

# ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO

*Until her participation in **DOCUMENTA 13** held in Kassel, Germany in 2012, where she filled a former gardener's home with abstract unfired clay forms, Anna Maria Maiolino was relatively unknown to international audiences. Now, after an acclaimed solo exhibition at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017, the Italian-Brazilian artist is finally getting the global attention she deserves with a major show at Whitechapel Gallery in London. Titled **Making Love Revolutionary**, it surveys six decades of her complex practice spanning woodcuts, drawings, poetry, video and clay (just don't call it a retrospective: the septuagenarian believes those are best suited to dead artists). At once timely and timeless, Maiolino's exploration of migration, language and labour oddly resonates with Brazil's current political context, burdened by the rise of far-right populist president Jair Bolsonaro.*

*Born during World War II in the region of Calabria, southern Italy, Maiolino immigrated to Brazil in 1960 via Venezuela, only years before the *coup d'état* which threw the country into two decades of military dictatorship. She came of age as part of the *Nova Figuração* (New Figuration) avant-garde, a movement concerned with popular art. In 1967, she participated in the seminal exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, alongside neo-concrete artists Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Lygia Pape. At a time of repression and censorship, the show set the tone for a generation of artists committed to addressing the region's political turmoil.*

**BENOÎT LOISEAU** This is not the first time your work has been exhibited at Whitechapel Gallery. In 1996, Belgian curator Catherine De Zegher included you in the group show *Inside the Visible*, alongside 30 other female artists from various backgrounds. It featured some of your work with clay, but it was also the first time that the documentation of *Entre Vida* (Between Lives), originally performed in Rio in 1981, was exhibited. The iconic triptych shows you crossing a street barefoot, cautiously avoiding stepping on eggs, as if walking through a minefield. Could you tell me about the origin of the work, and the process of documenting it?

**ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO** The world has changed a lot. Artists of my generation, we never thought about the art market, we just had day jobs. You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this. For me, a work is the product of a situation: economic, social, cultural and political. I am a woman, I'm Latin American, I'm an immigrant and, now, I'm old. All of these things mark the production of an artist, their origins. When I arrived in Brazil from Venezuela, aged eighteen, I was looking to identify with a land, a place. Everybody wants to belong somewhere, you know? I never knew if I found things or if things found me, but I was very pleased because I quickly found the artistic milieu of Brazil. I spoke Spanish then, not Portuguese. The military dictatorship emerged in 1964, when I was 27. *Entrevistas* was my second installation which featured organic elements. The first one was *Arroz e Feijão* [Rice & Beans, 1979], an installation which involved a table with frijoles and rice – the elementary meal of Brazil and Latin America – germinating in plates. It was installed in a space lent to me and other artists by the Alliance Française. Back then I wanted to talk about hunger – not just for food – but also a hunger for culture and freedom, at the height of the dictatorship. After that, I did *Entrevistas*, first outside my studio, without an audience, other than my neighbours and the people from the street – a rather strange situation. Ideas, for me, are never finished. The next iteration was different, it was set in a pavilion and with an audience. They're dynamic works. In Los Angeles, two years ago, we reenacted the performance with my nephew. Depending on who looks at the work, with their own psychological, social and cultural sensitivities, the audience completes the work, always.

**BENOÎT** Food and hunger have been central

to your work, throughout your career. In the cultural context of Brazil, the poet Oswald de Andrade laid the foundation for these notions with his *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), a central text for 20th century Brazilian art, in which he argued that 'only cannibalism unites us' – a reference to the country's colonial past.

