

Ahead of her retrospective at London's Whitechapel Gallery, ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO speaks to FERNANDA BRENNER about hunger, displacement and the power of difference in repetition

Mouth Over Matter



THIS PAGE
Por um fio (By a Thread),
1976, from the series
'Fotopoemação'
(Photopoemaction),
black and white analogic
print. Unless otherwise
stated, all images
courtesy: © Anna Maria
Maiolino; photograph:
Regina Vater

OPPOSITE PAGE
Entrevistas (Between
Lives), 1981, from the
series 'Fotopoemação'
(Photopoemaction),
black and white analogic
prints. Photograph:
Henri Virgil Stahl



ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO AND I met for this interview over lunch at her home in São Paulo, where we shared a typical Brazilian meal with a plate of rice and beans. This dish was the starting point for the artist's most emblematic works from the late 1970s. *Arroz & Feijão* [Rice & Beans, 1979] and *Monumento à Fome* [Monument to Hunger, 1978]. Food, as sustenance and as a medium of communication, has been a recurring subject of her six-decade practice.

In his landmark *Manifesto Antropófago* [Anthropophagic Manifesto, 1928], poet Oswald de Andrade argued that Brazil's greatest strength is its tendency to 'cannibalize' the various cultures that have intermingled there, from the country's many indigenous populations to its Portuguese colonizers, the Africans they enslaved and the waves of immigrants from Europe and Asia who disembarked on its shores in the 19th and 20th centuries. 'Rio de Janeiro's astonishing landscape engulfed me,' Maiolino wrote in 2009 of her arrival in Brazil, at age 18, from Italy by way of Venezuela. 'I allowed myself to be eaten like a "sacred enemy", in order to be digested and expelled by Guanabara Bay as a cannibal version of myself.' That Rio landscape included the new objectivity and neo-concrete movements, as well as Maiolino's friends Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, whose artistic influence she absorbed into her diverse multimedia oeuvre.

In Maiolino's work, consumption is both literal and metaphorical, linking hunger and nutrition to the creative act. Insatiably productive, she still sees herself as an apprentice, eager to learn – or devour – all the cultural information that comes her way.

FERNANDA BRENNER *After the recent opening of your retrospective at Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea Milano, you visited Naples for the first time since you left it decades ago, at the age of 12, on a ship bound for South America. Themes of displacement and the migrant condition have informed your work from the outset of your career. What was it like to finally return to the landscape of your childhood?*

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO At first, I didn't feel like going back to Italy to do a retrospective. I cried for six months before finally accepting the invitation. A familiar anguish came back to me. As a child, I felt Italy hadn't properly nurtured me – or, perhaps, that it failed me as a mother. The world was at war when I was born, and my family emigrated to escape the scarcity that followed. But I still bear a feeling of abandonment, as if I was rejected by my homeland at an early age.

Going back to Naples for the first time, after embarking on a migrant ship to Venezuela so long ago, was overwhelming. At the same time, I was confronted by the entrenched trauma of my first departure and experienced an instant reconnection with the Mediterranean basin. I was born in Scalea, in Calabria, only two hours away from Naples.

I was struck again by the seascape, the food, the music and, above all, the 'metaphoric mentality' of the Neapolitans. I marvelled at their ability to make poetry out of everything; I fully identify with that. I arrived in Brazil when I was 18, and it was there I developed my work as an artist. To better assimilate, I deliberately disconnected myself from Italian culture. But, in Naples, I could no longer maintain that stubborn denial of my origins; I felt at home.

FB Recurrent themes in your work – such as incommunicability, displacement and hunger – were already present in your first wood engravings from the 1960s, such as *Schhhiii*, *Anna* and *Glu Glu Glu* [all 1967]. As curator Catherine de Zegher observed in her catalogue essay for *A Life Line*, your 2002 exhibition at The Drawing Center in New York, since the beginning you have related food to language and language to food. How do you understand this relationship and how has it unfolded over time in your work?

AMM My university was my family's dinner table. The youngest of nine siblings, I absorbed adult conversations while sharing home-cooked dishes. In Italy, everything revolves around food. It is the core of our culture and civilization. Living bodies are oriented by an ongoing physiologic cycle: eating, digesting, defecating. It is a continuous process of material transformation, which is represented in *Glu Glu Glu*. I am interested in the logic that allowed humans to move from sustenance to cuisine with a combination of primal urges and cultural sophistication.

