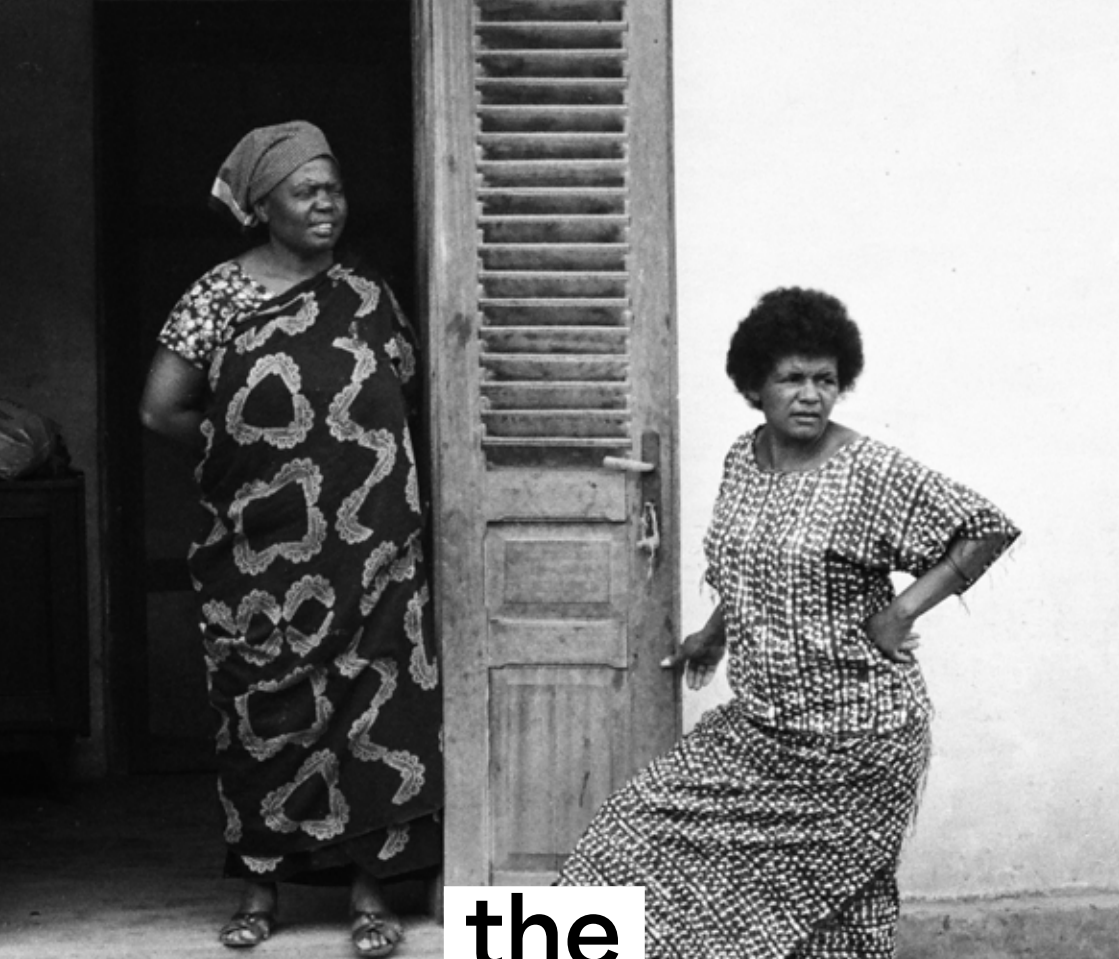




the curators' quaderno



THE FLORENTINE / Press

REVOLUTION ON FILM

Tribute to Sarah Maldoror

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The Curators' Quaderno is a collection of notebook-style publications, conceived by the Calliope Arts Foundation, in collaboration with The Florentine Press, to raise awareness of women's contributions to the fields of art, science and culture.

This issue is published in conjunction with the 66th edition of the Festival dei Popoli – the Florence-based international documentary film festival (1 to 9 November 2025) – under the artistic directorship of Alessandro Stellino and Claudia Maci's management (www.festivaldeipopoli.org). The festival's tribute to Sarah Maldoror is part of a collaboration between Festival dei Popoli and Calliope Arts Foundation, within the framework of 'Women Trailblazers in Documentary Cinema', a project aimed at rediscovering and celebrating female directors, whose work has been undervalued or forgotten.





