

Filminhos (Little films) close-up

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Any thoughts on Anna Maria Maiolino's films have to start with the close-up, her favoured frame composition. As radical for what it leaves out as for its scale perversion, the close-up is unique to cinema: it presents a bow to visibility at the expense of an ordered distribution of features and limbs.

Huge decapitated heads floating on the screen horrified early cinema viewers and Maiolino's close-ups profit from this same estrangement as they gravitate towards the face, only to reorient the frame's axis away from the reassuring symmetry of eyes nose and mouth.

Amplification can have two effects in film, both fully explored by the artist: the first is a de-familiarising assault on the human body; the second, is a conceptual expansion of sense making. Reframing and magnifying highly expressive organs, Maiolino develops, across her film oeuvre, their signifying potential. Detached, mouths, eyes and hands fill the frame ready to speak a new language.

Trying to recover where the artist's filmmaking meets her plastic sensibility I begin in reverse, with two minor self-portraits, *Um Momento*, *Por Favor* (One Moment,

Please) and *Quaquaraquaa*, both made between 1999–2004. Conspicuous for their domestic character these two little films show how the magnifying lens transmutes, in a way exclusive to cinema, Maiolino's daily actions.¹

In 'The Doing Hand', Paulo Venâncio Filho extols the implications of Maiolino's hand imprints: '...these clay objects... may very well represent the sum total of the daily actions that the hand performs. They are concrete witnesses of the routine doings that customarily dissipate without leaving a record. In each of them, the time and action necessary for performance are present. They literally deserve the generic name that designates the art object: work.'²

Maiolino's films, I claim, also work on the trace, intensifying through closeness cinema's indexicality. As a moulding fingerprint the camera presses close onto what is small, the daily routines and pleasures; and then, on the screen, she hangs it big so all can see the workings of time on matter.

Pliable presences

Described as a document on a pause, *Um Momento*, *Por Favor* announces its impermanence already in its title. Of all her films, this intimate portrait is the most infused with transience. As such it may illuminate how film, an indexical medium prone to registering time passing, adds to the artist's insistent interest in vestiges and traces.

An unidentified body part takes up the entire screen and in one continuous take the camera records a living, sonorous mass. As it bobs up and down and side to side to the rhythm of an Italian song, two lines of bushy hair and the fringes of eyes emerge at the bottom of the screen.

The easiest access to identity, a full-face portrait, is bypassed. The camera is fixed but used as a distorting mirror. Deformed by closeness, a face offers itself to the camera and turns, allowing each neglected facial corner equal display time. The cheek, or an eyelid corner, areas adjacent to main features are as closely scrutinised as an eye or mouth. Roberto Murolo sings *Serenatella a 'na cumpagna 'e scola*, while we see a curious bulbous

surface: it is fleshy, it moves and is inscribed with various blemishes, sunspots, lines. A dermatologist could identify these marks, but of course another kind of identity is at stake in this closely perused topography.

Giving the camera its objective, de-familiarising, power, Anna the performer, pierces her image with an atavistic relation to an archaic south. Remade into a strange terrain, a desert with grassy mounds, ridges, dents and plateaus, her face grounds and proclaims her Southern Italian identity. She sings to *Napule Canta* (*Naples Sings*, an anthology of Neapolitan songs). Murolo's voice is the signifier of Neapolitan folk-song heritage, which he helped recover through research and records. The lyrics speak of a yearned-for contact with a school friend, a nostalgic mourning for a life spoiled, a missed opportunity. Maiolino's family immigrated from Scalea after the war and when Anna adds her own voice, she is poignant and funny in her passionate, off-key echoing: Some words she remembers, while others become la-la-la-las. The refrain '*Vita sbagliatta vita sbagliatta*' (spoiled life) is bellowed in plaintive pleasure, as her mouth occupies the entire frame.

