Being and Language: relations in and with the world

I discovered Anna Maria Maiolino in 1996. Catherine de Zegher, a passionate admirer and beautiful reader of Maiolino’s work, placed the central image from the triptych *Entrevidas* (1981) on the cover of one the most important exhibitions of that decade, *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of the twentieth century in, of and from the feminine*. Within the catalogue, Anna Maria Maiolino was situated in a section entitled Enjambment: “*La Donna è Mobile*”. There her work entered into the creative dialogue curated by de Zegher that ranged from the sublime abstractions of Polish sculptor Katharzyna Kobro to the fibre drawings and geometric weavings of Sophie Taeuber-Arp from the 1930s, from the work of Lygia Clark and Eva Hesse in the 1960s, the photographic fantasies of Francesca Woodman onto the contemporary work of Ann Veronica Janssens and Joelle Tuerlinckx. *Enjambment* is a technical term for the breaking of syntax. Literally, it means straddling, where, for instance, the meaning in a poem overflows its line and passes into the next. The invocation of this syntactical term, associated with both poetics and the innovative or transformative elements of poetry perfectly accords with the project that is the work of Anna Maria Maiolino.

The linking of the transformation, achieved by a refusal of fixed lines, completed statements, enclosed meanings, and by the practice of *straddling, passage, transgressed boundaries*, with the phrase: ‘la donna è mobile’ introduces, furthermore, the aesthetics of sexual difference with whose significance we are still so fascinated, even while we remain, thankfully, endlessly perplexed.
Let me make myself even clearer. One of the greatest questions of the twentieth century, the first century of women, was not only the significance of being, from phenomenology and existentialism to deconstruction, but of being and embodiment, being and sexuality, and hence being within the human being. Human being involves language and sexuality, desire and the unconscious. As Bergson, Proust and Freud, and Levinas, as each in their different ways suggested, it also concerns being and time, being in time, being present and, in terms of the past, remembering lost moments of being, childhood on the one hand, dreaming on the other. But it also involves being different.

Perhaps we might consider the deepest art of the twentieth century as that which moved beyond political and sociological understanding of the disciplining, censoring and determining structures that shape us in terms of the great if utterly real abstractions of class, gender, ethnicity and so forth. Art moved beyond this external analysis and theoretical knowledge to present us through the aesthetic encounter with the being of difference, which can hardly be communicated, represented, pictured, imaged. If it cannot be contained in representation or narrative, this condition must in some sense be encountered by means of artistic practice in what we can name the production of aesthetic experience, so long as the term aesthetic is being understood not in the Kantian sense of dispassionate judgement of beauty, but in the Kristevan sense of the ways in which avant-garde music, poetry, dance and visual art might be understood as the transgression of the bounded and fixed in the name of semiotic renovation, and psychic heterogeneity.

At this level of interiorization with its social as well as individual stakes, what I have called “aesthetic practices” are undoubtedly nothing other than the modern reply to the eternal question of morality. At least, this is how we might understand ethics which, conscious of the fact that its order is sacrificial, reserves part of the burden for each of its adherents, therefore declaring them guilty while
immediately affording them the possibility for *jouissance*, for various productions, for a life made up of both challenges and differences.¹

The long career and fertile life-work of Anna Maria Maiolino straddles many media, practices, and processes. Drawing, printmaking, writing poetry, film, installation, sculpture, her practice straddles the major areas of modernist experimentation within the parameters of the still rich possibilities of each field’s constituent medium and the radical expansion of artmaking during the 1960s, when art ceased to be defined by medium. Instead, using a new range of materials, borrowed from industry and cinema, as well as popular and commercial cultural forms, art became a matter of activity. The reading of contemporary art poses the question: what is this work doing, rather than what is this of or about? Activity involves the making, the traditional moment of art as a kind of poiesis. But it involves reflexive contemplation of that process of making not as a means to an end, but as the thing itself, as process. It is in the presence of the traces of the process, that the viewer becomes an invited partner in producing the work, as an event that is not about objects to be contemplated, appraised and categorized. The event is an innovation that opens up consciousness to the world, and the world to consciousness. It is also a contest with time, staying time, suspending it long enough to invite attention to being, being conscious, being alive.

