Anna Maiolino begins working with clay quite late on. She had been making art since the 1960s, always working in a wide variety of media – reliefs, sculpture, drawing, video, performance. Almost no medium had been ruled out and yet she says ‘my first encounter with clay in 1989 provoked a storm inside me’\(^1\). The moment, in her recollection, seems like a volatile point. Yet looking back over Maiolino’s project now, it seems that the encounter was less a radical shift away from what she had been doing previously and more a coming home, a return to basics that simply dramatises the logic of her work from the outset. I want to concentrate on her clay installations with this in mind, in order to try to describe their particularity at the same time as to show how they connect to her other work.

\(^1\) Anna Maria Maiolino interviewed by Holly Block in *Anna Maria Maiolino: A Life Line (Vida Afora)* The Drawing Center New York 2002 p.00
There is a photograph from 1994 of a table covered with small pieces of clay in the artists studio in Rio (ill.00). They vary in size and shape, from small balls to long sausage shapes, some fatter some thinner, some straight some curled around like donuts, but all of them neatly arranged in lines and grids. The table was laid out as part of the working process that would lead the next year to her exhibition at the Kanaal Art Foundation in Kortrijk Belgium curated by Catherine de Zegher where several tables would be distributed across a much larger space in the installation entitled Modelled Earth (ill.00). In turn, part of this would be included in de Zegher’s ground breaking Inside the Visible exhibition that went on to the ICA in Boston and then the Whitechapel in London the following year. Clay shapes were placed on tables or shelves or stacked on the floor. The regularity of the arrangements heightens the irregularity of the pieces. The ordering of the grid opens onto the random aspects of the shapes themselves and the small and uneven intervals between them. Although much larger and more complex, the installations expand the improvisational character of that first studio table, which could also be a makeshift surface on which things were left to dry, temporary and in limbo somehow, rather than singular and complete art objects ready for exhibition.

It is striking that when Maiolino talks about her work, and most of all when she speaks about her clay work, it is to articulate an origin story of one sort or another. She has talked of ‘first actions of hands modelling and compacting clay’ for example which suggests an almost primal gesture – the first coming into being of

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2 Anna Maria Maiolino
form itself. But then, if we think this is the origin point, there is another, even
further back, an even more archaic memory of hands plunged into wet clay or ‘dirt
matter’. Preceding even the shaping of the material in the hand this suggests pure
tactile sensation. There is no image, least of all one which shows what this might
look like form the outside, that comes close to picturing this in the mind. The drift of
her work is to an archaic place of tactile sensation that comes before vision even and
certainly before language. This is a beginning even before the beginning. And the
first event is never a single point of origin but itself multiple and splintered into
many constellations.

This story of origins takes place before our eyes, and begins again each time we
encounter a multitude of clay shapes crowded on a table or a shelf or piled against a
wall. Rather than actually taking us back to a far distant past, this is what it is like
to live in and experience things in the present. The field of vision is without a single
focus, and constantly dispersed – a mass of small things proliferating to fill a large
space. This is also the case with her drawings which Maiolino also presents in grids
and series, and where a very simple gesture creates radically different results. The
formats she uses draws attention to the fundamental dynamic of all origin stories –
that they exist only in retrospect and as an after-effect. Which comes first, an
original point or its later repetitions? The answer would seem clear, governed by
our mental habits of sequencing events in a linear and progressive order. But we
would be wrong to leap to that conclusion, because of course one action or gesture

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3 Anna Maria Maiolino interviewed by Holly Block op cit. p.00
only becomes the original one by virtue of those that come after it, in the light of repetition. Conversely it follows that the operation of repetition in this instance necessarily come first and so not only precedes but actually creates the effect of an ‘origin’.

The constellations that Maiolino makes are temporal as well as spatial. By placing the idea of a first event in such intimate proximity to the idea of repetition, she scrambles preconceptions about temporality. The storm, for the viewer at least, is as much about the time of the artwork as the nature of the material. A linear model of time stretching continuously from past to present is broken up into pieces – just as her tables are filled with an ‘accumulation of fragments’ as she has put it.4 The effect of splintering and discontinuity is nowhere more apparent than in the relation she sets up between the lived experience of the artwork and an archaic and infantile past. In the encounter with one of her installations, it is soon clear that these aspects cannot be separated. Oppositions collapse in the face of the accumulation that makes up the work. The sense of the archaic becomes the actuality of the work. This seems to me to take place at the level of the body and strikes with a visceral, almost violent, force. It is not only the piles of turd-shaped lengths that invokes a scatological fantasy of excremental excess. But in all the manifold different shapes, there is the sense of some infantile system of production at work. This has in part to do with a radical refusal of technique in favour of the simplest actions, in part to do with the material force of the idea of the body’s waste products. The combination is

4 Anna Maria Maiolino p.00
powerful because rather than in spite of the fact that it never finally resolves one way or the other.