Sarah Maldoror and
photography director
Claude Agostini on the set
of *Sambizanga*, ph. Suzanne
Lipinska, 1972

Next page: Still from
Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, 1972



"In this edition of *The Curators' Quaderno*, portraits of filmmaker Sarah Maldoror at various stages of her life are interspersed with stills representative of her films. These frames, spliced from reels in need of restoration or recently restored, are like tiny fragments of an expansive vision, that of Maldoror, as filmmaker, thinker, revolutionary and mother. Her own words punctuate many of these stills, and they ring with a determination and clarity whose power is honed and heightened through the lens of her camera. The filmmaker's reflections are presented with the musings of others – curators and

cinema scholars – who advocate for her films' accessibility. They draw connections between Sarah's creative struggles and successes – some that were specific to her own multi-cultural background and others that were universal. Lastly, but perhaps most important, are the memories and dreams of the filmmaker's daughters, Annouchka de Andrade and Henda Ducados, who share the quest to restore, preserve and share Sarah Maldoror's legacy for lovers of freedom and cinema everywhere."

Linda Falcone
tcq editor



On the set of *Sambizanga*, the crew climbs aboard a pirogue to shoot scenes on the river, ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972

HER NAME, HER OUEVRE

"From Algiers to Paris, via Moscow, Bissau, Conakry, Bogota, Panama and Martinique, Sarah Maldoror never stopped fighting for justice and freedom. Maldoror's films discover, chronicle and celebrate the stories, myths and traditions of the African diaspora. In her cinema, driven by a decolonial, combative and poetic spirit, painting and music merge. Born 'Ducados' – to a French-born mother and a father originally from Guadeloupe – she chose the name Maldoror in honour of Lautréamont's poem, *The Songs of Maldoror*, a stance that reflects her artistic and political commitment.

In 1956, she co-founded the first theatre company of black actors in France, 'I Griot'. By 1966, she was assistant director to Pontecorvo for *The Battle of Algiers* and then to William Klein in *Festival panafricain d'Alger* (1969).

A few years after shooting her black-and-white short film *Monangambééé* (1969) in Algeria, Sarah Maldoror produced her masterpiece *Sambizanga* (1972). The film tells the story of the political awakening of an Angolan woman who takes action after her husband is arrested, in a love

story that is as individual as it is collective, in the fight for freedom of an entire country. It is the first feature film ever made by an African director in Africa. Despite *Sambizanga* receiving numerous awards, the director was never able to garner the funding needed to produce another feature film.

Following her meeting with Mario de Andrade, Maldoror expanded her work to include constant dialogues with intellectuals, artists and politicians from the world of revolutionaries. In subsequent decades, she made dozens of films: fiction, documentaries and countless shorts for French TV, some in the form of 'notes' and portraits.

Most notable are her several auteur portraits, such as those dedicated to Haitian writer René Depestre (1981), the Haitian singer Toto Bissainthe (1982), the Martinican poet and pan-Africanist writer Aimé Césaire (1977, 1987, 2009), and the Guyanese poet Léon Gontran Damas (1995), in the belief that the French Caribbean is an intellectual crucible of the modern world."

Alessandro Stellino

Artistic director,
Festival dei Popoli

WHERE TO BEGIN

"I have worked in cinema all of my life and that is why I knew where to start, when it comes to recovering my mother's legacy – whether that means reclaiming rights, finding copies, securing restoration or re-organising the archives. She produced 45 films over the course of her life and, while compiling her archives with my sister Henda Ducados, we've found 50 more, in various stages of development. Not all of them are ready to be shot, but in several cases, she'd written the screenplay, chosen the music, and left notes on how she envisioned production. Funding was always a problem; she was a mother, with a family to feed. She always wanted to make another feature film after *Sambizanga*, but she didn't have the film in her possession to show potential funders, and many didn't believe she could do it. The film couldn't be screened outside the United States for over forty years, because the producer and distributor who owned the rights refused to grant us access. It was Martin Scorsese who intervened in 2016, writing a personal letter to the licence holder and the fact that the law had changed by then (there is an obligation to restore films), so we got access to the negative in 2021, but Sarah had died in 2020. The restoration was carried out at the Cineteca di Bologna. Now it can actually be watched worldwide!"

