

# ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO. ENTREVIDAS, VIDA AFORA



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*Entrevistas* (1981) [fig. 1] is a photographic triptych belonging to Anna Maria Maiolino's *Fotopoemacção* (Photopoemaction) series.<sup>1</sup> It records a performance where the artist walks across cobblestones onto which raw eggs have been laid out and interspersed. The care and attention demanded so as not to tread on any is subtly suggested by the delicate steps of the figure. Each photograph depicts approximately the same space and, when placed side by side, the assembled images record the movement of a body across space and over time. Beyond this undeniable cinematic quality, in this essay I would like to elaborate upon the work's relations to time in a broader sense, namely its relation to its own time, to the artist's lifetime and how these become entangled within the time of art history.

A decade after producing *Entrevistas*, Maiolino spoke about it in relation to a particular historical time. She remembers conceiving it during the period of "abertura," the gradual dissolution of Brazil's military dictatorship, in the aftermath of the 1964 coup d'état. On that occasion, Maiolino suggested that the work invoked the expression "walking on egg-shells" as it captured a moment when an opening towards democracy, although still uncertain, started to be perceived.<sup>2</sup>

Having left Calabria as a child and after spending six years in Caracas, Maiolino arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1960, aged eighteen. The restricted democratic rights, repression, and censorship imposed by the military regime in Brazil therefore marked much of her adult life. The Photopoemaction series responded to the political atmosphere of those times. Therein a critique of censorship and repression was layered with poetic, subjective, and/or art historical references.

It seems only natural therefore that the artist, looking back at her artistic output, would remember *Entrevistas* in light of its predecessors, inscribing it within

1 Initiated around 1973, the early works in the Photopoemaction series were produced in parallel to 16mm and Super 8 films. They are not stills taken directly from the film, but photographs of the film set with the artist, between or following takes. A relatively late addition, *Entrevistas* was recorded on video rather than film, distinguishing more emphatically its Photopoemaction version.

2 Maiolino stated this in an interview with Holly Block,

leading many subsequent reviewers to assume this as its semantic limit. See Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, catalogue of the exhibition (New York, The Drawing Center, January 10–February 21, 2002; São Paulo, Museu de Arte Moderna, September–October, 2002; Rio de Janeiro, Paço Imperial, November–December, 2002) (New York: The Drawing Center, 2002), 352.

its respective political context. One would suspect, however, that there is more to this work than mere reflection about the time of its making. If so, other genealogies may be proposed when thinking about *Entrevistas*. For instance, an egg makes an appearance as one of several objects held by the female mouth in her 1973 short experimental film (and Photopoemaction) *In/Out Antropofagia*. Later, an egg appears in 1976's *+ - -*, where two men play a game across a table, upon which it is thrown from one side to the other. The players (acted by Bruno Tauz and Paulo Herkenhoff) appear to be engaged in a serious duel, carefully placing protective rubber gloves, lowering their eyes to the level of the table as if judging the right angle of attack.

Both films are constructed upon dialogical relations between their characters. With *In/Out Antropofagia*, this is presented in the form of a silent conversation, through the close-up shots of the female and male mouths. In *+ - -*, the egg substitutes language itself, thrown across from one to the other, mistreated, abused, but also safeguarded in a game whose instructions are never revealed. Despite the strategies for attack and the defensive precautions played out by the actors, it is on the egg's ambivalent meaning that the artist focuses when recounting the scene: "The film doesn't suggest the winner [of the game], indeed we are left with the enigma before the apparent fragility and the resistance of the egg."<sup>3</sup>

Art historian Fernanda Pequeno refers to Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* in her account of Maiolino's recurrent use of the egg in her work.<sup>4</sup> Bataille's writing, fueled by a Surrealist fascination with sex, violence, and the unconscious mind, played with the interconnecting formal resemblance between the egg, the eye, and the testicle. His shocking tale derides tradition, such as that upheld by the family, the church, and perhaps even the psychiatric hospital.<sup>5</sup> Maiolino, on the other hand, adopts the egg as a metaphor of a totality of sorts. According to her, "faced with the egg we are faced by nothing and everything; the empty and the full; the beginning as past, the end and the infinite."<sup>6</sup>

