

An Epiphany

The trajectory of Anna Maria Maiolino's work is the construction of a meaning that tends toward totality, preserving the immediate act of the constitution of the image in its most simple, direct and primordial sense. Totality and specificity. Maiolino articulates these two instances – distant, since they are at once big and small – through the idea of action.

Action is the subterranean river that moves the meaning of her work and the place for the irreducibility of the image. In the clash with action, the image becomes subjected to movement and change. All that is left for it – for the image – is to manifest itself through the fluidity that the body of the artist (the agent) unleashes. That is why Maiolino's images are fluid and constantly shifting. There is a state of acceptance of the plenitude that implies their adherence to the forces of time, as the true conductor and constructor of form in space. But to accompany the form that Maiolino gives to her work, it is necessary to understand that the manifestation of the fundamental meaning of things does not carry the state of immobility that a traditional vision of metaphysical transcendence might imply; on the contrary, the essential nucleus the artist strives for is constituted by change and through change. This idea of an essential nucleus, always mutant, is what guarantees the sense of the work and what drives it directly to the intimate side of things.

The synthesis of Maiolino's work is movement, not movement in itself, but rather that moment when form is born, when it goes from potential to action, which is where mutation takes place. Maiolino, like Bergson, strives toward the metaphysics of time: to preserve the moving and fluid structure of permanence, which is inherent to any form in constitution, through the production of uninterrupted images. These considerations are particularly evident in those works realised in a serial manner, such as *Terra Modelada* (Modelled Earth), 1994–2009; the drawings of *Ações Matéricas* (Matter Actions), 1993–2009; *Codificações Matéricas* (Matter Codifications), 1995–2009; *Indícios* (Traces), 2000–9; or *Vestígios* (Vestiges), 2000–9, among others. *Yet for the artist, seriality is not related to the production in series of industrial mechanisation, which Minimalism introduced into art. On the contrary, what interests her is not the repetition of the identical, but the generation of difference. The most important thing in the concept of action/serial in her work is not the end result, but the experience of time, through the artist's actions, as an experimentation in becoming.*

There is something performative in these series, since they owe their existence to action, as in an endless dance of corporal movements. Therefore, in proposing a structure that is open and in construction, and which depends on the actions of her body, the artist, paradoxically, offers a work with a powerful sense of finality, because what it wants to achieve is, in fact, a sense of totality. She is a weaver of the becoming.

When Maiolino turns differentiation into form, she is reinforcing Mário Pedrosa's idea of art as an experimental exercise in freedom, an idea that became norm in Brazilian visual art. An experimental exercise in freedom means to ally oneself with an open structure, in constant movement, whose function it is to exercise the multiple possibilities of the structure of time.

'Not everything is fixed, this is the reality of time. This means, above all, that there is no such thing as an enclosed whole regulating things from beginning to end and containing everything. If everything is not fixed, the whole is not a closed set. This means that there are possibilities, or rather non-actualised virtualities, which escape the whole.'^[1]

This is the reality of time that Maiolino strives for in her work, the impetus that gives form to the moment of transition between gestation and the configuration of the image. In other words, her work pursues the moment of the 'in between' that precedes the final form, and in which the image is pure becoming, a potential not yet realised. For that reason, we cannot say that the segments that constitute the works of the multiple series have a purpose in themselves, for they are not only a

translation of instants frozen in time, but a search for the accompaniment of the uninterrupted flux of time as a possibility for representation and becoming.

The Neo-Concretist Matrix and Malevich Desert

The relationship with the shifting quality of form that Maiolino radicalised in her work has its origins in Neo-Concretism, which establishes a bridge between concept and feeling by trying to overcome the traditional dichotomy between object and subject, and by recognising art's potential to create an object (non-object) capable of preserving the first tensions that lead to the appearance of form. Neo-Concretism seeks ways to give form to the substitution of representation by presentation, something that was already being gestated in modern art at the time.

*Imbedded in the concept of presentation we find a fundamental question, contained in the theory of the non-object, that leads to the chore of Maiolino's work. In the manifesto *Theory of the Non-Object*, Malevich is quoted as an example '...of the artist's efforts to free himself of the conventional frame of culture, and to find that "desert"... where the work appears for the first time free of any meaning other than that of its own appearance'.[\[2\]](#)*

Malevich's 'desert' corresponds to the moment when the image creates its own appearance and is free of any implications other than immanence. It is important to point out that there is a fundamental difference between modern art's concept of creating a discourse centred on itself, independently of the outside world, and that other concept that seeks to catch the appearance of the image at the precise moment when the image becomes part of the reality of the world as a direct and transparent translation of the underlying spirit of reality. Maiolino's contribution consists in spotting this 'deviation' and giving it density as a result of the actions of the body on the materials.

What Maiolino questions through her work is the possibility for creating images that do not represent anything other than their own process of formation. These images are not the result a retinal process of the hand guided by the eyes, or of a strictly mental operation: they are the result of an attempt to create a process for the generation of images that follows an organic structure, where the movements of the body leave an immediate imprint on the matter. The quality of this printed action is the result of a combination of impulses, where the artist is at the epicentre of the fault lines that run from her personal history to the socio-cultural history, until they integrate the perception of the relation form, matter and content as an indivisible visual unity.