Um Momento, Por Favor layers many temporalities: a joyous presence declared through music in the now and a wearied surface ridged by traces of a personal, transnational history. This same interest in how history is made flesh/matter is evident in Maiolino's plastic and clay work. When, in 1997 she speaks of her *Novas Paisagens* (New Landscapes) series, she is keenly aware that these strange formations, in concrete moulded from clay and plaster, allude to land seen from afar. Topological metaphors proliferate, linking manual work to earth: 'These are silent, desert soils that renew the question of territoriality and revive nostalgia for the land.'³ And speaking of her *Terra Modelada* (Modelled Earth) series *Mais* [More], and *Mais de Mil* [More than one Thousand], etc., from 1995) she pushes further the culture/nature connection, manifesting her wish to add her own gesture to other traces, either literally or metaphorically: The 'topological accumulation of these same/different forms' is as moving as 'the sight of a tilled field with the imprints of man and cultivation... The clay turns into stone, cracks. It is in a state of surrender to what the future holds for it. Beyond doubt, one day it will return to dust. And once

1. Sonia Salzstein develops beautifully the implications of Maiolino's 'stubborn insistence on the empirical', 'her attraction to elementary materials and processes related to the home'. Salzstein, 'With Eyes in her Hands', in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*. New York: The Drawing Center, 2001, p. 346.
2. Paulo Venancio Filho, 'The Doing Hand', in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, p. 284. This essay was originally published in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art In, of, and from the Feminine*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, p. 441-43. Although the author is non-specific about which work he refers to, I assume it is the *Modelled Earth* series of the mid nineties.
3. Anna Maria Maiolino. From a 1997 description of the *Novas Paisagens* (New Landscapes) series made between 1989 and 1990. *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, p. 221.

more blended with water, it will add new forms to the physical processing of matter, sustaining my desire.⁴

A similar sense of passing haunts Anna's face, her cracked voice. A tiny pause in between songs makes us aware of the close-up's erosive force. Skin and flesh acquire a primitive landscape connotation: a human topography moved by music and memory. In this brief silence we can appreciate the manner in which Maiolino treats her own body as material, pliable and open to wear, to damage. The same imperfections, the same marks of exhaustion left by her moulding hands on clay, are left on her body, and those she unabashedly shows.

Relying on music and an oblique perspective, *Quaquaraquaa* registers Maiolino's sensorial courting of contingency. She attempts in film the once-only trace, and for that she needs to film in one continuous take. Profiting from the high definition camera's ease and economy she has done more than six versions of the film, all in great fun. Still, she distinguishes these 'drafts' from editing seen as a posteriori correction, a form of fixing chance. Without cuts and in a single take, her identity is actualised in the same fluid gesture that moves her body and records the world around it.

In her nineties work in clay (the rolls, balls, little snakes), she escapes from a domesticated eye and the overly neat, diagrammed surface, through a manual and ludic coexistence with making. In film the primacy of the eye is also denied.⁵ Maiolino uses a subjective camera, attached to her head to explore her quotidian. She performs domestic tasks: she picks up a cup, a glass, she waters her plants on the balcony, drops some herbs into a boiling water pot. She also dances to the rhythm of Elis Regina's samba (A Brazilian singer from the sixties and seventies). She remains headless and body-less except for a couple of disjointed fragments briefly seen on reflections – her feet clad in Chinese floral slippers and her face blurred on the kettle. Her hands and arms, privileged by the viewfinder, guide her becoming-dance. Her buoyant rhythm transmitted through the camera is capped by a wonderful gesture, when Maiolino grabs a duster and delicately dusts off her framed engravings and watercolours. Flowing from this cleaning gesture, the duster briefly designs the contour of the frame designating the screen as canvas. Through this

4. Anna Maria Maiolino, 'Works in Progress,' unpublished text, 1 March 1997. Cited by Catherine de Zegher, 'Ciao Bella: Ins and Outs of a Migrant', in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, p. 95.
5. See Maiolino's interesting comments on the ways the making hand escapes the tyranny of the eye in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, p. 254.
6. In the catalogue *Maiolino gravadora* (Maiolino Engraver), Clarival do Prado Valladares states beautifully how her interest in the northeast's popular woodcuts allows her to adopt elements of a mature, collective product into her own art. Cited in *Anna Maria Maiolino*, São Paulo: Editora J. J. Carol, 2007, p. 74.
7. Helio Oiticica. 'General Schema of the New Objectivity', in Alesander Alberro and Blake Stimpson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, 40:42.

performative gesture she, domestic-artist, makes the film screen into one of her surfaces, one of her faces.

In these films the permeability between daily life and art registers the same sense of toil and vestigial exploration present in her paper and clay work. As we turn to an earlier period of her film work, the seventies and eighties, we note a significant difference in tone. A greater stridency and conceptual intent is evident, even as her basic frame composition – the close-up – remains the same.

