

O amor se faz Revolucionário

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Anna Maria Maiolino was born in Scalea, in the southern Italian region of Calabria, on 20 May 1942, to an Ecuadorian mother and an Italian father. She was the youngest of ten siblings. She began drawing at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Cristóbal Rojas in Caracas, Venezuela, where she had emigrated with her parents in 1954. In 1960, the Maiolinos moved to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where Anna Maria continued studying and began her long career as an artist. Drawing, it was as if she wanted to distance herself from the memories of a childhood spent in a war-torn country and free herself from the demons that the destruction of war had left within her. Maiolino began to push herself towards the creation of a personal dimension, seemingly wanting, right from the beginning, to escape the total control of reason, trying to achieve a sublime, spiritual state in which she could find the potential for human liberation. The most salient feature of Maiolino's innate metaphysical poetics is, however, that she always remains anchored in rationalism, revealing a strong resistance to anti-humanism. While Maiolino's imagination draws on spaces that are not even visible to humans, her narrative originates in reality. The artist uses geographically determined places to stir timeless forces. Though they push themselves to describe unknown depths, her works always start from the real. Her dreamlike fantasies do not materialise out of thin air. To get off the ground, they require the stimulus of a setting, an object or a real event. The world around her is her theatre of action, the book from which she draws inspiration. Every place, spatially and temporally delineated, becomes the support for an intrusion of atopic and atemporal forces.

Drawn by the experimental allure of the Brazilian cultural scene in the 1950s and 1960s, Maiolino signed the Manifesto of the Nova Objetividade Brasileira in 1967. Soon after, her work began to spread and grow, feeding in turn her artistic inclinations and visions. In many of her works from that period, abstract compositions and images evoke anatomical parts. The human body is taken apart, filtered and transformed. It is presented in Maiolino's work as the image of her existence, a nude full of meanings through which the artist expresses the conditions of her life. A hidden image of unfathomable suffering and profound existential anguish. An image that opens itself up to let the gaze of the other penetrate its interior. Through this openness, this subtle fissure, Maiolino tries to enter a world of intimate affections and sensations, in which she talks about her life as a woman and an artist in a world that is hostile and socially opposed to her (a fate shared by many female artists). All of this is expressed in often dreamlike scenes at the limits of the surreal, where the body is the main actor. It is the object through which she transforms the world into a graphic or pictorial gesture. What is this form that seems to obsess her to such a degree that talking about her work is like talking about a bodily realm or a corporeality beyond personal history? For Maiolino, the relationships between artistic creation and life, or, if you will, between making art and bodily experience, are two interchangeable ends of a single segment, since in her work, as in few others', life and art are one and the same. Maiolino identifies so completely with her work that it becomes a kind of alter ego. In this extraordinary feat, the artist effectively completes the fusion between art and artist. Her reiteration of the sign offers an anchor, a secure base that reveals nothing of the artist if not her very self. To those of a modest, prudent nature, this repetition is like a refuge, at times indispensable to the maturation and initial accumulation of one's forces. To those of a more impetuous, confident nature, it makes it possible to appear decisively and recognisably in public space, even while leaving the whole range of works to come open and available.

After moving with her husband to New York in 1968, Maiolino started to experiment with different artistic languages, developing her work in an extraordinary and unique direction. Employing a broad range of strategies with almost scientific precision, and anticipating the rhetoric of American minimalism, Maiolino has in common with artists like Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape the investigation of the material and visual properties of surfaces, light and colour, in an attempt to create art that is anti-metaphoric, uniform and lacking all reference except to itself. In the work of Maiolino and the Brazilian artists she associates with in those years, the immaterial and the material systematically confront one another. They are all artists whose work speaks to us not so much of the absolute that materializes and makes itself visible, a manifestation of some absoluteness, here and now in the concrete nature of the material, but, on the contrary, of a trace that reveals the material's self-concealment, its return to an infinite vanishing point that affirms the void, perhaps even nothingness. It speaks of the absolutely other with respect to the epiphany of the absolute in the material. It is as if it were noting a movement that goes in the opposite direction than that of the revelation of the absolute in the material support, the painting, the icon. It speaks not of the manifestation of the invisible in the visible, but rather of the rediscovery of the visible in the invisible. And so, nothingness and the void. Plotinus, who reflected at length on this concept, distinguished between the nothingness above and the nothingness below.¹ The nothingness below is the poor, miserable nothingness, the nothingness of annihilation, that imprisons us in a net; it is necessity. The nothingness above is the exact opposite, it is freedom, it is the fact of not having frameworks, something that imposes itself upon and dominates us. And it is the artist who gives us a taste of the possibility of this higher experience of nothingness. Before the work, the artist questions it, tries to understand what it needs to do. That single thing, that gesture, that stretch that rests on nothingness, and so the circle closes. Who, therefore, might be the illustrious influences on these artists? Probably, in my view, Lucio Fontana. Because there is nothing new in Fontana's gesture, but the essential is there: he is able to sum up that which – for example – Maiolino tries to do with her drawings, which is to say, predispose oneself towards the work knowing that one is guided not by an objective criterion, a principle, a canon, an order, but rather knowing that one is guided simply by something.