*At the core of the Neo-Concretist discourse lies the destabilisation of the constructive image as objectivity and mathematical-geometrical rationality. Neo-Concretism is a process aimed at the foundations of the first experiments in 'geometrical' abstraction, not as a plastic-formal exercise, but as an exercise in perceptive sensitivity capable of translating, through the appearance of form, the original perplexity, hence its spiritual and revolutionary poetics. To understand this, it is important to refer to – besides Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, whose concepts are included in Ferreira Gullar's texts – Mário Pedrosa's thesis on the Gestalt. In *Da natureza afetiva da forma na obra de arte* (The Affective Nature of Form in the Art Work), a thesis defended in 1952, Pedrosa sets the perceptive patterns of form in the individual as an item of objectivity. In other words, through Gestalt he shifts the field of perception from subjectivity to objectivity, attributing to it the statute of a reality as objective as exteriority. This shifting of the axel demystifies geometry as an item of mathematical-rational objectivity in the order of perception. Geometry is transformed into a structure of simplification (and this is the aspect Maiolino will absorb and integrate in her work), capable of restoring the objectivity that perception had lost, through an excess of interpretation, in the psychological and subjective imaginary. The square, although a product of the capacity for abstraction, is not a symbol of anything, it does not refer back to anything, and it does not occupy the space of anything. It is a square.*

The Post-Neo-Concretist Break-up

At the start of the Neo-Concretist process, artists softened the stronghold of the geometric form, beginning a process of deconstruction of the international Constructivist project. Form is destabilised through ambivalent games of perception. Brilliant examples of this are, among others, Hélio Oiticica with his *Metaesquemas* (Meta-schemes), Franz Weissmann with his induction of virtual squares, Willys de Castro with his active objects, and Amílcar de Castro revealing the plane's potential for three-dimensionality through the concept of cutting and folding. However, through the radicalisation of this process, the dichotomic game of subjectivity and objectivity disappears, creating instead a new encounter between these two forces. The end of this process gave rise to the post-Neo-Concretist break-up.

This encounter of forces is the place where the object claws at the visible, showing that what is seen and can be seen does not exist, but rather there is a game of visibilities, of gazes subjected to a constant shifting in time and space. That which 'is seeable' occupies the place of that which 'is not seen', opening up to infinite possibilities. In the same way as when everything is not fixed, the whole cannot be closed, equally if everything is not seen, the visible cannot be closed. But beyond this idea of infinite possibilities, the fundamental thing is that in the end (in the realm of reality) there is a field of potential multiplicities that claw at reality in its apparently unequivocal sense. In this way, form, in revealing itself, brings to the surface its underlying meaning, which is none other than its potential for becoming.

The importance of the post-Neo-Concretist break-up is to have abided by the perception of that moment and given it form. The deconstruction of the traditional artistic object occurs because there is an understanding that the work of art is not an item that exhausts itself. This is why it is important to understand the idea of participation as proposed by Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape. They did not seek audience participation in a gratuitous manner, as a form of co-participation in the plastic-visual experience. What they wanted to 'reveal' was the potential of the visible, which is not limited to the traditional artistic categories. In other words, the work does not stop at the perception of the immediately visible, rather it can assume multiple possibilities, depending on where and when it is seen, in what context, who relates to it and how. What they wanted to bring to the surface of the visible was the possibility of 'becoming', which is why the viewer is invited to experience, through their own actions, the transformation of the image that is contained in an artistic object as a potentiality. What is being questioned is the condition of the visible.

Post-Neo-Concretist artists were moved by a libertarian spirit, guided by Mário Pedrosa and his concept of art as an experimental exercise in freedom, and by a socio-political situation that favoured hope and the construction of a nation with its eyes on the future. The motto of the then President of the Republic and responsible for the construction of Brasília, Juscelino Kubitschek, was 'Fifty years of progress in five'. There was urgency and a desire for things to be done willingly, in order to change Brazil's relations with the world. In 1959 the annual congress of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) was held in Brazil to debate the subject of Brasília and the contributions to the new capital.

Maiolino arrived in Brazil from Venezuela at that time, having had to leave Italy during the war. She was an occasional student at the Fine Arts School in Rio de Janeiro, and there she met Rubens Gerchman, her future husband and father of her children, and Antonio Dias and Roberto Magalhães, all of them motivated by the achievements of the post-Neo-Concretist break-up and ready to observe the world through the eyes of a new figuration. All of them, including Maiolino, took part in the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity), held in 1967 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, with texts by Hélio Oiticica and Waldemar Cordeiro. From then on, they would become an important reference in artistic circles. Together with those artists, Maiolino senses the possibility of an internationalisation of Brazilian art and the reaffirmation of a strong desire, never felt with such great intensity before, to follow a new path.

