

# Anna Maria Maiolino

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File Note #51 Anna Maria Maiolino *Continuous*



*Study for installation*, studio view, Rio de Janeiro, 1994  
Photo: Beatriz Santos de Oliveira

Briony Fer

# Precarious Fields

Anna Maria Maiolino makes us think about how art comes into the world. All her work, in one way or another, seems to rehearse an almost primordial coming-into-being of art. And yet it is also very much of its time, both engaging and creating a friction with contemporary conditions of life and work. Since the late 1960s, she has been one of the key women artists to develop a lexicon of the body and the bodily whose powerful formal language carries chains of association through basic elements like the egg, the mould and the void.

*Entrevidas (Between Lives)* was made in 1981, as the military dictatorship in Brazil was collapsing. At a time when a return to democracy had become of glimmer of hope, Maiolino wrote: 'I use the simplicity of the egg, the archetype par excellence of life, to talk about life. How it resists, despite everything'. This was a time of regime change when the Brazilian people were literally 'stepping on eggshells'. Part of the performance involved placing eggs outside in the street and walking between them. There is already a precarious tension between the scattered arrangement and the vulnerability of the eggs. An egg is a perfect whole, with a hard shell, yet also a perfect partial or first object, and extremely fragile. It suggests a preoccupation with how origins are constituted and with where art comes from — which Maiolino has explored in numerous works and various different media and materials, including drawing, clay, film and performance.

Born in southern Italy, Maiolino first emigrated with her family to Venezuela and then finally settled in Brazil in 1960 at the age of 18. Brazil's modernisation was by then well-advanced, with the São Paulo

Biennial having already become a focus of international advanced art in the early 1950s. The utopian modernist city of Brasília would be built in the early 1960s. As the critic Mario Pedrosa famously put it, Brazil was 'condemned to modernity'. Maiolino's work of 1973 entitled *In-Out (Antropofagia)* engaged directly with the poet Andrade's idea of anthropophagy, coined much earlier in the 1920s, whereby Brazil cannibalised outside foreign influences by ingesting them and thereby radically transforming them. In the film, mouths fill the screen, suggesting the oral rather than optical matter that is art. Beginning with a taped mouth, signifying censorship, the film moves through alternating close-ups of male and female mouths, one filled with an egg, others eating multiple strands of coloured string. The mouth is an orifice — a site of eating, chewing, spewing and even, of eating words.

The body is the cipher of meaning in Maiolino's work — part of her anatomy of part-objects and bodily organs that is the modern. It is also one of many moulds that preoccupy her. Another, and perhaps the most primordial, is the hand, which Maiolino has called 'the first mould'. In the late 1980s she began working with terracotta and has made many installations of unfired clay shapes since: laid out in grids, piled up against a wall, on the floor. Some are irregular balls, others long sausage shapes, little lumps, doughnut shapes or flat slabs or coils. They are shaped by the hand and through the movement of the hand. And the clay is not fired so the materials can be recycled at the end of an exhibition. The intense materiality of making creates a bodily and corporeal environment for the viewer. The clay shapes often look like excrement. There is something infantile and playful in the pleasure of their scatological associations. They have their own logic of production, which mimics bodily products and processes.

Kneading and rolling are repetitive, mechanical actions, but they seem exempt from industrial models of modernity. They are organic, made of natural materials, and yet their arrangements are repetitive and serial — sometimes a grid or part of a grid, so the organic shapes play off the geometric. There is something intensely bodily about these uncanny fields of proliferating moulded shapes, but they also carry multiple and expanding associations too, from breadmaking to shitting. Maiolino's work can be seen to be part of that radical and bodily turn that art took from the 1960s in Brazil just as dramatically as it did elsewhere in Europe and the US — in the hands, for instance, of artists like Eva Hesse, Yoyoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois. Particularly by drawing on the legacy of Lygia Clark and others working in Brazil, who never abandoned the role of touch, Maiolino has taken the hand and the hand-made in a direction that speaks very vividly to art today.