Returning to Brazil in 1971, Maiolino again found herself caught up in the horrors of the dictatorship and created her work along an uninhibited path of actions and images, where the most disparate sensations, emotions, unease, disgust, ugliness and rejection coexisted. This is when Maiolino defined and developed her bodily image for the first time. With the expression, 'image of the human body'², Paul Schiller defined the mental picture that we create of our body, which is to say the way our body appears to us. We receive sensations, we see parts of the surface of our body, we have tactile sensations, sensations of heat, of pain, sensations coming from muscular innervation and visceral sensations. But beyond all of this is the immediate experience of the existence of a bodily unity, which, if it is true that it is perceived, is on the other hand something more than a perception, it is a 'framework for our body', a 'bodily framework'. The bodily framework is the three-dimensional image that everyone has of themselves and can also be described as a 'bodily image'. This term indicates that it is not simply a sensation or a mental image, but that the body also takes on a certain appearance ('postural model') in reference to itself. It also implies that the image is not simply perception, even if it reaches us through the senses, but involves mental frameworks and representations, even though it is not simply a representation. When, in reference to her performances from those years, Maiolino writes that they were not just symbolic actions, but reality, she is clearly expressing how an interior world that is proclaimed and given visible form can become real just like the world that one actually observes. Also considering that Maiolino's dimension invests body and mind with force, it is clear that her obsessions and fears are in large part those of the human race, involving it deeply, at the base of its essence of drives and sensations. We have an intake and a production, a tendency to maintain the bodily image within its confines and a tendency to expand and extend it, to keep its parts together and to scatter them everywhere. The deepest intimate forces of the human mind, part and whole, differentiation and integration, find their immediate expression in the postural model of the body, which is cause and effect of constructive and destructive tendencies. The visual images of Maiolino's performances may or may not be real, but they are in any case the transition point towards an all-encompassing image of the ineludible terror represented by her potential annihilation. It is naturally very difficult, in these cases, to establish the difference between what is an actual change of feelings and perceptions, and so of representations concerning the postural model of the body, and what is a feeling of fear concerning the image of the body. We know that image and perception are based on the same somatic processes, but there are also intellectual processes, thought processes, illusory elements concerning the body. Maiolino's work on the body, its use as a tool for measurement or experience, for fragmentary decoration, its trace, its valorisation as the seat of desire and of pain, its narcissistic or sacrificial behaviour, its eroticisation, the identification of its extraneousness, its role in transgression and its mechanical functioning are all experimental practices from which one launches a form of production defined in terms selected exclusively by the artist, who tackles its creation without any kind of external conditioning. It is by virtue of her unconventional visual imaginary that we often see the word 'dreamlike' used in reference to Maiolino's poetics. Her vision of reality is not, however, a surreal dream, it is just the opposite. Her synthetic and codified signs cannot be dreamlike visions because they are not the result of a process of symbolisation and there is no internal mental space that contains them. In Maiolino, the impulse to make art no longer obeys the rules of the unconscious of classical psychology, it is not subjected to censure and its manifest content does not refer to latent content. The traditional Freudian perspective on the unconscious is not negated here in its overall validity, but in the case of Maiolino, the premises for its full application fall away. This is because the world of the unconscious is a real cage that limits her, and so her images are not a vague dream, but rather a way of externalising her interior reality. One useful approach is that of Donald Meltzer, who explores the ways in which the unconscious creates symbolic forms that can be used to represent emotional and aesthetic experiences.³ Maiolino's work already provides us with a figurative caption for her poetics: although the intricate context has a clearly organic origin, the images and hues disclose (without revealing the meaning) mixed pulsations of pleasure and pain. Bodily interference with experience was at the centre of the development of Western contemporary art during her formative years, when Maiolino felt herself to be the creator and mouthpiece of something new with respect to her own traditions, and this represented her more emotional and intimate side, the one capable of leading her to her total realisation. With her explicit sexual allusions, for example, the artist plays with the clichés of femininity, making them into conscious satire and, at the same time, using them to promote herself and her work. The extraordinary thing about Maiolino's particular sculptural form is that it can be easily understood as abstract even though it isn't, abstract in the sense of a modernist formal logic within which she tries, through the use of traditional mediums like clay, cement and ceramic, to confront reality directly. From this perspective, Maiolino's sculptural objects can be put in relation with the round, material protuberances of Louise Bourgeois, sculptures that evoke a disruptive and complex sexuality. The meaning of both artists' work, marked by a seductive violence and incisiveness, is not defined so much through words, but rather as something visceral. It is physical before it is intellectual. Their work goes straight to the point, without intermediation beyond that of the artistic form, appealing to the truth of the body before intellectual comprehension, or rather is a form of defence, a tool for understanding the world and the uncomfortable reality of existence. And the reality expressed by both Maiolino and Bourgeois is indeed uncomfortable. The family traumas, fears and doubts of two women who always resist definitions, whether those of femininity and motherhood or those of creativity and intellectualism. The plurality of material forms used by both artists indicates the same complexity and shared irreducibility to any form of regulation of artistic practice and interior life, which instead intertwine in a tumultuous, rebellious and infinitely dangerous way. A wound that requires comfort from numerous sources, from religion and art to politics and psychoanalysis, attempts to conceal the horrifying nothingness. Fortunately, what awaits us is 'non-madness', the appearance of the eternity of all things. We are eternal and mortal because the eternal enters and exits from appearance. Death is a brief absence

