

(Outside—and Inside)

Poetic observations. Isolated verses, yet constructed like a haiku. Gestures inscribed on paper. Through graphic short narratives and scenes, the series *Entre Pausas* (*Between Pauses*) opens a crease in the world—that same crease in which the art of Anna Maria Maiolino has pulsed ever since.

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New York, fifty years ago. Following her first solo exhibition of woodcut engravings in Rio de Janeiro, Anna arrives with her husband Rubens Gerchman, who had been granted a scholarship. Overrun by housework and two small children, she is forced to put her artistic journey on hold. Packed in her luggage is a sketch pad with drawings she had started some time before; one of her ideas is to become an illustrator in order to achieve financial independence. She remembers the sketch pad when her friend, Hélió Oiticica, aware of her troubles, advises her to write, take notes, draw or scribble on paper, whenever she has a split second free from her daily chores. “One word, something...” recalls Anna, “it will be a record of existing.”

But, more than just a record, the artist makes this into her very existence. “Being an artist, a woman, has been part of one and the same repertoire since the start,” she says in a short text from 1997 titled *Vir a “ser”* (*Coming to “be”*) [first published in *Anna Maria Maiolino: Vida Afora/A Life Line*, ed. by Catherine de Zegher, New York: The Drawing Center 2002, p. 281]. From this multifarious repertoire—which, over the following decades, would intricately unfold through sculptures, installations, performances, works on paper, texts, photography, films, and audio works—*Entre Pausas* bears the original gesture: the construction of an alphabet. “My alphabet,” says the artist, who recently became acquainted with the homonymous book that recounts the experience of a child named Julia Kristeva, while celebrating Slavic Cultures and Writing Day, in Sofia. On that day, everyone was holding a large Cyrillic letter to their chest, and Kristeva stated: “I am also a letter. A hyphen connecting others, a swirl of language, a propeller of meaning.”

Anna is also a letter, or rather, she is that which constitutes every letter, but always persists beyond herself: a line. The line that is produced in some corporal gestures and is consolidated when cutting out and rebuilding the world, turning into a hyphen, a trace. Launching and twisting itself into our lives, intermittently (between pauses) and always

moving. The artist's alphabet is not composed, therefore, of discrete and arbitrary signs that are combined into words and phrases of a language in order to build a shared meaning. The arrangement of lines that it produces refuses to be held back and paralyzed as a sign, nor will it bend to the traits of a single language. Nomad and foreign, like Anna herself, it merges between and mixes languages—Calabrian dialect, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish—sounds and matter.

Carrying through the idea of the letter-line, I like to think of the drawings in *Entre Pausas* as ideograms with no fixed meaning. Like in certain haiku, they shift and transform, between figure and word, becoming at once both poem and drawing. Some explicitly outline the idea of transformation: a flower loses its petals until becoming a dot and a horizontal line; a caterpillar morphs into a butterfly, freeing itself into flight after kissing a flower. A woman is wrapped in a bandage, like a mummy or perhaps one of the faceless statues that in other drawings appear like an inert monument (but that might be hiding a body, a person, as the footprints on the ground suggest in one of them). A man, sitting comfortably on an armchair, holds the end of the bandage. Maybe he is making her spin, and she is becoming body and line—initially united, then gradually separating from each other as they draw (themselves) in space.

One day, Anna told me a poetic daydream that she had had many years ago: a line would emerge from her belly button to join the line of the horizon. Since reading this remark, every scribbled mark, line, and tear the artist makes has acquired another depth in my eyes. Since then I have seen her artwork like a connection between what is most intimate to each of us (our belly buttons) and what is common to us all, like the horizon—which we see together and share, despite being immaterial and moving, re-creating itself each moment, depending on our own position on the Earth's surface.