**ANNA MARIA** *Es bellissimo*. All artists, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, and their Neo-Concrete Manifesto, that's where they came from. To a certain extent, the *Manifesto Antropófago* proposed to leave out European art. Which is impossible, as the colonial legacy is so deeply rooted. But, Oswald de Andrade proposed an art with Brazilian roots, and that is beautiful. He suggested that native Americans were to eat the colonizers to incorporate them and their European ideals in order to excrete new, evolved, forms of art and culture. There are some incredible paradoxes in this notion. Enemies have to be eaten to be dominated but also incorporated. These are beautiful philosophical metaphors. My Super 8 film *In-Out* (*Antropofagia*) (1973) was inspired by the manifesto. In this work, I wanted to eat the enemies of freedom. I learned to read manifestos very late, you know. I never finished my studies – the [institutions] lie and say I've graduated but it's not true, I never finished. I'm an avid reader, but not always of art. I don't know if I've answered your question?

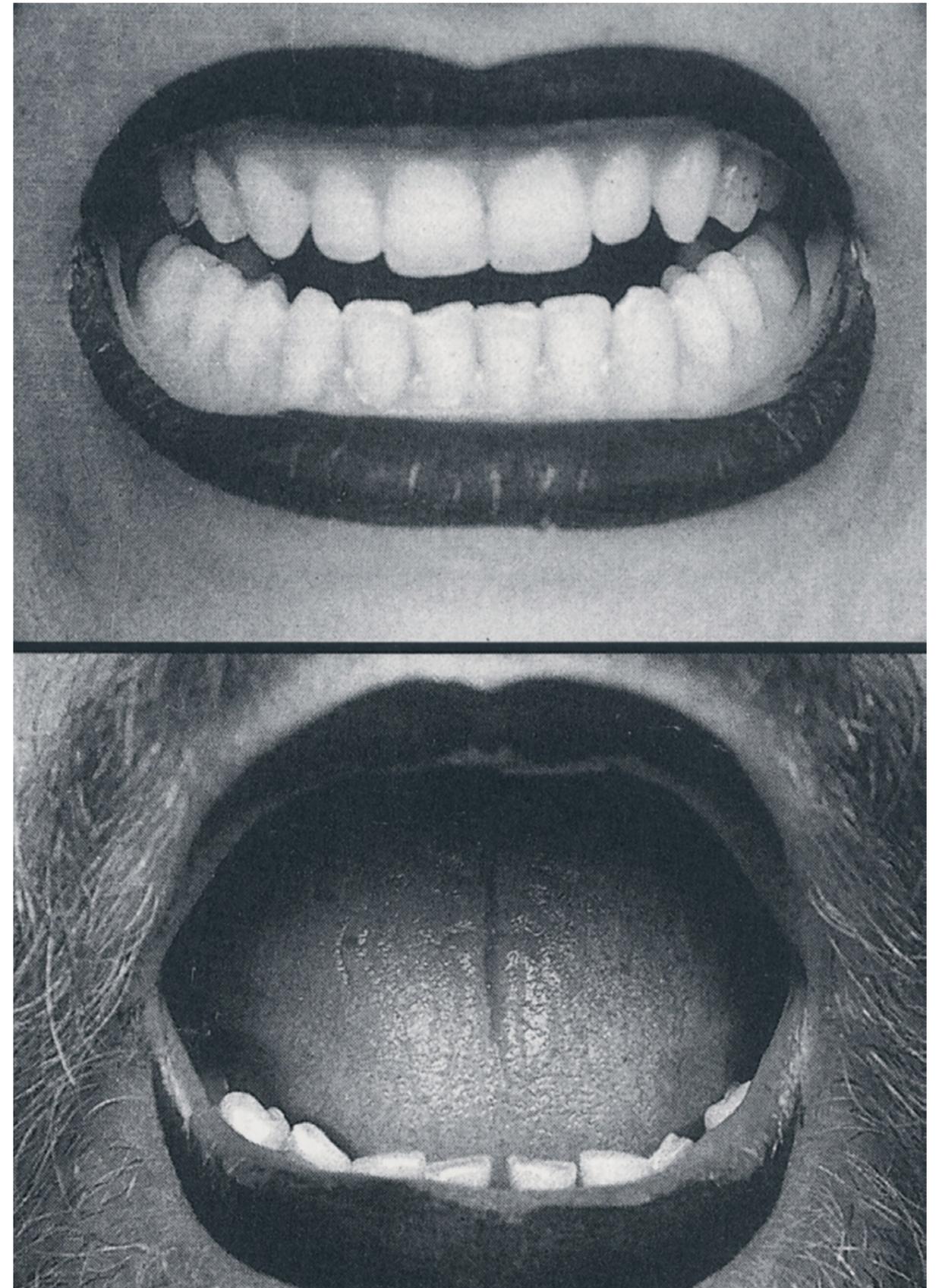
**BENOÎT** In part, yes. But I also wanted to ask you about your own relationship to food and hunger, which doesn't have its origins in Brazil but in the post-war context of Europe, more specifically of Italy.