of the eternal. What sights – if any – reveal themselves, therefore, after death? For Maiolino, the meaning of death goes beyond what is commonly understood by the term. It goes beyond the very opposition of death and immortality. Many contemporary thinkers understand it instead as annihilation, in some cases saving the soul or the consciousness, which continue to have a life of their own. With her art, Maiolino tries to show that the conviction that Eternity can annihilate itself with death is sheer madness. It is the most profound madness possible, not just in the human world but in Everything. Maiolino clearly wants her viewers to see what she ‘sees’. Through this process, the unconscious ceases to be a concrete mental state that imprisons the subject, and becomes anthropophagous, digesting and transforming experience.⁴ The assertive energy that supports Maiolino’s art seems to consist in the development of a creative system in which the grand imagination replaces the common capacity for assessing one’s own mental processes and those of others. With her imagination, Maiolino feels free to create. She knows that she is exploring a new world that is not yet hers, that she does not yet fully know and that she cannot yet understand. She uses imagination to seek out the reality that has not yet been experienced. When, however, the imagination ceases to have a potential relationship with reality, it itself becomes reality. It functions as a sensory organ that generates and projects outward the data that accumulate in the memory. The reality produced in this way becomes part of memory, where the released patterns are stored in an archive, ready to be reactivated whenever the artist decides to create.

Phenomenology is a method, an approach that entails occupation with the essential forms of the consciousness in which facts appear, which then become phenomena. Once one discovers and accepts that facts and consciousness work together to create phenomena, the philosophy of knowledge is ready to identify the essence and unvarying character of the perceptions (understood as the phenomena of consciousness). One comes to essences by carrying out certain operations, first and foremost phenomenological epoché, suspension of all judgement concerning the reality of the world addressed by consciousness, which makes it possible to achieve two goals: consider that reality only insofar as it is a ‘phenomenon of consciousness’ and perceive consciousness itself and the form of its actions (intentions). Through the deliberate operations of consciousness – which Edmund Husserl called *noesi* – like desiring, remembering, perceiving and imagining, the object becomes a phenomenon, or rather a lived experience, the only truly real experience. Indeed, the external object can even be something that does not exist, but what presents itself to the consciousness, the *noema*, always exists.⁵ Since Maiolino’s art is in fact an analysis of the artist’s human experience, the subject of her investigation can only be the lived experience indicated by phenomenology. The second moment of the phenomenological method is eidetic reduction, an operation that entails the variation of a concept or a perceptive phenomenon, which is to say adding or subtracting aspects to see whether the concept itself remains unchanged. This way, one can see which aspects are truly essential and which are merely accessory. Since eidetic reduction removes all subjective and changeable factors, this method can be used to define the universal contents of consciousness, or better the essential (eidetic) way in which each phenomenon appears (manifests itself) to the consciousness. Through eidetic reduction, the heterogeneous complex of serial phenomena that characterise Maiolino’s work seems to be underpinned by a single element. The presence of a phenomenological approach in the artist’s poetics can be seen in the drive to seek out essences that can always be perceived in her work and in her interest to define and reflect on concepts. Looking closely, phenomenology, together with the method of eidetic reduction, offers the artist a tool for defining her essential concepts, like those of space and time. Maiolino knows that her art is distanced from simple aesthetic definition. The interpretation can never be fully verified and the interpreted object never allows itself to be fully understood; it preserves a certain hardness and hermeticism. To better understand Maiolino’s poetics, one would therefore need to make it less partial and transform it into a form of anthropology, that is, devote more time to the themes of corporeality, sexuality, the animal nature of humankind. The solution expressed by Maiolino in her works is to unhesitatingly think in terms of the ‘what’, and not the ‘who’ or ‘how’, of human existence. This is only possible when one thinks of humankind as an animal species with specific characteristics that are limited, among other things, by its physicality, the properties of its sensory system. Though this type of approach to Maiolino’s complex production might seem reductive, it is worth keeping in mind that the problem of corporeality has consumed Maiolino for much of her career and that, by virtue of this, her art has two advantages: exclusion of all forms of transcendence and obligation to take on reality before any form of imagination. At this point, we see in Maiolino’s work a courageous attempt to rehabilitate the ‘world of surfaces’, the world of the senses. The polemic one can glimpse in Maiolino’s work with a certain Brazilian tradition should be read primarily as opposition to the latter’s aim to reduce the underlying functional structure of the world of phenomena. Comparison between Maiolino and tradition is therefore mainly marked by the problem of the definition of the epistemological statute of the phenomenal world. The powerful condemnation expressed by many of Maiolino’s works is that the senses are all too often considered mere vehicles of information, with no consideration of their real value. The world is not founded, as Descartes believed, by and on judgements (as Husserl put it, avoid the seductive errors made by Descartes and his followers). On the contrary, the world – the world of life – is pre-logical and pre-scientific. Since the rational faculty cannot be presumed in an absolutely fundamental way, sensory experience is the true premise of all experience. Here, the assonance between Maiolino and Merleau-Ponty is extraordinary: both recognise the existence of a world that precedes theoretical knowledge, a world that has not yet been made an object, that is felt before being perceived, that is landscape before it is geographic map, a world in which humankind immediately occupies the centre. A world to which we are all connected, or better that ‘pertains’, through one’s own body, well before it becomes the object of theoretical knowledge. For Maiolino, therefore, feeling precedes all knowledge and constitutes the possibility for one’s relationship with the world. To better understand the distinction between feeling and perceiving, one needs to refer to the more general one between the gnostic