Annouchka de Andrade

Sarah Maldoror's daughter



Sarah and Henda on the set
of *Sambizanga* with
Mario de Andrade,
ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972



SAMBIZANGA

"What I wanted to show in *Sambizanga* is the alone-ness of a woman and the time it takes to trudge... In this film, I tell the story of a woman. It could be any woman, in any country, who takes off to find her husband."



A MERGING OF THE ARTS

"She was curious and aware of everything around her. Whenever she decided to make a movie, she would start with a painting. This was important to her. Each movie is related to a particular painter or a painting. She would get her cinematographer to see this particular painting before the shoot. She didn't separate art into different categories. For her, cinema involved music, art, painting, sculpture, etc. She wanted to mix everything together. Whenever she was in the process of discovering a new country, the first thing she would do was to go to a museum to discover national artists, to feel the art, in order to feed it into her movies."

Annouchka de Andrade

Sarah Maldoror's daughter



DEFENDING BEAUTY

Maldoror faced criticism about the beauty of *Sambizanga*'s female protagonist, black actress Elisa Andrade, whom she defended: "When the heroine of a French or American film is beautiful, there is no problem, but if the heroine is African, she cannot be... I found a woman of great sensitivity and in addition to this, beautiful. Should I have given up on her because she was black? Of course not."



WOMEN ON SCREEN

"I'm only interested in women who struggle. These are the women I want to have in my films, not the others. I also offer work to as many women as possible during the time I'm shooting my films. You have to support those women who want to work with film."

Sarah Maldoror



 Sarah Maldoror's
Sambizanga,
filmed in Congo, 1972



IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY

"I play a cultural role as filmmaker. What interests me is to research films about African history, because our history has been written by others, not by us. Therefore, if I don't take an interest in my own history, then who is going to do it? I think it is up to us to defend our own history, to make it known – with all of our qualities and faults, our hopes and despair. It is our role to do it!"

Sarah Maldoror

DE-COLONISATION THROUGH CULTURE

"Maldoror's recounting of the struggles for African independence during the 1960s and 1970s oppose colonial and patriarchal perspectives, challenging Western narrative structures by promoting African languages, local traditions, and the avant-gardism of cultural resistance through the use of an expanded, circular time frame, similar to oral storytelling. Her militant and poetic cinema focuses on memory and becomes an instrument of resistance against assimilation."

Ludovica Fales

Curator, 'Tribute to Sarah Maldoror'
66th Festival dei Popoli, Florence



Monangambéé by Sarah
Maldoror, Algeria, 1969

Abuse by the Portuguese
slave traders in their
colony of Angola are
depicted through the
torture of one prisoner.



A VOICE THROUGH TIME

"The Festival dei Popoli's 'Tribute to Sarah Maldoror' reminds us of the importance of documenting and preserving the voice of a filmmaker whose courage and honesty never faltered. Her legacy is more important now than ever."

Margie MacKinnon

Calliope Arts Foundation, co-founder



A SPACE OF THEIR OWN

"African women must be in the images, behind the camera, in the editing room and involved in every stage of the making of a film. They must be everywhere – they must be the ones to talk about their problems."

Sarah Maldoror

A JOURNEY, AN IDENTITY

"From the outset, Sarah Maldoror expressed herself through a black feminist gaze, which was completely absent from cinemas of the time. In a context dominated by men, with post-colonial France reluctant to accept African independence, the filmmaker offers a narrative that focuses on the bodies, social roles, and contributions of black women to the struggle.

