

1980

Ana Mendieta

There is a certain time in history when people take consciousness of themselves and ask questions about who they are. After World War II, the label Third World came into being in reference to the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The movement of Unaligned Nations was founded in 1961 with a meeting which took place in Belgrade. Their aims are to end colonialism, racism and exploitation.

We of the Third World in the United States have the same concerns as the people of the Unaligned Nations. The white population of the United States, diverse, but of basic European stock, exterminated the indigenous civilization and put aside the Black as well as the other non-white cultures to create a homogenous male-dominated culture above the internal divergency.

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

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

As non-white women our struggles are two-fold.

This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being "other."

*Introductory essay from the catalogue for Dialectics of Isolation:
An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*

Dialectics of Entanglement

Roxana Fabius and Patricia M. Hernandez

Every time we look at the night sky we see the past. This is not a poetic line but a simple fact — the light we perceive was projected toward us hundreds of millions of years ago, but we decipher it as the present. The Western construction of time — the one that defines past, present, and future as a linear continuum, the one that synchronizes my phone, your calendar, and a digital clock using atomic forces — does not mark the pace of the world. It is the result of administrative measures that benefit commercial, financial, military, and logistic needs. According to feminist theorist Karen Barad, “quantum physics offers the possibility of radically rethinking the nature of time.”¹ Having an intimate conversation with the exhibition Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States, which took place thirty-eight years ago, is a good opportunity to formulate what this radical rethinking of time means.

Organized in 1980 by A.I.R. Gallery members Ana Mendieta and Kazuko Miyamoto together with the artist Zarina (Zarina Hashmi), the group show Dialectics of Isolation included works by Judith Baca, Beverly Buchanan, Janet Olivia Henry, Senga Nengudi, Lydia Okumura, Howardena Pindell, Selena W. Persico,² and Zarina. It took place at the original A.I.R. Gallery space on 97 Wooster Street between September 2 and September 20, 1980. As defined by Mendieta in the catalogue, the aim of the exhibition was to comment on the erasure of women of color in the American feminist movement that they helped to build. Rather than focus on the injustices of a racist society or a feminist movement that had become only for the white middle class, Mendieta wrote, the exhibition pointed “more towards a personal will to continue being ‘other.’”³

The current exhibition, Dialectics of Entanglement: Do We Exist Together?, opens a conversation with the original show and can be considered only a partial restaging of the 1980 iteration. It is composed of artworks featured in the 1980 exhibition; artworks by the exhibited artists that substitute for their pieces in the original exhibition, because of the impossibility of or constraints on showing the original work; writings by these artists that present their contemporary views of their work; and artworks and texts by contemporary artists and thinkers that were not included in the original exhibition but extend its concerns.

Many questions are raised by this project, which we define as being in conversation. We have asked ourselves how and if there is an authority to change the original decisions made by the three curators or to add to them by inviting contemporary artists and thinkers to reflect on the show. Through this process of interrogation, we concluded that there is a need for this intervention because the themes presented by the original exhibition have not been exhausted. We see this new iteration as our way to honor the 1980 exhibition and its makers. The past is not over, and it is time that the histories created by these women are brought into the present for current audiences. It is our entanglement with the complexities brought about by Dialectics of Isolation that prompts us to formulate a more fluid understanding of time.

In her text “Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: Re-turning, re-membling, and facing the incalculable,” Barad retools quantum physics to question many of our current assumptions about time. In this essay we focus on a few of those assumptions. The first is the determinism of Newtonian physics on the progressivist

notion of time, “where the future unfolds predictably from the past.”⁴ Against Newtonian theories of particle behavior, quantum physics has demonstrated that, under certain conditions, particles can be “in a state of superposition between two positions,” meaning that it is possible for individual particles “not to be here or there, or even simply here and there.”⁵ This extends beyond space and into time, wherein time superposition means “that a given particle can be in a state of indeterminately coexisting at multiple times — for example, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”⁶ The understanding of this process, called “diffraction,” and the way it defies our Western conception of space and time, are for Barad a profound challenge to our current worldview. She offers “diffraction as methodology” to help us read insights that might seem to be in confrontation “through rather than against each other,” by which they “make evident the always-already entanglement of specific ideas in their materiality.”⁷ The collapse of a traditional view of time, renders new concepts around the relationships between ideas, objects, and people.

Diffraction is in stark contrast to the process of dialectics as proposed in Hegelian terms, in which opposing sides go through a linear battle to elucidate rational thought. Within the complexity of diffraction, the indeterminacy of space-time allows for these exhibitions to simultaneously affect one another — shifting both past and future discourses around them. Thus, the Newtonian and the Hegelian methods cease to be relevant. The past is ever present in shaping a future that has yet to come. All sides have become entangled as a means of survival.

In re-examining this historical exhibition within today’s context, it was clear from the outset that a merely dialectical process was not possible. The main reason for this is that the types of knowledges that were and are being produced demand recognition, respect, and consideration for differences. These knowledges are as entangled as the particles and struggles that exist in multiple times and

locations. As Denise Ferreira da Silva rightly claims, in the non-local universe that quantum physics has provided us, “neither dislocation (movement in space) nor relation (connection between spatially separate things) describes what happens because entangled particles (that is, every existing particle) exist with each other, without space-time.”⁸ We want to understand ourselves as entangled existants with the artists, works, and spaces that engendered this show, the intention they set, the questions they manifested, and the ideas they expressed.

In the introductory essay, Mendieta wrote, “Do we exist?... To question our cultures is to question our own existence, our human reality.” In the context of climate change annihilation, the growing capacities of automation, and culture’s current failure to disrupt contemporary configurations of power, we now ask: Do we exist together? To those who want to live within the illusion of separability, we say: to question the entanglement of existence is to not understand the complexities of systemic oppression and the co-option and division late capitalism exerts over inseparable causes. These are the problems of real bodies in real places — not invisible, not intangible. Identification with the Third World in 1980 could be translated today to identification with the struggles borne by Black Lives Matter, the immigrant rights movement, the Ni una menos movement, Indigenous Peoples dispossessed of their lands, the multiple forms of refugee crisis — political, economic, climate change induced, the issues facing lesbian, trans, and other queer people, those living with disabilities... In these times of extreme unrest, the list keeps expanding.

