



Maximum Outrage Over Minimalist Sculptor

Carl Andre: "OJ of the Art World"?

By CARL SWANSON

1985 AROUND 5:30 ON the morning of September 8, 1985—a Sunday—the doorman at 11 Waverly Place heard what sounded like a woman pleading “No, no, no, no” from high above him; a few minutes later, there was what sounded like an explosion on the roof of a nearby deli. Artist Ana Mendieta had fallen from the 34th-floor window of the apartment on Mercer she shared with her husband, the famous minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, at the neighboring high-rise. She was wearing only her blue bikini underwear. Andre was charged with murder, and the entire art world took sides.

Mendieta, it turns out, was drunk; she and Andre were often drunk and often fighting. To the surprise of many of their friends, they’d married the previous January after breaking up the year before. Andre was older, 50 to her 36, and they were temperamentally at odds. He once complained to his gallerist “It’ll never work—a New England puritan and a Latina.” And while his coolly delivered work—think plates of metal or bricks arranged precisely on the floor—was not as fashionable as it was when he was one of the irascible scene-makers at Max’s Kansas City and the Guggenheim gave him a retrospective at 35, his art-historical significance was assured. Cuban-born Mendieta, whose work was more personal, was on the cusp of possibly making it.

The question that night was whether their differences—they’d been fighting, he said—were enough to get him to throw her

out the window. Was she threatening to leave him after finding out about an affair he was having? That night, Andre called the police and told them, hysterically, that she’d committed suicide; when they arrived, they found him with scratches on his arm and face.

Beyond that, it was all a matter of conjecture. How could someone with a show about to open at the New Museum (it opened just in time for Andre’s trial) commit suicide? How could someone who was so afraid of heights get so close as to accidentally fall out a window? Much of the art Establishment—friends and acquaintances of Andre’s—rallied around him. Some of Andre’s friends told the press that “the poor guy is being victimized by a feminist cabal.” During the week of the New Museum opening, unsigned posters soliciting witnesses for the prosecution were put up around Soho, reading: “Suicide? Accident? Murder? Anyone With Information Please Call.” Then: the D.A.’s number.

At trial, Andre asked that it be decided by a judge, not a jury. In 1988, he was acquitted. Andre was never really free, though: In the nineties, the Guerrilla Girls labeled him the “O.J. of the Art World,” and though he continued to produce work until very recently, and continues to live in the same apartment, he’s become somewhat reclusive, or perhaps ostracized. Still, the Dia Art Foundation is planning a retrospective next year. Last December, he told *The New Yorker* that Mendieta, who was barely five feet tall, had climbed up on the sills to close the windows and had “just lost her balance.”

Andre in front of the high-rise from which his wife fell to her death.