These first works arose from an interesting insight. When I arrived in Brazil in the 1960s, artists were searching for what they considered to be the constitutive elements of national identity. In this sense, wood engraving was a very convenient medium to start with; it was my way to land in this new territory and to take part in the discussion. I looked into *Cordel* literature [popular and inexpensively printed booklets containing illustrated folk novels, poems and songs] and was drawn to the uncomplicated way writers represented their own communities' pressing issues. Back then, I felt like a stateless person and, in these first wood engravings, I was dealing both with my personal feelings of displacement and the impossibility of free speech during the Brazilian military dictatorship [1964–85].

THIS PAGE
O Herói (The Hero),
1966/2000, acrylic
ink, fabric and
medals on wood.
Courtesy:
© Anna Maria
Maiolino and Museu
de Arte de São Paulo

OPPOSITE PAGE
Glu Glu Glu, 1967,
acrylic ink and fabric
on wood,
111 × 59 × 13 cm

FB You divide your work into two periods: pre- and post-1989. What happened in 1989?

AMM In the 1970s, I freed my work from figuration and, in 1989, I first experimented with sculptural matter. From that moment on, I started to think more about the intrinsic relationship between the hand and the mind in making art. Some years before, I was going through an intense personal crisis when I met the Argentinian artist Victor Grippo. For a while, I lived with him between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. It was the beginning of the democratization process in Brazil, and there was a general desire for a more light-hearted way of life after so many years of unspeakable horror. This, I imagine, was one of the reasons why so many Brazilian artists were reappraising painting and reconciling it with 'image-making' at that time.

I made a few oil paintings myself in Argentina, in which I obsessively painted oval forms. It felt like I was in a kind of trance, or some sort of active meditation. The egg shapes were the 'ground zero' of something still unknown to me. Grippo entered the room where I was painting these mad works and asked: 'Que buscas?' [What are you looking for?] It was he who suggested I try using clay.

FB And what happened?

AMM When I held the wet earth in my hands, I had no idea what to do with it. It was a fantastic experience, a re-encounter with matter and sensuality. So, I started making a self-portrait from memory and I kept on handling the material until I had made 100 'Annas' from the same chunk of clay. I polished that form so much that, in the end, it looked like a mortuary mask! When I went to my mother's funeral in Venezuela not long after that, I saw on her face the 'mask' I had just made. I look very much like her. She died at 86. I suppose that if you touch a form too much, it begins to die. There is a significant loss of vitality when we labour too long on a single form.

FB So, by quickly repeating simple forms – which you have been producing with unfired clay for the past 20 years – you have attempted to regain that sense of vitality?

AMM My rediscovery of materiality helped me reconsider the importance of process. For example, when I did *Um, nenhum, cem mil* [One, None, One Hundred Thousand, 1993], I realized that the action of the hands is never the same. Its variation is directly related to the body's energy. That such physical gestures produce differences as they're repeated might seem obvious to some, but I found the realization liberating! The aforementioned work departed from a reflection on the individual and the collective; its title is borrowed from a 1926 play by Luigi Pirandello. You are at the same time one, no one and 100,000 people in a public square. The actions performed by a single person bear the presence of many, the collective. I have continued this investigation of difference within repetition since then.

FB Did your focus on the open-ended process of hand-moulding unfired clay lead to the installation works from the series 'Terra Modelada' [Modelled Earth, 1990–ongoing], such as *Aqui & Lá* [Here & There, 2012], which you presented at *documenta (13)*?

AMM Yes. The installations are the accumulation of the simple forms I can make with my hands – coils, lines, loops, balls – which are also a memory of the gestures that originated them: kneading, rolling, tearing. I wanted to make sculptural works with more hand-moulded parts in less time, increasing the work's entropy, its inner energy. The prolonged repetition of the same gesture expands the duration of the working process: it makes time visible in the clay. In this kind of work, I pursue the exhaustion of matter, which is also the exhaustion of my own body. I am made out of matter, like clay. The idea of seriality became part of my language.







