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Beyond Feminism: The Egg as a Symbol of the Brazilian Dictatorship in the Work of Anna Maria Maiolino

By Mónica Lindsay-Pérez¹

Abstract

So easy to break and yet impossible to fix, the egg is, in itself, a contradiction: soft but hard; delicate but durable; impermanent but episodic. One of nature's most interesting creations, it is impossibly bigger on the inside than the outside and has accordingly captivated artists' minds throughout history. Artists have employed the egg as an allegorical tool for its religious, surrealist, or feminist connotations. Ana Maria Maiolino, a Brazilian artist born in 1942, pushed the egg metaphor beyond its most common iconographic meanings. For the artist, the egg was not simply a religious, philosophical, or feminist symbol, but also a political symbol of the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-85. In this turbulent context, the egg invited different concerns: women were not only navigating the social limitations of their gender, but also the repressive politics of their country. Fragile yet resistant, the egg became a means through which to explore the status of the censored woman artist living under dictatorship. This essay combines art historical visual analysis, feminist theory, and a historical analysis of Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-85.

Keywords: Brazil; Dictatorship; Feminism; Egg; Anna Maria Maiolino, egg metaphor, women in Brazil, Brazilian dictatorship

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Introduction



I imagine that
If Leonardo preceded the hen
He would have invented the EGG
Using an extreme ratio and the golden ratio

The EGG contains nothing in excess
It harmlessly comes out of a small body opening
It simply comes out into the world, always original

An Egg is an EGG
Prototype of wholeness
Even when it is broken or fried

...

I revere the hen and envy her.²

In 2007, Anna Maria Maiolino (b. 1942) created *Leonardo I – Photoemancipation*, a photo and poem series about eggs. She photographed a wooden mannequin’s hand alongside a human hand and an egg, juxtaposing the alive (hand), the not-alive (wood), and the in-between (egg). The Italian-born Brazilian artist interpreted the egg as a philosophical wonder, calling it a “prototype of wholeness.” Broken or whole, the egg reappears in video, collage, sculpture and performance works, from Maiolino’s early career – *In-Out (Antropofagia)* (1973) – to some of her most recent photographic projects (*Quaquaraquagua*, 1999-2009).

So easy to break and yet impossible to fix, the egg is, in itself, a contradiction: soft but hard; delicate but durable; impermanent but episodic. One of nature’s most interesting creations, it is impossibly bigger on the inside than the outside and has accordingly captivated artists’ minds throughout history. Artists have employed the egg as an allegorical tool for its religious, surrealist, or feminist connotations. Leonardo da Vinci, the protagonist of Maiolino’s 2007 poem, included two broken eggs in his famous painting, *Leda and the Swan* (1508), referring to some versions of the mythical story where Leda lays two eggs out of which Zeus’s children hatch. Eggs appear in many Renaissance paintings of the time, most famously symbolising Christ in Piero della Francesca’s *Brera Altarpiece* (1472-74). Vincent Vycinas sought to explain the prevalence of eggs in religious philosophy in his 1961 book, *Earth and Gods*. A perfect paradox, the egg was the ultimate religious metaphor. “The egg,” he writes, “is that which holds all life and death in unity; it is the total rest, as well as total movement.”³

In the twentieth century, the egg’s religious connotations made it the perfect tool with which to parody religion. “This is the blood of Gala,” says Dalí in a video of his wife emerging from an egg, “and the divine blood of Dalí.” Dalí’s infamous *Eggs on a Plate Without a Plate* (c.1930) presented an egg on a string, symbolising an embryo attached to an umbilical cord. Dali claimed to have conjured the painting out of “intra-uterine” memories of being inside his mother’s womb. Later, feminist artworks like Vicky Hodgetts’ *Eggs to Breasts* (1972), Carole Itter’s *Raw Egg Costume* (1975), or Julia Kunin’s *Egg Board* (1990) used the egg to challenge society’s fetishization of women’s reproductive capacities. For these women artists, the egg symbolised breasts, birth, ovulation, nutrition, and domesticity, allowing them the opportunity to play with their assigned role as carers and life-givers.

In her artistic and philosophical explorations, Maiolino took the allegory of the egg far beyond its most common symbolic associations. For her, the egg was not just a religious, philosophical, and feminist metaphor, but also a political symbol. In the work that she produced under the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-85, the egg invited different concerns: women were not only navigating the social limitations of their gender, but also the repressive politics of their country. Fragile yet resistant, the egg became a means through which to explore the status of the censored woman artist.

² Anna Maria Maiolino, published in Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino* (Fundació Antoni Tàpies: Barcelona, 2011), 244.