moment and the pathic moment.⁶ Feeling is connected to the pathic moment, the moment in which man opens himself to the world and establishes the how of every single sensation. This pathic moment is the moment in which one establishes the original and emotional relationship between the subject and the world. Pathic is when the situation seizes being, the immediate and uncontrollable exchange of the relationship with the world. The gnostic moment is instead the moment of knowledge, the moment in which it is the object that is sensibly and conceptually seized. Art usually deals only with the gnostic moment, with sensations and rarely with feeling, with that which precedes all knowledge and remains at the most primitive stage of lived experience.⁷ But the difference is absolutely necessary if one wants to reach the depths of Maiolino's works. This difference between feeling and perceiving clearly references the opposition between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge that – as is well known – can be traced back to the dawn of philosophy, and in particular to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Maiolino's art is primarily addressed to the place of origin of this practical knowledge: the senses. Modern critics have made objections to the attempt to reassess sensation and its autonomy. To take an example, it has been noted that Maiolino's gnoseology is unable to distance itself much from the traditional conception of knowledge, since it does not consider sensation in itself as an effective form of knowledge. In this way, Maiolino is seen as continuing, and not even very implicitly, to postulate the existence of a unique and absolute truth – to be known rationally – and the consequential fallibility of the senses, which return to being tools incapable of grasping that truth. In reality, in over fifty years of activity, Maiolino has always laboured to construct the conditions for the possibility of autonomous sensation. The variety of subjective interpretations has always been problematic for the interpretation of her work, but this difficulty can be unravelled if the curvature of one's thinking on consciousness diverges from that of tradition. It might seem that the apology of the senses nourished by the artist is completed by the conception of knowledge in which the more effective it is, the more capable it is of determining the meaning of a perception in relation to the context. In this sense, the quality of a perception is directly dependent on the perceiving subject and proportional to awareness of its involvement in the culture of reference. What really happens is that Maiolino uses everything that can be provided by anthropological and cultural analysis in order to reach a deeper level of reflection and thus be able to track down the errors that have led and lead to the disparagement of the activity of the senses. Indeed, the main mistake that one can make regarding Maiolino's work is that of neglecting the 'feeling' that precedes sensation. Ignoring the pathic moment leads to a false primacy of sensation, which, without its foundation, becomes merely a minor tool of intellectual knowledge. Sensation is knowledge only if ascribed to the original 'feeling', otherwise it necessarily transforms into a handmaiden in the service of reason. This is not enough to understand Maiolino's art. The reassessment of sensation needs to be interpreted as recognition of the human capacity to establish a preconceptual sympathetic relationship in which the world presents itself as a whole, not divided into units, whether these are sensory perceptions or analytic thoughts. The task of art criticism is to unearth specificity, the way in which the sympathetic relationship with the world is ruined. To use terms dear to phenomenology, we are sensible and impressionable flesh, and the world is matter that impresses this flesh and, in so doing, impresses itself as well. On the contrary, physiological theories isolate the organism and transform matter into stimuli, and sensible flesh into receptors of stimuli, delegating the task of organising the stimuli that come from the world to a consciousness placed beyond the flesh. These theories detach consciousness from the body and the conscious body from its world, ignoring that being conscious is above all 'pertaining' to the world through the possibilities of one's own body. According to Merleau-Ponty, the life of consciousness is underpinned by an intentional arc. This intentional arc constitutes the unity of the senses and of intelligence, that of sensibility and of motility.⁸ Through this arc, which joins my bodily self to the world, I pertain to the world and consciousness is pertaining to things through the body. My body is not in space like an ordinary object. It inhabits space. What we call 'consciousness' is the arc that unites, in a given instant, the intentional object that one stretches towards and the vital background of sensations and activities that resides in the body. Therefore, while the physiological theories distance the organism from its own world-environment, Maiolino's works, instead, express a world organised into areas with well-defined features, where physiognomy is assigned by the type of relationship between subject and object.

Profound consideration of human corporeality is probably the strong point of Maiolino's work. It is the element that connects the biological factor to the existential dimension, a theoretical tie that makes it possible to reveal the essence of her works. In 1963, Edwin Straus wrote: 'The body is the mediator between the I and the world'. On the surface, a consideration of this kind cannot help but lead to the failure of the attempt to get beyond the traditionally understood body/mind dualism, but this difficulty is overcome by the definition of consciousness formulated by phenomenological knowledge: consciousness is a relationship determined by a plurality of factors (historical, cultural, genetic, environmental, etc.). In Straus's definition of the body, the central element is in reality the very concept of mediation: none of the terms can be understood in and of themselves, but only in the terms established by a relationship, or better by a system of relationships, characterised by opposition and tension, man seeking union with the world and man seeking independence. It seems that Maiolino also categorically rejects the Cartesian separation of body and mind like that between man and world. In line with the phenomenological direction, these relationships seem to be intertwined in the artist's poetics and the elements in relation are always dialectically dependent. Man and world, body and thought, emerge simultaneously in a necessarily dependent relationship. Maiolino moves in an 'optical' space, where movement has an aim, an orientation, a direction, and proceeds from a centre towards a definite point. It is therefore also a 'historical' space, in the sense that, due to its formulation, the movement happens in time: as time passes, the occupied position shifts in a certain direction. One can say that optical space is directional space, in terms of both movement and time. These observations on spatiality

