise and his on its way down. Like most successful artists were beginning to be, they were globetrotting citizens of the world, and they also drank heavily and argued passionately wherever they went. As their respective factions during the trial proved, their practices existed in different spheres of the art world. Andre was a Minimalist sculptor, part of a group of men's men whose interests lay in physicality and phenomenology, and did not often include the social or political issues of the day, with an ideal viewer without background or identity as their audience. Mendieta, conversely, was very much engaged with the growing discourse of feminism, identity, gender and sexual politics, in addition to and connection with her artistic interests. It is tragically ironic that the issues that separated their work came to the forefront of the trial over her death.

The importance of issues of feminism, gender, and racial politics were made quite apparent from the beginning of Andre's trial. Many women were present at the trial, people who had been friends with Mendieta, others with feminist leanings who were interested to see how this case would be treated. The defense attempted to stereotype Mendieta as an emotional woman with a "fiery Latin temperament", one who would do something like commit suicide by jumping out of a window. Her personal history was dragged out, from her childhood in Cuba, to her interest in voodoo and Santeria, to photos of her posing with Fidel Castro.¹³ They downplayed the importance of her career, describing her as a wannabe art world figure hanging on to her husband's reputation,

¹³ Ibid.

ignoring her growing visibility and the fact that she had won a prestigious Prix de Rome. They attempted to paint her as an “other”, a screaming maniac dead-set on bringing Andre down, even from the grave. In many ways, a trial is built on parafictions – with each side demonstrating a reality skewed in their favor.

The reaction and shadow of the art world in the scandal is also revealing of the politics involved. The trial was framed by the two artists’ careers - Mendieta’s retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art opened the week that the trial began. The day the defense and prosecution gave their closing summations was the same that Andre’s show at the Palacio Crystal in Madrid opened. Posters began to appear in SoHo reading: “ANA MENDIETA: Suicide? Accident? Murder? Anyone With Information Please Call.”¹⁴ The feminist art collective, the Guerrilla Girls, denied responsibility for those posters but took credit for those displaying portraits of O.J. Simpson and Carl Andre side by side, with the words “What do these men have in common?”¹⁵ Several of Mendieta’s artist friends went on the stand, however, Ida Panicelli, an Artforum editor, was the only establishment art world figure to testify on her behalf. Many others chose not to, for fear of retribution and damage to their careers. Ruby Rich, a film critic who later wrote a Village Voice piece about Mendieta’s death, commented, “The cowardice of the art world has been staggering.”¹⁶

While there were many who were fearful that a woman artist would fall victim to the chauvinistic art and law institutions, Andre’s supporters felt he was in turn being

¹⁴ Patrick, Vincent. "A Death in the Art World." The New York Times. Web. 5 Feb. 2011.

¹⁵ Tully, Judd. "Carl & Ana: Ten Years + One After." New Art Examiner 26.8 (1999). Art Full Text. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

¹⁶ Tully. 1988.

victimized by a feminist agenda. There was concern over the effect that the scandal would have on his career. Barbara Kruger, an artist and regular at the trial, had a different opinion on the matter. She quipped, “It’s the most press he’s gotten in ten years. He needs it for his career”.¹⁷

In addition to the politics of it, the trial was convoluted and poorly handled. Due to careless police and prosecutorial work, certain evidence had to be suppressed. Andre chose to be tried by a judge, not a jury, which was unusual for a murder trial, and he himself never took the stand. In the end, he was acquitted because the judge was not convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Andre was guilty.

The fact is, the actual circumstances of Mendieta’s death remain a mystery, creating the need for a parafictional narrative that addresses unanswered questions and the sense of injustice felt by Mendieta’s loved ones. Andre has been acquitted, but many are quite unhappy with his refusal to speak on the subject. This uncertainty has led to actions with the intent of not allowing Andre’s acquittal to free him from retribution. In 1992, at an opening at the Guggenheim, protestors from the Women’s Action Coalition marched outside and chanted “Carl Andre is at the Guggenheim. Where is Ana Mendieta?” This protest inspired the title of Jane Blocker’s book *Where is Ana Mendieta*, a critical examination of the artist’s work.¹⁸ Raquelin, Mendieta’s sister, was inside the museum, dropping copies of a photograph of Mendieta’s face on Andre’s floor piece in the show.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Blocker, Jane, and Ana Mendieta. *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Durham [NC: Duke UP, 1999. Print.

¹⁹ Tully. 1999.