**ANNA MARIA** Do you know how many we were at the table to eat? Thirteen. That was the greatest university for me, this table where there was never enough food. That was my apprenticeship in life, humanity and knowledge. And for my parents, it was important that we had knowledge. *Eso fue una riqueza* [That was a luxury]. We didn't have much food but we had knowledge. When my mother was upset, she told us off in Latin!

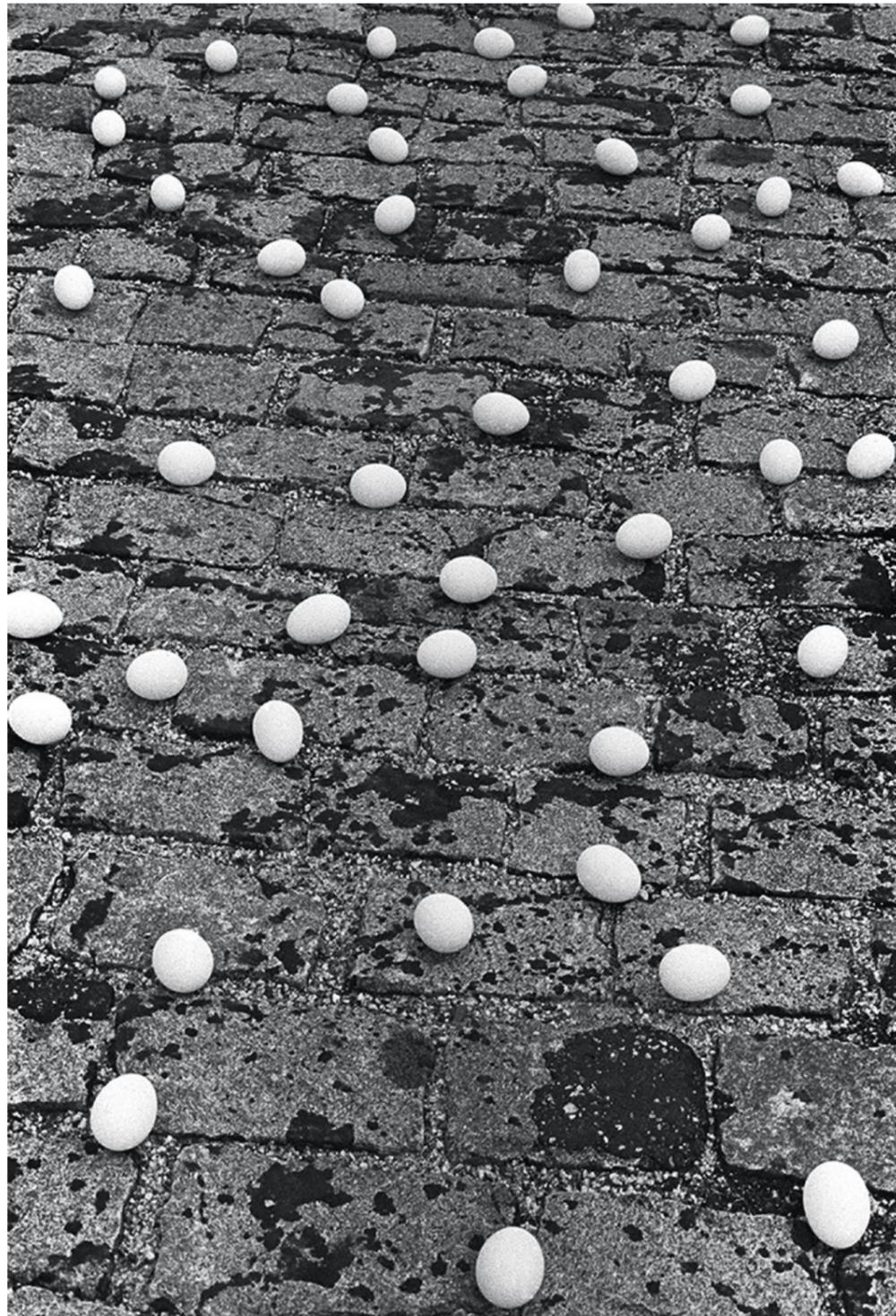
**BENOÎT** Scary. Mine swore in Flemish, that's when we knew we were in trouble.