3 Maiolino Statement, in Asbury, ed., *Anna Maria Maiolino: Order and Subjectivity* (Nicosia: Pharos Centre for Contemporary Art, 2009), 130.  
4 Fernanda Pequeno, "Ovos Excrementos Anna Maria Maiolino," paper presented at the 24th ANPAP annual conference (*Compartilhamentos na Arte:*

*Redes e Conexões*, Sant Maria, RS, September 22–26, 2015).

5 See Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'oeil* (Paris: Editions Pauvert, 1928). English version: *History of the Eye*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (London: Penguin, 2013).

6 Maiolino, Statement, in *Order and Subjectivity*, 90.



Taking Bataille as a reference might be a useful means of highlighting certain aspects of Maiolino's work, yet it is also important to keep distinctions in mind. For example, the (sexual) violence in Bataille's narration may be compared to some of Maiolino's earlier works from the Photopoemaction series. In *X* (1974) [fig. 2], a pair of scissors is captured as if moments before perforating an eye.<sup>7</sup> In the film version, the scene cuts to the floor, where drops of blood begin to gather. There is an ambivalence here between the general threat of violence and the masochistic, self-harming act that the image also invokes. While Bataille plays with the resemblance between the eye and the egg, with Maiolino the relation is more symbolic. Reference to Bataille's isomorphic associations may be useful as a means of bringing to the fore the attributed totality that for Maiolino the egg invokes, in the violence perpetrated by the state upon its citizens for example. However, a dangerous ex-temporality is also created by such an association reminiscent of former outdated interpretative tropes with regard to Latin American art.<sup>8</sup> Such associations risk exiling the work from its own time and place, undermining the evolution of the symbolic representations specific to the artist's own trajectory. This is significant especially because between the 1970s and early 1980s a critical repositioning took place within Maiolino's practice. In her earlier work, the artist's body stands for that of *every body*, where the violence perpetrated on the individual is potentially representative or symbolic of the violence suffered by the collective.<sup>9</sup> In the later work,

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, this work is classified (in this exhibition's list of works) as pertaining to the *Vida Afora* series as opposed to *É O Que Sobra* (1974), which is similarly themed (with the exception that no eyes or eggs feature). The fact that *X* focuses on the eye suggests that Maiolino herself may have invoked Bataille in this subsequent attribution.

<sup>8</sup> The exhibition *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America 1920–1987* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987), for example, associated the continent through Magical Realism and a vague notion of Surrealist sensibility, leading it to be duly criticized for its exoticizing gaze on the subject. In a review of her latest retrospective exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery,

Maiolino's work was described as that of a "witty surrealist," invoking yet again such associations. See Jonathan Jones, "Anna Maria Maiolino Review—roll up for a witty surrealist sausage party," *The Guardian*, September 25 2019. Article also available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/sep/25/anna-maria-maiolino-review-roll-up-for-a-witty-surrealist-sausage-party>.

<sup>9</sup> Maiolino has stated that "I made use of my own body at that particular moment, not as a mere metaphor but as truth, something that belonged to the domain of the real. Since in a moment of repression and torture, all bodies become one in pain." See *Order and Subjectivity*, 100.