A book was released in the early 1990's detailing their marriage and the trial. An article was written later that decade examined the careers of Mendieta and Andre, ten years after her death. Narratives have been pieced together, with various parties drawing their own conclusions. One can guess, but one cannot know with any certainty. This element of mystery, as well as the extensive coverage of the trial and its aftermath, has greatly increased the amount of interest in Mendieta's work. As her audience grew wider, critics and historians began to look past her biography, and stopped ghettoizing her as a Cuban artist and a feminist artist. The power and significance of her work is widely recognized, and there are now no major museums in the United States that do not have her as a part of their permanent collection.²⁰

Despite this critical recognition, the scar of the scandal has yet to fade, in both the body of Mendieta's work and of Andre's. Andre, since the death of Donald Judd, is seen as the foremost Minimalist sculptor, and one of the most important living American sculptors. But on the subject of his 1997 retrospective at Ace Gallery, critic Peter Schjeldahl of *The New Yorker* had this to say: "Andre will of course always be best known in the world for a reason that led the Guerrilla Girls recently to issue a poster pairing him with O.J. Simpson. I had thought not to mention it here, given my agreement with the gist of Oscar Wilde's remark, 'The fact of a man being a murderer says nothing against his prose style.'"²¹ And yet, against the advice of Oscar Wilde himself, Scheldahl did mention it.

This same coloring of the work by personal history is evident in readings of Mendieta's practice. Although many historians, critics, and curators have worked to

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

lessen the influence of her biography on the reception of her work, the two are now inextricably linked. While important to recognize the richness of her art practice, and all of the layers of meaning that stem from her intellectual and artistic interests, her death is inescapable in an assessment of most of her pieces. To begin with, her practice was already so closely tied with her personal history: her childhood, her displacement, and her resulting interest in history, religion, rituals, and Latin and Mesoamerican cultures. These things fuelled her creativity; they created the need for her to make art. Furthermore, many of her works *were* violent; they *did* deal with sexual politics and gender relations, with the victimization of women, with the struggle to carve out an identity for herself in a white patriarchal society. These issues are present in her practice, and they are present in her death.

These details of Mendieta's personal life create the parafiction of her as a tragic artist with a premonition of death, a myth that ensures her survival in a contemporary conversation. It is possible that Mendieta may have been pleased with this occurrence, as ancient practices, like the oral tradition, were very important to her, as well as a modern connection to these older practices. Mendieta did a number of rock carvings of Amerindian goddess figures near Havana. She was attracted to the idea that one could come across these works and not know if they were ancient or contemporary. She was able to include herself in a much older tradition, and insert it into the contemporary through its overt labeling as an artwork. The uncertainty of its origins also makes it compelling, as one must know its art world connection to separate it from the history of the site. Though prompted by a tragic occurrence, the parafiction of Mendieta's

biography functions in a similar way, rejuvenating the art world's oral tradition, and keeping the past in the present.

Conclusion

The oral tradition is very successful in allowing Conceptual Art to find continued life and relevance, as it meets the strictures for this task as outlined by Thomas Crow. A chronicling of mythologized narratives does not exist as a linear progression, and does not privilege an occurrence because of its proximity in time. Instead, stories and events exist in a fluid state, and are shared as new ones being added. Parafictions are particularly adept at this – elements of history are kept alive through their existence outside of reality, in their mythologized states. The parafictions of Alÿs, Ader, and Mendieta are also successful in their ability to reach beyond the confines of the art world. The critical significance of their work is supplemented by the personal and the narrative – anecdotes that appeal to basic human curiosity, pleasure, and awe in addition to the intellectual and the academic. Stories are wonderfully mobile, they can travel from Mexico City to New York City, from day laborer to museum director, from the pages of a newspaper to a dissertation, from a dream someone had in 1975 to a classroom in the present day. This mobility has allowed for the sought-after dematerialization of art – a work that is in essence an anecdote, and no longer dependent on photography or other documentation for survival. The most precious material of art history is its stories – the myths that connect to the past and give way to the future.

Conclusion: Beyond Conceptualism: The Capacity of Art's Chronicle

Highlighting personalized narratives and mythologized interpretations of their identities in the consideration of Bas Jan Ader, Ana Mendieta, and Francis Alÿs is not a rejection of traditional readings of Conceptual Art. Rather, I have sought to include in this discussion elements that had been necessarily excluded at the time of the movement's inception. The rejection of the Modernist concerns of the visual and the formal was a result of the politics and ideologies of a different era in art history. To attempt a break with the hegemony of Modernism, it was necessary to firmly and decisively occupy a position as its ideological opposite. Because of this, an interest in concept and intellectual emerged as the resistance against the veneration of essence and form. Conceptual Art in this era was wholly occupied with fighting this ideological battle and gaining recognition within the rigidly constructed and uniformly idealized Modernist art world of the mid-20th century.