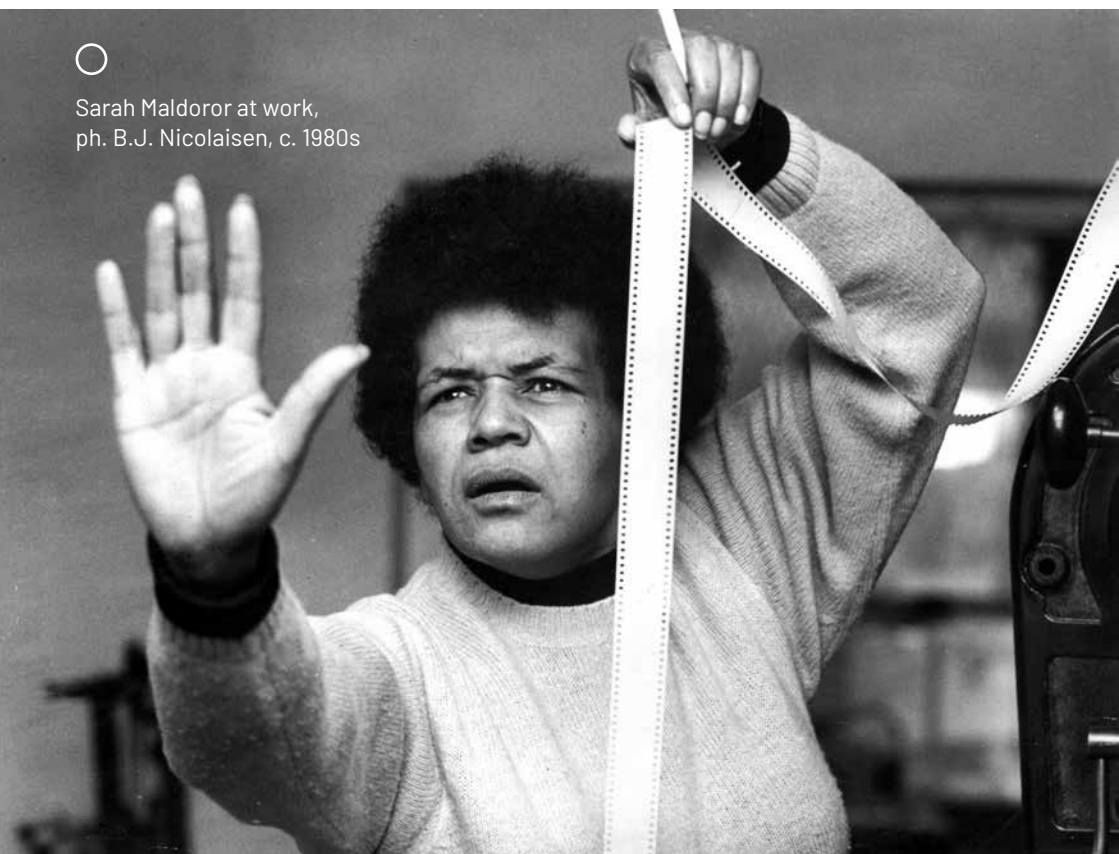
Adept at blending Russian influences, Japanese cinema and jazz into a personal style, Sarah Maldoror forcefully asserts her African identity, enriched by a multicultural experience that led her to travel between Algeria, Angola, Cape Verde, and other African countries. Her travels shaped a rich and unique perspective that is deeply attentive to the role of women in the struggle for liberation."

Ludovica Fales

Curator, 'Tribute to Sarah Maldoror'
66th Festival dei Popoli, Florence



Sarah Maldoror at work,
ph. B.J. Nicolaisen, c. 1980s



FOREIGN AND AT HOME

"I feel at home everywhere. I am from everywhere and nowhere. My ancestors were slaves. In my case, this makes things more difficult. The Antilleans accuse me of not living in the Antilles, the Africans say that I was not born on the African continent, and the French criticise me for not being like them."

Sarah Maldoror



À Bissau, *Le Carnaval*,
Sarah Maldoror,
Guinée-Bissau, 1980

THE STRENGTH OF RESISTANCE

"For Sarah Maldoror, filming Africa is a unique and political gesture. Her films reject colonial exoticism in favour of a style that merges documentary and fiction, combining poetry and realism, anthropology and creation. Her anti-imperialist gaze reveals the oppression and systematic violence of colonialism, but also the strength of resistance: dance, celebration, and oral tradition become aesthetic and political tools. Exile and imprisonment emerge as shared experiences, always imbued with a vibrant and indomitable freedom."

Ludovica Fales

Curator, 'Tribute to Sarah Maldoror'
66th Festival dei Popoli, Florence



"I refuse to make a
nice Negro movie."