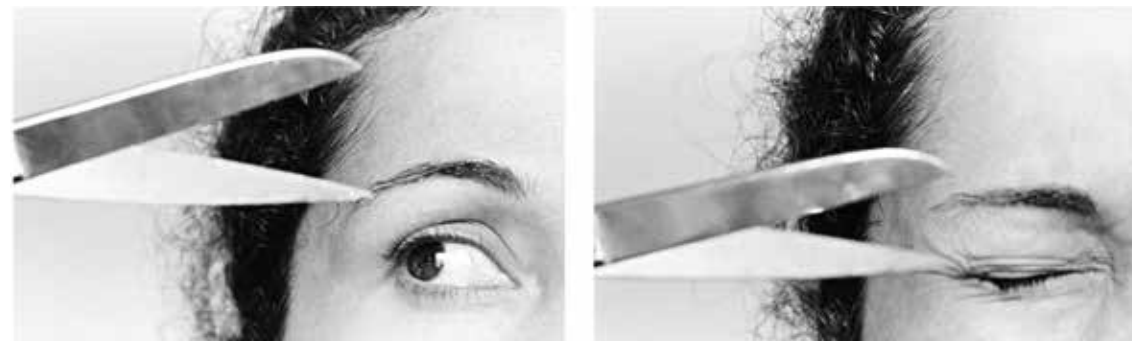
this is no longer explicit, since the metaphorical potential becomes more poetic, abstracted. The sense of totality, in other words, shifts from that of the collective to that of time itself, projecting its political potential from a critique of the specific event onto a broader ontological plane.

The title *Entrevistas* reflects a certain poetic ambivalence that is implicit in both the photographic objects and the performance it denominates. The Portuguese term “entre” in this context could mean either “amongst” or “in-between.” This is a subtle yet significant distinction, whereby the “Self” wanders amongst and/or in-between “Others.” The work, like its title, therefore reveals an autobiographical reflection, a statement of fact, that one lives one’s life across (both amongst and in-between) a path laid out over time and that is opened or restricted by others. While such an observation is deceptively simple, the images that document the eponymous performance, aspire to something more profound—an evaluation of how life has been lived up to a point, in a flow somewhere between the “beginning and the end.”

The title therefore could be mirrored, becoming enunciated in the singular as “entrevista.” Interiorized, turned upon itself, it suggests an evaluation of how external events, such as but not exclusively the advent of “abertura,” may have affected the artist’s own trajectory. To view *Entrevistas* purely in relation to the contemporaneous local political landscape seems therefore somewhat reductive, since it adopts a perception of time that does not seem to fit this ontological aspect. Understood in this way, as a reflection on one’s life, its trajectory, its joys, and its misfortunes, the work suggests an entanglement of emotional relations between the self and others, whether affective, social, or political.

Perhaps what is most striking in the distinct approaches towards the egg in Maiolino’s work is its framing within what has come to be celebrated as her expression of feminine subjectivity. Yet here, too, *Entrevistas* arrives at a crux in the artist’s trajectory, signifying a shift away from themes of fragility, censorship, repression, displacement, and family ties towards a far more assertive and determined positioning. As I have mentioned elsewhere, a shift that marked a transition in her work from “iconography to immanence.”<sup>10</sup>

10 Michael Asbury, “Anna Maria Maiolino: Articulations and Translations of and in Anthropophagy,” in *Making Love Revolutionary*, catalogue of the exhibition (Milan, Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, March 29–September 1, 2019; London, Whitechapel Gallery, September 25, 2019–January 12, 2020).



2. Anna Maria Maiolino, *X II*, from the series *Vida Afora – Fotopoemação*, 1974  
B/W photograph, analogue print  
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



3. Anna Maria Maiolino, *É o que Sobra*, from the series *Fotopoemação*, 1974  
B/W photographs, digital print  
Courtesy the artist, Private collection, Milan and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



4. Anna Maria Maiolino, *Por um Fio*, from the series *Fotopoemação*, 1976  
B/W photograph, analogue print  
Courtesy the artist, E. Righi Collection, Bologna and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan

The egg as the archetypal symbol of life, but also of its fragility, appears in other contemporaneous works by the artist, suggesting that its semantic invocations are indeed significant, particularly around the early 1980s. Such is the case of a series of photographic works under the title of *Vida Afora* (A life line), also of 1981.<sup>11</sup> Again, the untranslatability of the Portuguese title into English is telling. *Vida Afora* suggests an errant life, one that has been cast to chance, to the unpredictability of life's challenges. It has been translated into English as "A Life Line." The latter invokes salvation, perhaps implying the role that art has held for Maiolino, as she has repeatedly claimed.

