

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO:

Anna Maria Maiolino (b. 1942) stands as one of Brazil's leading contemporary artists.

Throughout her extensive oeuvre, the Italian-born Brazilian artist has developed a compelling poetic language across a wide range of disciplines—video, film, photography, sculpture, drawing and writing. In her body of work, she explores her identity as a woman, a woman artist, and an immigrant, especially under the military dictatorship in Brazil from the 1960s until the 1980s. As her work has influenced generations of artists all over the world, revisiting it today offers a great opportunity to explore new perspectives on life and living together. Her work continues to confront us with the power of the artist's imagination and her own sensibility towards human conditions and her acute awareness of social and cultural deficiencies in daily life and how to address them.

**“I AM DRIVEN
BY GREAT
CURIOSITY
AND THE
DESIRE TO
EXPERIMENT”**

INES GOLDBACH Many of your works revolve around the body: the political body, one that reflects both fragility and strength, political resistance even, the female body, the body of a mother. You draw on concepts from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and it's interesting to see their enduring relevance. How do you perceive the current emphasis on the body at a moment when your work is presented and exhibited in vastly different contexts and countries—here in Basel, for example, but also on a grander scale in Brazil, Argentina, and Italy? Meanwhile, this is taking place at a time when the world is grappling not only with war and political tensions, but also with a heightened awareness of the body's vulnerability in the face of health crises and climate change.

ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO In anthropology and sociology it is widely recognized that humankind is interconnected. Therefore, a single human being has as its most precious asset the entire combined heritage of humanity, and humanity gains added value from the potential of each individual. I have tried to make this one of my life's paradigms. Since the beginning, I have known that seeking greater meaning, wholeness, has been an immanent desire of mine. Faced with the impossibility of achieving it, I went on to create a body of work of multiple meanings and poetic and political propositions. To paraphrase a popular Brazilian song, “I'm not just a one-note artist.” I'm driven by great curiosity and the desire to experiment.

From the 1970s on, in addition to drawing, I incorporated other media into my work, Super 8 film, audiovisual media, photography, installations, and writing. Undoubtedly, my own body was the poetic support of several works from this period, among them the photo series *Fotopoemação* (Photopoemaction). Some of my Super 8 films, videos, poems, and sound works were made using pre-verbal sounds in which the mouth becomes the protagonist, the body.

IG I'd like to expand on the quote “I'm not just a one-note artist,” especially considering your multifaceted work, which not only includes installations, paintings, texts, and poems, but also films, photographs, and performance documentation. It seems that language has been an important component from the beginning. For example, your clay sculptures may embody a thought, a word, a pause, or a phrase. Would you say that impression is accurate?

AMM It's true that I've used various media in my work, and I tend to say my work develops in continuous spiral movements, now moving outward, now moving inward to the central points of interest that nourish the work, aspects of everyday life, nature, matter, earth, the body, sounds, concepts, the transcendental, the infinite, and the part. Works emerge that suggest digestion, defecation, the inside and the outside, and the political, all of which are also manifested in the body. *Fotopoemação* from the 1970s is clearly socio-political, but also *Entrevidas* (Between Lives), a performance from 1981. These works present metaphors based on experience, emphasizing the possibility of a reality consisting of ideas through the use of a body of senses connected by a variety of techniques. In this way, a web of meanings is formed, creating a multitude of languages.

IG You were born in southern Italy, and after emigrating to Brazil, you came back to Italy for the first time in the 1960s for an exhibition. There, Arte Povera was making waves, with artists like Jannis Kounellis, Marisa and Mario Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, and others. Given this vibrant environment, did you consider returning to Italy for good at the time? Your work could undoubtedly have served as an important source of inspiration there, especially in the 1960s and '70s, when Brazil was under military dictatorship. What factors influenced your decision to stay in Brazil?