³ Vincent Vycinas, *Earth and Gods: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 199.



From left to right: Leonardo da Vinci, *Leda and the Swan* (1508); Piero della Francesca, *Brera Altarpiece* (1472-74); Salvador Dalí, *Eggs on a Plate Without a Plate* (c.1930); Vicky Hodgetts, *Eggs to Breasts* (1972); Carole Itter, *Raw Egg Costume* (1975); Julia Kunin *Egg Board* (1990).

Censorship

In one of her earliest video works, *In-Out (Antropofagia)* (1973), Maiolino films men and women furiously masticating, zooming in on their mouths and detaching their lips from the rest of their bodies. The mouth is the part of the body through which food and air pass from the outside to the inside. In effect, the mouth exists simultaneously in and out (*In-Out*) of the body. At certain points throughout the video, the mouths are blocked by obstacles: covered by tape, string, or shadows. One mouth is pictured with an egg held between the lips, emphasising its double-existence: like the mouth, it survives in an in-between state, neither inside nor out. Speaking about her preoccupation with food as a metaphor, Maiolino said “we are talking about ‘inside and outside’, this implies movement, transit, and it leads us to vital aspects. If you think about life, you’ll see that nature renews itself in the movements of contaminated transits.”⁴ Catherine Zegher explains “Maiolino proceeds by taking the idea of ‘living organisms’ literally, through the inclusion of seeds, plants, and eggs” in her artwork.⁵

In-Out (Antropofagia) was not simply a philosophical exploration of in-between-ness. Maiolino confronted the theme of censorship by filming speech with no sound: the mouths strain and struggle as they pull exaggerated shapes, but the viewers’ expectations of dramatic vocals are not met. Instead, a drumming soundtrack by Laura Clayton de Sourza becomes increasingly loud and disjointed, as the mouths appear angrier. At the end of the video, the viewer hears the sounds of slow breathing, referencing the *sofoco* (suffocation), which was the name given to the most repressive years of the dictatorship. After President João Goulart was overthrown in 1964, the Brazilian Armed Forces took control of the country, repressing all opposition. In 1968, one of the most authoritarian acts of the Brazilian dictatorship was imposed. Under Institutional Act No. 5, Media was controlled, free speech was monitored, and torture was adopted as a form of government.⁶ In Maiolino’s video, the mouth is presented not only as a vehicle for speech, but more simply as a means through which to breath and exist.

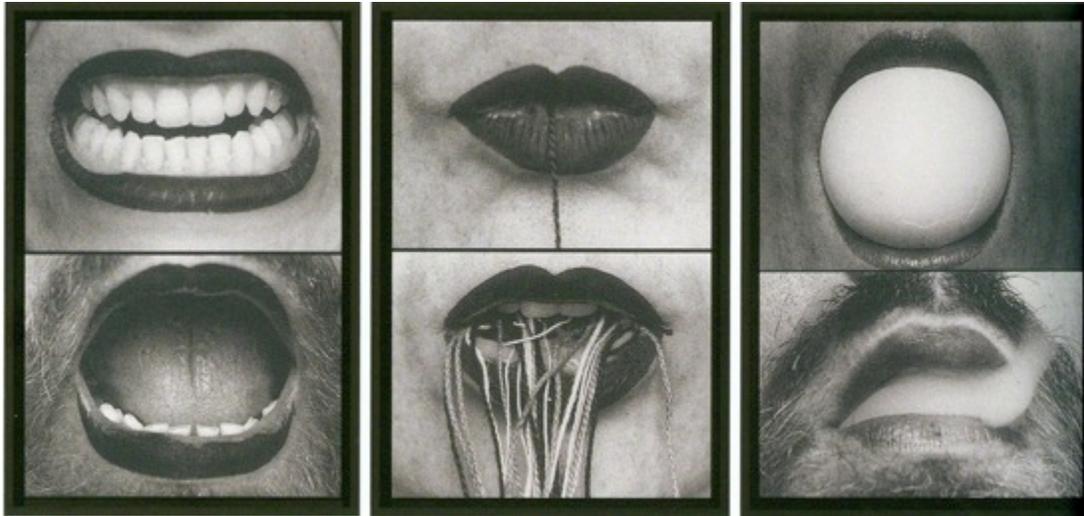
Maiolino lines up six months in a rectangle, playing many screens at the same time. Through her composition, which resembles a television studio, she reminds her audience of the many television stations currently controlled by Brazilian authorities. The egg in the film has been described as “filling the space of the mouth as if it were the belly of a pregnant woman.”⁷ But Maiolino was not employing the egg for its live-giving associations. Post-1968, the egg’s fragility had more pertinent symbolic connotations than its fertility. Its fragility served a double purpose: on the one hand, it represented the compromised nature of freedom of speech. On the other hand, its breakability suggested – in a hopeful manner – the facility of transgression.