Perhaps due to her insular condition as a foreigner, Maiolino felt that the underlying proposal of the post-Neo-Concretist break-up was the perception of dynamics as a condition of the visible. More than its formal qualities, what gave post-Neo-Concretism its strength was its belief in the existence of multiple possibilities to do with attitude and thought, something that, to this day, is still greatly influential in Brazilian art. This process brought down the geographic frontiers and the border between art and life, and opened up the possibility of using any type of material as artistic support.

As a foreigner, Maiolino felt at ease in a language and socio-political milieu where displacement was the norm, since it fitted in with her own condition. But she also noticed another aspect not much discussed at the time, but which came to fruition in her own work in the nineties, and that was the fact that, as Mário Pedrosa had observed, Neo-Concretist art is like the prehistory of Brazilian art, since it goes back to the search for language and the beginnings of art. More than other artists of her generation, Maiolino's work of the nineties reinforces that radicalisation of the process of restoring the visible, much as Malevich had done when he rediscovered in the image of the 'desert' the idea of the autonomy of the image, the place where all perplexity is revealed and the image opens up to the reality of the world, free of any tension other than that of its own appearance. And that is why Maiolino's work is like an epiphany.

Dynamics as a Condition of the Visible

What contemporaneity argues – and what Brazilian artists perceived with precision and anticipation after the post-Neo-Concretist break-up – is that art, in order to survive outside the sphere of representation, needs to question the condition of the visible in image production.

Since the Renaissance, the construction of the image had been seen as a way of 'wrapping up' the unequivocal truth. But to escape that in order to arrive at a condition that is open, i.e., that helps us reverberate in as far as we can recognise ourselves in a construction of the 'truth' that refers to our present reality, it is necessary to perceive the dynamic and shifting aspect of the visible as a condition of contemporary perception. Marcel Duchamp shifted the sense by altering the position of the object in the order of mental representation. The post-Neo-Concretist break-up leads to a shifting of the axis of the artistic object, making it oscillate between a subject that proposes and a receiving subject, as a way of emphasising multiplicity as the basis of the visible. Works such as *Parangolé* by Hélio Oiticica; *Caminhando* (Walking) and *Bichos* (Beasts) by Lygia Clark; *Divisor* by Lygia Pape; *Construção-Jogo* (Construction-Play) or *Livros/Objetos* (Books/Objects) by Maiolino, are some examples of the experience of visibility as the dynamics of shifting.

Restricting herself to the minimal elements of form, materials and action, Maiolino gives real and concrete meaning to this investigation, and tries to preserve the possibility for experiencing that which is mutant in its simplest form: by working the clay with primary procedures when making series of little rolls and balls. The idea of the dynamics of the visible is concentrated in the action and in the 'submission' of the materials to action, while trying to preserve, in the plasticity of the form, the moment of the appearance of the image. Hence seriality as repetition of difference. Each new form is always another. In this sense, the artist preserves the fundamental post-Neo-Concretist proposal, which is none other than preserving dynamics as a condition of the visible.

From 1993 onward, with the series of installations *Terra Modelada*, the concept of dynamics as a condition of the visible reaches its maturity. Maiolino attributes these works to the capacity to travel through the different languages of contemporaneity, and adopt the different forms of installation, body art, Conceptual art, performance, sculpture, ephemeral art, etc. She uses action as a way of de-structuring the image and recovering a spirituality that was lost in the divisions of Modernism. The combinations of segments in the installations *Terra Modelada* are elegant because they transmit harmony through a sense of open totality, and present themselves as a critique of the anguished fragmentation of the contemporary world. They restore the meaning of manufacture, not as a

symbolic element, but as a real element, with the potential to recuperate the sense of totality that had been lost through fragmentation.

After the nineties, and a decisive approximation to Victor Grippo during the eighties, when they influenced one another, Maiolino starts looking for ways to give materiality to the present lack of spirituality. To that end, she adopts the 'primitive' act of modelling clay. She adopts the foundations – the prehistory of art – in order to reconcile actuality and posterity.

'The installations Terra Modelada are works in progress, structured by an amalgamation of simple forms, the product of the act of gesture, which, being nature, does not repeat itself, but leads to difference in sameness. These primary forms adopt the shape of the hand that models them – the measure of man – and they remind us of certain aspects of commemorations, of rituals. The ancestral is revived in the process of making, in the ritual of the presented work. These works are not the product of a pre-existing form. Their form changes with the addition of new segments. My hands, in the process of working, away from the supremacy of the gaze and guided by desire, give themselves to the playful, immanent MAKING and incorporate a new function: that of the first mould. We could say that in this obsessive work there is an immanent desire for totality, and that, in the attempt to achieve it and to escape the malaise of contemporary fragmentation, it accumulates fragments. There is a semi-satisfied will, in the sense that the desire for 'the whole' is only achieved in the process, in the work's possibility for becoming, but not in its conclusion, since the work remains open. In the space of the transit of this process, a potential for life is articulated and transformed in the course of time. Immediately the clay will achieve its natural becoming: it dehydrates itself, it solidifies and can become dust again. If we add water to the dust, we'll have another elastic mass, excellent to continue working with.'[\[3\]](#)

In Maiolino's work there is a very particular auto-biographical dimension. Her work is not the result of her biography, rather her life is the self-knowledge she finds in the 'making' of her work. She has always seen herself as an outsider, or as a person on the edge, a circumstance that, although generated by her own history, acquires new dimensions in her since the thought of totality she strived for led her to perceptions that are paradoxical, ambivalent and open to reality. Therefore, she absorbed influences, not as such, but as confirmations of her own discoveries.