in Maiolino's work are not just of artistic-philosophical interest, but also help us to better understand how and to what degree space and its qualities are altered in her works. Specifically, we find an alteration of lived space, the qualities of which cannot be measured and instead have to do with the original features of our relationship with the world, the features defined by the pathic moment, from which all further perception and knowledge derive. The reflections on time that we can make around Maiolino's work are hand in glove with those on corporeality. The main reason for this is that the original form of the human relationship is essentially physical, it passes through the body and becomes fixed in the opposition between bodies. Maiolino, beyond all considerations assimilable to Merleau-Ponty, reads movement, physical, bodily action, as that which introduces consequentiality into the world. Movement articulates the body with space and time. Moreover, the capacity to move oneself is what makes it possible for man to develop causal thought. The body is not only a symbolic operator that symbolically organises space, it is also that which gives logical shape to thought through movement. Movement is a consequence of desire, physical character is an effect of the monadic soul that awaits external stimulus. Of course, analysis of the temporal structures of consciousness is the most useful thing for interpreting Maiolino's poetics. The phenomenological method she adopts can be legitimately defined as a method based on historical/psychological categories, inclined to see man as a being in a state of becoming.

Without trying to establish theories or pin down precise definitions, taking instead a more research-like stance, we are moving among Maiolino's works in a wandering, nomadic way, between her life and her work. The work of art is a synthesis of the intensity, passions and interior life of its creator. Similarly, talking about art is constructing a discourse that converts into a place of resonance where the inclinations of both the artist and the writer combine. Maiolino's work is the reflection of a mood, the materialisation of a vision of reality that reawakens still unexpressed feelings, those that we can encounter in the womb of a lost time, an image of eternity. It is the perfect harmony of oneself and the innermost essence of its author. The artist's personal experience, full of meanings, lightens or intensifies the magnitude of her creative work. But up to what point? In art, life and creation are two inextricably linked realities with a force that sometimes surpasses them, and so, the work emerges with a life of its own. Submersed in this environment where the problematic of art often seems melancholy, where artistic practice often finds itself on a road with no exits, what emerges is the work of a woman whose aim has always been wanting to go far beyond herself.

To grasp the intimate relationship between Maiolino's art and her life, we encounter numerous intriguing oppositions. A curious mix of energy and fragility, exalted enthusiasm and pain. But what relationship does the woman have within the process of artistic creation? How does she tackle the problem of art? What languages and what means does she use? It is indisputable that women's thought is, in most cases, determined by the structure of their body. A mirror that places them in comparison to their own selves, day after day, a current of existence that is unquestionable and miraculous proof of life itself. The body is a space in continuous becoming where its being is manifested. In the terrain of art, the woman's body, receptacle of life, nourishes and constantly articulates her conception and work as an artist. It is not, however, my intention to exalt the role of woman in art through the work of Anna Maria Maiolino, nor to polarise her specificity as a woman in artistic creation. I will limit myself to highlighting that the language of the woman artist starts from a specific and concrete reality: the image of the body. A language that makes itself into anatomy, that makes itself into a body, and is, for this reason, other and different. In this regard, I like the idea of comparing the language of Maiolino and that of Eva Hesse, two female artists that I deeply love and that only appear to be very distant from one another. For Hesse, too, the body is a cerebral and physical place where one encounters life and death. The sense of discomfort and fragility that Hesse reveals comes from a difficult past, made up of fear of Nazi persecution and marked by family tragedy, including her mother's suicide. An obsessive discomfort that often led the artist towards self-destruction, as well as the destruction, by her own hand, of almost all of her works. Maiolino and Hesse structure understanding of identity and art through a simple criterion of free association among materials, capable of bringing out their innermost qualities. The two artists apply this practice to both artificial and natural materials, as well as to the concept that underpins cerebral and physical identity. This relational dynamic, which exalts contrasts, programmatically acquires a markedly feminine charge in their work. There is, therefore, for both artists, a conversation or reference to the inside and the outside (internal/external) that converges in the maternal and fetal setting. In their poetics, femininity is clear not only in the quality of the materials used or in the choice of round and circular forms, but most of all in their way of evoking the organic female side of the material. According to Maiolino and Hesse, materials contain all of their energy within them and it is the task of the artist to control and position it. In a formal sense, the circular figuration (closed circle as introspective vision) that distinguishes the work of both Hesse and Maiolino highlights the psychological character and sexual aspect of their art. Through these formal characteristics, their art also acquires a certain erotic, as well as female, connotation. In reality, these aspects imply a more complex discipline, made up of constant, critical work on identity and society. Pursuing this path of inquiry led me to read Didier Anzieu on the production of the work by the hand of its maker and the way in which the artist projects the image of his own body into his work.⁹ Although Anzieu's writing is limited to study of literature (with the exception of the last part of his book *Le corps de l'oeuvre*, where he discusses the work of Francis Bacon), I draw on some of his ideas to explain Maiolino's relationships with her art and the form in which her works take shape, starting with the intensity and force with which the artist represents herself in the world. The image of the body is one of the cornerstones of the thought of a woman artist. This is manifested through an intimate, interiorising way of understanding things, which she expresses through a language of metaphors, silences, discontinuities and contrasting feelings, an extraordinarily ambivalent and secret language, close to poetry. Maiolino employs the real or translated image of the body as a privileged place