**ANNA MARIA** Hunger, for those who haven't experienced it, is an abstraction. It doesn't exist. That is a historical problem which humanity has never been able to resolve. In our civilisation, there are always people who are famined. That's what I brought with me, to Brazil. The experience of 'not having' accompanied me, and continues

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*In-Out* (*Antropofagia*) [*In-Out* (*Antropophagy*)], from the series *Fotopoemação* [*Photopoemaction*], 1973/74–2000 (detail)







Sem título, da série Vida Afore - Fotopoemação (Untitled, from the series A Life Line - Photopoemaction), 1981

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to accompany me. And yes, I brought it from Italy. My unconscious and my memory very much nourished my work. Even now that I live from my work, it's something that touches me deeply. The immigration crisis and the levels of intolerance, I think it's horrible. It's terrible, everything that's happening in the world right now. It's like there is no way out.

**BENOÎT** Do you feel that this baggage – your early experience of hunger in Italy – was ever assimilated to the cultural context of Brazil, and the philosophical concept of cannibalism?

**ANNA MARIA** You know, with age comes a lot of wisdom. But you have to be careful never to lose the rage when you need it. You don't want to live too peacefully. I know, I haven't responded to your question! I am a lot more *tranquila* now than when I was in my twenties and thirties. But that's also the danger: youth is always rebellious. As you get older, you want to be at peace with yourself and with life [pause]. I exorcised my hunger. When you enter in contact with art, it is like a ritual. A ritual which can surprise you, for better or for worse. When I discovered the *Manifesto Antropófago*, I understood that you had to eat your enemies to incorporate their ideals. I incorporated my hunger. I calmed it down. I exorcised it.

**BENOÎT** In 1968, you moved to New York with your then-husband, the artist Rubens Gerchman, and your two young children. It was a particular cultural moment for the US, the year of Martin Luther King's assassination, soon after the summer of love and just before the Stonewall riots. It was also a particular moment in your practice, during which motherhood came to dictate much of the way you worked.

**ANNA MARIA** I spoke Spanish, which was the language of the *descualificados*, ['unskilled'] I couldn't speak English, and I still can't really speak it now! My husband had received a grant, we were living humbly, but we got by, we had two young children of two and four. I never rejected the various destinies that were presented to me. I chose to be a mother, like I chose to be an artist. Being a mother and a wife didn't leave me much time, I didn't have anyone to help me with the children. I did what I could. But I believe that, for whatever you can put out into the world, there will be an outcome. It's only after I returned to Brazil [in 1971] that I realised how much I enjoyed being in New York. I have a positive memory of that experience.

**BENOÎT** And that's also when you started to write poetry?

**ANNA MARIA** Yes, that's where I started. I could keep a notebook, while looking after the children.

**BENOÎT** I remember seeing your work in the brilliant group exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* at the Hammer Museum in LA, in 2017. One of the arguments made in the show was that, for female artists across Latin America during that period, feminism was a bit of a dirty word. It was seen as a bourgeois concern, pertaining to the personal and distracting from the political attention required by the dictatorships that burdened much of the continent. Did the feminist movement at the time have an impact on you?