AMM I was born in Calabria in 1942. Unfortunately, I am a daughter of the war and of fascism. I was the youngest of ten children in a large, noisy family, typical of southern Italy. My parents came from another era, having benefited from a great humanist education, and they highly valued knowledge and art. My father was born in the late 1800s and my mother in the early 1900s. In 1948, the family moved to Bari in the Puglia region, so that my older brothers could attend university. I remember my childhood and the post-war years before emigrating to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1954. The first twelve years of my life in the south of Italy were certainly fundamental for my development as a person and as an artist. I would even say that most of my work results from reminiscing about the cultures of those lands: the preparation of food, the work in the fields, the harvests, the singing and music, the rocky landscape with its caves, the bright blue sky and sea divided by the horizon. I would say that my most primitive reactions and character are Calabrian, but I am not well-versed in Italian art. I have lived most of my life far from my country of birth.

Revisiting Italy, I only ever stayed there for just a few days at a time and never had the chance to travel as a tourist, so I still don't know the country. 2010 was the year that I had my first exhibition at the gallery I now work with, Raffaella Cortese. A few years later, I began working with Hauser & Wirth, headquartered in Switzerland. Then, in 2018, I had the privilege of putting together a retrospective, *O amor se faz revolucionário*, at Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan, curated by Diego Sileo. I have since returned on numerous occasions, always for work, but always for just a few days at a time. Without a doubt, it was my art that reconciled me with my homeland, although I feel torn for having been so far away for so long.

It was the São Paulo Art Biennial that allowed me to see all kinds of art from around the world, including Italy. This is how I became familiar with the works of important Italian artists of the 1960s. From 1964 to 1981, despite the censorship, I—like many artists—was able to work and resist. Today, our means of communication have made all countries neighbors, and the pandemic has currently everyone under the threat of death. It concerns me to see the rise of far-right politics around the world. Right now, Brazil is one example of this. However, my art also owes a lot to my shared experiences with Brazilian artists. I think Brazilian modern art is very strong and relevant, it is extremely vibrant in its experimentation. My assimilation into Brazil has been a long process, but I can say that working with art has been a curative process for me in many respects. I arrived in Brazil at the age of eighteen, with the heavy and painful baggage of an immigrant. I cherish my strong ties to this country that welcomed me, where my two children were born, and where I made my home.



IG You mentioned the situation in Brazil during the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1981. Did you ever think of leaving? Aside from family considerations, what motivated you to stay during those tumultuous times?

AMM In 1968, my then-husband, Rubens Gerchman, was awarded a grant and we decided to move to New York where he could use it. The grant allowed us to leave Brazil during difficult times, where the threat of repression and censorship loomed over us. You could say we exiled ourselves. Rubens and I were completely unknown artists in New York. There was nothing strange about that; we were not only newcomers, we were Latin Americans, which back then amounted to being nothing. In a 1997 text, I wrote, "I decided to assume all possible fates that had been laid out for me, without leaving anything out. Being an artist and being a woman have been part of the same repertoire since the beginning." I also felt a duty to address political and social issues. In fact, this sense of duty has strongly guided some aspects of my life. I was very young when I had to take a stand on reality, to balance my obligations as a woman and a mother with my desire to create art and discover who I was.

Spending almost three years in New York left a lasting impression on me. It was hard for me, however, not to be able to participate in the cultural life of the city with two small children and other difficulties, exacerbated by everyday life and financial hardship. The situation led to the breakdown of my marriage, and in 1971,

I returned to Rio de Janeiro with the children, separated from Rubens. We divorced shortly thereafter. Back in Rio de Janeiro, I had to start over from square one. The dictatorship was at its worst. I felt powerless and the thought of leaving Brazil with two children became impossible. I had to find a way to make a living. Still, I put my energy into my work. Despite the difficulties upon my return to Brazil, it was one of my most productive periods. It was a time of great experimentation, especially with drawing and the so-called new media at the time: Super-8 film and performance.