of reference to use in relation to the outside. Put another way, through it, phenomena that come from outside – including the phenomenon of art – find resonance in the internal structure of the body, in its anatomy and in its thinking. Through her art, Maiolino transmits a painfully fascinating world, made up of the emotions and sensations of her life as a woman. Since much of Maiolino's work is linked to her personal life, the artist reveals desires and obsessions in her works that highlight an inclination towards suffering, passion, pain, death and a revolutionary form of love, themes that take hold of her and appear as recurrent images in her work. The individual experience comes through in such a forceful and authentic way that it transcends its purely personal character, becoming increasingly universal. This is why Maiolino approaches her works as a flow of intensity, like a movement of energies expressed in organic images and strong, decisive, acid hues, lines of force that form the foundation of her art. This explains the importance of the image of the body in this universe, an image from which one weaves the language of forms to construct a work that cannot be broken down into structures, but where the body seems to absorb and influence the artistic form, infusing it with a biological rhythm that makes it eminently alive. Absent, silent, immobile, paralysed, imprisoned bodies. In Maiolino's works, we encounter an image of the body that functions as the centre and master of the space, from which everything seems to enter into a disquieting dialectic of the I and the Other. From the most ingenuous representations – if one can ever call this artist's works ingenuous – to the metamorphoses in clay, ceramic, cement and even glass, the body is for her a setting where everything can happen, a setting where something goes to free itself, the setting of being. It is in fact thanks to the body that the existence of the world and of things is revealed to us as something 'given', that 'is there', before all reflection and all scientific knowledge. There is also a spontaneous relationship between the world and the body that is expressed by the desire to grasp things from their origin, to find simple, ingenuous contact with the world, to discover things in the relation in which they look towards all bodily individuality.

In a word, from the desire to discover the act of feeling. This is, in synthesis, the aim of Maiolino's phenomenology. Within this close relationship, we find an interchange between the I (body) and the You (world), which indicates the presence of reversibility. In Merleau-Ponty, this reversibility or 'chiasm', as he called it, is the passage that makes it possible for us to exist in the magical flow that goes from us to the world and from the world to us. But why air the problem of phenomenology here, and compare it to the conception of an artist for whom the creative act is situated at the delicate border between the experience of the body and the outside world? Perhaps because Maiolino decodifies and institutes a language through this long interior journey of the body, trying to understand and project what happens within it. In the universe of this artist, empathy and coexistence between her body and the world are thus subject to a constant process of imbrication. There is an intimate, close relationship between her image and the outside world. Maiolino's – real or imaginary – body is present in almost all of her work, even if we do not see it represented. It weaves a web of challenging situations and figures that sometimes awaken confusion in the viewer, other times clear distress. It is here, in this close relationship between bodily experience and the creation of forms and figures, that her work develops and where the structure of the 'chiasm' can be found. Given the artist's profound awareness of the body, it is converted into the sole vehicle of her being through the world, and so it will be in the centre of the visible. Her body is the imperceptible end that all things look towards. It is the support of her universe. Placing it, in most cases, in a strategic situation in which the body connects it directly to the other elements of the representation, especially in the case of works where she is not represented objectively, there is an absolute prevalence of the body serving as background for the relative prevalence of the forms around her. The transcendence of the body is in fact what characterises her works. Narcissism? Probably. However, is it not perhaps true that there is a fundamental narcissism at the basis of everything? Since the body is what shapes things and, conversely and simultaneously, things shape the body, it projects itself into the world and the world is reflected in it. The image of the body, centre of figuration, thus converts into the receptacle of all visibility. It is the beginning and the end of her universe. Through her image, Maiolino shapes the whole of her work like something that is part of her very definition, like an annex of her own self, an extension of her being.

Maiolino's path as an artist, made up of investigation and experimentation, also transmits an apparently incomprehensible outpouring of eroticism. A sexuality that displays itself – in her sculptures as well as in her drawings and paintings – in all of its vulnerability, and in the end leads to that explosion of pleasure that Georges Bataille described as a 'little death'.¹⁰ After coitus, the two individuals involved in the sexual act return to being discontinuous and perceive this moment as an agonizing abyss. The sexual act is attractive in the same way as death, since both reveal themselves to man initially as moments of continuity, an image that is, however, quickly replaced by the discontinuity that in fact characterises their true nature. The attraction is an expectation, an illusion of continuity that is thwarted by sex and death. The expectation becomes tension, fear, anguish. And to remove this tension, the individual strains to fill his life with a whole series of little deaths, experiences that bring him to thwart, if only for an instant, the discontinuity that makes him alone and keeps him from communicating with other individuals. The erotic component that Maiolino evokes through her work always seems to have this destructive aspect, this breach. But this breach, being proper to human sexuality, profoundly, secretly belongs by rights to pleasure. The principle of eroticism initially appears to be the exact opposite of this paradoxical horror. It is the plethora of genital organs, an animal movement within us that stands at the origin of our existence. But the eagerness of the organs is not 'free', it can only unburden itself with the concurrence of will. As a place of opposites, eroticism triggers a fracture in subjects, a wound that, in the act of little death, ensures that they transgress themselves and go beyond their own limits. What one is attempting to achieve is the Impossible.¹¹ Maiolino's eroticism is nothing more,

therefore, than a pretext for reaching the Infinite, its Impossible, the stage that is the goal of most of her art. The sexual act therefore summarises all contradictions, its characteristic of continuity sums up the discontinuous being of man and woman and draws them near one another in an interior experience close to the Impossible. And the Impossible is no other than suspension, non-sense, the moment of passage through the breach that is itself Impossible, the instant of the dissolution of the I before that passage is complete.