Today, Conceptual Art faces no threat imposed by Modernism, and the juxtaposition of the two remains to serve as a reminder of the circumstances of conceptualism's inception. This ideological struggle exists only as historical evidence of a moment past. The theories of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried are no longer definitive statements on the nature of Art, but texts read in order to contextualize a genre of art and an episode of art history.¹ The biographies of these two historians are also a part of this discussion; a personal reading allows an understanding of why and how the two men came to occupy the positions they did. They were significant not only as

¹ See Greenberg, Clement. *Modernist Painting*. Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1959. Print.

scholars but as people, as their relationships with artists and younger historians increased the scope and longevity of their influence. A theory will inevitably lose its prestige and usefulness but the realization that the theory was conceived of and put into practice by people with ideas, motivations, and opinions makes it much easier to appreciate despite its irrelevancy to the age.

An oral tradition is not a new occurrence in the art world; stories about artists, patrons and muses have been passed down for centuries. However, this attention to what is personal and human within the sphere of art has become increasingly important in the contemporary environment. The globalization of the art world has brought about the establishment of new art centers all around the world, and especially in Asia and Latin America. Art is being produced at a rate and volume that is impossible to adequately document and consider, especially as the art world still only consists of a limited number of historians, critics, and curators. Art fairs have become much more frequent and popular, galleries and artist residencies have cropped up all over the world, as have the number of alternative spaces and collaborations, such as Los Angeles's "feral institutions."² There is only so much discourse that can be productively created through traditional methods of academic and critical writing, and there are only so many artists one can become truly familiar with. The exposure to such an abundance of art is in many ways a very positive and exciting occurrence. However, one must discern how to appreciate quality and meaning in the presence of such quantity. This has, perhaps unfortunately, led to the necessary "branding" of artists; as a distinctive persona is

² See Timmons, Matthew, Michael Ano, Christine Wertheim, Mark Allen, and Sean Dockray. "Afterall LA's Feral Institutions." Proc. of College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles. Web. 17 Apr. 2011.
<<http://www.archive.org/details/AfterallLAsFeralInstitutions>>.

created, which is often reliant on connections to previously branded individuals, such as a gallerist. A young artist who has just sold a piece to Charles Saatchi will be immediately imbued with an aura and reputation that will precede any analysis of the actual work.

Outside the realm of the art world, contemporary art continues to largely baffle and alienate. Lay audiences generally do not have the time, resources, or inclination to familiarize themselves with the conversations informing contemporary work. The elitism of the art world has been lamented for generations and continues to be today. An acknowledgment of the capacity of the narrative, of folkloric stories and accessible anecdotes, to incite interest and foster discussion could do much for this issue. Stories are accessible, mobile, and have universal appeal. While not every artist may have a biography that lends itself to being sensationalized and mythologized, extracting what is human from often-times daunting and alienating works of contemporary art has enormous potential for stimulating change. The democratization of art – this is a project that has been attempted for generations without significant results. Public art, community-based works, a social-minded attitude towards creation – these attempts have done much to widen the scope of art's focus, but perhaps not foster a sense of inclusiveness and accessibility.³

The recognition of an artist as a person with a history, life, and death, rather than a creative being, completely separated from day to day life, already allows for sympathy and a sense of connection to foster in the viewer. Artists like Bas Jan Ader, Ana Mendieta, and Francis Alÿs may be mythologized and revered, but the narrative of these

³ See Kwon, Miwon. "From Site to Community in New Genre Public Art: The Case of Culture in Action." *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002. Print.

artists has moved away from that of the Artist-Genius. Instead, it is their human qualities, their relationships, feelings, scandals, and motivations that inform the persona that is created. This character is readily communicable and simple to relate to on a personal level – putting a face to the otherwise unfriendly name of contemporary art. Once this persona is established, the next step can be taken. The art itself can be approached, and an attempt at understanding can be made – facilitated by a prior interest in its creator. Within this scenario, the meaning of the piece may be easier to grasp when taken in context. The initial attraction to a mythologized persona may serve as the successful introduction to the art that a purely academic approach may never have managed to create.

Art is an open-ended and ever-changing discourse that relies on the survival of its past to inform the present and produce the future. In this way, the chronicling of art is much more appropriate than its historicization. While there may be generally accepted views of movements and artists, nothing is definitive. Scholars continue to search for new meaning in 15th century architecture with the same fervor they would when examining Ryan Trecartin's newest work. Furthermore, the academicism of art history is just one component of the larger narrative preserved by this oral tradition. Critical writing and theory preserve the scholarly assessment of what is being discussed in a broader realm. The oral tradition includes the human and the basic as well as the intellectual. This is a practice that has been utilized by people for centuries to create a sense of community and history, to preserve what is best and memorable in the culture. This appreciation of humanity is in itself an achievement of art – as is evidenced by centuries of attention paid to creative individuals.

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