

A Conversation between Anna Maria Maiolino and Helena Tatay

Helena Tatay: You were born in Calabria, Italy, in 1942. At the age of twelve, your family emigrated to Venezuela, and a few years later to Brazil. Can you tell me about the time when you first arrived in Brazil?

Anna Maria Maiolino: I arrived in 1960. I was eighteen. It wasn't my decision – my parents had decided to move to Rio de Janeiro, and I found myself being an immigrant again, without speaking Portuguese. I felt as though I was on shifting sands, permanently anxious; what kept me going was my obstinate search for a language, my obsession to become an artist. In Caracas, my teachers had told me that art in Brazil was different to the rest of Latin America, and so it was. I soon found out that certain aspects of Brazilian art were made with very little. You could construct a whole poetic discourse with a single comma. Brazil is not like the Hispano-American countries whose memory of the past is burdened by a heavy Spanish iconography. Here you find the body painting of the indigenous peoples, so ancestral. It is a ritualistic form of painting, non-representative – poetically elaborated signs, rather than a construction of images. Equally important is the African presence in the Brazilian cultural imaginary, and the peculiar Mining Baroque of Minas Gerais that anticipated modernity.

2): In the 1960s, when you arrived in Brazil, there was a significant change in the country's perception of itself, it was a moment of national exaltation. In art, modernity seems to be exhausted and instead there is a renewed interest in popular forms.

I arrived at a time of great changes. Politicians and society in general aspired to a modern Brazil, and the move of the capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia, together with Oscar Niemeyer's projected architecture for the construction of this city, was proof of that. On the other hand, it was obvious that the socialist project was gaining ground in Brazil, as in the rest of Latin America, although the right was also gaining ground and plotting their system of repression throughout the whole continent.

I was very young and was not aware that modernity was practically exhausted. Besides, all my energy was spent trying to become an individual. The existential and art formed one anguished body. My life was dominated by anguish and doubts, although I also wanted to participate in that moment of great political, social and artistic effervescence that was pushing artists to make alliances with the previous generations, as was the case with the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity), that took place at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, in 1967.¹ We wanted to develop an autonomous national art, far removed from external patterns and models. For us, approaching the popular meant looking for our roots. Unlike American Pop art, in Brazil the incorporation of the popular was due to an interest in everything political and social. We dreamt of a free and autonomous Latin America, with its own economic resources, and art was no different in this respect.

3): At that time, the recuperation of the popular was done mainly by the New Figuration movement, in which you took part.

I joined the group through my colleagues in the wood engraving class: they were Antonio Dias, Roberto Magalhães and Rubens Gerchman, whom I married in 1963. There was a renewal in the questions of representation at that time, and my wood engravings were close to the tradition of the popular engravers in the north-east of Brazil: *O Cordel*.²

4): You said earlier that in the 1960s, in Brazil, the new movements were seeking alliances with the previous generations. There was also a look to the past, to the 1920s, which was another moment of national reaffirmation in Brazilian art. For instance, Andrade's *Anthropophagous Manifesto* was very much in vogue at the time.³

Among other things, the manifesto *Declaração de Princípios Básicos da Nova Vanguarda*,⁴ written and signed by various artists with the theoretical contribution of Hélio Oiticica, rehabilitated certain aspects of Andrade's *Anthropophagous Manifesto* of the Week of 22,⁵ since it aimed at the same 'Brazilianisation': it wanted a strong and autonomous Brazilian art. But it is also based on a *Neo-Concrete manifesto*,⁶ written by Ferreira Gullar, that sees a work of art, not as a machine or an object, but as a quasi-body, an organic being. Therefore, it shares with the Neo-Concrete movement a phenomenological approach to the work of art. But undoubtedly our manifesto goes further, since it assumes, proposes and expands art as a revolutionary contribution to all the fields of man's conscience and sensitivity, and gives sense to sensorial works and to those works that seek audience participation.

5): In the 1960s, in Brazil and other parts of the world, there was a resurgence in artistic practices of the body and subjectivity that had been absent or repressed in the more abstract practices. There was also a move towards audience participation.

Yes, there is a change of attitude towards art. The manifesto, which, as far as I can remember, was one of the last spontaneous collective declarations, was created for the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira*. This exhibition has become a point of reference in Brazilian art because it marked that change of attitude. Artists from many different tendencies took part, and also artists who were originally Neo-Concrete but who had already begun to move away from Neo-Concrete practices, such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica.

6): What was your participation in *Nova Objetividade Brasileira*?

I exhibited a sculpture made of stuffed fabric – a big ear entitled *Pssiu!*, in reference to the country's paranoia at the time with telephone tapping, as practiced by the government's repressive institutions. I also exhibited some wood engravings.

7): In your wood engravings of the 1960s (*ANNA, Glu Glu Glu, Pssiu!*, etc.), the themes and attitudes that would define your work thereafter are already apparent.

Themes that were hidden from me at the time, totally unconscious. I was not yet aware of where my work was going.

8): What were you interested in at the time?

My work from the 1960s is motivated by intimate situations and experiences, such as women's everyday life. Some critics at the time saw it as prosaic, banal, obvious. It was a socially excluded theme... it still is. On the other hand, military repression was also part of our everyday life, and some of my works, such as *O Herói* (The Hero) and *Glu Glu Glu*, both from 1966, reflect these political and social concerns.

9): So *Glu Glu Glu* is already in line with some of your later works, such as *Monumento à Fome* (Monument to Hunger) and *Arroz e Feijão* (Rice and Beans), where you talk about the way wealth is distributed. Does it refer to hunger?

Yes. It is a seminal work that gave rise to many others where I try to tackle poverty and to subvert the feelings of impotence and guilt that one feels before injustice. It's the hunger of my childhood, of Brazil, of the whole world.

10): When I look at the relief *Glu Glu Glu*, or the wood engraving, and at the way you relate what comes in and out of the body, I am reminded of the medieval alchemists who portrayed themselves as stomachs.