Sarah Maldoror



Sambizanga was restored by the African Film Heritage Project, an initiative developed by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project, founded by Martin Scorsese, the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers and UNESCO, in collaboration with Cineteca di Bologna.



Stills from *Sambizanga*,
Sarah Maldoror, 1972



POET AND PIONEER

"She was telling stories Africans would not tell, and that no one was talking about. I admire her for her sense of urgency, but also for her poetry, her aesthetic, for the respect she had for everything she was doing. I don't like it when she is referred to solely as a militant filmmaker. It's reductive, because there is this idea that militancy means the film was not well done – that the theme took precedence above all else. In reality, her films are poetry – perfectly executed, in terms of the production team, the photography, the music. She knew that she had a sort of responsibility and had to make the best film she could. She knew she was a pioneer."

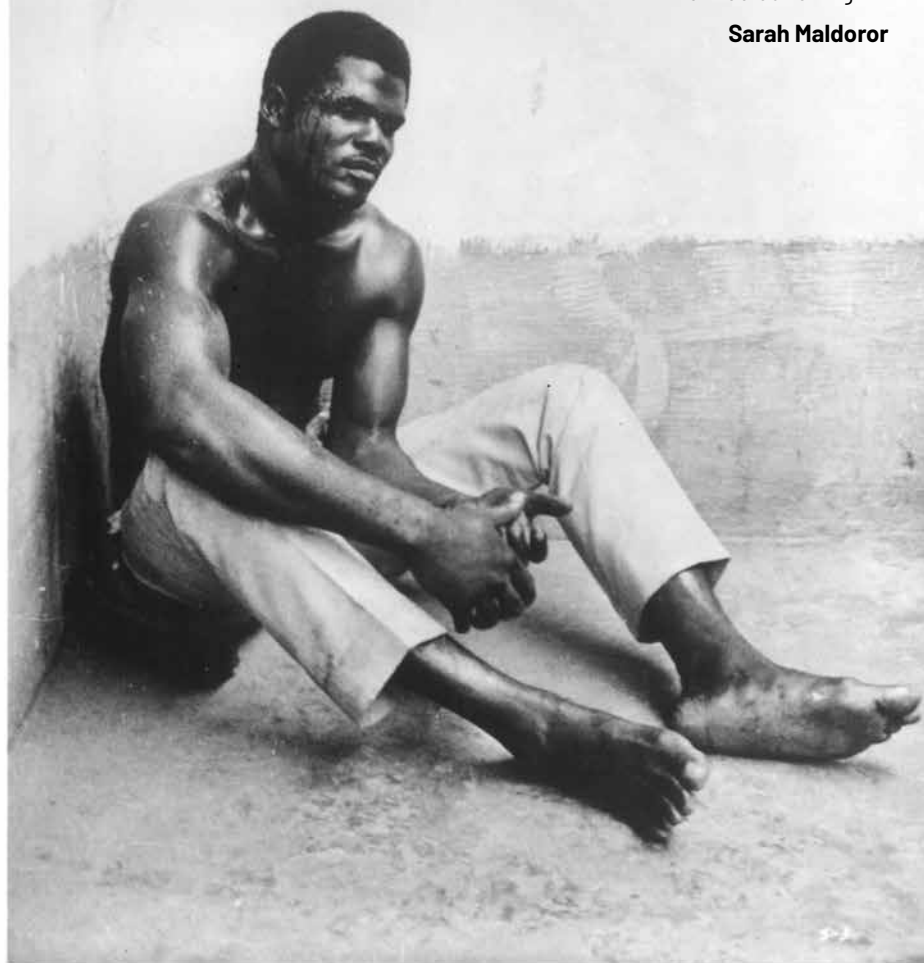
Annouchka de Andrade

Sarah Maldoror's daughter



"I am colour of night."