In 1976, Maiolino produced the Photopoeaction *Por um Fio* (By a thread) [fig. 4], a family portrait or matrilinear lineage. In the photograph, Vitalia, the artist's mother, Anna and her daughter, Veronica, are connected by a thread that hangs between their respective mouths. The translation into English this time is literal, yet "by a thread" does not carry with it the full meaning suggested by the title in Portuguese. "Por um fio" is a colloquial saying that describes a narrow escape, similar to that implied in the English expression "by the skin of their teeth." It is as if the artist is stating the fact that her life was marked by a narrow but "true victory" (*Vero, Vita, Victoria*) over the difficulties laid out in front of it. It is a statement of recognition perhaps, one that acknowledges that her accomplishments have been allowed despite but also because of her family ties. We find in the intimacy of this work similar themes that would arise five years later in *Entrevistas*. The latter invokes both the fragile and aleatory condition of being, as well as the responsibility one has in treading such a path with care, walking through life by the skin of one's teeth: walking on eggshells so as to protect others as much as oneself.

*Por um Fio* elucidates what that path may have been. It demarcates a series of transatlantic migrations: an Ecuadorian mother, her Italian daughter and Brazilian granddaughter. It is a cartography of sorts, a momentary frame of intergenerational displacements.

11 Catherine de Zegher curated *Vida Afora/A Life Line*, Maiolino's first international retrospective, at the Drawing Center in New York, taking the title of this particular work as that for the exhibition as a whole.

“Every time I’m lost, I think about territory. Territory is a way of recognizing where I am.”<sup>12</sup>

Her early work is very much a testament to this statement, a manifestation of emotional landscapes populated by expressions of affective displacements. Similarly, *Entrevistas*, *Vida Afora*, and *Por um Fio* are complementary, not only through the unfolding of their untranslatability—the meaning that is left behind in the process of being carried over into another language—but in their subject matter, their respective times of production, and relations to the lifetime of the artist. Amongst these, the question of belonging never seems to be far from the surface.

*Piccolo Mondo* is a Photopoemaction of 1982 in which a small origami paper boat, made from what looks like a printed leaflet, floats on water in the cup of two hands. The hands can only temporarily hold the water, and as the liquid insistently seeps away, it reminds one that time is slowly running out and the boat will shortly run aground. The work thus revisits the subject of displacement, yet now loaded with the acknowledgement that time will eventually sever the possibility of return.

Although *Piccolo Mondo* was produced shortly after *Entrevistas*, it seems a world apart. Around that time, Maiolino decided to leave Rio de Janeiro to embark on a year-long journey. It seems significant that she would spend most of that year in Italy, living alone in an unfurnished apartment in Rome, slumped and inactive, smothered by a dark cloud of depression. During Maiolino’s isolation in Rome, she came to an important realization. Rather than a return to her origins, the journey came to signify an attempt to understand her own sense of self, her condition of being in the world.

“I needed a break so I could go forward. [ . . . ] I travelled to Italy, New York and Caracas, the places where I had lived before. I was looking for something that didn’t exist anymore. The Anna of the past was dead; she only lived in my memory. [ . . . ] Finally, I realized how important Brazil was for me and managed to find my own territory. I am a Brazilian artist.”<sup>13</sup>

12 “A Conversation between Anna Maria Maiolino and Helena Tatay,” in *Anna Maria Maiolino*, catalogue of the exhibition (Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, October 15, 2010–January 16, 2011; Santiago de Compostela, Centro galego de Arte Contemporánea, February 4, 2011–May 1, 2011; Malmö, Malmö Konsthall, May 20–August 21, 2011), edited by Helena Tatay (London: Koenig Books, 2010), 53.

13 “A Conversation between Anna Maria Maiolino and Helena Tatay,” 52.