Dialectics of Isolation was an acknowledgment from its three curators of the ongoing and growing tensions within the feminist movement. The demand was palpable, not just within the A.I.R. collective but also in its surrounding environments. Mendieta, Miyamoto, and Zarina used the term “Third World” to strategically align themselves with a growing political movement. This gesture had multiple ambitions.

American feminism, seen as predominantly white, created a hierarchy that mimicked the very patriarchal structure it sought to dismantle. This led to the marginalization and exclusion of many. The curators, as members of A.I.R., saw this exhibition as an opportunity to challenge the system in which they participated. The response from the women artists of the A.I.R. collective was to acknowledge their shortcomings and failures, and to demonstrate their desire to support this project and be allies. The members understood themselves to be a political microcosm of their surrounding ecosystem. This exhibition, situated in isolation, subverted the hierarchy structuring feminism through its performative nature. It located A.I.R. Gallery as a site of exclusion, but also as a space that could be altered to become a site of difference.

In 1979, just before the exhibition took place, Audre Lorde would state that "difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic."⁹ This type of treasuring of difference is expressed today in the words of Ferreira da Silva when she claims, "difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable estrangement, but the expression of an elementary entanglement."¹⁰ Entanglement, in turn, is akin to what Lorde calls "interdependency," stating that, "only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters."¹¹ There are also no charters available to us, as exhibition makers, for approaching a conversation with distant but present time and place, but it is from our current position, located within A.I.R., that we want to offer an opportunity for viewers to consider this history.

As a physicist recently explained to us, when we touch someone or something, what we feel is an electromagnetic interaction, the repulsion between the electrons in the atoms in our hand to those of your skin. Such interactions leave

formal residues in the particles involved, and through those residues we are endlessly connected in space and time. We hope that through our respectful contact with the objects and subjects of Dialectics of Isolation, we are touching past, future, and present, because only in our entangled differences can we create the times we want.

Notes

- 1 Karen Barad, "Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: Re-turning, re-membering, and facing the incalculable," new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics, no. 92 (2018): 60.
- 2 Formerly known as Selena Whitefeather.
- 3 Ana Mendieta, Introduction, Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States, exhibition catalogue, September 2-20, 1980, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY.
- 4 Barad, "Troubling time/s," 61.
- 5 Barad, "Troubling time/s," 65.
- 6 Barad, "Troubling time/s," 67.
- 7 Barad, "Troubling time/s," 64.
- 8 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," Incerteza Viva: 32 Bienal de São Paulo, exhibition catalogue (São Paulo: Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil, 2016), 65.
- 9 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984) Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007) 110-114.
- 10 Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," 65.
- 11 Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," 114.

Agitation, Isolation, Abstraction

Rachel Rakes

Restaging eases a historical exhibition's transition into object. But what kind of object depends as much on the spirit of the gesture as the series of works and ideas that were part of its initial iteration. In the case of this small group exhibition, originally organized at A.I.R. Gallery thirty-eight years ago as one of several "national" group shows hosted by the gallery during the first half of its existence, restaging materializes an event that has existed largely as an American art historical footnote. Minor but persistent, Dialectics of Isolation has been referenced in part because of Ana Mendieta's involvement, because of its strident title and message, because of the trajectories or recent re-evaluations of some of its artists, and because of the staying power of its institution — excavation perhaps increases the risk of its becoming mythologized. However, I want to propose that rather than merely solidify, heighten, or reify the original endeavor, this reassembly as Dialectics of Entanglement offers distinctive possibilities to contend with institutional history, feminist history, and the sexist and racist rules on aesthetics still in play in the American art world, and on a similarly modest scale.

The message of Dialectics of Isolation was understandably critical toward its housing institution, and I think that Dialectics of Entanglement can be seen not so much as an attempt to rectify that through re-representation than as a prolonging of that antagonism, now as past and present self-critique. It's admittedly a tricky move, but the decision to dig up the original exhibition produces a few distinctive opportunities. One of which is the chance to see the ways in which the US art world, or if we can still be so provincial, the New York art world, has developed in terms of

fundamental representation, of who is in it and who decides who is in it. Relatedly, and this is a matter of not only time passing but timing, is the possibility to undertake aesthetic re-evaluation, to apply some of the critical work that has been conducted in the intervening years to complicate abstraction, to de-whiten minimalism and modernist art, to bring greater respect to figural representation, and to understand craft, handiwork, and traditional practices as art forms on their own terms. All these changes have had an impact on the way gender is seen and reproduced in the field of contemporary art (and the world at large).

"Placing each piece involves a long time of looking and moving — shifting — replacing and looking some more."

— Beverly Buchanan, in the original Dialectics of Isolation catalogue

Aesthetic and symbolic meanings are at the mercy of critical and social convention. Dialectics of Entanglement arrives in the wake of a number of large-scale solo and group exhibitions that have aimed at grappling with modern and contemporary art history on more feminist and antiracist terms, or, in some cases, that have attempted to apply different types of art critical analysis to an artist's body of work. Some examples of the former include the Brooklyn Museum's We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85 and Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, both in 2017, along with several group exhibitions that contend, finally, with the history and current practices of Black abstraction.¹ Among the latter are the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's five-decade survey of the work of

Howardena Pindell, entitled What Remains to Be Seen (2018), Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals at the Brooklyn Museum (2016), dual retrospectives dedicated to Senga Nengudi at the Museum of Contemporary Art and RedLine in Denver (2014), and the major ongoing tour of Ana Mendieta's films, Covered in Time and History (2015-).