⁴ Helen Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 42.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rebecca J. Atencio, *Memory’s Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* (The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2014).

⁷ Marcio Doctors, “Future Venation”, in Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino* (Fundació Antoni Tàpies: Barcelona, 2011),173.



Anna Maria Maiolino, *In-Out (Antropofagia)*, (1973).

It was typical for Maiolino to broach the subject of dictatorship through the medium of food. Some of her earliest work explores digestion, consumption, and sustenance, often incorporating food as a metaphor for wider political issues like hunger, poverty, or power. In her sculpture *Glu Glu* (1967), a seemingly furiously hungry, open-mouthed figure is placed above brightly coloured digestive organs. In an interview with Helena Tatay, Maiolino called *Glu Glu* “the hunger of my childhood, of Brazil, and of the whole world.”⁸ *Glu Glu* was first shown in the “New Brazilian Objectivity” exhibition at Rio de Janeiro’s Museum of Modern Art in 1967. The exhibition marked Maiolino’s entry into conceptual art, which she had first become interested in through the Brazilian *Antropofagia* movement. *Antropofagia*, spearheaded by Oswald de Andrade’s famous *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibalist Manifesto), combined the words “anthropography” (the eating of flesh by humans) and “digestion” to re-imagine what Oswald de Andrade perceived to be Brazil’s “cultural dependence.” He hoped to inspire a nationalistic Brazilian art that absorbed and digested foreign ideas without losing its uniqueness.

Maiolino felt deeply connected to the language and message of the *Antropofagia* movement. Discussing the requirements of good art, Maiolino uses food as a metaphor, explaining, “the succulent dishes last longer, those that truly feed you.”⁹ In one of her many short essays, “Anthropophagous Banquet,” she describes her career as a “banquet” in which she goes through various processes of “digestion” and “cannibalism”:

I did not arrive like the conquerors in the ‘carnival country’, but in a train of immigrants. No sooner had I disembarked in Rio de Janeiro than I was **devoured** [...] I **fed myself** happily to the **open mouth** of Guanabara Bay. I was **eaten** like a ‘sacred enemy’, **digested** and expelled me, myself, a **cannibal**. In my new capacity as a **cannibal**, I went in search for **food**. [...] The first person on whom **I feasted** was Oswald de Andrade, through identification with his Anthropophagous Manifesto. Next, it was the turn of the Neo-Concretists. I **digested very slowly** the conceptual questions they had formed [...] The **banquet was plentiful** in the

⁸ Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, (Koenig Books: London, 2011), 41.

⁹ Anna Maria Maiolino, “Anthropophagous Banquet: Conference Project” (2009), published in Helen Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 99.

sixties. I tasted the immanence and subjectivity and Lygia Clark, while Helio Oiticica suggested new problems for the **consumption** of Brazilians. [...] So I continued to **feast** on others' poetry, always the **fresh banquets** with which my nomadic life provided me. **Voracious**, I absorbed it all quickly [...] I would alternate **fabulous dishes** with **indigestible elements**: news from newspapers and television, which, thankfully, are **easy to digest** in the lightning passing of time.¹⁰

Maiolino has often spoken about the importance of food as a metaphor: “we live and we die from the mouth of the anus. I find it impossible not to speak, not to poeticize about what enters and leaves the body, when these experiences are fundamental, corporeal, and vital for us.”¹¹ One of Maiolino's most famous works, *Monument to Hunger* (1978), used food as a metaphor for survival. It consisted of thirty kilos of rice and beans in two plastic bags and was exhibited in protest against the first Latin American biennale of 1978. The biennale was titled “Myths and Magic,” which Maiolino believed was purposefully apolitical, overlooking the on-going Brazilian dictatorship. She placed *Monument to Hunger* on one of the most expensive shopping streets in Brazil, calling the installation *Empty Myths*. The juxtaposition of hunger and luxury served to intervene in the masking of injustice with art and glamour.