IG Regarding your Super-8 films from the 1970s—particularly *X* and *Y* (both 1974)—which still elicit powerful emotions in visitors, they appear to emphasize the fragility and vulnerability of the human body. In the films, the female body takes center stage, in all its beauty, even in moments of danger. The blindfolds, the tears, laughter blending into screams, and so on, raise the question of how you managed to produce and breathe life into such politically charged imagery during such a tumultuous time.



AMM My imagery is first and foremost visual; even when I write texts or make videos and sounds, I work with emotions, mental visions that support my production in different media. During the oppressive years when Brazil was under military censorship, I tried to emphasize emotions with audiovisual works like those made using Super 8. Even repression expressed in art can be a means of transformation with a strong emotional impact. Like many Brazilian artists who felt trapped, I invented loopholes. I used poetic metaphors to circumvent and resist censorship in a fragile attempt to defend freedom and human rights. In the 1970s, I very much devoted myself to experimenting with different media as a way of extending the discourse of the work. That's how I started filming with Super 8 and creating installations and performances, all in the pursuit "to possess truth in a soul and a body."¹ I hoped to find a new body-soul-peacemaker by working with media completely unknown to me.

In 2008, I began filming a series of TV news broadcasts with a digital camera, the *LOG* series. One of these is my video *The Hydra*. These works could be defined as

X, 1974
Video, color, sound
3' - DVD
Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese,
Milano / Albisola Superiore

Y, 1974
Video, color, sound
2' 28" - DVD
Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese,
Milano / Albisola Superiore



self-documentaries, since my person is present in the recorded images, or through my voice. The narrative is a hybrid language of meanings due to the overlapping of facts and emotions close to my own feelings, other times it is coupled with the speech of others. In these ever-changing and nomadic works, memory is the great, steadfast interpreter of time, the bridge connecting past and present.

IG For your solo exhibition at Kunsthau Basel-land, we had the opportunity to present the installation and performative work *Entrevidas (Between Lives)* in Switzerland for the first time. The work involves navigating over several chicken eggs distributed across the floor—each beautiful and perfect in its shape, fragile as the human body and life itself. This year, you performed the same work with

De: Para: (From: To:), from the series Fotopoemção, 1974-2016
B/w photograph, digital print
75 x 48 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano / Albisola Superiore
Photo: Max Nauenberg



Sou um Múltiplo de Oito (I am a Multiple of Eight) - (Black/raku), 2012
Raku ceramic piece in cement base on metal table
28 x 58 x 28 cm
Element: 24 x 70 x 40 cm (base), 76.6 x 54.6 x 33.6 cm (table)
Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano / Albisola Superiore



Performance in ATTO, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan, April 20, 2015
Performer: Sandra Lessa
Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri



Untitled, from the series *Incompletude*, 2019
 Acrylic ink on paper
 100 x 70 cm
 Courtesy the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano / Albisola Superiore
 Photo: Nicola Morittu



Performance "Entrevidas" at Neue Nationalgalerie, 2023
 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
 Performer: Gabriel Sitchin
 Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul



Entrevidas (Between Lives), from *Photopoemaction* series, 1981/2010
 Black and white photographs and digital print
 88 x 56 cm each
 Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano / Albisola Superiore

your grandson for the first time in Germany at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It was first realized in the 1980s—how has the performance evolved through time and different contexts?

AMM The historical cycles of humanity, with their dramas, conflicts, and violence, repeat themselves over time. Without a doubt, humanity today is once again facing major social, cultural, global crises that have never been seen before. Contemporary velocity and social media immerse us in the problems and catastrophes that plague humanity: unending, undeclared wars, intolerance among different religions and ethnicities, issues of gender, the struggle of minorities, and the plight of immigrants. In this unencouraging panorama, we (artists) now emphasize the production of performances and works that take a critical view of social reality, that appropriate things from the real world—the surroundings.