These exhibitions necessarily operate upon past presentations, ideally to make historical artistic and curatorial endeavors useful to our present ones, and at the same time to respect previous movements—recalling them as a way of pressing against current preconceptions. In the mediation for Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals, curators Park McArthur and Jennifer Burris foreground Buchanan's cast concrete objects and earthworks, which in the artist's life were overshadowed by her more representational "shack" sculptures produced in homage to vernacular houses built by Black Southerners in the post-Civil War era. Burris and McArthur's research saw these slab works as similarly referential, despite their abstract appearance. The exhibition highlighted the fact that many of these pieces were installed, sometimes officially and sometimes in places only known to the artist, as monuments to both major and quotidian events in the history of Black struggle.² Seeing the poetically political nature of Buchanan's cast concrete and earthworks as site-specific gestures of protest reframes the slab "frustula" that were on view in the original Dialectics exhibition. In showing an example from Buchanan's shack series, this current manifestation highlights instead how these works were also often deeply abstract and impressionistic, combining real models with the interpretive, felt constructions of the artist.

A 2017 duo exhibition at White Rainbow in London called Minimalist Anyway put side by side the work of Kazuko Miyamoto (one of Mendieta's co-curators for Dialectics of Isolation, along with the artist Zarina) and Brazilian-born Lydia Okumura. Stemming from a tongue-in-cheek comment by Miyamoto that "being Japanese, you

are minimalist anyway," the show recontextualized the artists' work in terms of their material choices and methods of production. In the early 1980s, both artists, whose large sculptural works often deal with line, light, and geometry, were pushed into the shadows of lionized American male minimalists (both Miyamoto and Okumura also lived near to and worked with Sol LeWitt in the '70s and '80s). But there are myriad other apt, individualized references and analyses to apply to either of the artists, beyond their New York milieu. Okumura's artistic life began with conceptual experimentation among the concrete and neo-concrete movements in Brazil, and her preference for abstract geometric shapes could be seen as a political turn away from the figuration that became too easily utilized by fascist populism.³ Okumura has defined her work in terms of "feminine constructions" in shape and tone; their lightness and materials, such as string and thin wire, and the meticulous nature of their construction might also suggest what was traditionally considered women's work.

Consisting of woven, stretched threads, in readymade form, Senga Nengudi's long-running R.S.V.P. series of sculptures (1976-) are made of pantyhose weighted down at the ends with sand and stretched across walls and corners. Although Nengudi has long worked across disciplines, creating happenings and events, performances and documentations, these nylon works have come to define the artist's oeuvre. About this persistent motif, she explains in the wall text for the new Dialectics iteration, "My approach to art has changed and expanded over the years, but my concern with the way life experiences pull and tug on the human body and psyche has remained steady, now with more of a focus on cultural and universal human ways of coping." These sculptures then carry through time, with slightly changing contexts but always a need for expression.

These sculptural, spatial gestures stand in apparent aesthetic disjuncture with Judith Baca's "portable mural" Uprising of the Mujeres (1979). Baca has written of how her choice

of style and place of expression are related primarily to the fact that murals cannot so easily enter the art market, and thus have their audience restricted. As a curatorial gesture, placing Baca's mural alongside some of the more ostensibly abstract or obliquely referential works in the show helps to reframe the different approaches and open up the representationality among all of them. Seen another way, it might also help to demonstrate that with figural works, the complete story can be just as hard to comprehend.

In the sole video of Dialectics, Free, White and 21 (1980), Howardena Pindell (also a founding member of A.I.R.) uses caustic mockery to recall disturbing true stories of her interactions with white women at school, at work, and in social settings. It's a punctuation mark in the show. Pindell plays herself, relaying harrowing memories of abuse and discrimination from childhood on, and also a young, liberal white woman, who gaslights Pindell with statements like:

"You really must be paranoid."

"Your art really isn't political either ... If your symbols aren't used in a way that we use them, we won't acknowledge them."

"We'll find other tokens."

In her update to her wall text for Dialectics of Entanglement, Pindell relays a few of the many additional interactions that could have been included, from both before and since the original show. There are always more stories behind the told stories. Keeping this in mind, the exhibition-as-object only solidifies into the known if we allow it to — otherwise, we keep excavating.

Notes

- 1 See Seph Rodney, "How to Embed a Shout: A New Generation of Black Artists Contends with Abstraction," Hyperallergic, August 23, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/389105/how-to-embed-a-shout-a-new-generation-of-black-artists-contends-with-abstraction/>; and Chloe Bass, "Can Abstraction Help Us Understand the Value of Black Lives?," July 28, 2016, Hyperallergic, <https://hyperallergic.com/314166/can-abstraction-help-us-understand-the-value-of-black-lives/>.
- 2 Rachael Rakes, "Ghosts of the South Haunt the Brooklyn Museum," Village Voice, December 21, 2016, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/12/21/ghosts-of-the-south-haunt-the-brooklyn-museum/>.
- 3 Ricardo Sardenburg, "Lydia Okumura" (review), Frieze, March 28, 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/lydia-okumura>.

Curating Difference

Aruna D'Souza

We are living through a historical moment when “intersectional feminism”—a political position that grapples with the ways that gender injustice is almost always shot through, doubled, intensified, or even occluded by a person’s class, race, ability, sexuality, and so on—is both a buzzword and an urgent call to action. Even before legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the phrase in 1989,¹ Black feminists and other feminists of color had long called for a more expansive notion of what a truly feminist politics should address to serve interests beyond those of white, bourgeois, cis women: not just abortion access, but a mother’s right to raise her children without the state taking them away; not just equal pay for equal work, but a living wage; not just access to birth control, but access to hormone therapy for trans folks; not just the ability to free oneself from domestic drudgery, but affordable, nondiscriminatory housing; not just the opportunity to break the corporate glass ceiling, but the need to dismantle capitalism; not just the rejection of patriarchy, but the rejection of racism and imperialism, which are both its motor and its consequence.

But it has been since the election of Donald Trump in 2016—when 53 percent of white women who voted chose the misogynist, white supremacist, ableist, corrupt candidate, despite his history of sexual assault and other travesties—that many (largely white) feminists first became acutely aware of the need to form alliances across ever-deepening chasms of race, class, and other markers of unequal treatment. This realization was prompted, not least, by the feelings of betrayal expressed by women of color, who overwhelmingly voted against him.