Of course, it is a place for creation. There is an analogy there, because, where do we think? In the stomach? In the soul? In the spirit? Or in the mind?

11): For the alchemists, the stomach was a place for vital transformation. The world came in through the mouth, things were transformed in the stomach, and through defecation the vital cycle came full circle, since the corruption of an element could regenerate another. Your way of talking about the body is always related to that transformation between the inside and the outside. We could say that all your work is about transformation.

Our basic needs are central to us, and some are primary psychological needs that are inherent to all of us. Themes such as hunger, the body, what comes in and out of the body, have been approached by many people. Meanwhile, all works of art originate in the individual experience of the artist, it is the experience that defines them and makes them unique. I would go as far as saying that my works about digestion come from what my mouth remembers of my mother's breast, the comfort of that first food, while as a counterpoint, I see defecation as the 'first work'. For, if the body is the architect of work, it is not surprising that in some cultures they refer to defecation as 'work'. We live and die from the mouth to the anus. I find it impossible not to talk, not to poetise about what comes in and out of the body, when these are experiences that are fundamental, corporal and vital to us.

12): This allusion to the abject, already outlined in your earlier works, keeps reappearing in your work, in a scatological state, or in the installations of unfired clay that can be seen as excrements or organic parts.

This is a paradox, because my work also has a clean aspect, almost elegant, I would say. But if we are talking about 'inside and outside', this implies movement, transit, and it leads us to vital aspects. If you think about life, you'll see that nature renews itself in the movements of contaminated transits. Is there anything more contaminated than the birth of a child? In the south of Italy they refer to lucky people as being 'born covered in shit'. Seeds rot before they germinate. Fortunately, nature doesn't 'do clean'. There is an intrinsic duality in it, without any kind of moralisation. It exists with all its opposites. Bataille says: 'I love purity to the extent of loving impurity, without which purity would be counterfeit.' Luckily, in art, all higher and lower aspects of existence are susceptible to appropriation and transformation.

13): It seems odd that the notion of the abject already appears in your early works. The abject is, psychologically speaking, related to the construction of subjectivity, since the formation of subjectivity is to do with language but also with the abject, which is what has been expelled by the body and turned into an alien element. So the abject establishes the limits of the body – which are maintained by social regulation and control – but also those of the subject.

Now, more than ever, art owes much to subjectivity, since contemporaneity emphasises the processes, and therefore the modes and behaviour that, in themselves, affirm subjectivity in a meta-art. In my work, the discourse of subjectivity has been reinforced by a desire to form myself as a person and to introduce a healing process in the artistic work. Look, you can establish all sorts of analogies with the digestive system, and one of them would be the place of desire. The intestine is a hole that we can never fill, just as we can never fulfil desire. I think man invented God in order to fill this immense, eternal void that never gets full and is never satisfied. Maybe that's why we make art.

14): In your work there's always been a search for language that you associate with the search for identity.

Well, my youthful need to find an identity has disappeared. In the end, I understood that identity is a dynamic process of formation. When you manage to articulate a language, you can also articulate the multiple aspects of life. What I did learn intuitively is that to form myself as a person, and to be able to be in the world with all its nastiness and beauty, also meant to form myself as an artist. I was

carrying many childhood traumas, because I lived through the war and post-war years. I was the youngest of ten brothers and sisters, in a southern Italian family, and, as I've already said in my writings, I was often forgotten in the middle of an air raid. As a child, I'd stay motionless in a corner of the house for hours. Would I be able to escape such a harsh reality? Carmela, my nana, when she saw me in that absentminded state, would call me lovingly and I would have to abandon, half-heartedly, that secret place in my mind. Then I would find it difficult to go back; for me living was a conflict, even as a child. It was all very enriching and terrible at the same time.

17): Your condition as an immigrant must have affected you, too. You changed countries several times, and every time you had to adapt to different languages and situations. Catherine de Zegher, in *Vida Afora/A Life Line*, talks about the divided personality of the immigrant. Is this duality, this split, cultural or to do with personality?

Both, I think. In any case, they're both reflections of my subconscious. One, to do with the duality of the memory of my childhood culture, which I still consider real, as it was described by Norman Douglas in his book *Vecchia Calabria*.⁷ The other is to do with a divided identity, the feeling of being a nomad, a pilgrim, of never being able to find a place where one can identify oneself and be complete, as Catherine de Zegher explains. That's why the search for language was also a healing process for me. Art allowed me to place my feelings, which were invisible, in the world, and to transform this 'lack' into compensation through a constant process of elaboration of signs and metaphors. On the other hand, my subconscious visibly legitimised my duality as it really was: natural. This is very clear in the wood engraving *ANNA*.

18): Can you talk about the duality of ANNA?

ANNA is a self-portrait in the form of a palindrome. A self-portrait where my name is substituted for my image. It's an engraving with sharp contrasts, with opposites: black and white, positive and negative. Two white figures, father and mother, pronounce in unison the name ANNA with their big mouths. The word ANNA is a palindrome, it can be read left to right and right to left. The two figures, in the manner of primitive idols, sit from the waist up on a rectangular block resembling a tombstone, a sepulchre, where the name ANNA is also written. The word ANNA can mean the announcement of a birth, or a cry of sorrow for the death of the loved one. Therefore, ANNA means birth and death. It means presence but also absence. Black and white. Positive and negative. Father and mother, masculine and feminine. It is a self-representation with a heavy subjective charge, where many tensions converge. This was the last figurative work I made before leaving for New York in 1968.

19): Curiously, in 1968, the year when you were granted Brazilian nationality, you moved to New York.

I went to New York because my husband had a grant. It was an important place for art at that time, there was Pop and Conceptual art was just beginning, a parallel situation to that in Brazil. There were many Latin American artists living there, and most of them were self-exiles, not because we were being persecuted by the dictatorships, but because it was very difficult to produce art in that state of repression in Latin America at that time. I felt very uncomfortable. It was like living on crumbs from the rich man's table, in a country that was supporting the dictatorships in our continent.

20): You stayed three years?