This condition of 'interstice', of always 'being' between one thing and another, opened up her experience to the perception of the other: to the idea that there is always an 'other' on the horizon. The force that rises from the place of shifting gives structure to the creative process in the incessant search for change, for, as Catherine de Zegher points out, the lost origin generates a suspension of the present, implying a new beginning and an awareness of transition and mutation.[\[4\]](#)

The lack of origin distorts the limits and allows for a search of the 'always other'. It generates open processes that break the staleness of duality and border on the paradoxical. Thus Maiolino, as nomad, imprints on her work a sense of movement that incorporates all the elements of presence and absence as part of her work.

Born in 1942 in the Italian coastal town of Scalea, Calabria, in the unforgiving times of the Second World War that would come to strongly influence her visual trajectory, she emigrated to Venezuela in 1954 at the age of twelve. She arrived in Brazil in 1960, at the age of eighteen, and enrolled in a course at the National Fine Arts School given by the engraver Oswaldo Goeldi (1895–1961). When the artist became ill and died, she continued her studies under Adir Botelho, Goeldi's assistant.

The fact that she had chosen Goeldi's course and that she was interested in woodcuts demonstrates that Maiolino, with her turbulent life, was searching for a direct and simple form of expression, akin to that memory of her native Scalea. Moreover, Goeldi was a powerful synthesis of Brazilian visual art. We could say he was a Neo-Concretist in reverse. Starting with Expressionism, he achieved an economy of means, with minimal interventions in the matrix, but trying to preserve the maximum

expressivity in the image's final result. Goeldi anticipates the idea that less is more – from an Expressionist vision, strangely enough.

The simple images of the woodcuts, with their sharp contrasts, bring Maiolino close to the popular imagery of O Cordel, as evidenced in one of her earlier works: ANNA. Moreover, what is positive in the form of the woodcut becomes negative in the impression. In other words, the paper receives the impression of the ink from the intact areas of the wood block, the only areas of the matrix untouched by the artist's hand. Inversely, in metal engraving, what is printed is the area engraved by the artist on the plate. It is this coexistence of the positive and the negative that attracted Maiolino to engraving; the fact that it is necessary to leave an area intact – a constituting void – to 'make things seeable'.

From her first plastic experience, this search for an open path becomes apparent, like the ramifications of a nomad's path, her own condition, which is here reaffirmed by her election of the method of engraving, and its engagement with the positive and negative. It is in this movement that she recognises herself, and it is this same structure that will determine her whole artistic career. In the seventies, while staying in New York, she began a series of works that culminated with *Mapas Mentais* (Mental Maps), which reveal the necessity to find one's own limits, to recognise oneself and determine who one is. We could describe these works as an autobiography in reverse. The artist recognises herself through them.

The series *Mapas Mentais*, 1971–76; the metal engraving *Escape Point*, 1971; the series *Projetos Construídos* (Constructed Projects), 1972; and *Buraços/Desenhos/Objetos* (Holes/Drawings/Objects), 1972–76, are works about spatial and mental localisation, as are the poems she wrote at that time. What Maiolino wants is to find herself. Or rather to define that non-place as her own condition and give it expression. It is a moment of doubt, insecurity and political and personal instability. The world at the time was in a process of transformation. And she sees and feels herself in that way. Therefore, she is not constructing an autobiography or a self-portrait through what these expressions say – something precise, affirmative or definitive – about what is already formed or constituted; on the contrary, she is talking about a place of fragility and instability where she can recognise herself. This dimension in Maiolino's work identifies it with a historical moment when minorities are becoming aware of their place in the world. In this sense, Maiolino's work is pioneering, in Brazilian art, because it talks about women's place as a point of listening.

Maiolino and Clark: the Form, the Void and the Process

The idea of empty-full that Lygia Clark had developed found its continuation in Maiolino. The key to Clark's world is process. Works such as *Caminhando*, *Baba Antropofágica* (Anthropophagical Dribble), *Cabeça Coletiva* (Collective Head), *Rede de Elásticos* (Elastic Net) and *Bichos*, all come from a process of traversing and overcoming the basic dichotomies of life, the fragmentation of time between the two established voids (birth and death) that stop us feeling it. Clark wanted to achieve plenitude, which might be the reason why, in the end, she tried to relate art to medicine, creating a third field halfway between art and therapy. But her idea of plenitude is one that is capable of giving man back the complete void as a way of overcoming the nihilist void, as a force capable of reconciling man to the cosmos. Only through the process of making can we find this possibility for plenitude, or rather, the force that will guide us in this journey.