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In the cited 1997 text, Anna asserts that the need to “equate herself/get even/find her balance” in relation to her reality and everyday life played so heavily on her mind that she started “to craft them into images, work material.” Contrary to what the title *Entre Pausas* may seem to suggest, it cannot really be said, therefore, that the drawings were made between the pauses that her life was imposing on her art. First and foremost, it is the drawings that operate the pauses, putting on hold that oppressive life and firmly announcing,

like the title of a film from 1999/2004: *Um Momento, Por Favor* (*One Moment, Please*). In the suspended moment, as if between brackets: Micael and Verônica, her children, facing one another in the bath. Sister-in-law Betty in the pose of an entire generation. A man who sleeps while a naked woman observes him, standing.

The matter is never one of escaping life, but rather one of crafting it as art. “I decided to assume all the possible destinies toward which I had been traced, without leaving anything out,” says Anna. And we understand: the destinies toward which she had been traced; indeed, just like a drawing. Or many. Trace perhaps always implies retracing life itself, assuming it. And nothing is “left out” in life, because the work is precisely that minimal space between “being traced” and tracing, that place that conjugates “inside” and “outside”: a crease, as I suggested earlier. That is why the series *Entre Pausas* is “here and there,” as the artist told me. They inscribe “Yo... y el espacio...” [I... and the space...] as printed in Spanish under a drawing that presents, like in a photo, an empty public square where a faceless monument stands, duplicated by a solitary tree. In the “photograph” below this one, the statue is a knight holding his sword aloft, with foot soldiers marching ahead.

The space is political. Folding the world in such a way as to make within it a minimal space for herself: zero level of all politics (and all art).

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What Anna does through these works, therefore, is actively (and politically) operate a pause, and say “no” to the oppression, as she does repeatedly in the drawing that brings a crowd of people marching with banners that exclaim: “NO.” This is making art as liberating suspension, perhaps engaging the formula of Mario Pedrosa, critic and political man, who marked the emergence of contemporary art in Brazil: “Art is the experimental exercise of freedom.” From Rio de Janeiro, Anna carried in her baggage the violent atmosphere of the military dictatorship (which in those years had radicalized its state terrorism), alongside another more subtle and insidious, but no less violent, oppression: that of gender-specific practices that normalized the role of women as housewife and mother. Even in liberal artistic circles, there remained a broad (and hypocritical) prejudice against the work of female artists, who tended to be restricted to the role of object of their male companion, especially when he was also an artist.

Some drawings portray this male perspective, evoking the objectification of women and the question of seduction. In one, a man photographs from below a ballerina held aloft; in another scene, he focuses on a nude woman on a pedestal, in a public square. A man looks at another naked woman, who asks, in Spanish: “Bueno, que te parece?” [“Well, what do you think?”], and he replies “Linda, realmente linda” [“Beautiful, really beautiful”]. Thus, several sexist clichés are parodied, whilst maintaining a smoothly dramatic tone. This is accentuated in one almost surreal scene in which a woman stares intensely at a man’s head, whose body is buried; meanwhile, in the background, two pigeons almost touch beaks.

“There is an ironic dubiousness in this work,” acknowledges Anna. At times, her work almost resembles caricature, like in the drawing of the tree-couple alongside which a tree-woman closes her long-lashed, perhaps seductive eyes. Or in the Dadaist collage, with the man’s head hovering over a woman’s leg, flanked by a pair of breasts hovering over a similar leg. As we flick through these diverse scenes, even those of everyday, almost banal situations, there is a pulse that pervades them, with pain and poetry: a force, some wrath. A woman and the world: people, husband, children. From the mouth of the sleeping man and woman a black emanation seeps out, converging into a cloud. The superman bends over a child in the crib, while the woman’s shadow (the mother?) walks by in the corridor, carrying a plant. A woman attempts to accept being a mother, in drawing. “Us mothers have the wrath of nature,” Anna tells me, and I agree. She then recalls an eloquent Italian saying: “Hell hath no fury like a mother’s wrath!” We laugh.

In the various situations that she sketches, like in a voice exercise, the artist adjusts her poetic stance, which exquisitely combines intimacy and politics, materiality and concept. Life and art—always tracing lines in the world.

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