It was two and a half difficult years. When I arrived, I didn't speak any English and I had two children aged two and four. I spoke Spanish, the language of the immigrants and the unqualified, and Italian when I went shopping in Little Italy. The Latin American artists we frequented didn't know I was an artist, maybe because I didn't describe myself as such. I remember once, in our loft in the Bowery in 1970, a Brazilian newspaper, I can't remember which, was doing an article on Brazilian artists living in New York at the time. There was Hélio Oiticica, Amílcar de Castro, Ivan Freitas, Roberta

Delamonica and, of course, my own husband, Rubens Gerchman. Nobody invited me to take part and I spent the whole time serving coffee.

You can imagine how I felt. The fact that I had participated in exhibitions such as *Opinião 66* (Opinion 66) and *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* in 1967 seemed to count for nothing. Was it my fault? It was obvious that my colleagues and my husband saw me as foreigner. And they were partly right. All I could do was to continue with my project of forming myself as a person and as an artist. To do that, I needed a minimum of economic independence. Because if you are economically dependent, you feel divided inside and that undermines all your ambitions. So I started looking for a job I could do while continuing with my art. I found a textile-printing workshop where I worked illegally, like all immigrants, during the hours when Veronica was at nursery school, and Micael at school. As you can imagine, I had very little time left.

21): But in 1971, while you were still in New York, you received an artist's grant, didn't you?

What happened was that one day Rubens showed some of my wood engravings from the sixties to Luis Camnitzer, a Uruguayan artist who had come to visit him; and he liked them. He immediately got me a grant from the International Pratt Graphic Center, where he was teaching. They had studios for foreign artists. That's when I abandoned figuration and started doing metal engravings: *Escape Point* and *Escape Angle*. This return to work after such a long period of inactivity helped me to redefine my life. I decided to leave Rubens and to return to Brazil.

22): Why did you abandon figuration?

It was a natural process. Before doing those engravings, I was writing poems. After that reportage on Brazilian artists, Hélio Oiticica realised I was upset. He told me that if I couldn't work due to my situation, I should take notes, do some writing. He said I should always carry a notebook in my pocket, that it would help me with my work without the need for a big space. Hélio was always very generous with other artists. 'James Joyce renewed the English language because he was Irish,' he said to make me feel better, since my Portuguese was still rather limited. So I started taking notes. They were words/feelings, sketches for short stories, short visual stories. Some would end up in Super-8, and others resulted in the series *Mapas Mentais* (Mental Maps), which I made from 1971 to 1976. The words, with their weight and meaning, turned into metaphors of feelings in my desire to find answers to the many questions in my personal life. They also helped me to find a way of coming to terms with the military dictatorship on my return to Brazil.

23): The 1970s, when you went back to Brazil, was a very productive period. You did a series of drawings, but also started using other media, Super-8, photography and installations.

I went back to Brazil and to work. And I had to start from scratch: I had to resume my career, and earn a living without a husband in a society where women were represented by men – I'm talking about the beginning of the seventies, although I'm not sure it has changed that much. I managed to earn a living doing all sorts of jobs, until I began printing textiles for factories in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo as a freelance first, and then as a factory employee. I had to juggle this with my work on paper and my research on new media: films on Super-8, performances and installations. It's amazing how much patience I can have in my work, when I'm so impatient in life.

24): There is a whole series of works on paper where you cut or tear the paper, then sew it or superimpose it in layers, exposing the reverse, which is normally unseen. The first works where you sew the paper and show the hidden side are a series of engravings.

With the technique of engraving you're in contact, first with the 'negative' matrix, and then with the 'positive' paper, and therefore, with the front and back, with the inside and the outside. From the moment I did my first wood engravings, I became intrigued with the back of the paper, that other space that is absent but latent. Then, with the metal engravings, I began to discover all sorts of new

possibilities. I started printing on both sides of the paper, front and back, and then, by cutting and folding the paper, I began to incorporate the reverse into the work. I entitled this series *Gravuras/Objetos* (Engravings/Objects). For me they were important as progenitors of other series of drawings, such as *Projetos Construídos* (Constructed Objects), and *Desenhos/Objetos* (Drawings/Objects).

25): All these series widen the concept of drawing since they don't use traditional methods.

There is a development at the moment when the paper ceases to be a mere surface that receives the impression of the engraving or drawing, and becomes matter, a body. A material with which to construct and dramatise, as in *Projetos Construídos*, *Desenhos/Objetos* and *Livros/Objetos 1971–76* (Books/Objects). These are hybrid works, where the traditional elements of drawing coexist with cuts, slashes and sewing thread.

26): In these series we begin to see something of what will become your trademark in your later series of drawings: the importance of the gesture, the action, the process. The gestures here are slashing or cutting, and then sewing.

The gesture is the manifestation of what is inside. Again, in the gesture we find a copulation between the inside and the outside, similar to the relation empty-full. I hear myself using the word 'copulation', but I'm not using it in a sexual sense, rather in the sense of its synonyms: to couple, to join... I'm using this word because it hints at something that is produced, at the transformed fruit, as in a work of art.

27): Every time someone mentions your *Desenhos/Objetos*, they quote the work of Lucio Fontana as a reference. Did you know Fontana's work?

In the seventies, I hardly knew it. But even if you don't physically know the work of an artist, you hear what other people say about it. What my work and Fontana's have in common is their research into the surface of the support, and that's why they quote him. But my work from the seventies, where the sheet of paper ceases to be a surface and becomes a body, is very much indebted to the practices of Brazilian Neo-Concretism. What I seek is to poetise the fullness of the void. This is evident in works where the sewing thread literally works in the gaps, as in *Linha Solta* (Loose Line), 1975, where the sheets of paper, as the layers of an onion, are slices of space that indicate the existence of other invisible planes, on the inside, towards the infinite.

28): The void in your work does not represent the 'absence of being'. On the contrary, it is an active void. You talk about this in your *Desenhos/Objetos* from the seventies, but also in the sculptures from the nineties where you use the mould as the 'shadow of the other'.