The history of Brazilian art is very much intertwined with that of Italy. From the first manifestations of *Modernismo* and its futurist rhetoric, to the institutional foundations of modern art, with influential figures such as Ciccillo Matarazzo and Pietro and Lina Bo Bardi, the Italian presence in the arts of Brazil has been impactful to say the least. Add to this the influential writings of Giulio Carlo Argan, the presence of a great number of artists of Italian heritage, and the less savory political allegiances of some of the protagonists of Modernism in the 1930s and you arrive at an unquestionable if sometimes problematic relationship between the art both countries<sup>14</sup>. São Paulo, as opposed to Rio, has nevertheless been at the forefront of that transnational relationship.<sup>15</sup>

Maiolino’s attachment to Italy, on the other hand, remained at a personal level, whether through her invocations of memories of the landscapes of her Calabrian childhood or her complicated family history of migration. Her still prominent Italian accent, contaminated perhaps with hints of Spanish, appears at first antagonistic to the legacies of Brazilian modernism and the 1960s neo-avant-gardes, particularly those from Rio de Janeiro, with which she most strongly identifies.

Her generation had broken away from the certainties afforded by the abstract tendencies of the 1950s in order to explore the iconography of Brazilian popular cultures. Although such references were foreign to Maiolino, it was through the medium of woodcut printing that she was able to find a language within which to articulate her complex sense of belonging. Woodcut had been associated with the popular press and folk traditions, such as Cordel literature. Through woodcut printing Maiolino sought to invoke neither the geometric tradi-

14 For more information on the problematic aesthetic and political relationships between both countries see Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, “Modern Classicism: Margherita Sarfatti and the Novecento Italiano, between Brazil and the United States,” in Rachel Silveri and Trevors Stark (eds.), *Reactionary Modernities, Selva Journal of Art History 2* (Fall 2020), 214–241. Article also available at <https://selva-journal.org/article/modern-classicism-margherita-sarfatti/>. Original article “Classicismo Moderno. Margherita Sarfatti

e o Novecento Italiano, entre Brasil e Estados Unidos,” in *Revista de Italianistica*, 37 (2018), 37–57. Article also available at <https://www.revistas.usp.br/italianistica/article/view/155649/151348>.

15 One of the exceptions to this general rule is Antonio Dias, a colleague of Maiolino from the New Figuration group in Rio de Janeiro. Dias lived in Italy for several years during the 1970s, establishing lasting relationships within the Italian art world.

tion of her predecessors nor the references to popular culture of her immediate peers. Instead, she focused on her inner world, her subjective experience of displacement, whether by referring to family ties or by tapping into specific Brazilian art historical themes, such as that of anthropophagy. The revival of Oswald de Andrade's 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago* (Anthropophagy manifesto) thus gained a new emphasis within Maiolino's work, that of an artist recently arrived in Brazil, digesting the local culture, transforming it into expressions of her own psychological landscape.

It was also these references to the legacies of Brazilian early modernism that ultimately brought Maiolino closer to the generation that had preceded hers, whose interest in geometric work had been transformed by the late 1960s into an engagement with the participatory potential of experimental art practices. Under these influences, the crude manner in which inner landscapes figured in Maiolino's work slowly gave way to more subtle, immanent, ontological expressions.

*Entrevidas* arrives at a critical point in this transition, one that immediately preceded a "seismic shift" in the time of art history: the arrival of the Transavanguardia in Italy and other international manifestations enthused by a return to expressive, often quite crude, figurative painting.<sup>16</sup> In Brazil, the effervescent return to painting would be consolidated in Rio de Janeiro with the exhibition *Como Vai Você Geração 80* ('80s generation: how are you?) in 1984 and in São Paulo with the activity of artists' groups such as *Casa 7* (House 7). For Maiolino, an artist very much aware of her own time, who began her career with the advent of New Figuration, itself bringing a return of figurative art after the dominant informal and geometric abstraction trends, this art world shift must have felt like an impasse.

