When it is truly alive, memory does not contemplate history but extends an invitation to creating it. Rather than in museums, where the poor thing gets bored, memory is found in the air we breathe. . . . Living memory was not born to be an anchor. It has, rather, a catapult vocation.

Eduardo Galeano, “La memoria viva”

In one of the most moving scenes in Estela Bravo’s documentary Los que se fueron (1980), Ana Mendieta reminisces about the day of her departure from Cuba on 11 September 1961 when she was close to thirteen years old. She remembers being confined to the “fishbowl” inside the airport, built to keep Cubans who were flying out of the country from mingling with those who remained. Once past the threshold of the “fishbowl,” passengers reached a point of no return. After going through the immigration authorities, they had turned into noncitizens, no longer regarded as part of the nation by virtue of their “abandoning” it. Mendieta’s parents were on the other side of the fishbowl with their hands against the glass, in all likelihood agonizing over their decision to send their girls away, while Ana and her sister, Raquelín, tried unsuccessfully to make contact.

The two girls would arrive shortly in Miami and be placed in camps and foster homes in a string of cities in Iowa, far from the fledgling Cuban enclave in South Florida, which perhaps would have offered a more hospitable
environment for Peter Pan children. They would not see their mother for five years. And it wasn’t until nineteen years since that day at the airport that Mendieta would go back to Cuba and single-mindedly try to restore her bonds to kin and the nation with her work. She was finally breaking free from the glass enclosure, although later events would make it all too clear that some partitions had not budged. In the end, Mendieta’s case agrees with the volatile character of return.

Between January 1980 and July 1983, visual and performance artist Ana Mendieta (1948–85) went back to Cuba seven times. The remarkable intensity with which she undertook the project of reconnecting with her former homeland naturally calls for special attention in a book about homecomings. This chapter treks into Mendieta’s attempts to insert herself in the island’s art milieu, pursuing opportunities to show her work, forging professional relationships, and crowning her labor with the Esculturas rupestres or Rupestrian Sculptures in the Jaruco limestone caves, a capstone achievement inspired by indigenous mythology. “Chiseling (in) Cuba” explores the reception and impact of Mendieta’s work in Cuba in order to determine how successful she was over time, and it concludes with a mixed appraisal of the full balance of her struggle. The artist’s aspiration to gain a rightful place in the nation’s art no doubt came to fruition during the time of her visits, when she received the attention of the media, local artists, and the art establishment. However, Mendieta’s traces today are to be found not in the art institutions whose relationship she cultivated but on the margins, in alternative spaces where her memory has been passed down, albeit rather unconventionally, through generations. Both Maurice Halbwachs’s and Pierre Nora’s conceptualizations of collective memory and sites of memory, respectively, will assist in appraising how those alternative spaces have been configured and what is their function.

Given the scope of Mendieta’s artwork, it is not surprising that her work still casts a spell on new generations of artists in Cuba and beyond. Mendieta was part of a cohort of artists who experimented with performance, earth, and body art at a time when these innovative forms were still viewed as experimental. Prior to her trips to Cuba, she worked in Iowa and Mexico, drawing attention for a series of unusual performances, some of them riveting. Through her pieces and performances, she sought to make a statement about violence, power, and indifference in society. Her works in this area include self-portraits using blood as a medium, enacting a violent rape scene,
transforming into a sacrificial cock by covering herself with white feathers, standing naked while holding a dead, bloody rooster in her hands, making ritualistic tracks on a white wall with her hands and arms spilling blood, and having a steady stream of blood flow from underneath a door onto the street while monitoring the reaction of passersby.

She was interested in normativity and the socially constructed nature of gender as well. In two of her “self-portraits,” she pasted hair onto her face to simulate a beard and a moustache, and in another project she distorted her face against a glass surface. She also conveyed the vulnerability and ephemerality of human existence through the short-lived silhouettes that she made outdoors, availing herself of whatever nature bountifully supplied: sand, water, mud, tree branches, grass, dirt, and leaves, in addition to gunpowder. Animating Mendieta’s life and work was the quest for change and transformation at various levels, in art as well as life. She knew firsthand how disruptive politics as usual could be on individuals and the family.