The scramble to “become intersectional” has played out in public, as mainstream, largely

white and middle-class, feminist groups try to reimagine themselves in more inclusive ways. (One might recall, for example, the initial fumbles around the Women’s March on Washington, DC, when, after an outcry, a number of women of color activists were added to the organizational team.²) The problem with this mind-set of opening mainstream feminism to intersectional concerns, of course, is that it is conceived as an act of generosity—a making welcome of difference, a function of empathy and goodwill—in which the center makes room for those at the margins. It is a “big tent” approach, which dreams of consensus, of common purpose, of indivisibility. But intersectionality as a political strategy isn’t an act of generosity, a product of empathy, or an understanding across the chasms of difference—it is a survival strategy, a necessary response to a political and social landscape in which every act of resistance is too easily co-opted, rendered powerless, made illegal, marketed to death, or otherwise subverted. It is a way of thinking about feminism as a matter of coalition building and collaboration across difference, in a way that leaves difference intact, that abandons the hope for a unified voice because it sees strength in many, sometimes conflicting and contradictory, positions as the most effective way to undermine the maddening single-mindedness of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. It is rooted, most crucially, in an explosion of the center, of rendering untenable the notion of margins.

In her introductory essay for the catalogue of the groundbreaking 1980 show at A.I.R. Gallery, Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States, Ana Mendieta—one of the three curators, along with fellow artists Kazuko Miyamoto

and Zarina — made this point economically and forcefully.³ The exhibition itself was an oppositional gesture, one that grew out of a contemporary and widespread critique of A.I.R. Gallery, the eponymous journal published by the feminist Heresies Collective, and other women-centered cultural organizations whose programming and activism largely reflected the concerns of their mostly white memberships, to the chagrin of many women of color in the art world. But Dialectics of Isolation was not predicated on the idea of inclusion — that is, its goal seems not to have been to merely make space for artists of color in a hitherto white space, though it certainly achieved that. Rather, it was predicated on a much more radical idea: the productive value of difference, the power of speaking from a position of isolation. “As non-white women our struggles are two-fold,” Mendieta wrote. “This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being ‘other.’”

The challenge Mendieta and her co-curators posed to their peers at A.I.R. and other feminist art spaces in New York was contained in the title of the show, referring as it did to the idea of “Third World women.” The use of the term “Third World” to denote US-based women of color emerged over the course of the 1970s; it drew upon a Cold War term that referred to mostly developing nations in the Global South that resisted alignment with the global superpowers of the NATO alliance (the First World) and the Communist bloc (the Second World). The embrace of the idea of a Third World feminism came as Black, Chicana, Indigenous, and other feminists of color in the United States recognized the importance of seeing their own liberation as part of larger, global processes of decolonization, linked to anti-imperialist struggles such as the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement, independence movements in former colonies, and antipoverty activism. By theorizing the existence of the Third World within the First, they were able to critique the class and race privilege of Western

feminism and see their own oppression as a continued legacy of colonialism and multiple forms of violence. It was predicated not on a univocal, big-tent notion of feminism but on strategic coalition building through shared interests.

For those who took on the mantle of Third World feminism, an antiracist feminism was not just one flavor among many to choose from in the fight against patriarchy; it was, on the contrary, a fundamental and necessary starting point. As Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist group that became widely influential in art world conversations thanks to their challenge to the journal Heresies for not including a single Black person in their 1977 issue on lesbian art and artists, wrote:

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement.⁴

In their famous 1977 statement, one that is largely credited as the origins of a rigorous, class-conscious, intersectional form of identity politics, the Combahee River Collective outlined the expansiveness of their notion of feminism:

The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. ... We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World Women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and

the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.⁵

The multiplicity embodied in Third World feminism—not simply in terms of the various identities, races, ethnicities, and colonial conditions of its adherents, but also in terms of the issues it understood to be central to its struggle—is reflected, perhaps, in the unusually emphatic heterogeneity of Dialectics of Isolation. Carrie Rickey, in her review of the show in the Village Voice, saw this heterogeneity as a sort of incoherence, in which works she deemed to be “phenomenological” and “lyrical” stood in jarring contrast to the “ideological” art on view. Rickey attributed this disjuncture to what she saw as an emerging genre of exhibitions—the “affinity show”—which substituted an emphasis on “political and social considerations” for aesthetic ones.⁶ She mapped out the exhibition’s two poles (phenomenological-lyrical versus ideological) in surprisingly formal terms, however: abstraction versus representation, roughly speaking. As such, Rickey imposed an opposition between, on the one side, Beverly Buchanan’s grouping of cement blocks; Zarina’s delicate, geometric, cast paper reliefs; Lydia Okumura’s site-specific installation, which involved painting the wall and floor of the gallery space to render the difference between horizontal and vertical planes moot; Senga Nengudi’s weighted pantyhose sculptures with their uncanny corporeality; and Selena (Whitefeather) Persico’s conceptual rendering of the landscape as a site of decay and degeneration, and, on the other side, Howardena Pindell’s iconic video Free, White and 21 (1980), in which she dons white drag to recount shocking, real-life encounters with liberal white feminists; Janet Olivia Henry’s playful, hilarious, and devastating Ju Ju Bag (1979–80) which contains the necessary, if miniaturized, accouterments of the WPM (white Protestant male); and work by the Los Angeles-based Chicana muralist Judith Baca.