For Clark, man is form and void. And this certainty, which constitutes the very essence of art, is something Maiolino would remark upon. One of the central points of Maiolino's work is the perception that the transition from void to form occurs through a process of explicitation of the potential of art. This is why we keep referring to the importance of making (the process of the action) in the context of her work. It is in this process that she recognises herself as an artist and as a woman. Implicit in this idea is a perception of the body of the woman as a cloak of life. The process of the generation of life implies giving form to the void. Clark and Maiolino transform this experience of the

female body into the process of their artistic manifestations. The multiple possibilities that exist between the idea of form and void refer to the female experience of art.

In works such as the series *Nova Paisagem* (New Landscapes), 1989–90; *Ausentes* (The Absent), 1997–2009; *É o Que Falta* (It's What is Missing), 1993–2009, and *Uns e Outros* (One and the Other), 1996–2009, this process manifests itself in different ways. In *Ausentes* and in *É o Que Falta* the artist refers to what is missing; she presents the remains of what is no longer there. In *Uns e Outros* there is a conjugation between what was left out and what returns to its place. But it is in the execution of *Nova Paisagem*, in which the artist uses the mould for the first time, where the process of the void and the form is manifested through the technique she uses; the traditional technique of sculpture cast from moulds. The execution of the works from this period has three stages: 1) modelling the positive object with clay; 2) execution of the negative mould; and 3) the final positive cast in plaster or cement. This traditional process of casting becomes a work of art in its own right at each stage of the process: the void becomes form and in the form the void is retained.

We could establish a parallel between *Caminhando* and the series *Terra Modelada*, 1994–2009. In these works process is fundamental. For Clark, it is a proposition that turns into experience: it suggests that with a piece of paper and a pair of scissors we can all make a Moebius strip, as a possibility of experiencing that which always moves but is never in the same place. There is a rich reduction of the administration of logic in Clark's proposition. Equally, in Maiolino, the concept does not precede the action, as in the series *Terra Modelada*, for instance. What the artist proposes is an action-concept. Maiolino executes the primordial and fundamental gesture of 'putting her hands on the dough-like clay' as if she were making bread (the staple food), or as when children, in the second stage of childhood, experiment with the process of individuality and separation from the mother's body by playing with their faeces and offering it to their parents. Maiolino reinstates, in the simple gesture of modelling clay, an action-concept that hints at the experience of difference (of the accumulation of difference) as the basis of the experience of freedom, as is the case in *Caminhando* by Clark. In Maiolino, form is not a fusion of the voids that precede and succeed us, as it is in Clark, who hints at the healing powers of art and who, with great precision, detects in this art's potential for transcendence. In Maiolino, art's transcendence lies in matter's formal immanence, which is in itself the concomitant manifestation of absence and presence. For Maiolino, all forms carry the void as the necessary other. There is in her work a sense and a necessity of totality that wants to uncover the obverse and the reverse. Form for Maiolino is the expression of plenitude.

FontAnna

The feeling of plenitude implies the idea of the void as a necessary other, which allows us to establish a parallel between Maiolino and Lucio Fontana. The non-presence, the other, the opposite, the fold, the orifice and even the void, are part of a nomadic vision of the world. People on the move have a constant need to find their own ground. Maiolino's physical and mental displacement finds a place for presence in her work, while reinforcing the idea of her experience as a constant displacement. What the other is in respect to presence circulates and manifests itself in the density of meaning the work offers us and in the artist's need to express herself through a variety of media. Maiolino works with drawing, poetry, sculpture, installation, painting, engraving, film, performance, photography... in other words, she is constantly creating a new ground in the same way as the nomad needs to keep moving.

In fact, only in this way can we understand her works from the sixties and seventies, when she tried to create a series of self-portraits that are totally unique and original. Beyond this autobiographical aspect, we should also remark on their socio-political density as a subtle way of expressing the political, social and ethical conflicts in Brazil at that time. When Maiolino first arrived in Rio de Janeiro, she found a positive and enthusiastic climate, but after 1964, with the military coup and the dictatorship, the situation changed, culminating in 1968 with the signing of the Institutional Act No. 5, which suspended the freedom of collective and individual expression. In the climate of terror that

followed, people were imprisoned or expelled from the country and many artists opted for exile. It is in this context that Rubens Gerchman and Maiolino moved to New York, where they became close to the artist Hélio Oiticica. The answer or visual solution that Maiolino finds for her work at that time is one of the best examples in recent art history of the political relationship between individual and collective action.