I think we all have a strange and undefined nostalgia for the void. A previous memory brings back something we think we know. Could it be the memory of our mother's womb? I remember the nostalgia I felt as a child, an incomprehensible desire to return, the nostalgia for a place. Later on I recognised this nostalgia for a place of the mind as the drive that guided the construction of the *Desenhos/Objetos* during the seventies. The sewing thread, with its trajectory across the layers of torn paper, insinuates and represents fullness, strengthening the fascination with the infinite. Moreover, life is renewed in containers such as the holes in the earth, the uterus, and so we learn that these two realities, empty and full, are one and the same. This became clear to me when working in sculpture cast from moulds, where there is a constant copulation between the full and the empty, the empty and the full. The positive generates the negative, which in turn generates the positive, and a mould preserves the memory of the positive that originated it. Here, the void is the memory, the 'shadow of the other', the previous presence.

29): In both cases, in the *Desenhos/Objetos* of the seventies and the sculptures made from a mould in the nineties, there is an interest in the space that is not visible, the hidden space. One of the constants in your work, which is not linear or chronological, neither in its interests nor in the media it uses, is that a theme can appear in some of your works and then reappear years later in a different media. Therefore, when seen in its totality, what appears is a rhizomatic structure, where the works are like semiotic steps, loaded with gestures, perceptions, attitudes, interests. These steps, the works, establish transversal connections between themselves that create a web, so that the meanings, between one work and the other, reverberate and grow. We've talked about your interest in the hidden spaces, but equally we could talk about seriality, topologies, the same and the other, etc.

That's right. During all these years, my work has grown in a spiral sense, turning round some central points, which at times move away only to come closer again. I mean, the work always returns to the points of interest that feed it, or to the basis that drives it forward. For example, the humble aspects of everyday life: food, manual work, drawing, sewing, modelling. Starting with these, and moved by desire and need, I create metaphors of the body: digestion, defecation, the inside and the outside. Also through the body, the political can be manifested: a clear example of this can be found in the photographs of the series *Fotopoemações* from the seventies. Another reflection of the interrelations between myself and the others are the questions referring to maps, frontiers, the here and there, territoriality and extra-territoriality. And finally, there is the interest in the big and transcendental things: the search for totality and the infinite through repetition and seriality.

30): Your films from the seventies, such as *Fotopoemações* and some actions, are a reaction to the political climate and the dictatorship in Brazil, but as in all your works, they also contain many other interrelated meanings. Which is the first film you made?

*In-Out (Antropofagia) (In-Out (anthropophagy)), in 1973. The title refers to the *Anthropophagous Manifesto of the Modern Art Week of 22*. The word *antropofagia* has a mythological meaning in Brazilian culture. Our history of anthropology says that the Indians used to eat their enemies, they incorporated them with the aim of dominating them. This is the perfect meaning for this *Super-8*: to eat the repressive organs of the dictatorship, the enemies of freedom at that time. Meanwhile, as you rightly say, there are other meanings. There is an attempt by a female mouth to articulate words, the discovery of language. And also an attempt to establish a dialogue with a male mouth. It has no linear history.*

*Through editing the images acquire meaning, but not a specific one. We can change their position in the process of editing and the result will still be the same, precisely because it doesn't follow the linear logic of language. A series of images and their meanings follow each other, they construct a structure of meanings that expresses emotions. The structure of the film is combinatorial, like a game of chess. I have followed the same type of editing structure in all my films and videos. In a way, we find this same structure of mutant combinations in the series of drawings that I made from 1993 onwards, such as *Marcas da Gota (Drip Marks)*, *Vestígios (Vestiges)* and also in my sculptures/installations.*

31): I'd like you to talk about the collective happening *Mitos Vadios (Empty Myths)*, from the end of the seventies, in which you participated with two works, *Monumento à Fome and Estado Escatológico*. They refer to the two extremes of digestion, food and defecation.

*I went back to the subject of digestion, in reference to the social problems and the eternal hunger in the world. It was 1978. The title, *Mitos Vadios*, refers to *Mitos e Magia (Myths and Magic)*, the theme of the I Latin American Biennial in São Paulo, which was the first important event after the dictatorship and the advent of democracy in the country. We artists were against this theme. How could they talk about *Mitos e Magia* after so many years of repression in Brazil and Latin America? To show our disapproval, the artists, led by Hélio Oiticica and Edwaldo Granado, occupied a disused plot of land in *calle Augusta*, which was the street with all the smart shops in São Paulo. I took part with *Estado Escatológico*, an irony on the consumerist pretensions of the rich. It consisted of various*

types of toilet paper hanging on the wall, from the most expensive to the cheapest, including pages of newspaper and leaves. The other piece was *Monumento à Fome*: two sacks of 30 kilos, one full of rice, the other full of beans, the two staple foods in Brazil. They were placed on a table tied with a black ribbon, the symbol of grieving. I remember that the artist Antonio Emmanuel said the work was static and museographic because it was on a table. He wanted to destroy it, and since I resisted him he attacked me physically [laughs]. I think he was drunk.

32): In the installation *Arroz e Feijão*, you refer to digestion again, although ultimately it is about transformation, of the food we eat, and the seeds that germinate on the plates.

In 1979, the military finally allowed the country to open up to democracy. It was a moment of readjustment, but the country was far from achieving equilibrium. I installed *Arroz e Feijão* for the first time in the Artist's Space in Botafogo, a place lent by the Alliance Française of Rio de Janeiro. The space was an initiative of a group of artists from Rio – Ana Linnemann, Amélia Toledo, Luiz Ferreira, Maria do Carmo Secco, Maria Luisa Saddi, Mauro Kleiman, Osmar Fonseca and Rogério Luz. The aim was to promote debates and exhibitions at such a hopeful time for the nation. *Arroz e Feijão* was the first show there. It consisted of a large table covered in a black cloth that made it look like a catafalque, set for a meal. On the white plates, seeds of rice and beans germinated in the soil. In the four corners of the room, there were four tables covered in white cloths where rice and beans were actually being eaten. When we finished eating we started debating on the work proposal, art, the current events in the country, etc. To talk about the stomach, about hunger, is to start a cycle of renovation, because this is where life struggles against death. The seeds germinate and bring hope, despite the fact that a third of the world population eats more than the other two thirds, who at times literally starve to death.