Many fine, astute and knowledgeable art historians, curators, critics and poets have written on the work of Anna Maria Maiolino, tracing the history of her practice from its early beginnings in woodcuts through the encounter with new trends in Brazilian

avant-garde under the long years of military dictatorship, through to the encounter with minimalism and conceptual art at the critical moment around 1970, and back to Brazil and the multi-media explorations that each bear the imprint of singular and distinctive aesthetic of purity, economy and justness. I am drawn, however, to the voice of the poet-artist. Maiolino is the artist of the hand. The hand makes as we see in the films of her rolling and moulding that primordial substance of the earth, clay. She is the artist of the mouth. The mouth is the portal of the body where our bodily needs are fed by ingestion of food and our human needs are expressed as we configure the muscles, tongue and teeth to shape the sound created from our expulsion of air from deep inside the lungs across the taught strings of our vocal chords. The hand cuts, rolls, moulds, draws, marks, and in several of the artist’s short films, talks its own expressive language. It orients itself to the world, acting upon it, shaping the spaces before, it, touching itself. The mouth is one of the strangest elements of the body so freighted and charged from our earliest forms of post-natal re-establishment of contact with the pre-natal, unknown partner-in-difference: suckling for nourishment from the maternal body. This activity of the tiny infant lays down the intense track that becomes orality expressed in childhood by sucking and eventually fostering the pleasures of sound making and speech, itself to be understood as the direct descendent of infantile nursing, inheritor of all those inchoate sensations associated with primary nourishment, contact, senseless bliss, sensual repetition of motion and. Lips, tongue, teeth, cavity, open, closed, clenched, relaxed, receiving, expelling. These are all explored by means of the use of super-8mm filming close-up, tightly framed to allow the camera to pay its inane attention to what we rarely see in our own faces, or even really attend to in the face of the other – so hooked are we
to that other human link: the gaze. In a poem, *Of Thee + Me*, Anna Maria Maiolino writes:

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    My hands work
    I weave with the threads of hope
    In my shriek together dwell pleasure
    Pain
    The call of the children…
    …
    My hands work
    They wash
    They cook
    They knead bread
    I mould clay
    And with my eyes I read philosophy
    I like poetry…
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1995

A retrospective of an artist such as Anna Maria Maiolino is not a mere inventory or catalogue of accumulating works. It will never offer itself to the standard museum classifications: medium, style, allegiance, descent, reference. The visitor will be invited on a journey that travels to many different places and spaces, processes and things. What do these many forms and processes invite us to think about? I find myself seeing a world stripped back to something beyond essentials— that would take us to early 20th century explorations in constructivism and abstraction, all of which robbed the world of what Merleau-Ponty called the flesh of the world. The opening sentence of that philosopher’s essay ‘Eye and Mind’ (1961) declares: ‘Science manipulates things and gives up living in them.’ Against this tendency, Merleau-Ponty will position art as he came to understand it through the study of modernist painting, notably Cézanne’s. Merleau-Ponty died in 1963, just as a seismic upheaval would occur in the visual arts, which, harvesting those possibilities which modernism had pushed to the limits via fidelity to each medium, while
only momentarily imaging how to break out entirely from their respective disciplinary confines, would open up to a kind of ethical phenomenology way beyond what philosophers like Merleau-Ponty could conceive for and as art in 1963.

Some paragraphs later Merleau-Ponty states:

Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the “there is” which precedes it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies— not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but this actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts.

I do not know if Anna Maria Maiolino’s eyes read this philosophy. But perhaps she did not need to read it to do what she was doing. Instead, we need to have Merleau-Ponty as a guide to open our eyes to the research undertaken by artists into this question of Being which aesthetic practices can bring us to experience precisely because making an art work takes us momentarily out of time, the flow of living, in order to experience in that which art holds before us, a sense of what Being, embodied and conscious, might be.

Merleau-Ponty continues in a different vein, intimating the co-presence of memory or intimations of others who share Being with us, past and present. Thus does Being transgress the borders and limits of the single, autistic, monistic subject. Being in the world with the world, of which we are one in its flesh, is also being with the human world, a psychologically charged, affective and relational web.

Further, associated bodies must be revived along with my body—“others”, not merely as my congers, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt: “others” along with whom I haunt a single, present and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territory or habitat.

For Merleau-Ponty art, aesthetic practices, is the privileged domain of both Being in the world and Being with the others, creating both a moment of perpetual presentness and a
moment in an invisible chain of connection both to vertically and laterally, to the past and memory and to what lies beyond my own being.

Now art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore. Art and only art does this in full innocence.

Art is thus neither science (one mode of abstracted knowledge) nor philosophy (the site of judgement and opinion). Art becomes a mode of paying attention to the world without ever allowing us to be outside it, looking on from above as science, or not looking at all but knowing as philosophy.

Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.

Philosophically, Merleau-Ponty identified a potentiality in certain kinds of modernist painting and articulated in his language a project that had since the end of the 1950s, and with growing impetus during the 1960s, would explode out of modernism itself to draw freely on any and every material, process, practice and medium in order to explore art and being, which is more usually discussed in terms of the Cagean idea of effacing the gap between art and life.

Beside her making hands and her reading eyes, are Anna Maria Maiolino’s writing hands and thoughtful eyes that look within and beyond. In a text written 20 May 1997, titled, *Vir a “Ser”, Coming to “Be”*, Anna Maria Maiolino wrote:

I chose to accept all the destinies that had been traced out for me, without leaving anything out. Being an artist and being a woman have been part of a single repertory from the beginning.