It is possible to find in the works of that period a clear approximation to Fontana's work, filtered by the Neo-Concretist experience of Amílcar de Castro, which becomes almost crystalline when described by Maiolino herself:

'From the beginning of the sixties, I was intrigued by the hidden spaces in paper, the reverse, the other space. The matrix, the plate used in the process of engraving, puts us in direct contact with the OBVERSE and REVERSE of the space of impression. At that moment I decide to emphasise the hidden space, the REVERSE, what lies behind, away from the viewer's eyes, the absent, and I start printing on the front and back of the paper. Then, through a series of cuts and folds, I reveal what is printed on the reverse and incorporate it in the work, together with the void created when cutting the paper. The engraving, no longer present uniquely on the plane of the sheet paper, acquires new dimensions, it becomes a graphic object. I title these works Gravuras/Objetos (Engravings/Objects), 1971–72. The need for that other constructed space also takes over the drawings in Desenhos/Objetos (Drawings/Objects), 1971–76. In the engravings, it is through the knife and the fold that that 'other space' is revealed and made present. In the drawings, the slashes dominate. It is the aggressive and spontaneous gesture of slashing that discovers the void, which will be immediately sewn together with thread as a sign of repentance.'^[5]

It is a singular response at a moment when most artists of her generation were concerned with figuration. Her response to the lack of freedom in the country was not an explicit denunciation through realist images, but a gesture: cutting, slashing, folding, sewing, stitching. And it is here that we find the foundations of the gesture in her work as a response/escape to a situation of tension. The same applies to the series of drawings *Invadindo* (Invading), 1971; *Ao Sul* (To the South), 1973; *Os Objetos S.O.S.* (The S.O.S. Objects), 1974; and *Alma Negra da América Latina-Situação Geográfica* (Latin American Black Soul-Geographical Situation), 1976, made during the dictatorship. In the current climate, her situation would be the equivalent of overcoming the pressures of life. Her response was therefore spiritual, and it is here her work approximates to that of Fontana. It is a response that seeks to open (slash) matter in order to create a new space through the act of gesture, a new concept of space (*concetto spaziale*) that implies duration and instant.

Action as a central element of 'making' is what counts for the artist. It is the action of folding the paper, slashing it, stitching it, working it on both sides, sewing it, in order to arrive at the primordial and inaugural gesture of the hands modelling the clay and giving birth to form. It is pure action, pure gesture. It is a moment of absolute spirituality because it precedes any attempt to explain, rationalise or intellectualise. It is pure contact at the precise moment of the action, the presence of duration. As Fontana explains:

'My slashes are above all philosophical declarations. Acts of faith in the infinite, affirmations of spirituality. When I sit and contemplate one of my slashes, I immediately experience a widening of the spirit. I feel like a man free of the stronghold of matter, like a man reunited with the immensity of the present and the future.'^[6]

But slashes for Fontana have a male dimension. They are unique and directed gestures that become the subject of contemplation. For Maiolino, on the other hand, a slash is an opening of 'another' space that aims at totality and becomes the continuity of the surface from which it was cut. This is evident in the various series *Desenhos/Objetos* and in the series *Os Buracos* (Holes), 1972–76, *Espiral* (Spiral), 1975, *Buraco Negro* (Black Hole), 1974, *Céu Estrelado* (Starry Sky), 1976, among others; and also in the *Livros/Objetos*, 1976, *Trajectoria I* (Trajectory I), *Trajectoria II* (Trajectory II), *Ponto a ponto* (Point

by Point), Percursos (Wanderings) and Na Linha (On the Line). Maiolino's proposal is that of a totality constituted by totality and constituting totality. It is an inclusive impulse not to let anything escape. It seeks the whole as a structure that precedes form and manifests itself in the constitution of form. For that reason, many critics nowadays think that Maiolino's work belongs to the feminine discourse. The slash in Fontana is a male gesture, like a knife that cuts and opens a space beyond the work, 'an act of faith in the infinite', as he himself says. In Maiolino, on the other hand, the slash is often made by the hand and it does not seek the infinite but the opposite, the extensive immediate, a closer and more immanent world where the other is not a subject of contemplation but of inclusion, hence feminine.

The Fixed and the Mobile

In Fontana gesture has impetus and grandeur, hence its association with the immensity of time and the vastness of space. There is a sense and a feeling of grandeur, permanence and stability that seek transcendence. In Maiolino, on the other hand, what gives metaphysical meaning to her work is the immanence of action, small gestures that establish an organic division in the dynamics of the reality of her work. Her actions are not limited to an indicative, precise and precious gesture, as in Fontana. They are a sequence of unpretentious gestures, capable of establishing a relationship with the reality of the everyday, as in the act of sewing or cooking.

Fontana's spatial concept becomes in Maiolino the concept of the foundation of another space of self-knowledge. And the Conceptual and Minimal art she discovered in New York widened her experience of the exercise in reduction she had acquired in Brazil with Neo-Concretism. This allowed her to get close, without drama or subjectivisation, to the idea of a body that recognises itself in the process of making. The objective of creating 'another' space is to be able to recognise oneself. In Maiolino, Anna is annA and annA is Anna. It is a palindrome. In the same way, she is interested in both sides of the paper. The filled and the hollow. The inside and the outside. The empty and the full. Only for her these fields are not continuous, as they are for Fontana and even for Clark. For her, there is a separation (the structure of her visual language) that is resolved through sewing, cutting or preserving a graphic guide-line capable of uniting what is separated. In *Desenhos/Objetos*, or in *Livros/Objetos*, the presence of this line is clear.