Backdrop to Mendieta’s Return Story

Mendieta’s return in 1980 was made possible by the Circulo de Cultura Cubana, created in 1979 by Cuban Americans who shared an interest in cultural exchanges between their native and adopted homelands as a means to bridge the divide. Ana Mendieta was a founding member of the Circulo de Cultura Cubana along with others who had also left Cuba as children, some, like her, through the Operation Pedro Pan.

From a cultural point of view, these were auspicious times for exchanges as Cuban cultural production was just recovering from the slumber of the 1970s. At the beginning of that decade, state cultural institutions promoted socialist realist aesthetics in support of the large-scale revolutionary project, thus making the cultural sphere subservient to politics. Alas, rather than fostering social transformation, the policy produced a stifling environment that hindered the development of works (both in the visual arts and literature) whose outlook overstepped the boundaries of orthodox criteria. The period, which stretched beyond 1975, received the moniker of quinquenio gris, a term intended to showcase the dullness of works produced under its banner.¹

By the early 1980s a breath of fresh air was sweeping across the Cuban cultural landscape. Cutting-edge, experimental works of art began to come
out of workshops, galleries, and art studios on the island. According to Luis Camnitzer, those accountable for the shift in direction were a new generation of visual artists who would make an outstanding contribution to the image of Cuban art worldwide. The eleven artists—José Bedia, Flavio Garciandía, Tomás Sánchez, Leandro Soto, Rubén Torres Llorca, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Israel León, and Rogelio López Marín (“Gory”)—behind the renewal came to be known as Volumen I, the title of a group exhibition of their work launched in Havana in January 1981.

Mendieta’s second trip to Cuba crystallized at the time of the Volumen I exhibition in the framework of a specialized exchange of U.S. artists and critics organized by the Círculo de Cultura Cubana. Mendieta, who led the exchange, met the young Cuban artists, who were her junior by just a few years, befriending some of them. There is a photograph of Mendieta surrounded by several of the artists—Bedia and Garciandía, among others, along with American art critic Lucy Lippard—taken at the time by López Marín. Like a family picture, the photograph conveys warmth, affinity, and bonding. Showing them huddled in a tight group, the photograph transmits the idea that the artist had naturally assumed her place among peers. To be sure, both Camnitzer and Olga Viso comment on the strong ties that developed between Mendieta and this group of artists. One of them, in fact, led her to Jaruco, where she would later carve her Rupestrian Sculptures.

Return, Personally Speaking

For Ana Mendieta, Cuba contained the key to understanding her peculiar, traumatic experience of exile and parental desertion. Based on careful research, Viso asserts that Mendieta began to ruminate about her return to Cuba at the time of her reunion with her father, a former political prisoner, in April 1979 after eighteen years of separation (Ana Mendieta 78). Perhaps her reencounter with the homeland would yield more consolation than the reencounter with her father, which neither healed the pain nor bridged the emotional distance caused by the lengthy separation they had experienced. Mendieta herself disclosed the rift in an interview with Cuban journalist Roger Ricardo Luis published in Granma during one of her visits.

At about the time of the father’s arrival, Mendieta met other Cubans her age who, as college students, had become involved in campus protests
against the Vietnam War and in the national struggle for civil rights. The political and social unrest in the United States during this period called into question many assumptions, likely contributing to Mendieta’s later determination to return to Cuba with her peers in order to see with her own eyes the accomplishments of the young revolution. Mendieta’s first trip in January 1980 took her not only to Havana but also to Trinidad, Cienfuegos, Bahía de Cochinos, Camagüey, and Santiago de Cuba, in addition to Cárdenas and Varadero, where her ancestral roots are located. In Havana, she honored one of the rituals of return: she passed by her family’s former home, asked to be let in, and sat in her old bedroom. Overcome with emotion, she broke down in tears.2 Even if for the returnee children of exile “home” was, as José Quiroga writes, a “constructed fiction, an imaginary landscape” (186), the truth is that emotionally, upon arrival, it seemed all too real. Only later would the occasion present itself to determine whether first impressions would stick.

After an interlude of nearly twenty years, Mendieta reunited with her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins with whom she had had a nurturing relationship as a child. Hers was a large, extended family with artistic inclinations. Both her maternal grandmother and her mother studied art