In her search for cohesion, Rickey’s otherwise entirely sympathetic and sensitive review missed the point of how affinity might operate in curatorial terms: as a cognate, we might say, for the tactical idea of coalitions that Third World feminism sought—as a matter of shared concerns across formal and conceptual divides, in ways that keep such divides intact but see their dialectical and productive potential. Buchanan’s cast concrete blocks were as site-specific as, for example, both Okumura’s installation and Baca’s Great Wall of Los Angeles (1978). Buchanan made her concrete admixture out of local materials and often placed her blocks outdoors to mark sites or events significant in the Black American experience.⁷ Buchanan’s and Zarina’s reimagining of minimalism’s formal language was as much an upending of white masculinity, it seems to me, as Henry’s parodic lexicon—both minimalism and preppy fashion being the purview of white Protestant males, for the most part. Nengudi’s use of pantyhose, weighted, bulging, and stretched, to refer to the ways colored bodies are stressed and pulled apart in a racist world is echoed in Pindell’s video, in which, in addition to appearing in whiteface to act out the words of various “allies” she has encountered in her life, she pulls a stocking over her head, disfiguring her face in an attempt to mask her Blackness. Baca’s and Okumura’s interventions both turn to architectural space in order to introduce otherness, to make present bodies that have been absented from the public representation of community—Okumura’s in terms of pure (skin) color, Baca’s in terms of narrative representation of missing histories. There are more connections to be teased out, to be sure. In short: Dialectics of Isolation can be understood as an incohesive show only if one fails to look for the more subtle, glancing ways in which these artists’ works share conceptual and political terrain.

Dialectics of Isolation offers a set of timely reminders for our politically volatile moment, a moment in which we are struggling to find effective models of organizing and protest to counter increasingly bald expressions of

racism and misogyny in our social and political worlds, and in which art institutions (from small independent spaces to landmark museums) are being challenged to make clear their own complicity and investments in structural racism and sexism. First, the exhibition is a reminder to mainstream feminist organizers that models for intersectional feminism have long existed within the spheres of Black and woman of color feminisms, most pertinently as Third World feminism. In other words, a truly intersectional feminism is not an expansion of liberal white feminism to incorporate other concerns, but a decentering of it. Second, it offers a historical model for the current embrace of decolonization—a concept that has been gaining more and more currency in the art world in recent years, driving many provocations for institutions to reimagine themselves in relation to everything from Indigenous land claims, to repatriation of stolen objects in museum collections, to gentrification. (For example, the recent protests against the Brooklyn Museum, which began with an objection to the hiring of a white curator for its collection of African art but quickly spread to questions of the museum’s role in abetting the influx of white gentrifiers to a historically Black and Latinx neighborhood, were organized by a group called Decolonize This Place, a coalition whose work extends across the globe.) And third—and perhaps most importantly—Dialectics of Isolation offers a model for how such political imperatives can be translated into curatorial form, via an exhibition that privileges difference and highlights the glancing correspondences of works that share a broadly sympathetic terrain, coming together to speak in unexpected mutually reinforcing ways. The open-endedness of Mendieta, Kazuko, and Zarina’s show conjured a space of multiplicity, one that transformed A.I.R. Gallery and, by eschewing curatorial models of “coherence,” forced us to see affinity in unexpected and politically efficacious ways.

Notes

- 1 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” University of Chicago Legal Forum 140, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.
- 2 On the question of intersectionality and the Women’s March, see, for example, Farah Stockman, “Women’s March on Washington Opens Contentious Dialogues about Race,” New York Times, January 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/09/us/womens-march-on-washington-opens-contentious-dialogues-about-race.html>.
- 3 This piece draws upon my essay “Early Intersections: The Work of Third World Feminism,” which appeared in We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85: New Perspectives, ed. Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2018), 73–95. I have also benefited from the work of Anastasia Tuazon, and I thank her for sharing it with me. See Anastasia Tuazon, “The Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists Form a Coalition through Difference” (master’s thesis, Stony Brook University, New York, 2018).
- 4 From a talk Barbara Smith gave at the closing session at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, May 1979; published as Barbara Smith, “Racism and Women’s Studies,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies 5, no. 1 (1980): 48–49, and reprinted in All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies, ed. Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982), 49.
- 5 The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in We Wanted a Revolution, 176, 182. First published in Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
- 6 Carrie Rickey, “The Passion of Ana,” Village Voice, September 10–16, 1980, 75.
- 7 See my review of the exhibition Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals, Brooklyn Museum, October 21, 2016–March 5, 2017: Aruna D’Souza, “Beverly Buchanan” (review), 4Columns, 2016, <http://www.4columns.org/d-souza-aruna/beverly-buchanan>.

La Sombra (The Shadow), 2017

Regina José Galindo

Yo pude haber terminado en un barranco
pero estoy aquí

escribiendo malos poemas
pensando performances
fumando mariguana
deprimida

otras
con vidas ejemplares
no tuvieron la misma suerte.