In the seventies, social movements were repressed and human rights suppressed. This period in history is known as the 'Leaden Years'. But this was also a decade of resistance when artists, intellectuals and students, together with country people and some politicians, opposed the dictatorial regime and began to undermine the foundations of power. The Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) was founded at the end of the seventies as a result of the strikes in the ABC region of São Paulo, the most industrialised region in the country, thus turning a working-class movement into a political party. Mário Pedrosa returned from exile together with other intellectuals, and became leader of the party. Many artists and intellectuals returned to Brazil to fight the dictatorship, which, in the era following President Médici, began to weaken and open up to democracy. After 1974, a period of transition began, in the typical Brazilian manner of adapting to change. And finally, by the end of the seventies, another political reality seemed possible.

In 1971, Maiolino, separating from Gerchman, moved back to Brazil from New York with her two children. There she met the generation of Cildo Meireles, Luis Alphonso, Antônio Manuel, Vanda Pimentel, Artur Barrio, Colares, Amélia Toledo, Afonso Luz, Maria do Carmo Secco and the critic Frederico de Moraes, among others. They all favoured an art against the regime, without being pamphleteering. Some of the works were extremely radical and put the artists at risk for showing the actions of the repressors in public. They created a language of ambiguity through the obvious. It was not direct denunciation, rather a public exposé of the wounds, halfway between fiction and reality, as in the case of Artur Barrios' bloodstained bundles of clothes in the river Arruda, in Belo Horizonte.

In New York, before returning to Brazil, Maiolino found herself limited by financial difficulties, lack of space, and her duties as a wife and mother. Noticing her anxiety over the absence of working conditions, Hélio Oiticica advised her to take up writing. She began to write poems and make a series of conceptual drawings, where she uses words as elements in the construction of the work (*Mapas Mentais*, 1971–76). It is a moment of great experimentation and widening of her artistic discourse, for in Conceptual art she discovered a way of freeing herself from language and adopting a new attitude before art that would allow her to use any kind of language, as the post-Neo-Concretist break-up had suggested. On her return to Brazil, she began to investigate new languages and produced a series of Super-8 films and installations with a strong political and social critique. In her works from the seventies, especially her Super-8 films, the image is fragmented by sudden cuts that deliberately subvert linear narrative. They tend to be close-ups with a dry and dramatic view of reality. They are works with an indicative language where the literal borders on the obvious.

In-Out (Antropofagia), 1973–74, has no beginning, middle or end. It is a sequence of images of two mouths, one male and one female, abruptly edited (in fact, there is no editing), where the images in close-up jump from one to the next, creating a dramatic effect due to the proximity of the camera. These are mouths that cannot talk, incomprehensible dialogues or monologues where one line expresses what we swallow, while others express what we expel. It traces an analogy between censorship and Antropofagia, indicating that the strength of Brazilian culture comes from its capacity to live with adversity, and that the anthropophagous strategy of eating the enemy constitutes a way of escaping. It is in *In-Out (Antropofagia)* where Maiolino establishes a parallel between the political ‘state of emergency’ and the culture of survival through the digestive resistance.

The egg, which appears here for the first time, is transformed into a constant metaphor in her work of that time, and it will become the perfect translation of the situation of ‘political opening’, the name that was given to the transformation of the dictatorial regime after General Ernesto Geisel became president in 1974. It is interesting and important to point out that, in the unconnected and incomprehensible dialogue or monologues of the mouths, the egg appears to come out of nowhere, filling the space of the mouth as if it were the belly of a pregnant woman. It is a metaphor for danger and alertness. For fragility and the richness of change. For what is secretly being gestated. At that stage in her work, Maiolino assumes a rare and pioneering characteristic in Brazilian and international art, which we could identify as a feminine anthropological discourse in art, albeit without any overt feminist political militancy on her part.

Moreover, Maiolino begins to incorporate more and more frequently in her art the ‘small household chores’ (cooking, sewing) as elements of her work, as a place of secret intimacy where the body, immersed in those ‘small’ chores, establishes a rich and vibrant perception of the world that feeds it. For Maiolino these are sacred moments. They are moments when it is possible to recover the world’s spirituality. In this way, she anticipates a tendency that will only crystallise at the end of the seventies and in the following decades. *Versus/Inversus*, 1979, is an intriguing film. Maiolino seems to take up in this film the idea of the double as the possibility for widening perception. The film has similarities with the idea of Guimarães Rosa in *A terceira margem do rio* (*The Third Bank of the River*): the idea of a space where the artist knows for certain that there is no room for enclosed definitions or precisions; none of the river banks are as safe as her own bank, the place for her boat. This is when she gives herself over to the sweet flow of the current, with her empty boat turned upside-down as a way of pointing to that ‘other’ space. Although surprising, this is perfectly natural. As though it had always been there. As though the void had always accompanied her. But it is also a metaphor for the disappeared, those forgotten and silenced by the military regime. Counterpointed with the image of the boat is the lack of ground of the nomad, the lack of security of the State, but also deterritorialisation as a guarantee of imagination and creativity, as the territory of art.