Simple enough, but actually monumental, this statement involves many paradoxes. I chose, she starts. This is the fundamental political, ethical and human action. I chose
means I am not merely the plaything of fate, life, destiny, family, society, convention. Faced with the realities of historical and political living, I can disentangle itself to be the I who makes a choice. That means, I take responsibility, and I take possession of what is before me, in the sense of both time and space. But what she chose to accept were destinies already traced out for her. These involve the contingencies of a personal family history, which is itself imprinted with major social, economic, cultural, linguistic, national, and familial determinations. It also means, we can see, accepting something of what it means to be that which is called ‘a woman’ in relation to all of the above: a woman, and this woman in this family, in these places, at this time of Italian, Venezuelan and Brazilian history in the second half of the twentieth century. Whatever is a destiny traced for a woman which may include partnerships, children, parenthood, separation, economic anxiety, vulnerability, responsibility, it is conjugated with another mode of being that until the twentieth century had more rarely and without any kind of real social sanction or support been associated with women. Of course, women have always made art in every culture and in every way. But the writing of art’s histories, the public representation of art and the artist, had in the West been firmly in the masculine. To chose to be a woman and an artist, an artist and a woman, and thus not to repudiate any aspect of femininity (such as so many women modernists had felt obliged to do for fear being anything other than one of the boys would compromise any chance of being recognized as an artist), to wash, clean, bake and feel the call of children, as well as dedicating herself to becoming a self through the actions of a life-time of being an artist is a historic declaration of immense resonance. The artist thus continues:
My main project, the attempt to construct myself as a person was definitely a source of anguish, an anguish as thick as the stratification of all my interests.

Being an artist/woman means, therefore, construction a self as a person. Such a sentence implies that one can exist, one can be born and live, but not necessarily be or feel oneself to be a person. Being a person is a project. Becoming a person involves construction. One builds a person but in anguish. This anguish is thick, an archaeological site of many layers composed of interests which can lead to pain as they struggle in this composition, this multi-storeyed building that is a person, an artist, a woman, a mother, a friend, a daughter, a lover, a politically aware citizen, a participant in the making of culture.

Being an artist/woman constructing herself as a person is not a matter of image-making. It concerns above all being able to speak. To speak this newly created personhood requires a new language. Being an artist is being an inventor of a language to say the as yet unspoken or even yet unthought.

My dedication to the formation of a language demanded a great deal of time, patience and work. At the beginning of my work as an artist, I believed that the formation of a language would come about only through the organization of my sensibility. It took years for me to discover that, besides sensibility, the formation of a language is also the result of a practice of interrelation with the things of the world.

Organization of sensibility is perhaps a fundamental mode of training for the artist who must become aware of, and take ownership of a specific and singular way of seeing and feeling which is offered to the world as but one of many sensibilities that can enlighten us, each from its own singularity, as to what it is to be, to be human and to feel, look, see and think. Organizing sensibility would result in choices about the materials to be used in making artworks, the scale, the aesthetics of mark-making, gestures. Anyone visiting an exhibition of the work of Anna Maria Maiolino will feel the intensity of her unique and
specific sensibility in every mode and form of her practice. Sometimes it feels very classical in its incredible justness – I take this word, I think, from Jean-Luc Godard, who writes about a just image, just being a word that tells us that formally and ethically the choice and the decision to begin, to make, to end, to leave the work as it is, has balanced all the ‘anguish’ of the ‘stratifications of many interests’ into a resolution that invites, and sustains prolonged contemplation without exhausting the richness of even the most minimal stroke, action, gesture. But it is not classical. Perhaps, it is minimalist as there is certainly no excess of romantic gesturing and display of any of that anguish. Intensity and anguish is contained because, I suggest, Anna Maria Maiolino has created for herself a language. This is why the work appears so diverse, formally and materially, so unconfined to one specific practice or problematic.

So we arrive in a retrospective to travel in the country of Anna Maria Maiolino, artist/woman and must learn her language. But this is not a hermetic artistic language, again beloved of certain modernisms. It is a language that ‘is also the result of a practice of interrelation with the things of the world.’ This brings me back to Merleau-Ponty. I have a feeling that for Anna Maria Maiolino, the materials from which she makes her art, be it incised or polished wood, watercolour washes or paint, clay, cement, plaster, photographs or super 8mm film are also things of the world, linked not only with the otherness of what is not human but of which we humans make our humanized world, but with all made or found objects that can become the transports of memory, affect and meaning. Writing on 7 July 1989 about ‘my oldest recollection’, Anna Maria Maiolino weaves into story about this first, traumatically incised memory of leaving her childhood home in Scalea two objects: a lock of baby hair and a key to a coffin. Both mark the
brief life and death of a baby brother who died at birth. In a large family, of which the artist was the youngest of ten, the final but always missing child was none the less preserved by name and by physical traces by his mother. The box containing the once living hair and the key to his second, permanent home, a coffin takes on talisman-like quality. Its appearance from the cupboard heralds major changes, movement. But the artist also tell us that she loved playing with the things in that box, which was the box of her mother’s memories. In sharing with her daughter the meaning of the preserved things, Anna Maria Maiolino writes ‘ she was called by the sight of these memories and the two of us became immersed deep in life, inside Mother’s memories.’ While listening and rehearing these memories were inimitable, Anna Maria Maiolino concludes: ‘Nothing could be stronger, nothing could be compared, I felt, to that touch: Antoñio’s fine hair and his tiny, cold key in my hands, tremulous receptacle of Mystery.’ 217.