In and Out: the politicaliminal

Maiolino starts making films in the seventies at a point when Brazilian authoritarianism is in full force. The impulse to go out into the world, to address and correct the misrepresentation of social and political issues often leads first-time makers to documentary. Anna Maria responds instead by sharpening the conceptual possibilities of film, making it continuous with her performances and photo-sequences interventions. Moved by a social and political urgency, her seventies films and performance display a cutting, trenchant quality. The close-up helps her delineate her minimal expressive unit – the mouth, the eye – while exerting pressure over it.

Featuring single, magnified body parts, the films display the same stark graphic sense present in Maiolino's early wood-block prints – basic human shapes figuring a family triad (*A Viagem* (A Travel), 1966); black holes in white totems standing for cut out mouths and cries (*Glu Glu Glu* 1967). Along with sixties Brazilian artists of the New Figuration such as Antonio Dias and Rubem Gerchman, Maiolino used a simplified lexicon referencing kitsch, popular and mass media elements such as tabloid headlines and comic strips. Borrowing the language of clothesline literature (*literature de cordel*), Maiolino was able to voice her core biography (*ANNA*, 1967) in a collective and popular register.⁶

The quest for 'the popular' takes many forms in Brazilian art of the sixties, from the incorporation of popular iconography to participatory modes of art creation. In the initial phase of the dictatorship, between

1964 and '68 when links between intellectuals and the masses were severed, the question of 'the people' inflames artistic discourse. In his 'General Schema for New Objectivity', in 1967 Oiticica voiced his concern: '...how to, in an underdeveloped country, explain and justify the appearance of an avant-garde, not as a symptom of alienation but as a decisive factor of its collective progress?'⁷ Social commitment has to be balanced with a cautious distance from a facile populism and it is in part this tension between abstraction, concept and direct embodiment that generates the most interesting art of the sixties and seventies in Brazil, Neo-Concretism.

In a brilliant formal coup, *In-Out* (*Antropofagia*) (In-Out (Anthropophagy)), Maiolino's first film from 1973, conjoins questions of personal and political expression. A black tape covers a mouth in an obvious reference to censorship. In the next shot a shadow slides over a mouth in a filmic unveiling of the gag. Like a curtain opening-up a new stage in the show, we attend to a serial permutation of mobile holes, mouths standing for faces, uncanny gates of humanity. At first the mouths are clenched, as if wanting to speak but being prevented from it. Verbal language is muted and taken over instead by abstract, concrete music. Instead of hearing the words, which are visibly masticated, articulated, angrily or ironically mouthed, we see only their expressive, intentional fury. Sound flirts with meaning, making references to affects without allowing us to exactly name them. Laura Clayton de Souza's soundtrack is allusive but disjointed. We hear guttural sounds when the mouth first opens, ironic laughter, and at one point a ritualistic *batucada*, a drum beat.

Red or black lipstick is used to create 'characters'. They are mini-masks as well as structuring devices. Red, black and white, the main colours of Maiolino's prints, become here part of a differential system, signalling otherness and dialogue. A speeded-up image, and a faster cutting between the two colours, casts this dialogue as rapid fire. A male mouth with red lipstick moves in slimy slow motion surrounded by beard stubble. Inside the cave an egg appears, its concavity protruding as a question; teeth smile and then grimace in a show of anger.

This serial explosion of indeterminate meaning rests purposefully open. At one point the mouth ingests a black

line, and in a characteristic magic trick the line, multiplied into red, beige and black interwoven threads, is spat back. In a barely disguised metaphor, visceral creativity is figured through these drooled colours as they pour forth from the mouth. Reduced to making faces, the mouth, in this displaced, minimalist, histrionics ends up cumulatively representing the very idea of language, a problematic, thwarted language.

An undercurrent of drama and urgency charges the series despite the fact that the gagged mouth at the end seems to be a bookend to match the film's opening. If, however, political reference to censorship seems artificially appended to the work, what does this sense-stretching film mean to say?

Hanging over the void in between 'in' and 'out', the open mouth is a literal chasm of sense – this is Maiolino's reflection on creative and political existence. One of the last shots features a mouth and nose, inhaling and exhaling, the sole image in sync with natural breathing sound. In this period of *sufoco* (suffocation) as the years of hard-line authoritarianism after the Constitutional Act 5 – AI-5 were called, simple, unobstructed breathing equals resistance. More than that, for Maiolino being is indistinguishable from art-making and in this first film she asserts her artistic identity. The threads coming into and out of the mouth prefigure her 1976 book-objects, stitched in such a way as to place in contact negative and positive areas of paper (*Percurso*s [Wanderings]; *Trajatória* [Trajectory]; *Na linha* [On the line]).