In 1976, Maiolino used eggs once again in her video + - = -. She filmed two men playing with an egg on the table, rolling it backwards and forwards. If the egg is taken as a symbol of womanhood, the video can be interpreted as a critical exposé of patriarchal play. Taken as a broader symbol of life itself, the video can be analysed as a parody of the relationship between politicians and citizens under dictatorship. The men are (literally) playing with life, as the egg risks falling off the table. By leaving the film without an ending, Maiolino embraces the possibility of either life or death. She explains:

The winner will be the one who lets fewer eggs fall and break. The film doesn't announce a winner. Instead we are left with the enigma of the egg's apparent fragility and resistance.¹²

Once again, the egg serves a double purpose, representing both vulnerability and resilience. Catherine de Zegher explains that this uncertainty made the egg an attractive symbol for Maiolino, as it allowed seemingly opposing themes – life and death – to exist simultaneously in her art. Her fixation with the egg in the 1970s was not so much about womanhood as it was about livelihood. Sustenance and survival were more prevalent themes in her art than feminism and philosophy.

¹⁰ Anna Maria Maiolino, “Anthropophagous Banquet: Conference Project” (2009), published in Helen Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 99.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 42.

¹² Anna Maria Maiolino quoted in Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 42.



Anna Maria Maiolino, *Glu Glu* (1967).

Fragile Yet Resistant

“Feminism was not embraced by Brazilian artists,” says Calirman in her 2012 book, *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship*.¹³ “There were more pressing issues discussed at the time.” While it is true that many Brazilian women artists, including Maiolino, were resistant to the feminist label, Brazil’s relationship with feminism in the 1970s was more complicated than Calirman’s statement suggests. Maria Amélia de Almeida Teles explains that feminism was not absent in Brazil, but rather stigmatised, in keeping with the bad reputation that feminism had acquired in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s.¹⁴ Many at the “International Women’s Year” conference in Mexico of 1975, which attracted women from across Latin America, denounced feminism as a bourgeoisie, capitalist fancy, incompatible with the burgeoning desire for socialism across the continent. In Brazil, feminism was criticised not only by right-wing fascists, but also by left-wing anti-abortion campaigners and Communists, leaving leftist women artists in a complicated position.¹⁵

Maiolino’s photo-series *Vida Afora* (Lifeline) (1981) shows that Brazilian women artists actively unpicked central issues in women’s lives like fertility, domesticity, and childbirth, even while rejecting the feminist label. In *Vida Afora*, Maiolino photographed eggs in unexpected and precarious places: on beds, in newspapers, or balanced at the top of tall staircases. Maiolino explored fertility by photographing eggs uniformly distributed across a double bed, riskily balanced above a soft mattress. Next to the bed Maiolino placed small statuettes of Virgins with crosses around their necks. Eggs are symbols of fertility and resurrection in the Christian religion;

¹³ Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Duke University Press, 2012), 44.

¹⁴ Jane S. Jaquette, *Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America* (Duke University Press: 2009).

¹⁵ Maria Amélia de Almeida Teles, *Breve história do feminismo no Brasil* (Editora Brasiliense: 1993).

but here, Maiolino leaves the viewer wondering whether the photograph is about fertility or infertility. The presence of the eggs presence makes the bed unusable, creating a sense of discomfort not typically associated with bedroom spaces. Catherine de Zegher writes: “By containing the fear of rupture and terror within the image of fertility, Maiolino creates a space where the most distant polarities meet.”¹⁶ Maiolino used the egg to symbolise not only the life-giving potential of a woman, but also the pressure to be fertile.



Anna Maria Maiolino, *Vida Afora* (1981)

Maiolino was not the only Brazilian artist to embrace the iconographic potential of the egg as a symbol of fertility. In 1968, Lygia Pape made *Ovo* (egg), a film in which the artist emerges from the inside of a three-dimensional white cube by tearing a line through the fabric. Pape egresses in slow movements, rolling onto her back and resting on her knees before standing up. Laura Harris’ article “At the Egg’s Edge” contends that Pape’s exploration of the egg coincides with the artist’s fascination for the psychoanalytic philosophy of Jacques Lacan.¹⁷ According to Lacan, the source of life’s anxiety can be traced back to the moment when the “perfect sphere that is the egg” is broken; when the umbilical cord is cut. Man is left incomplete: “Man [l’Homme] is

¹⁶ Catherine de Zegher, ‘Ciao Bella: Ins and Outs of a Migrant’ in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line* (2002), 92.

¹⁷ Laura Harris, “At the Egg’s Edge,” 168.

made by breaking an egg, but so is the Manlet [or l'Hommelette]."¹⁸ Like Pape, Lacan perceives birth to be a moment of simultaneous destruction and creation. Birth is presented as a moment of destruction, escape, and salvation.