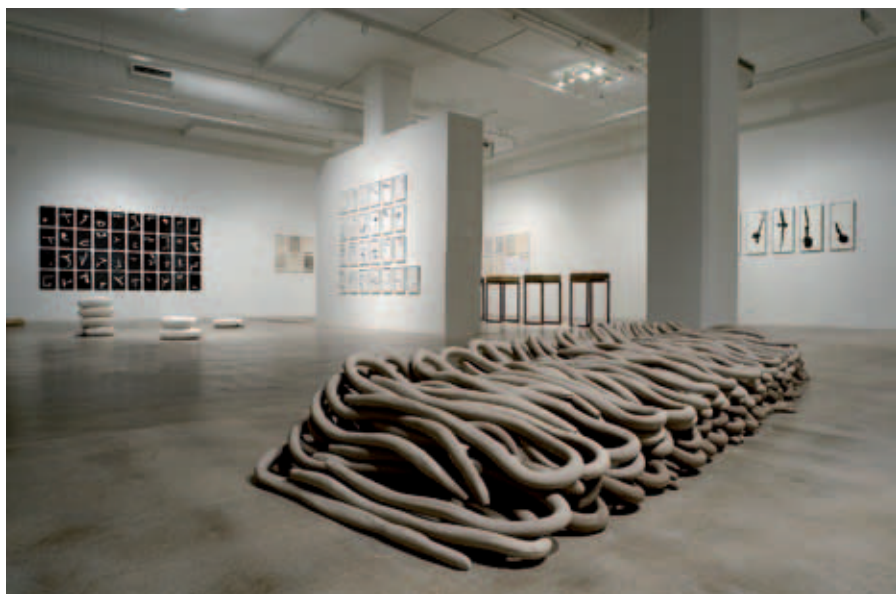


Film stills from *In-Out (Antropofagia)*  
/[*In-Out (Antropofagia)*] 1973-4 / © the artist

*Entrevidas (Between Lives)* from the series  
*Fotopomaccion* 1981  
Photographer: Henry Stahl / © the artist

Maiolino's massive accumulations of shapes that often crowd out sections of floor or wall and which both invoke a regular grid but also resist its law. Relations between order and accident, parts and wholes, are made dramatically unstable in the process. And whole rooms or spaces are transformed, so that it is as if, in her larger installations, we are contained, as viewers and subjects, within some huge orifice that is a room. Giant tentacles or interlocking snakes of clay amass at our feet and walls breed accumulations of clay moulds. Shelving or tables, domestic props, often become the receptacle or platform for these arrangements. But the whole effect is also very spare. There is a mixture of under- and over-statement and of minimal and excessive elements which makes for a volatile aesthetic effect. From the outset, by breaking down those conventional oppositions between inside and outside, the bodily and the mechanical and so on, Maiolino has made work that takes the lived body as its model and which continues to be part of an emancipatory project of resistance. By looking back to the beginning, by beginning again and again, she holds out for a certain kind of hope for change. And by making art that at one and the same time looks like piles of leftovers, she shows that waste products can form the very ground of those new beginnings.

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Installation view of *Territories of Immanence* (retrospective exhibition) at Miami Art Central, USA, 2006  
Photographer: Oriol Tarridas / © the artist

**Anna Maria Maiolino** was born in Italy in 1942 and has been a Brazilian citizen since 1968. Maiolino studied in The Escuela Nacional Cristobal Rojas (Caracas), in the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes (Rio de Janeiro) and in the International Pratt Graphics Centre (New York).

Maiolino began her professional practice as an artist in 1958. She has had a number of solo exhibitions both in the UK and internationally such as 'Order and Subjectivity' at Camberwell College of Arts (2008) and Pharos Centre for Contemporary Art, Cyprus (2007); 'Entre Outros/Territories of Immanence: A Retrospective' Miami Art Central, Miami (2006); 'Among Many' Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo (2005); 'Vida Afora / A Life Line' at the Drawing Centre, New York (2002); 'N Vezes Um / N Times One', Art in General, New York (2002). Maiolino's work has also been exhibited in numerous international group shows, including: 'The Sites of Latin American Abstraction' Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), California (2009); 'Contre-Corps. Oeuvre de Dévoration', FRAC Lorraine, France (2009); 'A Batalla dos Xéneros', Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, Spain (2007); 'The Sites of Latin American Abstraction', CIFO, Miami (2006); 'Tropicália—A Revolution in Brazilian Culture', Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2005); 'UNBOUND', Parasol Unit, London (2004).

#### Reading List

- Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (First published 1677)
- Friedrich Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy* (First published 1872)
- Gaston Bachelard *La Terre et les Réveries du Repos* [*Earth and Reveries of Repose*] (First published 1946)
- Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa) *O Guardador de Rebanhos* [*The Keeper of Herds*] (First published 1914)

#### Viewing List

- Pedro Almodóvar (Dir.) *Hable con Ella* [*Talk to Her*] (2002)
- Luis Buñuel (Dir.) *Viridiana* (1961)
- Andrei Tarkovsky (Dir.) *Andrei Rublev* [*The Passion According to Andrei*] (1966)
- Ingmar Bergman (Dir.) *Gritos e Sussurros* [*Cries and Whispers*] (1972)
- Pier Paolo Pasolini (Dir.) *Uccellacci e Uccellini* [*Hawks and the Sparrows*] (1966)

#### Listening List

- Johann Sebastian Bach 'Chaconne' from *Partita No. 2 for Solo Violin in D minor* (1717–1723)
- Vivaldi *Le Quattro Stagioni* [*The Four Seasons*] (1723)
- Chico Buarque *As Mulheres de Atena* [*Women of Athens*] (1976) from *Meus Caros Amigos* (*My Dear Friends*) Polygram Brazil (1997)
- Tom Jobim and Elis Regina *Águas de Março* [*Waters of March*] from *Elis & Tom* Philips Records (1974)



Film still from *Ad Hoc (For This Case)* 1982  
Photographer: Regina Vater / © the artist

‘Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it.’ — David Hume

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Cover: Installation view *Among Many* (retrospective exhibition)  
at Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Brazil, 2005  
Photographer: Isabella Mathews / © the artist