**ANNA MARIA** At the time, I didn't think of feminism as a political stance. For instance, what Brazilian artist Lygia Clark explored, the notion of sensuality, of immanence, it was important. But I never saw these things as fundamentally female, you know? I understood that what American feminists were doing was important for us. I did recognise that female artistic production could be hindered by male curators, for instance. But there wasn't a reflection on Latin American feminism in Brazil. Now we have religions and politicians trying to tell us how to live our lives, but it's absurd. As long as you lead your life with ethics and compassion for others, everything will be fine. The discriminatory politics around gender have radicalised to such an extent, it's awful. We have a president who is utterly intolerant. Just like in the United States, it's worrying.

**BENOÎT** At the height of the dictatorship, upon your return from New York in the 1970s, you made the photo-sequence *É o que sobra* [*What Is Left Over*], from the series *Fotopoemação*, [*Photopoemaction*] (1974) where you are holding a pair of scissors, as if ready to cut off your own tongue. It is a work that speaks to censorship and political resistance, at a time of profound turmoil, and it feels more relevant than ever in the contemporary context of Brazil. How do you feel about this work today?

**ANNA MARIA** Humanity forgets. If you forget, you will repeat. When Bolsonaro appears on TV, I suffer. Because I feel disrespected in the best of who I am. Civilisation, as I see it, is to have tolerance for one another. To find a dialogue, in a democratic way.

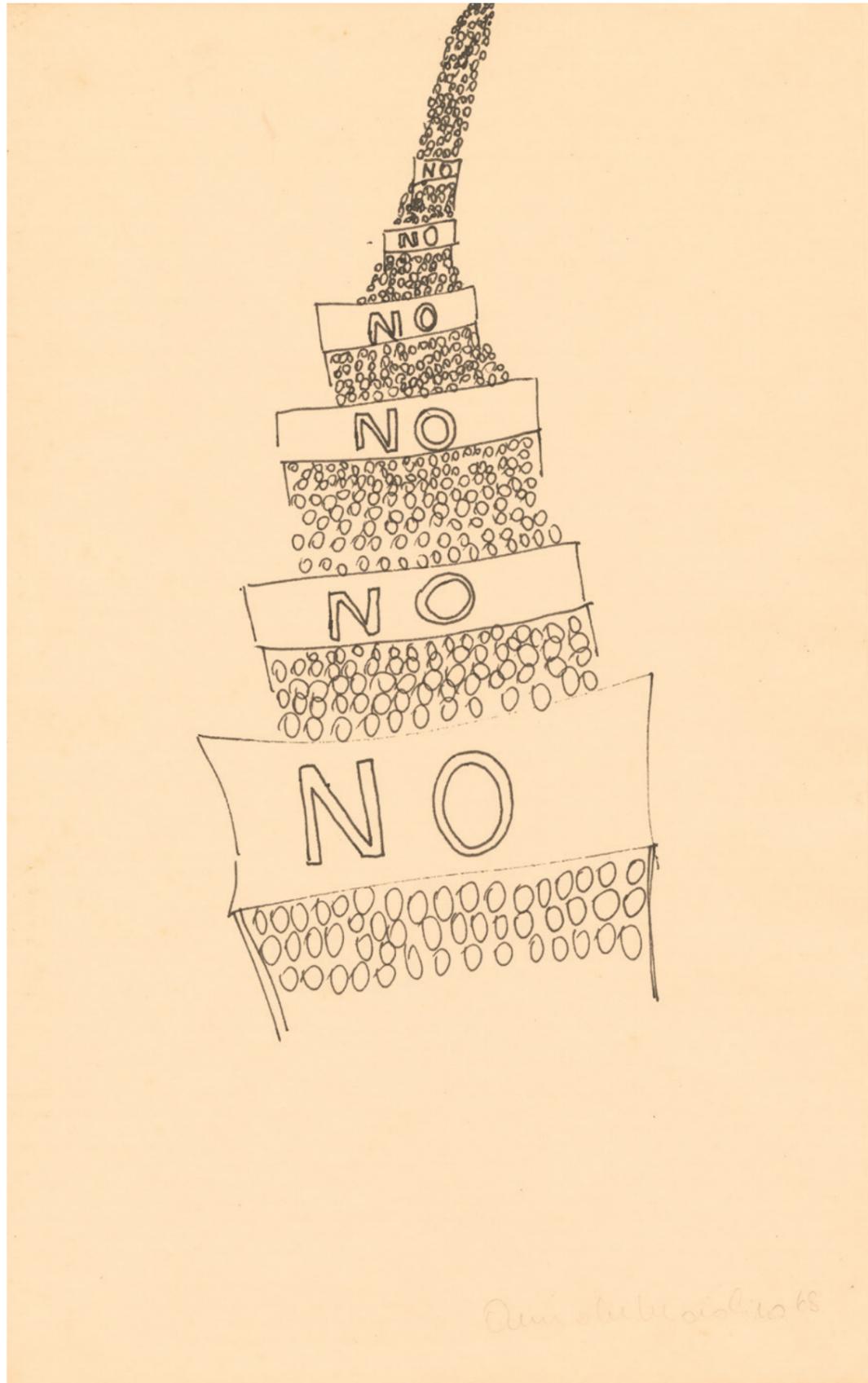
**BENOÎT** In 1989, something important happened in your practice... you discovered clay.