Sarah Maldoror



SARAH MALDOROR'S "SAMBIZANGA"

A New Yorker Films Release



AUDIENCES AND AFRICA

"I'm no adherent of the concept of the 'Third World'. I make films so that people – no matter what race or colour they are – can understand them. For me, there are only exploiters and the exploited, that's all. To make a film means to take a position, and when I take a position, I am educating people. The audience has a need to know that there's a war going on in Angola, and I address those among them who want to know more about it. In my films, I show them a people who are busy preparing

themselves for a fight and all that that entails in Africa: that continent where everything is extreme – the distances, nature, etc. Liberation fighters are, for example, forced to wait until the elephants have passed them by. Only then can they cross the countryside and transport their arms and ammunition. Here, in the West, the Resistance used to wait until dark. We wait for the elephants. You have radios, information – we have nothing."

Sarah Maldoror





THROUGH HER LENS

"Sarah Maldoror understood filmmaking as a tool for social engagement and political change. Her encounter with Aimé Césaire at the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 marked the beginning of a shared vision: art as resistance and cultural affirmation. Through the series of works dedicated to Aimé Césaire, she gives form to his militant poetics; an aesthetic of critical language rooted in African and diasporic struggles, grounded in histories of liberation and the construction of identity.

Césaire's vision of *Négritude*, not as a philosophy but a sledgehammer, becomes, through Maldoror's lens, a lyrical but incisive instrument, illuminating the fractures, contradictions, and dreams of everyday people navigating postcolonial memory and historical violence."

Justin Randolph Thompson
and **Janine Gaëlle Dieudji**

BHMF, Black History Month Florence



Maldoror during the filming
of the lost film *Guns for Banta*
Guinée Bissau, 1970,
ph. Suzanne Lipinska



FIVE FILMS FOR CÉSAIRE

In Aimé Césaire's poetry, there is a reference to the land; just as in Sarah Maldoror's cinema, there is a reference to the landscape. This affinity is revealed in the documentaries and films that Sarah Maldoror dedicated to Aimé Césaire, poet, philosopher, and politician from Martinique, one of the most authoritative voices of the *Négritude* movement. In the numerous films dedicated to him, Césaire appears as a voice that, moving among the shadows, seeks to capture the drama of a land and the tragedy of a condition. The strength of Sarah Maldoror's films dedicated to Césaire undoubtedly lies in their ability to bear witness not only to the journey of a body, but also to that of a land, caught between profound contradictions.

Still colonized, the Antilles remain - even today - a scandal that the poet's voice, despite its power, has failed to resolve. This is why Sarah Maldoror's films are so valuable: despite the current situation, they bear witness to a land, but also to women and men who have never stopped resisting. They also make perceptible the concrete, material link between land, history, and language, which influence each other through the voice of the poet.

Chris Cyrille-Isaac

Poet, art critic, and independent exhibition narrator



UNFINISHED ARCHITECTURES

"Sarah Maldoror's cinema merges documentary, poetry and fiction into a cartography of kinship and unrest. In *Aimé Césaire, Un Homme Une Terre*, for example, she crafts a political meditation in movement, centered on Léopold Sédar Senghor's first state visit to Martinique. Echoing Césaire's play *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, which punctuates the film, the encounter becomes a stage for reflecting on memory, power and the unfinished architectures of independence. Césaire welcomes his old friend through a tale about Béhanzin, symbol of a conquered Africa, while Senghor embodies the promise of a fraternal continent. Through sculpted figures and resonant music like that of Yusef Lateef and Erick Cosaque, Maldoror maps out an emotional topography where exile, return and solidarity coalesce across the Black Atlantic."

Justin Randolph Thompson and **Janine Gaëlle Dieudji**

BHMF, Black History Month Florence



Sarah Maldoror and her daughter
Annouchka de Andrade at 'Berlinale
Shorts' 2017, ph. Heinrich Völkel

Previous page: From Aimé Césaire,
Un Homme Une Terre, Martinique, 1976



"I love what is beautiful, I
don't know why: painting,
sculpture, poetry, everything
interests me. And yes, I like
to film poets."

Sarah Maldoror

ON COURAGE AND COWARDICE

"I could add a few words about the making of *Guns for Banta*. Maldoror once said that when it came to making films about the formation of Guinea-Bissau, she was struck by the fact that women were active participants in the struggle and carried guns and heavy loads of artillery and machinery for the men. A lot of the disagreements they had towards the end of the project were due to her focus on this aspect of the struggle. She highlighted gender imbalance, but she did it with a lot of beauty. Women were active soldiers even though they received no recognition for their service. It's important to say, as well, that during this period, Maldoror said she discovered what human beings really are, men in particular.