Anna Maria Maiolino’s life has involved migration from a deeply formative childhood in Southern Italy, to new locations, adopted countries, naturalized citizenship, the passage from Italian to Spanish to Portuguese, living in Brazil, United States, Venezuela and Argentina. Much can be made of the immeasurable significance of displacement, relocation, and loss. But equally we could, following de Zegher think about this life as enjambment, a poetics of straddling many worlds, past and present, lost and made, old and new, north and south. We could see the life work of Anna Maria Maiolino, as we review it at this point in a major retrospective in Europe, as one long poem. Its lines break out and overflow between her many forms and processes, diverse materials and practices, in each of which she works with a breathtaking distinction and justness so that we might say what a painter, what a photographer, what a film-maker,
what a printmaker, what a sculptor. Yet, and that is why I have tried to write in the presence of all this work, rather than by concentrating on any one of them, each of which soliciting its own essay, it is ‘the interrelations with the things of the world’, the interrelations made visible by the movement across all the things that Anna Maria Maiolino has made that constitute the experience of her work. I have wanted to be haunted by her exquisite words and her astonishing works that defy our art historical habits, our critical insistence on making connections, fitting art works into the very categories art works are made to explode.

This brings me finally back to where I began. Catherine de Zegher proposed an elliptical traverse of twentieth century art, *in, of and from the feminine*. The term ‘feminine’ refers to a psycho-symbolic position, in language and a psycho-symbolic formation of subjectivity marked by sexual difference. It does not at all suggest a known, given, fixed identity. Her exhibition excavated from the margins and the bypassed alleyways of the twentieth century another series of possible tracks through the century that dealt with fragmented, bodies, blank pages and new languages, traumatic histories and reclaimed lives, weavings and webbings, and mobility and poetics. She, like me, has come to argue that the failure to listen to, hear and see what women have contributed to the cultures of the modern world internationally has impoverished our sense of ourselves, our worlds, our histories and our futures. Being in the world, means being in history, in time, and in difference. But difference does not mean being fixed as different, the outsider, the foreigner, the exile. It means working with the necessity of so being, which is to some extent the condition of the feminine in phallocentric culture, as the double condition of anguish and *jouissance*, of burdened labour and creative transformation.
The feminine is also at a specific join of life and meaning, so often reduced to being the body that makes and carries new life but is denied by stopped mouth and unheard words the possibility of giving birth to meaning. One of Anna Maria Maiolino’s favoured found objects and repeated ‘things’ is the egg. The perfect sculptural form that nestles in the hand, that can be tough or fragile, that nourishes and promises. Her performance and photographic triptych lays eggs across a cobbled, mossy street between which a woman walks barefooted, picking her way between what her poem of the same name calls ‘a territory mined with the fragility of lives’ and ‘originary fullness [that] requires care’ while ‘Lies the threat of death in the false step that crushes.’

The line between life and death, the path and the false step is not visible here as it might be in works where threads join generations of women, to threads are consumed and expelled from the mouth, or become fat, thick rolls of clay, or wander in paint across canvas or paper. The poem concludes:

   Thus we relive that which has been forgotten and step by step we recall that which is known. 186

The ancient stones, the memory of the earth’s becoming, the living moss, and the iconic eggs that any moment might be fertile and hatch or remain sealed and silent, these form the ground of things in and of the world between which the moving body plots it course. Fascinated when I first encountered Entrevidas, I re-encounter it now as almost emblematic of the life and work of Anna Maria Maiolino. It is a journey without a destination, a journey through life, between lives. It is grounded in ancient memories of the earth. It is a path that must be walked, slowly and with enormous care, attentive to the fragility of living and dying, to the meaning and effect of each gesture, each action, each thought. It is a metaphor for a kind of art, in, of and from a feminine that has been
chosen as a retraced destiny, to be lived not suffered. As we wander amongst the many forms of Anna Maria Maiolino’s ethical, aesthetical, visual, poetical, thought, we shall surely learn a great deal about the deepest sense of the interrelations between art and being.

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2008