Another contemporary of Maiolino, Lygia Clark, also used the egg to explore birth and rebirth in her work of art from the same year, *O corpo é a casa* (The House is the Body) (1968). Viewers were invited to walk through a series of rooms full of plastic, wire, and balls in order to experience what the artist described as "Penetration, Ovulation, Germination, Expulsion."¹⁹ Clark invited participants "not to crack the egg [...] but to join it, to enter into its trajectory by feeling their way in the dark through the variously textured walls, floors, and passageways of the maze before rediscovering themselves."²⁰ Pape and Clark's artworks can be compared with Maiolino's own descriptions of birth:

Is there anything more contaminated than the birth of a child? In the south of Italy they refer to lucky people as being 'born covered in shit' [...] Nature doesn't do 'clean'. There is an intrinsic duality in it, without any kind of moralisation. It exists with all its opposites.²¹

Unlike Pape and Clark, Maiolino explores the moments before birth rather than birth itself. Her decision to leave the egg unbroken in *Vida Afora* represents her preference for the ambiguity provided when the egg is still fluctuating between "inside and out" states. In another photo from the series *Vida Afora*, she holds an egg precariously between her legs, just below her shorts. Two life-giving forces are framed in one photograph. Calirman concludes that Maiolino's artwork is "feminism in disguise."²² Maiolino did not avoid feminist issues; she simply went beyond them, using the egg a symbol for the precariousness of life, particularly the life of a woman under dictatorship.

Griselda Pollock describes the egg as "a fundamental form [...] the envy of every human imagination." She continues, "it bears the shape of its own formation: the shape of birth. It contains, non-identically, the promise of an entirely unique new life, which it protects, while remaining intensely fragile." Like Pollock, Maiolino focuses on the duality between the egg's potential for life and the risk of death. Unborn and unstable, the egg is a symbol of life in limbo. In its state of limbo, the egg had more pertinent political connotations. In *Vida Afora*, she placed in danger: passed between two hands, placed at the cusp of a closing door, or balanced at the top of a steep staircase. The connotations of instability are rendered political most clearly when she places the egg in a crumbled-up *Journal do Brasil* newspaper. The title reads *Khomeiny promote luta* (Khomeini promises a fight), referencing the Iranian revolution. Crumbled as if in anger, the viewer is left wondering how the egg was not also crushed, in keeping with Maiolino's predilection for the "fragile yet resistant" politics of the egg.

In 1981, Maiolino created *Entrevidas* (Between Lives). Placing multiple eggs on a cobble street, Maiolino began to walk through the precarious space with her eyes closed. She walks "between lives", playing with life itself to symbolise the neglect of Brazilian citizens. She enacts

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton), 717.

¹⁹ Ibid, 175.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Anna Maria Maiolino, quoted in Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 42.

²² Claudia Calirman, "Brazilian Modernism: Feminism in Disguise," *Frieze* (August 2018).

a literal expression of the saying “walking on eggshells”, an appropriate metaphor to describe the role of artists tentatively evading censorship. The temporality and immateriality of performance as a medium gave it a useful impermanence under the dictatorship. Miguel A. Lopez has argued that Brazilian artists embraced vulnerability as a form of resistance against the regime. Enacting what he calls “precarious materiality”, he says “in that suffocating context many artists developed new aesthetic grammars using the vulnerability of their own bodies as well as cheap, precarious, and ephemeral technologies.”²³ Against grand military displays of power, body art, performance, video and photography provided an alternative exhibition of ceremonial force. As one of the most vulnerable objects in human existence, the egg, fragile yet resistant, provided the perfect counterpoint.



Anna Maria Maiolino, *Entrevidas* (1981).

Conclusion

Maiolino took the iconographic potential of the egg beyond its most common uses. It symbolised not only feminism, philosophy, and religion, but also the politics of censorship and dictatorship. Maiolino hailed what she deemed the “simplicity of the egg, the archetype of life,” which signified “the promise of a new freedom and its precariousness.”²⁴ It was this balance between fragility and resistance, inside and outside, that Maiolino exploited in her use of the egg as an artistic tool. For the artist, the paradox that the egg encapsulated – existing between life and death, birthed and un-birthed, inside and out – presented not a nonsensical contradiction, but instead a quintessential embodiment of life under dictatorship.

²³ Miguel A. López, ‘Disrupting Normality: Disobedient Bodies and Dissident Sexualities Against the Politics of Extermination’ in Heike Munder, *Resistance Performed: An Anthology on Aesthetic Strategies under Repressive Regimes in Latin America*, (Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst and JRP Ringier, 2015), 30.

²⁴ Griselda Pollock, ‘Being, Making, Thinking: Encounters in Art as Life,’ in Helena Tatay, *Anna Maria Maiolino* (2011), 209.

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