FB *In the capitalist mentality, hands-on labour – as opposed to intellectual work – is an overvalued symbol of productivity and efficiency. This somewhat dated idea assumes a different meaning in relation to your work. The repetition of the gestures you define as ‘the hand’s vocabulary’ attempts to reconnect with the most elementary forms of labour, which give us shelter and nurture us with food and affection. In your work, physical activity is inseparable from mental activity and is seen as a structuring element of communal living, closer to the tribal mentality than to the modern industrial society’s division of labour, in which repetitive work alienates and disarticulates individuals.*

AMM The image of the ‘hand that does’ is part of our daily life, something all cultures have in common. The concept of seriality helped me realize that I don’t need to create something new at all times; the process of manual repetition is itself revealing. We can all relate to the rolling of dough and the mixing of cement.

Nutrition, or a lack thereof, has always been broadly important to me. The works *Arroz & Feijão*, *Monumento à Fome* and *Entrevidas* [Between Lives, 1981] were all made during Brazil’s democratization process, at a time when there was real physical starvation in the country

“My clay works pursue the exhaustion of matter, which is also the exhaustion of my own body.”

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO

OPPOSITE PAGE
‘Errância Poética’
(Poetic Wanderings),
2018, exhibition view,
Hauser & Wirth,
New York. Courtesy:
© Anna Maria Maiolino
and Hauser & Wirth;
photograph:
Timothy Doyon

THIS PAGE
Monumento à Fome
(Monument to Hunger),
1978, performance
documentation
as part of *Mitos Vadios*
(Vagabond Myths),
Rua Augusta, São Paulo



as well as a hunger for information and knowledge. That hunger is still out there. Little has changed since I first completed *Arroz & Feijão*: one-third of the world eats a lot while two-thirds starve. I suppose that, in indigenous cultures, such perverse hierarchies don’t exist. People all work together to secure the livelihood of the entire community. Hierarchy and privilege inform our food-supply chains and cause all kinds of deprivations. The seeds that germinate on the plates in my installation represent the promise of life in the face of adversity; they are a symbol of resilience and regeneration.

FB *You presented Monumento à Fome for the first time in Mitos Vadios [Vagabond Myths], the infamous 1978 happening organized by Ivaldo Granato and Hélio Oiticica in a vacant lot in São Paulo. What was the initial response to that installation?*

AMM *Mitos Vadios* was a direct response to the first Bienal Latinoamericana, which had just opened in São Paulo on the theme ‘Mitos e Magias’ [Myths and Witchcraft]. The title of the happening pilloried the exhibition, which we considered completely estranged from the political situation at that time and not representative of local artists’ concerns. *Monumento à Fome* is a very direct, single image representing the lack of available food in Brazil at the time: five kilos of rice and five kilos of beans in plastic bags, tied up with a black ribbon and standing on a black table. The black ribbon symbolizes grief. During the opening, the artist Antonio Manuel accused me of making a ‘museological’ work and suggested I throw the rice grains at the public like confetti at carnival, as a more performative act. I turned my back on him and literally sat on the work! I was planning to take it back home to feed my children. Some people think I have a temper, but the conceptual coherence of my art is what matters most to me. How could I waste food when making a statement about hunger?

FB *We did most of this interview while having lunch together. The first thing you mentioned when we started talking was that your work starts from the mouth...*

AMM The mouth connects our interior and exterior. It is how we eat and speak – our first physical link to the world. I told you before that my university was my family’s dinner table; as a child, I felt I was swallowing those conversations along with the food, and this nurtured my imagination and my intellect. My Super-8 film *In-Out Antropofagia* [In-Out Anthropophagy, 1973] is about the mouth that consumes and produces language.

FB *What are you working on now?*

AMM I am deeply concerned with the current political situation in Brazil, and in the world. My working ethics have never changed and I am still haunted by the same ghosts of gender inequality, social injustice and all other forms of oppression.

In the past few years, I have been doing more directly political works. The selection I presented in the 2018 group show ‘Imannam’, at Pivó in São Paulo, is a good example: I rearranged audiovisual pieces and visual poems, from the 1970s to 2010, as a single installation. This presentation was the product of the critical eye of Anna, at 77 years of age, actively working and closely following what is going on in the world today ●

FERNANDA BRENNER is founder and artistic director of Pivó, an independent non-profit art space in São Paulo, Brazil, and a contributing editor of Frieze.

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO is an artist based in São Paulo, Brazil. Her solo exhibition at Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea Milano, Italy, was on view from 29 March to 1 September. Her first retrospective in the UK will open at Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK, on 25 September.