33): In 1981 you did the performance *Entrevidas* (Between Lives), which evokes the tensions between life and death. Eros and Thanatos.

In contemporary art, performances and installations have an immanent subversion, in the sense that they strengthen our need to redo the repressions. In *Entrevidas*, this is literally so, since it was a response to the repression during the dictatorship. It's not surprising that this type of work may feel strange and indigestible.

34): What do you mean 'redo the repressions'? To re-enact them?

Yes. I mean that installations and performances in contemporary art articulate themselves in that mythical ancestral space of the ritual, while at the same time appearing like a children's game: it's what is called *fazer de conta* in Portuguese, to pretend. Here, the artist works with reality, with the real world; exposes it, turns it upside down, showing new dimensions, new truths. The artist exorcises and subverts the repressions.

In the performance I did outside my studio in calle Cardoso Junior in 1981, and later in the installation of the same title, the feet walking among hundreds of eggs lying in the street are a menace, a danger for the eggs. So the experience is one of tension and fear. This is what I mean by 'redoing the repressions'. You can build an analogy between the repression and menace of the feet and the dictatorship. In this work, although we find ourselves in the dilemma of having to choose between life and death, life is reaffirmed through the symbol of the egg. The installation is a poetic act – it subverts meanings, and it allows for different readings.

35): In 1982 you spent the whole year travelling.

I needed a break so I could go forward. I managed to get some money and travelled to Italy, New York and Caracas, the places where I had lived before. I was looking for something that didn't exist any more. The Anna from the past was dead; she only lived in my memory. After a whole year

travelling, I went back to Rio de Janeiro. Finally, I realised how important Brazil was for me and managed to find my own territory. I am a Brazilian artist.

36): So once you accepted that Brazil, following the principles of *Antropofagia*, had devoured you, you moved to Argentina in 1984.

When I went back to Brazil, I met the Argentinean artist Victor Grippo and ended up in a relationship again after so many years. We lived between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. I started working at a slower pace and had very little to do with the art world. Something similar had happened after my first marriage. But slowing down and having a break can be very regenerating, when you start again you realise that you'd been in a state of gestation.

37): You say having a break can be very regenerating...

Yes, but you don't realise until later. Somehow I was aware, since long before I went travelling in 1982, that I was going through a crisis in my artistic work. I kept wondering how I could do an art that would help me avoid the anxiety, the unease and the speed of contemporaneity. An art that could express a world in favour of life, a space for the future, a platform for optimism. To express life and nature in a creative and integrating act.

38): During those years in Argentina, you were painting. Was it for the first time?

Yes and no. I'd done some painting at school. A bit like in mythological tales, where the character is lost and goes back to the beginning. I did the same. I restarted with a traditional support. I spent days in front of the same canvas. I would paint the shape of zero, '0', the ovule, or rather suggest it, because it could hardly be seen. I constructed and deconstructed the image on the canvas in dialectical movements – some brushstrokes paint the image and others make it disappear. Then I would start again, and so on. I was working with a duality that made me despair because I couldn't find what I was looking for. I would have liked to come out with a definitive answer. Like Fontana when he called his series of oval-shaped paintings *Fine di Dio* (The End of God), a phrase that leaves no room for doubt. For me, the '0' was like that Hindu saying: 'The Aura of nothingness, before realisation and the root of diversity.' Imagine how mixed up I was!

39): That '0' suggests the egg. Do you still have those paintings?

I finished very few paintings, but that working 'with nothingness', which might have seemed alienating, expanded my consciousness. I left that pictorial activity with a sense of renewal. Only when I started working with clay, a year later in Rio de Janeiro, did I realise how important this pictorial work had been for me.

40): On your return to Rio de Janeiro in 1989, you started working with clay. Are your wall sculptures *Nova Paisagem* (New Landscapes) your first clay works?

I started a series of sculptures using the traditional method with a mould. First I model the clay, then I make the mould, then cast a positive in plaster or cement. I'm going back to territorial questions, but this time through the tactile.

41): Do you start making cartographies again, as in the *Mapas Mentais*?

Of course, every time I'm lost, I think about territory. Territory as a way of recognising where I am. A lump of clay on a table is already a topology. This is what guided me while I was making those objects that I would then paint in oil. Look how the oval shape of the paintings reappears in these

desert reveries that evoke the primeval, the genesis. They seem on the edge of language, between nature and culture.

42): The installation *De Vita Migrare Anno MCMXCI*, which you presented at the São Paulo Biennial of that year, also evokes extra-territoriality, man and the cosmos.

The title in Latin literally means 'to migrate from life, year 1991'. Migration and death are metaphors in themselves. I presented this installation just after I'd finished the series *Nova Paisagem*, and it is also a landscape that suggests spatial relativity, a game between the notions of small and large, inside and outside, territoriality – here – and extra-territoriality – there. In the same way as the wood engraving *ANNA* signalled the end of representation, this installation marked a dividing line with what was to follow, in the nineties. I emigrated from my own language, at a psychological and mental level, and started a new phase in my work.

43): Can you talk about this installation?

It was a one-hundred-square-metre space, enclosed within very high walls and with two entry doors. The floor was covered in water – it looked like a mirror – and in the middle of the space there was a dwelling, a house. A gangway built over the water connected the two doors. The high walls were reflected downwards, on the water, creating a very deep well, and when the spectators walked on the gangway, over the water, they felt suspended, outside time. On a symbolic level, the house represents our inner and mental dwelling. The four elements – earth, air, water and fire – take part in the installation. In the middle of the water there is a stone with a flame, fire. The spectator, through an opening in the front wall of the dwelling, can see the Earth inside, filmed by one of the *Apollo 11-17* astronauts during his first journey into space. The image alternated with a news programme on the 1991 Iraq War.