During the course of shooting the film, part of the team had to return to Algeria because of the bombings, but Maldoror stayed on with a few members of the crew. When she came back, she was furious because she had been abandoned. I think the General at that time wanted to make a point, not only because Maldoror had brought back a project that wasn't aligned with what had been agreed, but also because she'd made a point of telling him what a coward he was! We're talking the 1970s, the Algerian army, and the fact that we were guests of the Algerian government at the time – these things all contributed to Maldoror being expelled and to the movie disappearing."

Henda Ducados

Sarah Maldoror's daughter





During filming of *A Dessert for Constance*,
Paris, 1979, ph. Martine Uzan

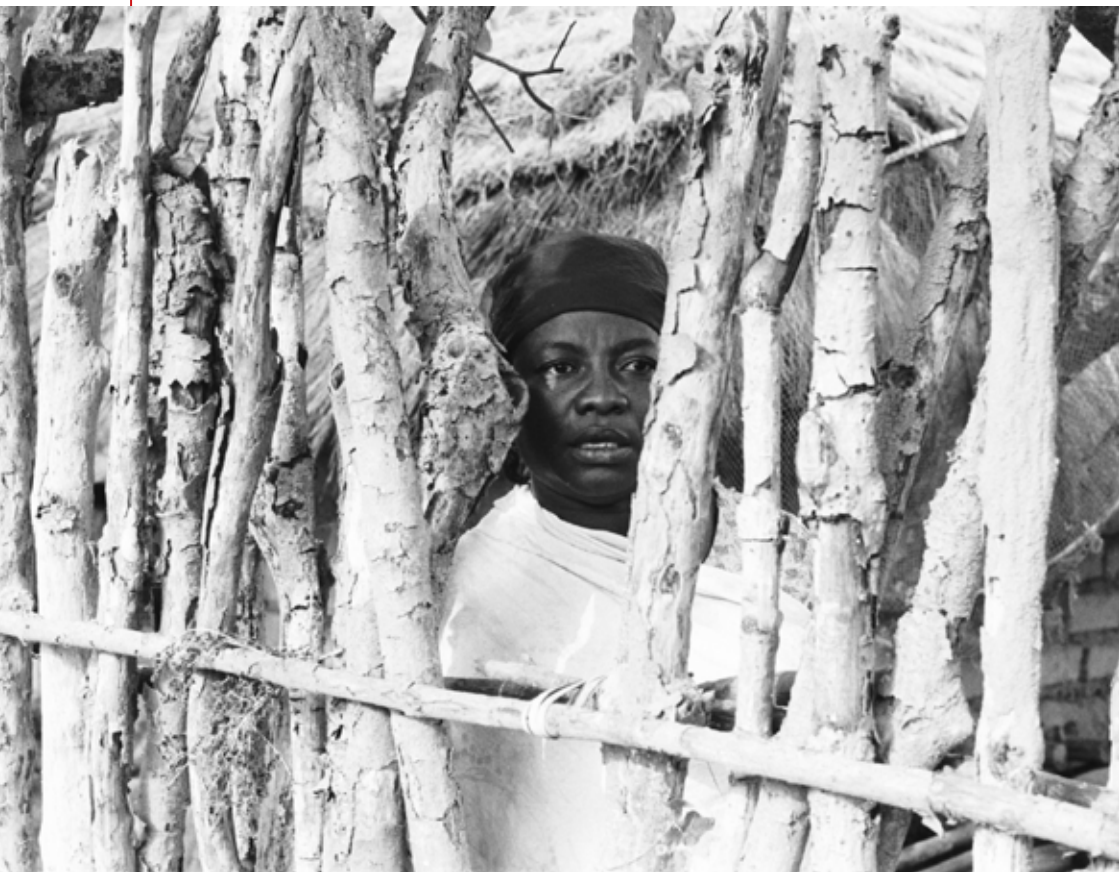


"When filming, I seek to
leave everyday life behind
and introduce dreams."