In the performances and installations she did during that period, there is a reduction of the distance between the work’s underlying idea and the form it adopts when being realised. There is a literality, an almost indicative language, between the idea and its execution. Words and images become

potential metaphors, reducing the irreducibility between them. In this way Maiolino comes full circle between the word and the image, and liberates the metaphorical potential of the work creating other levels of meaning. The strength of *Entrevidas*, the same as other installations from that period, lies in the articulation of the obvious to talk about the non-obvious. It is a strategy to disguise, through visual rhetoric, the evident and, above all, that which cannot be said openly in the exceptional political situation of that time. In *Entrevidas*, the popular expression ‘treading on eggs’, referring to the special care we must take in difficult situations, is literally represented by a person walking among eggs, which could be broken at the slightest moment of carelessness. In the centre, a hatched egg: as a metaphor for life overcoming the death and destruction of that uncertain moment of transition of the authoritarian regime. As in many of her works, the ‘obvious’ is transformed into a game of layers, as a truth that hides beneath another truth.

Composition by Dissolution

To perceive fluidity, not as a continuous but as a discontinuous action, is what gives a spiritual dimension to Maiolino’s work, since it means to perceive reality as an open totality that moulds and structures itself as it occurs. The artist administers fragmentation by dissolution. This is why her work has a sense of harmony that challenges the patterns of contemporaneity and its dismissal of beauty. Harmony in Maiolino’s work does not mean a concern with beauty, rather a derivation of the perception of reality as a subterranean current that escapes fragmentation and is at the origin of contemporary pain and suffering.

Acões Matéricas, 1994–2009; Codificações Matéricas, 1995–2009; Marcas da Gota (Drip Marks), 1995–2009; and Vestígios and Indícios, 1995–2009, are all examples of works that deal with ‘chance’ as a form of order in chaos. They search for those secret paths whose existence we doubt, and which reveal that the world is not a be all and end all, but a constant mutation. They are drawings presided by gesture, realised under the principle of gravity, with the obsessive repetition of difference, or made under an elusive gaze, as though they wanted to surprise the senses that hide beneath the invisible. Maiolino’s work confirms our suspicions that there are no certainties preceding form, since form is always in action.

There is order in chaos. It is possible to give in and stop. It is possible to draw without traditional tools, using only gravity and the movement of the body controlling the ink. It is possible to make sculptures modelling the clay as though it were bread dough. All it needs is to let the potential of nature and human freedom flow. These are works guided by the certainty that no single unit precedes form. The artist deals with the facts and effects of reality, and reality is chaos. From a critical perspective, Maiolino tries to arrive at the point where the dissolution of a form allows for the birth of another, creating a continuous flux without beginning or end, but with the circularity of an eternal return toward an open structure capable of absorbing the becoming as mutation.

What does exist is action as a substratum of reality in the process of becoming. And it is through gesture that Maiolino preserves the idea of action as the regulator of the formation of the image. Any plastic meaning is beyond the image. The visible can appear through discontinuities, in fits and starts, in a ‘composition by dissolution’ where the guiding logic is not linearity, but the superimposition of one image over another, annulling and strengthening the previous one in a chain of meanings where the fragment is as powerful as the whole. Maiolino’s work can be understood as a movement of eruptions where every form annuls the previous one, not by opposition or negation, but by the imposition of facts that negate the transcendent idea of metaphysics. Maiolino seeks metaphysics as immanence; she deconstructs visual reality while trying to preserve, with simple determination, the reality of life and art as constant mutation. The harmony we find in her images is the direct translation of what feeds the subterranean meaning of the world, i.e., its fluidity. Thus her images can be displaced, reordered, recomposed and re-accommodated. Her films, her installations and her series of drawings dismiss linearity; they can be apprehended (and always surprise us) at any time or in any situation. They do not answer to an idea of linearity or harmony by the adhesion of the parts to

the whole; rather they strive for the structuring manifestation of an idea that will guarantee harmony through discontinuity as the substratum of reality.

[1] Arêas, J. B. Bergson, 'A metafísica do tempo', in Márcio Doctors (co-ord.), *Tempo dos tempos*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 2003, 1st ed., p. 141.

[2] Ferreira Gullar, 'Teoria do não-objeto', in Aracy Abreu Amaral (co-ord.), *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte: 1950–1962*. São Paul: Serviço Grafico da Secretaria de Cultura, Ciencia e Tecnología do Estado de São Paulo, 1997, p. 90.

[3] Declarations on her work by Anna Maria Maiolino, on the occasion of the exhibition *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*.

[4] Catherine de Zegher (ed.) et al., *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*. New York: The Drawing Center, 2002.

[5] See note 3.

[6] Barbero, Luca Massimo (ed.), et al., *Lucio Fontana*, Venecia, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006, p. 23.

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