44): You said that the series *Nova Paisagem* evokes the primeval. There is also nostalgia for the origins in *De Vita Migrare*, although more transcendental. This evocation of the primeval, this nostalgia for the origins, reappears in all your works in clay.

When we lay our hands on that wet mass of clay, a whole cosmic vision appears with all the archetypes of creation. Clay is the perfect prototype of matter, and it contains the possibility of form and invites us to look for it. Meanwhile, form organises amorphous matter, it sets limits on it. We are faced with a paradox. The form that organises matter is also the beginning of death... What do you think? All these thoughts on materials were going round and round in my head when I started casting sculpture with moulds.

45): You seem to be talking about limits again. All your work is a negotiation of dichotomies – inside-outside, pure-impure, empty-full – and they all reconnect in a process of transformation. Now you mention form-amorphous as a metaphor for life-death. It seems you're evocating questions relating to the individual and his or her limits through the materials.

An artist is like an alchemist, who in seeking to transform metal into gold, ends up transmuting his own being. The process of artistic work is a constant state of construction and deconstruction, which to me represents an active state of transforming meditation. On the other hand, the territory of art is a mirror of life, and it is possible to establish analogies with all the physical and psychological aspects of life. That's why life and death are present in *De Vita Migrare* and in the installations *Terra Modelada* (Modelled Earth).

46): You started making sculpture in a traditional way, with a mould, but working with basic forms, minimal.

The methodology of clay – to knead, cut and compact – is an important part of the sculpture vocabulary. I do the same thing with the archaic method of ceramics called *cobritas y rollitos* (little snakes and rolls). These are common procedures because it is what the material demands. But I incorporate it in my work and I make it visible.

47): Is *Um, Nenhum, Cem Mil* (One, No One, One Hundred Thousand) the first work where a simple form is repeated serially? Where there is repetition and difference?

Yes. Basic forms produced by hand, identical and different, are added to the body of the sculpture. The same as in nature, they don't repeat themselves, there is difference in sameness. Like the Pirandello play the title of which I borrowed, *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*, this is a work about multiplicity that questions the notion of identity. When forms are repeated, next to each other, they affirm and negate one another in their sameness and difference. In a public square you are one and no one, because your identity is dissolved and you become one hundred thousand.

48): After this, you begin what you call sculptures/installations, which are a series of sculptures, cast with a mould, but which remain open because you keep adding and subtracting parts, the segments. For example, you were talking about *São* (Saint).

The series of sculptures/installations that I began in 1993 are still in progress, unfinished. There are series made with modules or segments in positive, and others made with the negative, the mould. These last ones are made with the mould, which is normally discarded in the process of sculpture, but which here acquires the status of a work of art. *São* is a series in positive that so far has over seventy modules or segments. Each segment has its own mould, which is unique. These sculptures/installations are similar to some primary biological forms where, when one part of the body is lost, it grows back again. The segments can be divided, subdivided, removed from the main body of the installation and used as an independent sculpture. Then, one day, all the segments could be put together again to form that main body. Moreover, we could also add the new segments we've been making since. The installation will thus have an ever-changing structure, acquiring new configurations in every space.

49): The mould, which is normally discarded in the sculptural process, acquires the status of a work of art in its own right in your work. Do the titles you give them – *É o Que Falta* (It's What is Missing), *A Sombra do Outro* (The Shadow of the Other), *Ausentes* (The Absent) – allude to the memory of the sculptural matrix?

I'm interested in the working process, the preparation, what happens before the work is finished. In my imaginary, titles feed on the work's execution, but in the meantime they allude to something real since I'm working with the empty and the full. A mould is an empty space that used to contain the positive when the positive and the negative were conjoined. In fact, *A Sombra do Outro* refers to the absent positive.

50): Your work is not explicitly feminine or feminist, but the narration is clearly that of a female voice. You talk about the everyday, food, the memory of the matrix, the tactile, the proliferation of life through repetition and difference, etc.

It is a reflection on my relationship with the world, with my likes and dislikes. Working hands are very present in my imaginary. I refer to them in several of my writings and they figure in a Super-8 film of 1982 and a video of 1997. There are also the works on the 'hand that makes', which relate to the sculptures/installations and to the installations *Terra Modelada*. And there are other motivations that could be seen as metaphors of the female body, the inside and the outside, and which relate to the positive and the sculptural mould. But the metaphors of the body are unconscious, since the work wants to be in a real space far removed from anything allegorical. So the associations with sexual and bodily aspects are the interpretations of others, of the viewers. On the other hand, in my earlier

writings are clearly formulated images that leave no room for doubt, as in the poem *Tu + Eu* (You + Me), where I say: '*Sinto as paredes do meu oco na presença do outro*' (I feel the walls of my hollowness in the presence of the other).

51): I think both your writings and your work reflect a relational subjectivity that goes out to meet the other, and that is more common in the work of women artists.

This reminds me of your first visit to my studio, when I told you that the difference between the work of male artists and the work of women artists could be interpreted by comparing their orgasms. You remember? I hope I'm not generalising too much here, but the male orgasm goes in a straight line right to the end, while women are lucky that their orgasms go in a spiral sense, with the possibility of multiple re-starts. This circular, spinning motion can be compared to the facility women have to express their affection for what lives 'between' things. And since for women small can be large, their choices are not hierarchical, they're simply related. Besides, we have a disposition to sacrifice, which has been socially imposed on women because traditionally they take care of others. I don't believe we have to sacrifice ourselves for others, rather to be with others with affection, as Tarkovski says in *Sculpting in Time*, a book that has greatly influenced me.

52): In 1994, you began making large installations with unfired clay, which are ephemeral. When did you decide to discard the mould?

It became very difficult to transport the large quantities of segments that make up the sculptures/installations for an exhibition. And since one of the most important aspects of these works is the sensorial feeling of one's hands on the clay, I decided to discard the mould. I opted for manual work, the work of happy hands, moved by will and desire and away from the supremacy of formal vision. Besides, working without a mould allowed me to make more segments in less time and to concentrate on the installations. It was a liberation, as was the subject of the permanence of the work!