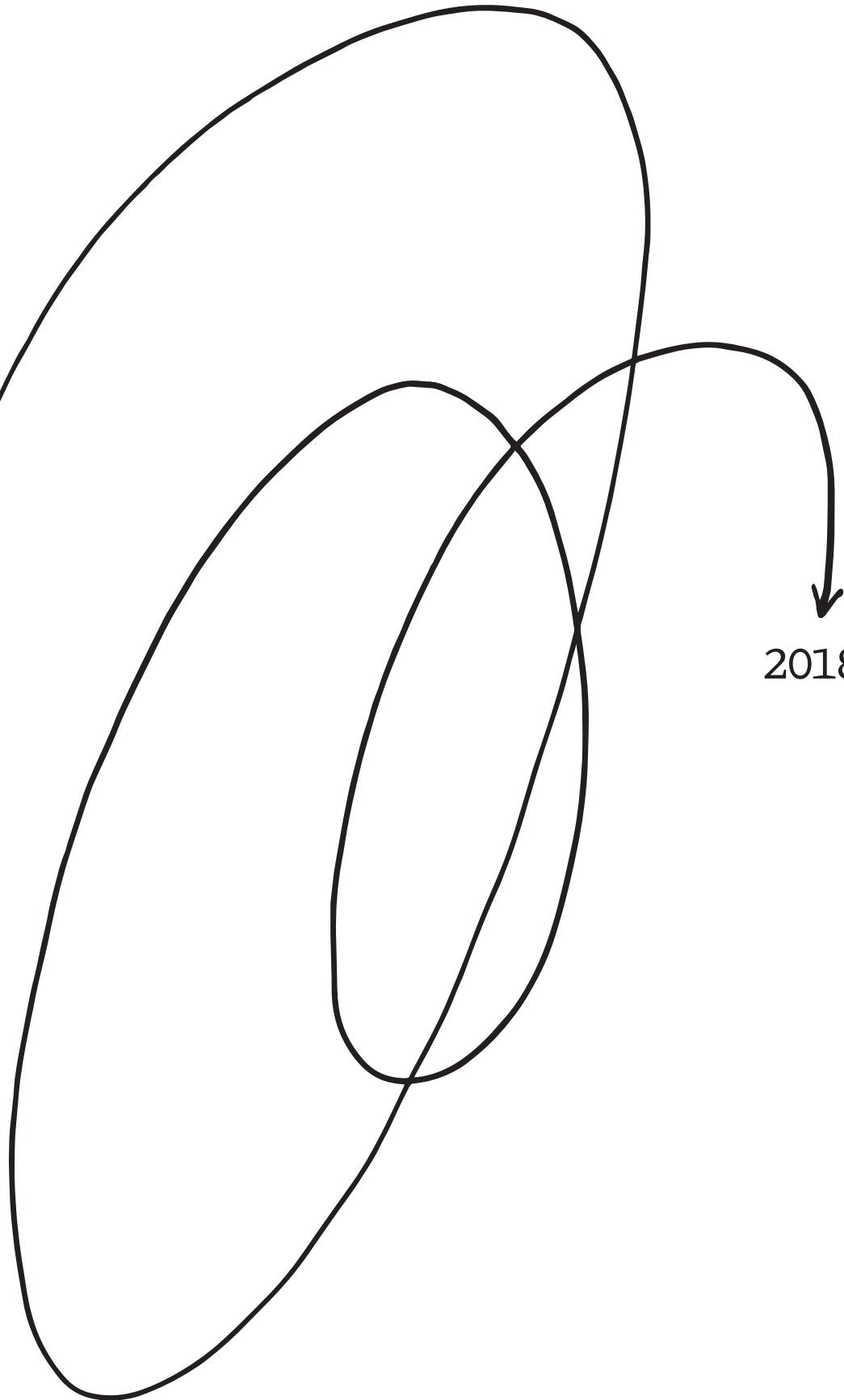
I could've ended up in a ditch
but I'm here

writing bad poems
thinking performances
smoking weed
depressed

other women
with exemplary lives
didn't have the same luck.

1980

2018



1980

Judith F. Baca

11 Drawings for the "Tujunga Wash Mural"

As muralist, I am committed to a process that brings community together with the artist for the creation of an art product. It is through this process that the artist often becomes a visual spokesperson for the issues that are affecting the community. Murals have the capacity to effect change on an urban environment quickly and relatively cheaply. It is for this reason and others (the increased social consciousness of the artist, the exclusion of minority and women artists from the museum and gallery system, the artists' desire to broaden their reach beyond the gallery audience), that the "Peoples Art movement" has spread rapidly through the U.S. and abroad. Since a by-product of ownership of a work of art is the power to limit a viewer's access, murals have the added benefit of belonging to no one, therefore to everyone.

2018

Judith F. Baca

Study for central figure, When God Was Woman, 1981

Uprising of the Mujeres, 1979

The drawings exhibited here are from a series of works that were influenced by the women's spirituality movement of the 1970's and 1980's, particularly by the writings of a number of authors such as Mary Daly and Marija Gimbutas, and were named after Merlin Stone's book When God Was a Woman.

In my own cultural and family life, spirituality played a deep role in my choice to become an artist. My grandmother used Indigenous healing practices to heal us and taught us that our dreams played a prominent role in making decisions in our daily life.

I was troubled by my religious training, however, as I became a feminist, particularly by the purview of men over women granted by a male god and by the Garden of Eden myth. Eve, created from the rib of Adam, was subjugated to him and sealed all women's fate by eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil that caused the loss of paradise. As a result of this act, women were to submit to the dominance of man, who was given the divine right to rule over her from that moment until now. This has permeated all aspects of secular life, including women's rights over their bodies, and has bolstered misogynist practices, which are on the rise again today.

What if God had been a woman? I began to follow the steps of many scholars who explored this concept discovering the prehistoric and early historic periods of human development dating as far back as 50,000 years BC, when religions existed in which people revered their supreme creator as female. In various cultures she was the divine ancestress, the weaver of life, the moon goddess, and the valiant warrior.

These drawings are for a series of portable mural panels in which the goddesses of various cultures (African, Asian, Native American, pre-Hispanic) exchange places as the panels revolve and provide examples of valiant female creators and their symbology of female strength. Judeo-Christian religions fought aggressively to suppress even the memory of this early female worship and to hold male deities supreme.

The work was created in a workshop I led for thirteen women, in which we explored the history of women deities and included our collective dream. When God Was Woman is so timely for the time we are living in now, which parallels in profound ways Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.

1980

Beverly Buchanan

Wall Column, 1980

Notes on wall column

Each piece of the sculpture is cast separately and placed individually, one at a time. Placing each piece involves a long time of looking and moving — shifting — replacing and looking some more. The slight weight shift and emphasis on my right to left orientation continues in this piece. The small front half slab was placed first.

2018

Beverly Buchanan

Structure

Eleanor Flomenhaft: How did you become involved with shacks?

Beverly Buchanan: Basically because I like houses. When I was growing up there was a young Black woman in my hometown who wanted to be an architect. I was so impressed with her. When I first started shacks my ideas were really about architecture. There are so many different kinds of shacks. I am basically interested in structure. I was living here in Athens making stone pieces, which are sculptures as far as I'm concerned. At some point I had to realize that for me the structure was related to the people who built it. I would look at shacks and the ones that attracted me always had something a little different or odd about them. This evolved into my having to deal with the fact that I am making portraits of a family or a person, which may recall individuals or families I had met, and I would sometimes add traits from other families to a particular structure.

An excerpt from Beverly Buchanan, "Shack Portraiture: An Interview with Beverly Buchanan," in Beverly Buchanan, Shack Works, a 16 Year Survey, by Eleanor Flomenhaft (Montclair, NJ: Montclair Art Museum, 1994).