Entrevidas was first performed in 1981 on Rua Cardoso Júnior, a street in Rio de Janeiro in front of my old studio. It was a sensitive moment in Brazil during the country's redemocratization or so-called "political opening" after many years of military dictatorship. Ultimately, the performance and installation are an attempt to transform lived experience into a poetic work, a product of metonymy that turns conscious experience into a poetic and moral practice. The performer navigates this minefield with tension—any misstep could threaten an egg. Meanwhile, the egg, that archetype of life par excellence, tells us that despite everything, life will resist, as it is continuity.

IG I recently had a chance to see your early paintings at Raffaella Cortese in Italy, and what a pleasant surprise. Painting inherently involves planning: preparing the canvas, priming it, choosing the colors, etc. There, I sensed a unique blend of deliberation and intuitive spontaneity. Similarly, when it comes to performing with others—you can plan and anticipate, but you also always have personalities to work with and the moment in which the performance unfolds. This dynamic extends to some of the materials you use. Clay can be shaped by hand, but can also yield unexpected results, like drying cracks. Could you elaborate on the roles of planning and intuition in your work, and those of the materials?

AMM The painting series *Ações Matéricas* (Matter Actions), shown at Raffaella Cortese this year, began in 1994 and is ongoing, giving it the character of a life cycle. The chronological time spent on each canvas is nullified for the viewer. Creating the series involves a conscious interplay of materials: my impulses, the ink, and gravity. The ink poured onto the canvas is the agent that transforms the surface; it drips, inscribes, traces. It condenses when it comes into contact with air as it travels, stops, resumes. Guided by gravity, it runs down the canvas as I hold it in my hands. Much like a ship's captain steering the rudder, I navigate the canvas through air, embracing chance with a watchful eye. With these pictorial works, I welcome the same sense of joy and freedom as working with clay. In the series *Terra Modelada* (Modeled Earth), chance intertwines with the actions of the hands during execution. The hands' actions carry a perennial gesture, dating back to prehistoric times. The repeating, varying clay shapes of the *Terra Modelada* installations result from real, everyday gestures, the same ones used to prepare food.



With this, humble gestures enter art history, rehabilitating labor and the poetics of making beyond industrialization. The result is a system of signs of correspondence with labor as a code of life.

IG Since our initial interaction several years ago, initially linked to the exhibition but extending beyond, I've witnessed your wonderful rapport and vibrant exchange with young people, in particular. This includes your niece, who performed in Berlin as mentioned before, as well as other family members, your studio team, and young curators like Paulo Miyada, who curated a stunning retrospective of your work in Brazil and Argentina. Do these interactions lend your work a bridge into the future, as it were, infused with the love, passion, knowledge, and dedication of all these individuals?

AMM When answering these questions, I like to refer to thinkers who came before me and who have taught me a lot. As Henri Matisse once said, "The development of the arts arises not only from the individual, but also from an accumulated strength, the civilization that precedes us. One can't just do anything. A talented artist cannot do just as he likes. If he only used his talents, he would not exist. We are not the masters of what we produce. It is imposed on us." I find this last sentence stimulating and thought-provoking, and I think he's right. The artists speak as unique individuals but also wield intuitive gifts that enable them to embody and transform the present and the collective past, thus guiding us into the future. My interactions with my young assistants and my few young artist friends are enriching. They offer new ways of looking at my surroundings, renew me; I feel less discontent with the present reality.

THE INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED IN SEPTEMBER 2023 AND INCLUDES ABRIDGED PASSAGES OF INES GOLDBACH'S COMPREHENSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO ON THE OCCASION OF HER SOLO EXHIBITION AT KUNSTHAUS BASELSTADT IN 2021, PUBLISHED IN LISTENING TO ARTISTS (VIENNA: VERLAG FÜR MODERNE KUNST, 2022).

É o que Sobra (What is Left Over), from the series *Fotopoemação*, 1974/2010
Black and white photographs and digital print, 62 x 153 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano / Albisola Superiore
Photo: Max Nauenberg



In the sky I am one and many and as a human I am everything and nothing
Installation view, Kunsthaus Baselland 2021
Photo: Gina Folly