53): Besides the subjects of food and defecation that we have already mentioned, these ephemeral installations allude to something primordial. You use basic movements of the hand, which are common to everyone, and which evoke in our memory a vital impulse in everyday life towards gesture, repetition, work and tiredness.

José Gil, a Portuguese philosopher, says that a body carries the legacy of the dead and the social imprints of the ritual. Our hands carry the memory of the history of humanity's work since the first gesture of our ancestors, when the hands became the first working tools, giving rise to language and the domination of matter. Since the actions of the hand are immutable in time, the primordial and the ritual are relived in this work. These installations are based on repetition and difference, and on supporting the 'principle' of work.

Faced with the mounds of segments made by tiredness – a satisfying tiredness – the audience can identify with their own daily work.

54): You said earlier that in the eighties you were searching for an art that would help you forget the contemporary malaise. I think these installations are part of that search, especially at a time when, as Agamben points out, everyday life in a large metropolis has lost track of experience. Your installations evoke that transforming capacity of experience.

It is true that contemporary man is incapable of translating everyday life, which is the raw material of experience, into experience, and that's what makes the here and now so unbearable. But I want to be optimistic about the future, and to believe that what is permanent in the human, its need for transformation, will prevail. For now, I spare myself, I protect myself, I take refuge in the memory of that first working of the hand, reviving the memory of knowledge, not of the alienating work of industrialisation, or of the virtual, but of those first working actions of the hand that are common to us all since the beginning of humanity.

55): Deleuze says that artists develop ‘percepts’, which are combinations of sensations and perceptions that survive those who experience them. The coincidence between your ‘percepts’, and the concepts developed by Deleuze, like difference and repetition, is amazing. Had you read Deleuze?

I read him in 1997 because my son Micael introduced me to him. First I read *Difference and Repetition*, and I felt it was very close and very intimate. Then I read his other books. To me it is clear that, intuitively, I have developed a work that is very close to his philosophy. On the other hand, his philosophy is very close to life.

56): Your work has also been related to Eva Hesse. Did you know her work? Did you see it when you lived in New York from 1968 to 1971?

I can't remember if I saw her work when I was living in New York, because at that time 'I lived yet did not live in me', with two small children, without any help or time. I saw her work years later, in publications and exhibitions. There are confluences between her work and mine; they are rather formal, like a certain phallic aspect that is visible in our work – at times Hesse seems to have a certain phallic irony – and also in the use of the series and the metaphors of the body. But as I said before, I'm indebted to Brazilian art. Now they're showing works of Hesse that were found in her studio, made from 1966 to 1969. These precarious works reveal Hesse's wish to arrive at a non-art, a question that was in the minds of many artists at that time. For instance, in 1966, Lygia Clark was working on her precarious and sensorial objects, in works like *Natureza (Estrutura cega)* [Nature (Blind Structure)], 1966–67; *Pedra e ar* (Stone and Air), 1966; *Respire conmigo* (Breath with Me), 1966; *Diálogo de mãos* (Dialogue with Hands), 1966. This last one consists of a Moebius elastic band tied to the wrists of the participants, and these participants establish a dialogue with the movements of their hands. I mention these works by Lygia because, together with 'the nostalgia of the body' that she talked about so much, I think they really are the origin of the work I did after 1992, when I understood that the phenomena produced by the materials with which I work, as well as my own body, are the co-authors of my work. A good example of what I'm saying is the series *Codificações Matéricas* (Matter Codifications), where the movements of the hands on the paper, the drop of ink and the force of gravity are the mediators in the realisation of the drawing. It is obvious that, formally, they have nothing to do with Lygia's work, but they share some basic premises.

57): And yet you do see a relation between your ephemeral installations and *Arte Povera*.

The use of worthless, ephemeral materials, and the emphasis on aspects of the ritual and on manual work, mean that there is something in common between these installations and *Arte Povera*. Also with the metaphors that can be established with the *pasta fatta in casa* (home-made pasta), and with the relationship between the preparation of food and the fiesta and the ritual, which transform elementary human situations into signs. On the other hand, when the segments of clay/earth are laid down on the floor, there is an analogy with the ploughed fields, and with the marks of man and his culture.

58): In the drawings of the nineties, as in those of the seventies, you don't use traditional methods either. These series, which are always open, are elaborated with repeated gestures or actions, like moving the paper so the drop of ink sliding on it can do the drawing, as in *Marcas da Gota* and *Codificações Matéricas*; or sewing giving priority to the tactile, looking only occasionally, while you draw on both sides of the paper, as in *Indícios* (Traces); or to elaborate 'families' of drawings using the common marks that you leave while painting on Japanese paper, as in *Vestígios*. In all these series of drawings, the result is as important as the process.

What I do is to keep the work process in the work. When I'm drawing like that I think of seriality, and I realise that it is to do with basic tensions: one brings the other, announces the next one, which is repeated but will always be another.

Since 1993, when I began the series of work on the 'hands that make', and until now, I have opted for

the same work methodology in each series, the same materials and dimensions, so the series remain open and unfinished. It is the same with the series of sculptures and the series of installations with modelled earth. Each new piece already contains the morphological possibility of the next one, and so on. These series of drawings are defined by their methodology. They are structures that combine multiple possibilities. This same structure of mutant combinations reappears in all the films and videos I have made so far.

I sometimes think that by working like this, keeping the series open, I have found a way of escaping the tyranny of the new, since the 'hands that make' never repeat themselves, thanks to the vital tensions of the gesture.

59): I'd like you to talk about your last series of sculptures, *Emanados* (Emanations), which are transparent organic forms that you produce by blowing glass.