1980

Janet Olivia Henry

Juju Box for a White Protestant Male, 1979–80

When I couldn't get something as a child I drew it or cut it out of the paper. Ju ju Bags perform a similar function for me now as an "adult." Collectively these "art objects" create a story. Each item represents a word, a clump of things together make a sentence. Ju ju Bags are private, the kind of thing you can sit in a corner and examine.

2018

Janet Olivia Henry

The Studio Visit, 1982

At a fundamental level, slides can't accurately represent three-dimensional art (if you don't know what a slide is—too bad for you). "But what would we use instead?" I asked the couple who was adamantly voicing their opposition to having their work appraised using transparencies. "Hrrrmph" was the response, and off they marched.

I remind myself of that exchange every time I start fulminating about having to write an artist statement. "I'm not fabricating some constipated treatise predicated on some philosophical folderol I don't care about." If it's handled like the response to a query—"What made you start using toys?"—all I have to do is recount how I discovered Mego action figures for a dollar each in stacked heaps at Alexander's department store. Could walk across town from Just Above Midtown to Chinatown with \$10 and come back with big bags of stuff and then combine them in color groupings that went in boxes covered in washi paper.

I discovered that American culture had been replicated in miniature. Old Barbie stuff was accurate, detailed, and made with care. (Not the dolls, never the dolls, which were immobile, while the action figures were basically pliable armatures with portrait faces.) The "Little Family." Again, the dolls were ... meh, but the clothes were great: piping, lining, buttonholes—wahoo.

All this going on about detail? It's where I put the eye I developed from being able to draw. Yeah, I'm one of those artist that can, big deal. Paul Cézanne couldn't "draw," but he affected art more than almost anyone. That's what has always made me humble; having facility is great, but inventing and challenging your ability is the bomb.

Oh, and then I started writing.

1980

Senga Nengudi

Nuki Nuki: Across 118th St, 1982

I am concerned with the way life experiences pull and tug on the human body and psyche. And the body's ability to cope with it. Nylon mesh serves my needs in reflecting this elasticity.

2018

Senga Nengudi

Nuki Nuki: Across 118th St, 1982/2014

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

In my work I often use humble, discarded, castaway materials — tape, plastics, pantyhose, etc. — as well as nature's own sand and water as part of performances and thought actions as a means to express the belief, which is the same one I hold regarding disenfranchised humans, that materials that are often dismissed may be transformed into poetic entities.

With an improvisational impulse, I gather and work my materials. The elements of my pieces are like individuals: fragmented, confused, straightforward, full, empty, misunderstood, frayed, titillating, bland, slick — radiating infinite possibilities, when combined with one another, this way and that. Like Alice going through the w(hole), being on the other side of real, my pieces give voice to those with no tongue to speak about their fragile selves. My work says yes to all those who have been told no by the majority.

1980

Lydia Okumura

Diagram of the Cubicle Parallelogram, 1980

*Born in a certain space and time,
carrying a certain color in the face,
learning about lines and borders
of those spaces, in different languages,
every one having a personal history,
obviously belongs to the same space —
The Earth.*

*Types of misunderstandings, prejudices
or privileges among people are
invented by people, not by Nature.*

*I believe Art is a way of
surpassing those barriers by
seeking for humanness; awareness
and freedom of individuals
belonging to one Nature.*

2018

Lydia Okumura

Diagram of the Cubicle Parallelogram, 1980/2018

Though I participated in many “diversity exhibitions” in New York, the exhibition Dialectics of Isolation at A.I.R. Gallery was where I did my first installation in a group context. Subsequently, I began becoming conscious of being within a racial minority, something I had never been much aware of before.

After graduating with a degree in fine arts from Armando Alvares Penteado Foundation (FAAP) in São Paulo in 1973, I was a student in 1974 at Pratt Graphic Center in New York, and I met artists like Ryo and Joe Watanabe, who lived in the same building where Sol LeWitt resided, and, together with Kazuko Miyamoto, they had become the first installation assistants of Sol LeWitt. In 1976, I met Sol LeWitt and helped him install a piece at the School of Visual Arts. I met Sol again in Tokyo in 1980 during his exhibition at Galerie Watari, where I also showed that same year.

In 1978, two years before Dialectics of Isolation, Lowery Sims, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, acquired a drawing of mine through a donor from Nobé Gallery and it became the first acquisition of a work by a Brazilian artist at the Met in decades. That same year, I was invited to participate in Iman: New York at the Center for Inter-American Relations and had a solo show of my installation work at the Cayman Gallery, established by the Friends of Puerto Rico in Soho.

Most of the works in the A.I.R. show were made of different materials in feminine constructions, but I had never considered to consciously define myself in this way. My work is about the human being moving through space and about reflection upon ourselves within our own mental space.

Lydia Okumura, in conversation with
Anke Kempkes, June 2018.

1980

Howardena Pindell

Free, White and 21, 1980

As a Black American woman, I draw on my experience as I have lived it and not as others wish to perceive my living it as fictionalized in the media and so-called "history" books. Black Americans, all non-white Americans, face racism projected on them by white males and females ... The white feminist who wishes equality for herself too often remains a racist in her "equality," her racism unnoticed by colleagues who also may carry the same poison.

2018

Howardena Pindell

Free, White and 21, 1980

I made Free, White and 21 in 1980, almost a year after the near-death car accident that would become a pivotal moment in my career. It was the first work of the Autobiography series (1980-), which grew out of a strong desire to tell my story and part of my mother's story.

Recently, I have begun reflecting on the video in light of the current #MeToo movement — especially my story with the minister. I briefly considered doing an update, but have decided the original says all that I want to say. However, there are still numerous stories I have not told that could very well merit an additional video. One such example occurred in Florida during the 1970s, when the chairwoman of an art organization where I had been invited to jury an exhibition became infuriated with me when I refused to sleep with her fifteen-year-old son. (As a bit of context, it was common practice in the South during slavery to send the slave owners' sons to rape the female slaves as part of the boys' sex education.) Another similar experience occurred in the 1980s, at the International House of Japan in Tokyo — a Rockefeller Institution — where I was staying while on an artist grant. A certain woman, who, uninvited, would dine at the house and sit with me, once propositioned me to become a prostitute. I remember she said that they would put me in a house and that I would be "very popular." I was shocked and of course said no.