A place of contradiction, therefore, and of the synthesis of opposites: fullness and fragmentation, horror and enjoyment, coincide in an intolerable excess of being. This unsustainable excess is joined by that of thought, which is thwarted and wiped out by excess. Indeed, excess wipes out consciousness, and expression – because extreme – demands not so much abandonment as expulsion from consciousness. Being is unrecognized by itself. Not only that, the paradox is accentuated in eroticism because eroticism is the sexual activity of a conscious being. Maiolino provides a visual representation of this awareness of the excess of thought and of its expression: the Impossible, as suspension of the speakable, is an un-said, or better, an un-speakable, pictured through – for example – protruding blots of paint on paper or canvas or in deep furrows dug into the material. Where the Impossible is, there is only silence, and it is an anguished silence. In Bataille, the body is, however, an accumulation of malodorous entrails; like the rose, it, too, contains within it the idea of its end. Here, there is never ecstatic contemplation of a canonical beauty, there are never proportionate members that fascinate the narrator's eye, the body is only attractive in its most obscene, most desperate projections, and ecstasy is associated with the pain consonant with sacrifice.¹² In Maiolino, instead, although there is recognition of painful beauty and pain is paired with ecstasy, the body has a powerful universe in which it enjoys all of the attentions it is due. But because it is indeterminable, the essence of erotic desire can oscillate between degrees of repulsion, of the fascination with the obscene, between the Bataillean iconoclast who destroys bodies and that of Maiolino who, before losing them, establishes them as an example of absolute beauty. One can therefore state – basing oneself on the distinction that Mario Perniola made within the eroticism 'phenomenon', namely that between iconoclast eroticism and libertine eroticism – that the Bataillean statute belongs to the former, which is to say iconoclast, while the one relative to Maiolino's belongs to the latter, libertine. We thus find in her work an intimate correspondence between the body and the outside, an animation that the body makes of everything that surrounds it. Through this line of force, that of her own anatomy, Maiolino's art envelops her being, leading it to a world where the frontiers between art and the body tend to disappear the very minute that feelings are profoundly experienced and sensations and pains intensely felt. Beginning from a bodily creation, or better from a bodily identification through the work of art, the individual comes to the wondrous 'erotic/aesthetic' pact evoked in many of Maiolino's works. An art where we find a double play of eroticism and aesthetic pleasure, where the body is simultaneously the theme and object of artistic creation.¹³ In Maiolino's work, one never talks about indestructibility, but rather about the consumption (corruption) of the body and about death as a necessary condition of life. A work of art and a sacrifice both participate in the search for a sacred moment that goes beyond secular time, where prohibitions ensure the possibility of life. To better clarify the meaning of Maiolino's aesthetic propositions, one can make a comparison with some of Yayoi Kusama's ideas on the same theme. Of course, the working methods and aims of the two artists are very different. Kusama assimilates an extreme, painful, sometimes masochistic, form of pleasure; Maiolino, instead, through her uncomfortable but inoffensive phallic protuberances, moves towards an aim of bodily liberation. What unites them is the desire of both artists to make their art a real science of man that tries to be connected to all of the forces of the unconscious, to the memory of man, of the sacred, of the mind and of death, to restore the consciousness's original force. It is thus necessary to experience one's own body, or reveal its weakness, the tragic and merciless servitude of its limited nature, wear and precariousness, become aware of its phantoms, which are none other than the reflection of the myths created by society.

Without wanting to go too far with the psychoanalytical vision of Maiolino's work, I am reminded of what I have read about the 'Electra complex' as an alternative interpretation of some of her works with a more explicit appearance and graphic content. Jung theorised this inclination of the female psyche in his 1913 book *The Theory of Psychoanalysis*.¹⁴ Freud openly repudiated the theory in an article published in 1931, deeming aberrant Jung's idea that the sexes have symmetrical positions towards parent figures.¹⁵ And yet, it must be noted that Freud had long held that – *mutatis mutandis* – the Oedipal complex attributed to the male child could be transposed as-is to the case of the female child. This postulate was then demolished by his theory of the infantile genital organisation of the libido, according to which there is only one organ that is important to both sexes during the phallic stage (and so at the height of the Oedipal complex), which is the phallus, and by the progressive promotion of the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. This pre-Oedipal phase is particularly manifest in female children, since for them the Oedipal complex entails the shift of the object of love from the mother to the father. The female Oedipal complex therefore has distinctive features. The loss of the phallus, which male children experience as consequential to a punishment, is instead an assumption in female children: they discover right from the beginning that they do not have one and do not perceive its current absence as a sexual characteristic, supposing instead that they had one before and were later deprived of it. In his late writings, Freud accentuated the female child's recognition of this absence and her blame of her mother for it, who also, for that matter, does not have one. The deprivation of the penis is tolerated, but not without an attempt at revenge. On another front, however, the void – widely represented by the numerous cavities in Maiolino's sculptural works – evokes a situation of vacuousness, solitude, loss or the unknown, and is connected to the sublime, not in descriptive terms, or rather that which is beautiful or majestic, but instead in an emotional and psychological sense, like something that inspires subjection and can provoke terror, almost a return to the

origins, a regeneration, which can, however, be experienced as a *regressus ad uterum*, a 'return to the uterus' (a phrase often used in initiation rites).