I've always thought of drawing as the product of a vital breath, for it is a very simple way of making art. Perhaps this is because I relate drawing to the mythology of creation, when God created Adam out of clay, and gave him life by blowing on him. Beautiful, don't you think? So I've always loved drawing, it gives me an immense sense of freedom: to breathe and to draw, to draw and to breathe, like going from the lungs to the paper in a series of movements. I've always felt drawing was like a pneumatic being, a product of breathing, immensely vital, on the border between life and death. All these ideas kept turning in my head until 2007, when I finally made works where the principal media was blowing: *Emanados*. I made some myself, but most of them are made by professionals whose breath I guided like a conductor. The liquid balls of incandescent glass soon become simple oval forms, fragile, like life itself. They are containers of vital breath.

60): In one of your last videos, *Um momento, por favor* (One Moment, Please), you use your own image, something you had already done in the seventies when you made the *Fotopoeamações*. You said earlier that in those pictures the political climate at that time was reflected through the body. How do you see *Um momento, por favor*?

The photos from the seventies are an emotional response to the political climate in Brazil at that time, but I think that *Um momento, por favor* also has political connotations. It is a visible and audible portrait, a self-representation in movement, made in parts, a face. The parts are corporal cartographies in movement, traces of worn flesh. It is an anti-erotic bodily space, where matter is revealed in all its tiredness. In this territory there is no room for mythification, or for lies, since the emotional galvanises the work with its own aesthetic. It has a great emotive and subjective charge that is shown to the audience unashamedly. The audience are facing a non-aestheticised subjectivity. My voice, which accompanies the Neapolitan songs of Roberto Murolo, is an internal text of the body; these are the imprints of a journey of the being through its own being. This work doesn't follow the social and conventional demands for corporal perfection. It is a self-portrait that turns its own skin into a map.

Endnotes:

1. Held at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro – MAM/RJ – in April 1967, and organised by a group of artists and art critics, the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) brought together all the different national avant-garde movements –Concrete Art, Neo-Concretism, New Figurations – around the idea of a 'new objectivity'. The creation of objects of various types, as well as the defence of specifically Brazilian solutions that did not copy what was being produced in international centres, defined the central spirit of the exhibition, which was a kind of summary of the different paths taken by Brazilian art. A compromise with political positions, the rejection of easel painting, the bodily, tactile and visual participation of the viewer, these were the basic ingredients of the new objectivity.

2. *O Cordel* is the popular literature typical of the northeast of Brazil. They are narrative poems illustrated with woodcuts, printed in the form of small booklets and hung from a string to be sold. The themes may be traditional or based on current events. They can be humorous, too.

3. The *Anthropophagous Manifesto*, written by Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954), was published in May 1928 in the first issue of the recently founded magazine *Revista de Antropofagia*, a vehicle for the diffusion of Brazilian anthropophagous culture. With its metaphorical language, full of poetic and humorous aphorisms, the Manifesto became the theoretical basis for this movement, which questioned Brazil's cultural dependence. The apex of early Modernism, the anthropophagous period was officially inaugurated during the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Week of Modern Art), 1922. It highlighted the violent contradiction between two cultures – primitive culture (Amerindian and African) and Latin culture (of European descent) – which form the basis of Brazilian culture, through the transformation of the savage element into an aggressive instrument. It is not a question of harmonious, spontaneous assimilation between the two. On the contrary, primitivism now appears as a sign of critically devouring the other, the modern and civilised.

4. The text *Declaração de Princípios Básicos da Nova Vanguarda* (Declaration of the Basic Principles of the New Avant-garde) accompanied the exhibition *New Brazilian Objectivity*. It was signed by Hélio Oiticica, Antonio Dias, Carlos Vergara, Rubens Gerchman, Lygia Pape, Glauco Rodrigues, Carlos Zilio, Mário Pedrosa, Maurício Nogueira Lima, among others.

5. The *Semana de Arte Moderna* was part of the celebrations of the centenary of Brazilian independence in 1922. It was presented as the first collective public manifestation in the history of Brazilian culture, in favour of a new modern spirit and against the conservative art and culture that had been prevalent in the country since the nineteenth century. From 13 to 18 February 1922, a festival was held at the Teatro Municipal, São Paulo, with an exhibition of over one hundred works and three literary-musical evenings. Without a defined aesthetic programme, the Week can be seen, in the context of the history of Brazilian art, more as a rejection of the current conservatism in literary, musical and visual production, than as a constructive event with specific proposals for the creation of a new language. What united all the participants, according to the two principal ideologists Mário and Oswald de Andrade, was the negation of all 'devotion to the past' and the rejection of imported art and literature.

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Oswald de Andrade, was the negation of all 'devotion to the past' and the rejection of imported art and literature.

6. The Manifesto of 1959, signed by Amílcar de Castro (1920–2002), Ferreira Gullar (1930–), Franz Weissmann (1911–2005), Lygia Clark (1920–1988), Lygia Pape (1927–2004), Reynaldo Jardim (1926–) and Theon Spanudis (1915–), denounces Concrete Art for its 'dangerous rationalist exacerbation'. Against the constructive orthodoxies and geometrical dogmatism, Neo-Concrete followers defend the freedom to experiment, the return to expressive intentions and the rescue of subjectivity. The recuperation of the creative possibilities of the artist – no longer considered as an inventor of industrial prototypes – and the effective incorporation of the viewer – who, by touching and handling the works, becomes part of them – are presented as the recuperation of humanism. For Neo-Concrete artists, art is not an industrial production, but a means of expression anchored in experience.

7. '...There is a curious echo of this description in the graphic portrayal of Calabria made by Norman Douglas at the beginning of the last century. In his book published in 1917, Douglas says that the Calabrese talk of figs as black and white, when we know that they are not black or white. Olives are also black or white. Stones are black or white. Wine is black or white. Snakes are black or white. They don't have the slightest notion of what blue means, Douglas continues, probably because there are very few compact blue things in nature. Max Muller claims that the idea of blue is a modern achievement of the human race. Therefore, a cloudless sky is seen as "*propio bianco*" (pure white). Once the writer asked a boy what colour the sea in front of him was and he replied: "It's like an almost dead colour," when in fact it was a brilliant sapphire blue.' Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria* (The Marlboro Press: Marlboro, Vermont), 1993 (1915), pp. 49–50.

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