All that being said, I am sure that my enslaved ancestors would have much more violent and cruel life experiences to share. The video is lightweight in terms of what they must have experienced. Yet, I am glad it has gained new momentum in our current era.

1980

Selena Whitefeather

Complete View of Region in Every Direction, 1980

For years I have been interested in plant & animal life in relationship to our visions of ourselves. I'd never had an interest in shrubs, however; they seemed distorted, somehow like mutants forced to exist next to shutters or windows on houses and buildings.

One day I saw a shrub which stood apart from a landscape; it wasn't wild but it wasn't quite cultivated either. I began to photograph other 'individual' shrubs—hundreds over a two year period. I saw them with their own particular life histories and as part of particular sites. I found they were subject to gall & canker & warts & rot and experienced them in various states of grace—as 'dignified', 'sober', or 'sedate'. I wanted to explore this totality of their being in this piece, and by doing so, question the nature of our perceptual limitations.

2018

Selena W. Persico

Complete View of Region in Every Direction, 1980/2018

Thirty-eight years ago, Ana Mendieta, Kazuko Miyamoto, and Zarina presented an exhibition of "other": art of Third World women in an attempt to show the multiplicity of vision, analysis, and inspiration that those artists could bring when given the platform. It was a challenge to the women's art community to include more, to see differently, to question the narrowness of their narratives. Too often what was presented as "other" were voices of exclusion, anger, and suffering or clichés about exotica and nobility.

The overlap of cultures in the United States forces us to see the other, to be constantly entangled. But work still needs to be done to hear the barely heard—not just the loud—and to be inspired by other ways of seeing. It's imperative for this country to see alternative visions of what a human being can be.

My lived experience as a multiracial woman is not only the basis for how I am seen in the world, but also a foundation from which I draw strength. The natural world is integral to my work: through observation, prayer, wonder, and questioning. Focusing on drawing, painting, and photographic work that incorporates industrial materials, pigments, and earth, I try to answer where and how our humanity overlaps with nature. How do we survive and thrive?

Does the flight of the hummingbird, bat, and moth mean anything as we perform our own social navigations? Do we see new worlds sharing a simple cat's cradle? How do we show suffering, anorexia, the internment of people or animals? How do the voices of others and the simple song of the robin help us to set our own course and fly?

1980 Zarina

Corners, 1980

*I looked into Mt. Aso filled with burnt ashes
walked the corridors of temples with rows of niches
blackened by the smoke of oil lamps
lamps lighted for the dead
silently came to my corner*

2018 Zarina

Corners, 1980

When I was at the papermaking center in the small village of Sanganer in Rajasthan, I saw the potential for paper pulp to be used to make an object, not just a flat sheet of paper.

Cast paper is often mistaken for papier-mâché, but it is not. There is no glue involved in the process. Once the water is squeezed out of the pulp, the paper fibers lock together in a process called hydrogen bonding. I use a plastic mold, so when the fibers shrink, the cast paper easily slips out. It is then burnished with an agate stone. The loose threads come out and the irregularities are visible. I do not use man-made materials. The pigments used to color the pulp are all natural. Graphite is permanent and does not fade.

I consider myself a printmaker, not a sculptor. My medium of expression is ink and paper. I have always liked its texture and fragility, how it will become part of the earth it came from.

Works included in Dialectics of Entanglement

Judith Baca

Study for central figure, When God Was Woman, 1981, Oil pastel on paper, 27" × 35"

Uprising of the Mujeres, 1979. Final coloration of the female central figure of the mural.

Original drawing, study I, 27.5" × 30.5", Pastel on paper.

Courtesy of the artist and SPARC LA, Los Angeles

Janet Olivia Henry

The Studio Visit, 1982. 1979–80, Mixed media, 19 7/12" × 21 7/12" × 14"

Courtesy of the artist

Howardena Pindell

Free, White and 21, 1980, Video (color, sound), 12:15 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

Beverly Buchanan

Structure, Acrylic on foamcore, 12" × 5.50" × 4.50"

Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Zarina

Corners, 1980, Cast paper, 32.5" × 22"

Courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine Gallery, New York

Senga Nengudi

Nuki Nuki: Across 118th St, 1982/2014, Nylon mesh and wooden slats, Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, and Lévy Gorvy Gallery,

New York and London

Selena W. Persico

Complete View of Region in Every Direction, 1980/2018, Digitized slide show.

Courtesy of the artist

Lydia Okumura

Diagram of the Cubicle Parallelogram, 1980/2018, Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Regina José Galindo

La Sombra (The Shadow), 2017, Video following performance with Leopard tank, 11 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala

Acknowledgements

A.I.R Gallery has been functioning as a space for women-identified artists since 1972 and operating under a unique cooperative model through which women's issues have been raised and scarce assets have been shared through multiple outlets. Our permanent exhibition space supports an open exchange of ideas and risk-taking by women-identified artists to provide support and visibility. As a self-directed governing body, the organization is an alternative to mainstream institutions and thrives on a network of artist participation.

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Curators: Roxana Fabius and Patricia M. Hernandez

Curatorial Assistant: Carla Zurita

Exhibition Assistants: Tessa Debole and Maribelle Bierens

Copyeditor: Jaclyn Arndt

Design: MGMT. design

2018

Roxana Fabius and Patricia M. Hernandez

Many questions are raised by this project, which we define as being in conversation. We have asked ourselves how and if there is an authority to change the original decisions made by the three curators or to add to them by inviting contemporary artists and thinkers to reflect on the show. Through this process of interrogation, we concluded that there is a need for this intervention because the themes presented by the original exhibition have not been exhausted. We see this new iteration as our way to honor the 1980 exhibition and its makers. The past is not over, and it is time that the histories created by these women are brought into the present for current audiences. It is our entanglement with the complexities brought about by Dialectics of Isolation that prompts us to formulate a more fluid understanding of time.

Excerpt from the essay "Dialectics of Entanglement"