Including the word 'anthropophagy' in the bracketed portion of her film's title, Maiolino also reclaims her Brazilianness, affiliating her inquiry on the anxious poetics of speech to Brazilian modernism. For Maiolino, an immigrant from Italy and later from Venezuela, this national artistic badge matters. In its focus on the mouth as a signifying organ *In-Out (Anthropophagy)* shares certain traits with Lygia Clark's *Baba Antropofágica* (Anthropophagic Drool, 1973) a performance in which 'participants expelled threads of cotton reels from their mouths, projecting "cannibalist slobber" onto a reclining body'.⁸ Eventually this visibly wet, corporeal extension creates a mould of the affected body, a collective womb in which each participant has been contaminated by the others' emanations.⁹ Clark's material-gestural extensions

constitute rituals to reconnect individual and collective spaces and consciousness.

Made the same year, both works claim the creative ingestion theorised by Oswald de Andrade in his 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibalist Manifesto). Embracing the irremediable cultural impurity of colonised society where electricity and modernity went by the name of LIGHT (a British company), the Oswaldian syncretic principle – the digestion of multiple cultural influences – informs the sixties taste for dissonance and allegory. After 1969, with many artists imprisoned or exiled, art's *antropofagia* has a bitter taste, the artists having to swallow, in addition, a harsh, policed reality. It is this bitterness that makes the mouth twitch in *In-Out*.

Exploring film's scale, its public nature, Maiolino hangs the mouth as a flag, a façade, an in-your-face statement. Equated to the screen surface, the mouth in *In-Out* remains a gate of meaning in sustained alert. Extremely ambitious, *In-Out (Antropofagia)* is followed by other films in which existential issues crisscross politics. A scream and an alarm are their basic soundtrack.

X and *Y* (both from 1974) perfectly integrate political commentary with the medium's language. In *X*, for instance, the crisp cut and the clean composition inside the frame serves to relay a terse message. Following basic tenets of montage, the sequence of disconnected images generates a narrative. A woman's face stands behind a black-lace veil in mourning; the same eye now fills the frame and looks around it threatened; flashes of metal blade – we barely see the scissors – move rapidly across the screen; a piece of white paper is gradually covered with drips of red – paint/blood. The scissors never share the same shot as the eye and the neat separation of elements – eye, scissors, blood – defines a wish to target basic plot elements. This compact narrative of torture is the filmic equivalent of Maiolino's triptychs, her square-lined drawings or mental maps. Despite its visual clarity, *X*'s meaning straddles a reference to the violent costs of the dictatorship, but also to Maiolino's artistic tools: the scissors for the collages, the white paper, a support for a play of drops and stains. If the stains in her *Codificações Matéricas* (Material

Codifications) series balance gravity and design with their controlled spilling of paint randomly over the floor, the red drip in *X* flows without stopping, an unmistakable sign of extreme injury. Red, in this work stands for blood, but not only that: it is in between these registers, the metaphoric and the literal, that Maiolino's films work their politics, never obvious, never single minded.

Y is the film counterpart of a performance piece and a photo-poem-action from 1976, *Pouco a pouco* (Little by Little), in which a blindfold covers a woman's eyes letting her/us see through a diffused light, at the borderline between repression and freedom. In the film an intense whispering takes place over the dark screen, 'courage' being the word enunciated most clearly. A mouth, the only uncovered part of a masked face, gradually opens in a scream. Stretched over the soundtrack the scream continues while black film leader, stills of the open mouth and shots of the scream-action alternate. A feminine overlapping chorus identifies by profession, race and name those tortured or dead: 'Anna Viera da Luz, a washer-woman; Manuael da Gama, a mulatto who works at the Companhia da Misericordia; Ana Teodora Costa, a black who is still alive, or is she?' A shot of a gauzy fabric covers and slides over a still image of a woman with closed eyes. Repeatedly this shot inter-cuts the scream.

Here is where Maiolino's use of cinema again matters. Conflating blindfold with an optical effect, a sort of filmic unveiling the film effectively implicates the viewer in a memorial action. Maiolino makes us see torture and the dead with the barest of cinematic means – stillness where movement is expected instead.