It is a symbolic return to a particular primordial state that unites all human beings. This regression only apparently leads back to the mother. In reality, it is the door to the unconscious. Indeed, when undisturbed, regression does not stop at the mother, it goes beyond her to reach an eternal prenatal feminine, the primordial world of archetypal images.¹⁶ In Maiolino, we find a reassessment of regression, conceived as a premise indispensable for all spiritual rebirth. In a critical moment of existence, man is given the task of changing life, changing mind. Man is frightened, he hesitates and then – often – he decides it will be better to flee back in time and find refuge in his own fantasies. Roland Laing writes that regression can be understood by individuals as a return to conception before they can change and resume advancement, and he describes it as a 'journey' (backwards and then again forwards) that leads to a transformation of a potentially liberating kind, for which he proposes the term *metanoia*.¹⁷ The subject therefore not only discovers the true reason for his infantile cravings but, pushing himself beyond himself, enters the sphere of the collective psyche, first entering the fabulous realm of collective ideas and then that of creativity. *Metanoia* indicates the path that man needs to take to achieve his own individuation: touch the bottom of the unconscious to then go back up again and rise in a newer and truly authentic form. *Metanoia* means 'change of mind': it is a journey that leads to a profound transformation of the self and each of us tries to undertake it at a particular moment in our lives. It is a journey that goes backwards, a regression to primitive stages of development, which Maiolino travels through her works, to then once again return to moving forward towards the acquisition of a renewed self. The goal is to live forever in eternal return.

1 Plotino, *Enneadi, II*, edited by Giuseppe Faggin, Bompiani, Milan, 2010. Published in English as *Plotinus, The Enneads*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

2 Paul Schilder, *Immagine di sé e schema corporeo*, Franco Angeli Editore, Milan, 1973, pp. 36–41. Originally published as *Paul Schilder, The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1950 (first edition 1933).

3 Donald Meltzer, *La vita onirica. Una revisione della teoria e della tecnica psicoanalitica*, Borla, Rome, 1989, pp. 53–54. Originally published as *Donald Meltzer, Dream-Life: A Re-Examination of the Psycho-Analytical Theory and Technique*, Clunie Press, Perthshire, 1984.

4 See Oswald de Andrade, *Manifesto Antropófago, 1928: 'Only Anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The only law in the world. Masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivismisms. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties.'*

5 Cristian Muscelli and Giovanni Stanghellini, 'L'approccio fenomenologico di Erwin Straus', introductory note to Erwin Straus, *Sull'ossessione*, Giovanni Fioriti Editore, Rome, 2006, p. 8–9.

6 Mauro Carbone, 'Della differenza tra il sentire e il percepire', introductory note to Erwin Straus, 'Della differenza tra paesaggio e geografia come differenza tra il sentire e il percepire', translated by Andrea Pinotti, in *Estetica 1995*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1996, pp. 283–300. Originally published as 'Vom die Verschiedenheit des Empfindens und des Wahrnehmens', in Erwin Straus, *Vom Sinn der Sinne. Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegungen der Psychologie*, Springer, Berlin, 1935.

7 Erwin Straus and Henri Maldiney, *L'estetico e l'estetica*, edited by Andrea Pinotti, Mimesis, Milan, 2005, p. 81.

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione*, Bompiani, Milan, 2005, p. 191. Published in English as *Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Londra 1962.

9 Catherine Chabert, Didier Anzieu, Armando, Rome, 2000. Originally published as *Catherine Chabert, Didier Anzieu*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996.

10 Georges Bataille, *L'eroticismo*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan, 1969, pp. 87–97. First published in English as *Georges Bataille, Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, Walker & Company, New York, 1962. According to Bataille, eroticism expresses the continuous reference between horror and carnal pleasure, final pain and unsupportable joy. This is why this irresistible transport coincides, ultimately, with death, anticipated by the 'little death' of erotic relations.

11 Georges Bataille, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

12 Mario Perniola, 'L'iconoclasma erotico di Bataille', in *Philosophia Sexualis*, Ombre Corte, Verona, 1998, p. 142.

13 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Pantheon, New York, 1988, p. 60.

14 Carl Gustav Jung, *Saggio di esposizione della teoria psicoanalitica* (1913), vol. IV of *Opere*, Boringhieri, Turin, 1973. Published in English as 'The Theory of Psychoanalysis', in *Carl Gustav Jung, Freud and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1961. The name comes from the mythological figure of Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The latter had the former killed by her lover Aegisthus, and when Electra found out who was responsible for the death of her father, she got revenge, killing her mother. In my interview with Maiolino for this exhibition (published in the present catalogue), Jung's name was often cited among the artist's readings.

15 Sigmund Freud, *Sessualità femminile* (1931), vol. XI of *Opere*, Boringhieri, Turin, 1989. Published in English as S. Freud, *Female Sexuality*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, Hogarth Press, London, 1953–1974.

16 Carl Gustav Jung, *Libido. Simboli e trasformazioni*, Boringhieri, Turin, 1965, p. 323. First published in English as Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido, a Contribution to the History of the Evolution of Thought*, translated by Beatrice M. Hinkle, Moffat, Yard and Company, New York, 1916.

17 Ronald Laing, 'Metanoia', *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, no. 2, April–June 1971, pp. 1–4. Published in English as Ronald Laing, 'Metanoia: Some Experiences at Kingsley Hall', in *Going Crazy: The Radical Therapy of R. D. Laing and Others*, edited by Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek, Bantam Books, New York, 1972.