Sarah Maldoror

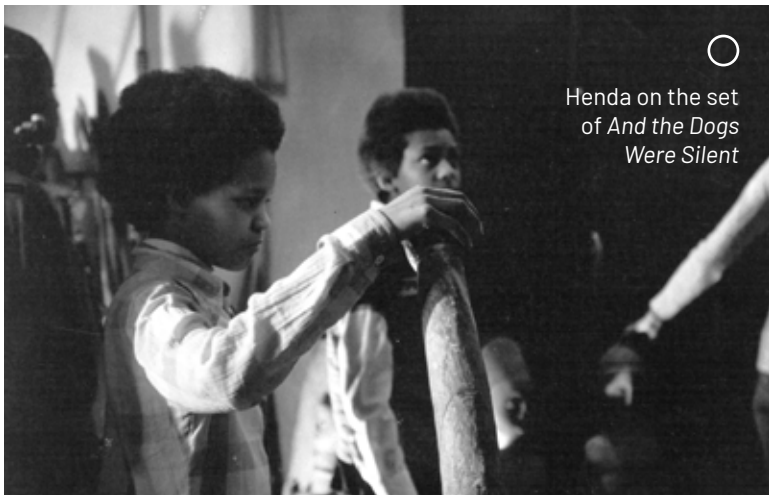


While touring Guinea-Bissau for
the film *Guns for Banta*,
ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1970



"Cinema is an art of the
present. It's not about
yesterday or tomorrow –
it's about today!"

Sarah Maldoror



Henda on the set
of *And the Dogs
Were Silent*

A MOTHER, A REVOLUTIONARY

"Sarah was modern, ahead of her time, and she always treated my sister and me as individuals. This was heavy to deal with as a child. Now, as an adult, I appreciate her even more. One day, she was supposed to go to Nigeria for three days but only returned three months later. How could she have imagined that she was about to land right in the middle of a coup? Things were never easy with her, but they were always fun and unpredictable – *un vrai bordel*.

People came in and out of the house all the time and good-hearted strangers babysat us while Sarah travelled the world. Later on, I was astonished to learn that so many major figures of the 1960s had stayed with us and sat at our kitchen table. There were very few rules I can remember her setting, but one of them was that guns should be left by the door."

Henda Ducados

Sarah Maldoror's daughter



THE SEARCH FOR SARAH

"When I began this restoration project, my sister Henda Ducados and I shared the goal of bringing our mother's work back to life – of recovering her memory. The first step was to track down the film prints and reclaim the rights. There were films we had never seen, or had forgotten. Some were missing altogether. My mother would sometimes lend master copies to festivals – those reference versions were then lost.

Today, no trace remains of certain films! We're still searching. Others are in very poor condition, either due to technical issues or storage conditions. All the films shot in the 1970s shifted to red. For now, we have restored eight films, which is not so bad in three years. Restoring Sarah Maldoror's films is a way of reviving her thoughts."

Annouchka de Andrade

Sarah Maldoror's daughter

Photo credits

All the photos herein have been generously provided courtesy of the Friends of Sarah Maldoror and Mario de Andrade Association (www.sarahmaldoror.org).



Front cover: Sarah and Ma tété while filming *Sambizanga*, Congo, ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972

P. 3: Sarah Maldoror at the dock, Congo, ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972

Pp. 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25: Stills from Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, phs. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972

Pp. 9, 16, 17, 19, 26, 28 (*All rights reserved*), 33 (*All rights reserved*): Stills pictured are courtesy of Annouchka de Andrade and Henda Ducados

P. 34: *A Bissau, Le Carnaval*, courtesy of Annouchka de Andrade and Henda Ducados

Back cover: Still from Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, featuring actress Elisa Andrade, ph. Suzanne Lipinska, 1972

For references to other photos, please see captions.

Acknowledgements

Many people and organisations made this edition of *The Curators' Quaderno* possible. Firstly, we acknowledge Sarah Maldoror, in gratitude for her outstanding legacy. Heartfelt thanks go to the Festival dei Popoli, its president Roberto Ferrari, artistic director Alessandro Stellino, manager Claudia Maci, and editorial consultant Alberto Lastrucci, with special thanks to Calliope Arts Foundation and its co-founders, donors Margie MacKinnon and Wayne McArdle, for their support of 'Women Trailblazers in Documentary Cinema' and *The Curators' Quaderno*.

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