**ANNA MARIA** *Ah, si!* I was in a profound crisis of language in the 1980s, with the pace of things in the modern world, I couldn't understand what I was expecting from life anymore. My partner then, the Argentinian artist Victor Grippo, said to me, "Why don't you try clay?" And you know, I am an artist of experiences – I attach a lot of importance to experiences. When I touched the clay and put a chunk on the table, it felt like the entire world was contained within it. This kind of experience stays with you, inside of you. I didn't know what to do with the clay, so I started sculpting my own face, like autoportraits. When I finished, it looked like a mortuary mask sitting on the table, as if I had killed her. Because with clay, the more you touch it, the more it loses its vitality. When I began to work with more basic shapes, that's when I started a different conversation.

*This interview has been translated from Spanish to English and edited for clarity.*

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Sem título, da série Entre Pausas (Untitled, from the series Between Pausas), 1968-69

ALL IMAGES  
COURTESY THE ARTIST  
AND WHITECHAPEL  
GALLERY

IN-OUT  
(ANTROPOFAGIA)  
PHOTO: MAX  
NAUENBERG,  
COURTESY GALLERIA  
RAFFAELLA CORTESE,  
MILAN; ENTREVIDAS, DA  
SÉRIE FOTOPOEMAÇÃO  
PHOTO: HENRI VIRGIL  
STAHL, COURTESY  
PRIVATE COLLECTION,  
MONZA AND GALLERIA  
RAFFAELLA CORTESE,  
MILANO; É O QUE  
SOBRA PHOTO:  
MAX NAUENBERG;  
SEM TÍTULO, DA  
SÉRIE VIDA AFORA  
PHOTO: HENRI VIRGIL  
STAHL; SEM TÍTULO,  
DA SÉRIE ENTRE  
PAUSAS COURTESY  
COLLECTION OF  
LISA AND TOM  
BLUMENTHAL, BOSTON;  
SEM TÍTULO, DA  
SÉRIE FILOGENÉTICOS  
PHOTO: EVERTON  
BALLARDIN, COURTESY  
PRIVATE COLLECTION,  
SWITZERLAND; SÃO  
PHOTO: VICENTE DE  
MELLO, COURTESY  
HAUSER & WIRTH



Sem título, da série Filogenéticos (Untitled, from the series Phylogenetics), 2015