Maiolino has described the hands as the first mold. At a workshop at the Camberwell School of Art in London held in conjunction with the current exhibition, she demonstrated this by holding her two hands together, cupped, as if holding an invisible piece of clay. It is this idea of a mold that I want to stress, not only because it is clearly so important to Maiolino, but also because it seems to be a site of contradictory impulses. A mold may not immediately appear to have a temporal aspect. But it does, at least in so far as it is the shape that does the shaping of another – it suggests a continuous state of anteriority. A mold always comes before an object in the production process. The fact that it is always so – that it is destined to be repeated in that process ad infinitum - points to a friction that is latent within it from the very outset.

This is interesting to think about in relation to the idea of the prototype – which is also a kind of ‘first product’. In modernity the prototype became inextricably caught up in the language of industry, bound to assumptions about mass production. But it is worth remembering that the word prototype is used by anthropologists to refer to a first schema for the production of images or objects – Christ would be an obvious example. A mold that is used in shaping an object can

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5 Workshop May 30th 2008 Camberwell School of Art London. I am grateful to Michael Asbery for inviting me to participate in this event which coincided with an exhibition of Maiolino’s work.
of course be part of the prototype but also, even then, maintains its priority – as a proto-prototype almost. Looked at this way it is very clear that Maiolino’s whole approach to production is diametrically opposed to the kinds of industrial models of production and consumption that have been internalised by other art movements like minimalism. Her work places production very powerfully in the register of the body and its drives. This has a bearing on prevailing conditions of modern production processes but only terms, I think, of a kind of pocket of resistance to them – operating as their psychic and bodily double. At stake is a pre-history of modern production that is not only artesanale but also infantile.

If the mold taps in to a world of production – it is to the production of difference. Every piece of clay that is shaped, however repetititive the process of manufacture by Maiolino’s hand, is unlike every other. This sets in train not minimum but maximum differentiation, dramatised by the strict adherence to making the most basic shapes rather than composite ones. But it also opens the mold to a different kind of temporal field. I think this can be seen in the way it creates a point of friction in the critical gap between a prototype and an archetype. In other words, in the way the mold presupposes its own mythology of origins as against a myth of universalising principles that transcend time. When Maiolino traces her method of working clay back to the way our ancestors made utensils, it may seem to invite a rhetoric of timeless archetypes. But this is closer to the dynamic of the prototype unravelling backwards, to the very beginning, and beyond the beginning. Looking back rather than forwards, this is repetition in reverse order, creating rather than
finding an ever-receding origin point. Certainly it is relevant here that, as Freud insisted, repetition is the very index of the infants experience of loss - but the sheer momentum and scope of Maiolino’s repetitions also makes this experience one of overwhelming infinitude. Where infinity is understood as endless and however counter-intuitively this might sound, as the material deposit of time itself. Rather than a metaphysical concept, infinity is just an accumulation of things that doesn’t end. This might sound prosaic but it precipitates an almost vertiginous falling backwards at the same time as we make our circuitous path through it and around it.

It is not just the material pieces of clay that accumulate but also the associations that accrue to them. There is no one metaphor or analogy that will offer a key to the interpretation of the work. I think the whole point is that the associations that jostle for attention come not singly but in multiple clusters – which not only attach to the work but are part of the additive logic of the work. Breadmaking can be seen to be one of several – one that Maiolino herself has invoked. It doesn’t matter that kneading bread and clay are very different techniques, one designed to put air into the material, the other to get it out of it. There is the sense of a primordial demand to work material in this way. Kneading, shitting, molding become a metonymic chain of associations that make up the composite of what it means ‘to make’.

Rather than essences, they are latencies, to recall Lygia Clark’s idea of immanence⁶. Possibilities dwell in the material rather than transcend it. It is coincidental but

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⁶ Lygia Clark p.00
appropriate that in English the word mold also means rotting organic matter (think of the different senses of leaf mold or fungus). It seems to combine the most basic senses of nature (rotting base material) and culture (the first tools).

The fact that the clay is unfired is not to be underestimated. This means that it maintains its dry powdery quality and feel of incompleteness (at least from the ceramicist’s point of view). The pieces can also be recycled and reused. There is always something temporary about the material as well as the lay-outs and the tables that support them. It all accumulates. And the more you see of her work the more this economy of waste and recycling comes to dominate the sense that I have of it. A narrative of beginnings becomes impossible to extricate from that of leavings. Every time you encounter the work it is as if to begin again, but also, to follow its own rhythm, to find endings already in those beginnings. Increasingly, the massed groupings of clay pieces also come to have the appearance of so many leftovers. And of course, they are quite literally the deposit that has been left from the mold, and which will be recycled to make other work. A process of becoming turns into one of remaindering. The very idea of a mold, which is both the thing that shapes and which is left over, encapsulates both aspects at once. When I recall Borges’ phrase ‘Every tale has its own technique’ it is with this in mind.