Maiolino speaks of a brief return to painting during the 1980s, using canvas as a support after so many years involved in less traditional media. Yet, these were anything but effervescent in nature. Dark, black monochromes in which the figure of a Zero, perhaps recalling the egg, appeared out of the shadows.

16 By the expression "the time of art history" I am referring to the specific time frame accounted for within consensual art history. This is a time that is predicated by its constitution, one that is laid out in retrospect, not necessarily chronological

and imbued with the prejudices arising from its consensualness. It is not therefore necessarily coincidental with the specific time frames of the artist, her work or those around her within the still nonconsensual genealogies of Brazilian art.

"I would paint the shape of a zero, 0, the ovule, or rather suggest it, because it would hardly be seen. [ . . . ] I finished very few paintings, but that working with 'nothingness,' which might have seemed alienating, expanded my awareness. I left that pictorial activity with a sense of renewal. Only when I started working with clay, a year later [in 1989], did I realize how important this pictorial work had been for me."<sup>17</sup>

A transfiguration of sorts takes place from here onwards. The egg, or perhaps the zero, becomes a generic form—primal is the term Maiolino prefers—that is repeated, in concrete, plaster and later in clay, *ad infinitum*. The emptiness within her sculptural forms, such as in the *É o que Falta* (It's what's left out) and especially in the *Pequenos Ausentes* (Little absent) series, both from the mid 1990s, seems to confirm this supposition.

Although *Um, Nenhum, Cem, Mil* (One, none, one hundred thousand) was completed in 1993 and is considered her first work to clearly approach the question of repetition and difference, I would argue that *Entrevidas* and the *Vida Afora* series were precursors in this respect. Through the figure of the egg, they announced a procedural approach yet to come, one in which the work is never finished, always deferred. We may think of her work with clay in this way, where the search for the most primal of forms is never achieved, always repeated. Alternatively, her graphic work on paper such as the *Marcas da Gota* (Drop marks) series, in which the repetition of simple ink marks suggests a search for the first sign, one that precedes language itself, evoking a zero degree of writing.

Considered in Brazil as a foreigner but perhaps not foreign *enough*, Maiolino was "discovered" by the curator Catherine de Zegher, who brought her to international attention. *Entrevidas* thus gained a life of its own, transcending the specificity of its locality and entering the time of art history. Serving as the cover for the catalogue of the groundbreaking exhibition *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th century art in, of, and from the feminine*, *Entrevidas* became associated with feminine subjectivities and/or feminist sensibilities within art practices. Such perspectives had of course been central to her practice from the beginning, yet perhaps they were

17 "A Conversation between . . .," 52–53.

not given due attention until then. The work's detachment from its own time and its specific context, rather than alienating, revealed *Entrevidas's* latent, perhaps truer, sense and critical potential. Unwrapping its layers of attributed signification, its most intimate, subjective, and poetic meanings were finally able to emerge. Such an observation could be associated as much with the critical reception of her work as with her own realization of her condition as an artist, as a woman in the world. As Maiolino herself claimed:

“My dedication to the formation of a language demanded a great deal of time, patience, and work. At the beginning of my work as an artist, I believed that the formation of a language would come about only through the organization of my sensibility. It took years for me to discover that, besides sensibility, the foundation of a language is also the result of a practice of interrelation with the things of the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Translating, mistranslating, interrelating these works, I arrive at yet another, *Untitled*, of 2015, which in this exhibition is placed within the gallery on a wall all to itself. The work, a composition of three pieces in Raku glazed ceramic, resembles a set of parentheses that hold a third primal form, separating it from the rest of the world. It is only through that separation that its significance can be revealed, its immanence perceived amongst/between.



5. Anna Maria Maiolino, *Sem título*, 2015  
Raku ceramic  
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan

18 Quoted by Griselda Pollock in *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 206. Original statement in de Zegher, *Vida Afora/A Life Line*, 281.