A photo sequence from early on in her ongoing Photo-Poem-Action' series, *O que Sobra* (What is Left Over), made in 1974 the same year as *X* and *Y*, sets these films' use of stillness and pose in an interesting light. Holding scissors poised to cut her own nose, her own tongue, Maiolino creates a suspension in which subject and object pose prior to an irrevocable action. The self-performance element should be noticed here. If many experimental works in the seventies pass first through the artist's own body, with Anna these highly stylised references to mutilation, mobilise body-art

8. Catherine de Zegher, p. 90.

9. Maiolino was a member of the New Objectivity group and shared many of the ideas informing Helio Oiticica's and Clark's concerns. She mentioned in conversation how much Clark appreciated *In-Out* (*Antropofagia*).

tropes (literal pain) to a conceptual end. They are only completed in the spectator's mind. The stillness of the medium partakes in the deep consequence of any cut, any violence.

Becoming (vir a ser)¹⁰

Eggs make their first appearance in Maiolino's *In-Out (Antropofagia)*, a single one protruding from the open mouth. This image brings up the precariousness Maiolino associates with life under the dictatorship. The installation *Entrevidas (Between Lives)* (1981) drives this analogy home

as spectators were invited to cross an obstacle course of eggs on a cobbled street in Rio de Janeiro in order to experience the feeling of uncertainty and risk at this fragile moment of *Abertura*, as the end of Military rule in Brazil was called.

For the artists of the seventies, film, video and photos were an inevitable extension of performance, functioning often as a documental record of happenings. Maiolino's *Fotopoemacção (Photopoemaction)* series works as autonomous statements. These sequences hint at a narrative, while each photo internally freezes development in an expectant suspense. Midway between film and performance, her photos pose the paramount question of contingency. Stillness makes the moment acute, pregnant with action. It interrupts continuity and instills a sense of potentiality. In *Vida Afora*, an egg is poised on a doorway step.¹¹ The egg is an object but also a subject, in *potentia*. It contaminates everything around it with an animistic power. By placing the egg at the threshold of the door, Maiolino enlivens this liminal space with hesitation.¹²

The adventures of indeterminacy animate Maiolino's + & - (More and Less), a little film in which her 'doing hands' are literally in flight from the eye's primacy.¹³ The close-up magnifies in uncanny detail fragments of a body: wrinkled, spotted, hairy parts of flexed, mobile trunks. Autonomous, the fingers are no longer members or appendages. Compounded words stretch towards sense, mixing languages and words: hosmen, mais mis amis, musicalnoise. If the soundtrack

10. See Maiolino's text 'Vir a Ser' in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/ A Life Line*, p. 185. I use becoming rather in the Deleuzian sense of an identity in flight – it is this quality of in between states and senses that seems so essential to the artist.
11. Catherine de Zegher writes beautifully on the figure of the egg, noting the connections with origin and trace so relevant to the artist: 'All indeterminate mucous body, enclosed in a hard shell and ready to engender, the egg approximates the nature of the imprint as a dialectical image: is it the contact with the origin or the loss of origin?' 'Ciao Bella', *Ibid.*, p. 92.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 131. De Zegher develops the consequences of the doorway space citing Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*: 'The door scents me, it hesitates.' 'The door is an entire Cosmos of the Half-open... the very origin of day dream.'
13. I borrow 'The Doing Hand' from the title of Paulo Venancio Filho's essay.
14. In 'The Art of Immanence' Marcio Doctors, discusses Maiolino's 'Here They Are' (an installation at the Museu do Açude of wooden shapes hung from a tree) emphasising the link between closeness and time: 'She makes art come closer and closer to the carnality of the world. Or better still, she makes art that is powerful enough to approach the condensation of time in order to restrain the increasing speed at which images disappear.' *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, p. 201.

is mostly literal in its suggestion of erotic or animal noises, it does enhance these bits of flesh's struggle to speak otherwise. This clashing background, a greenish speckled wall that takes over the screen in between bouts of touching, introduces tactility as the film's main, awakened sense.

Close contact, it should finally be said is the key to Maiolino's art.¹⁴ Pressing against the screen her close-ups yearn for contact. That is why the camera is always so damn close.

Maiolino commands the frame's primitive power to disfigure the human form. Her film promotes a humorous encounter between sight and touch, film and performance. A master of small forms, Maiolino's obsessive repetitions yield difference: *digitais* (the digital ones) marked by many, many finger prints; *n times one*, hollow shapes in which the pressure of the hand creates in one go void and shell, inside and outside. Yes, we gather these fleshy, hairy trunks in + & - are fingers. From what is closest at hand, the smallest, most accessible of toys, Maiolino creates a pure becoming, experimenting with her own hands (and the camera eye) at the edge of touch.