I mentioned earlier on how Maiolino’s drawings follow a similar logic to her clay installations. Having placed so much emphasis on the materiality of the clay as ‘dirt matter’ this may seem unlikely. But again, it is worth remembering that from the
outset Maiolino seemed to be acutely aware of what was palpable about the paper that she worked with. Her cut books are perhaps the most vivid demonstration of this, which seem to be like three dimensional drawings. In *Point to Point* (ill.00), made in 1976, a red string connects the front and back covers through a hole cut through the papers, which expands as the book is held in the hand and opened. Her cut paper reliefs, many of which date from the same 1970s, burrow through the layers of paper to reveal a hole or absence, that might be circular or egg-shaped. The layers of paper are stratified, as if to lay bear the archaeology of what she calls her Drawing/Objects (which clearly relate closely to the Book/Objects in this respect).

The potent symbolic currency of fresh eggs, that she used in her performances at that time, become delicately stepped paper craters in the drawings. In the film she had made in 1973 called *In-out anthropophagy* an egg appears in one sequence filling that other mold: the mouth. As Paulo Venancio has described, ‘molding is the inverse of speaking, the other side of the voice’.7 This kind of criss-crossing between the different media she works in is a constant feature of Maiolino’s approach to making art. The mouth is an orifice, the channel into the inside of the body, the site of eating, chewing, kissing, sucking spewing and the rest. If the mouth acts as another kind of mold it is because it is a container that both fills and empties. A mold works by pressing in on matter in order to shape it. A mouth moving shapes sounds, just as the pressure of the palms of your hands shape a ball of clay.

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7 Paulo Venancio Filho ‘Dwelling in Space’ in Maiolino Drawing Center p.50
Looking at Maiolino’s serial drawings like ill.00 the link may seem more tangential, but I think in the end those lateral leaps are what holds the work so tightly together despite the different media she uses. Again there is a very simple gesture, that is repeated. Black ink is dropped on a piece of white paper and the paper is lightly tilted and turned so that it begins to make a shape. Before it becomes anything more than the most provisional gesture it is stopped. The flat piece of paper may not be a mold in any recognisable sense that we have been speaking of – and yet by moving it around in her hands Maiolino makes of it a field of reciprocal pressures. The arabesques of ink are molded, if I can use that word, by those movements of the hand. One surface exerts a pressure on another that yields to it. How different is such a rotation of the hand to the rotation that makes a ball out of clay?

When Maiolino was once asked about an element in one of her drawings that looked like Malevich she replied ‘Who does not have a Malevich inside them?’ Or a Duchamp she added. Or perhaps a Fontana or a Manzoni. This is an interesting way of thinking about artistic influences. If you read interviews on the subject with her, you will notice that she always fields the inevitable question about influences. Accepting that inevitably she has been but refusing to pinpoint by whom. This idea of having the historical avant-garde and maybe also the neo-avantgarde inside you can be related to an anthropophagical notion of cannibalising other cultures. But she has also talked about the art of the past being left as a series of traces or residues

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8 In conversation with the author, 30th May 2008.
on her – as if they collect on the artist like dust. The history of art ends up being a history of leftovers too.

I want to end not by charting influences on her work, but by pointing to the radical reconfiguration of the mold, both as it was undertaken by Maiolino and as it transformed innovative art in the second half of the twentieth century. Of course molds and casts have always been traditional to sculpture, but any straightforward, let alone sequential, relation between the technical instrument (mold) and artistic product (cast) is virtually impossible to sustain in ambitious art after 1950. In the US we could think of Duchamp’s small erotic casts of body parts, in Europe Manzoni’s gesso gestures of his achromes. Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman both worked in ways which upset conventional distinctions between mold and cast, both using materials like plaster and latex rubber that cut against the grain of the slicker industrial materials used by most of their contemporaries. I think what is important here to note is how much of this work makes us radically revise our ideas about the artist’s touch. It is as if only by mediating the touch of the artist through the transitional state of the mold can touch be detached from old ideas of artistic self-expression. To reveal instead a new kind of pure touch that triggers the visceral affects that I have been describing. This has nothing to do with whether we, as spectators, literally touch the work or not, but the imaginary projections that come into play.
Lygia Clark’s work of combining found objects like a small stone in a clear plastic bag was not simply to make a new kind of art object but to rethink entirely what making art could mean. The intensity of the involvement with handling the thing comes to override the question of its aesthetic status or formal appearance. The role of the hand is radicalised in this context. Maiolino’s work, paradoxical though it may seem, pushes the possibilities of hand-madeness further by pushing the limits of the mold to its most extreme as well as most elastic point. For the hand to become the mold is also to allow it to be its own transitional object – that is to say, a way of escaping the suffocating baggage of self-expression that attached to orthodox modernist eulogies to the artist’s hand – or even more pervasively projected onto the hand of the sculptor as a kind of fetish-object. Maiolino’s clay installations posit the mold as an operation rather than as a thing in itself. So although she may have discovered clay late, it reiterated certain impulses that had been in her work from the late sixties on. The double-actions set in play – between container and contained, presence and absence, material and void, touch and sight - relate as much to her project as a whole as to the specifics of clay. The work continues to be new, and to connect to the pulse of what is happening now in the work of much younger artists. When I think again of Maiolino’s gesture of explanation: that action of cupping her hands in order to demonstrate the operation of mold, it is also, of course, an action of offering up what is as yet invisible and unknown. That this is undoubtedly a gesture onto a future rather than a past is surely entirely apt in this context.