

WOVEN WRITING

12.05–03.09.2023



MARIA LAI

WOVEN WRITING: COMMUNITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Imma Prieto

Maria Lai (Ulassai, 1919 – Cardedu, 2013) sews as if she were writing her own biography, bringing us closer to an extraordinary and profound knowledge, to a memory that is both personal and collective. She also sculpts statements sometimes, but always by means of the gesture of the needle that gets sunk in. Ideas that are sewn, piercing the fabric that functions as an infinite page. In them she threads together not only memory and life, but also, and above all, knowledge, seeking a way to bring us closer to one of her utopias: social equality. Maria Lai creates a space in which people inhabit a place that originates from free, perhaps undisciplined thought. Lai constructs new territories, establishes borderless lands through multiple dichotomies. Those given paradoxes are, perhaps, contradictions that in her work become dissolved and point to the union of a finite in the infinite, as she writes on one of the fabrics she made for theatre scenography: *L'immenso s'imbarca nell'isola* [The vastness embarks on the island], in the same way Xavier Bassas translates, in a constituent sense, Rancière's thoughts in his book *Jacques Rancière: ensayar la igualdad*: "putting equality into practice through writing ... generating a tension between singular and universal knowledge, with undisciplined modes of writing and reading that interrupt consensual opinions and question thematic divisions, without offering definitive conclusions or magisterial positions, practicing equality in the

Errando n. 2 [Erring no. 2], 2008.
Thread, wood, fabric, tempera and velvet,
100 × 100 × 5 cm. Private Collection

present”. Why else choose books as one of the supports on which to inscribe (not write) her thoughts? Does reading not constitute one of the primordial forms of knowledge?

This curatorial project reconstructs the path of one of the most important figures of European art during the second half of the 20th century, even considering that her particular profile is rooted in a Mediterranean landscape that responds to specific codes and frequencies: the heart of Sardinia, in a village in Ogliastra located between stone mountains and the sea. A space that is also transgressed by invented cartographies and maps of the world, immersed in suspended atmospheres.

Lai embarked on a creative journey that explored the potential of thread, understood as an autobiographical trace, as a metaphor for her artistic practice. It is worth noting the fact that she began her career in an especially solitary way, being a woman in a context that did not quite understand what she was doing. Little by little, she began to reveal not only her own language but also a strong commitment to communality. Gestures that respond, in some measure, to her interest in collective actions, as can be seen in her homage to Antonio Gramsci and other works, such as those in which she involves neighbours or collaborates with collective theatre groups.

As with so many other issues, she was ahead of her time and prematurely showed a clear conviction regarding the importance of involving her neighbours and fellow citizens, committed to an approach that understands art as a pedagogical tool for learning and social transformation.

As its title indicates, the current exhibition points to the connection that is established between writing and sewing, both as intimate gestures that expose ideas and create

new universes on the blank page or fabric. Lai asserts that “to weave is to be”; in fact, this is one of the key concepts that run through her entire exploration, revealing itself as a way of being in the world.

It is interesting to note how, from the beginning, we find in some of her drawings the elements that would accompany her throughout her life: stones from a landscape, looms that create communion, asemic or non-sign-based writing, etc. In her work, writing is the driving force of creation, even if it is not legible. Through her use of thread, the artist creates a new form of visual writing, singular and mysterious, indecipherable yet accessible. Maria Lai captures the essence of local traditions and reinvents them to bring to light the relationship between humanity and nature, between personal identity and collective ritual. She embodies memory and nostalgia, as well as a strong determination to invoke the past through the infinite possibilities of (positive) contamination and referencing.

That, among other things, is why this exhibition does not follow a chronological order, but rather highlights the constant cross-referencing in Lai’s works, which are interwoven to form a grand design of art and life. The project is based on three main ideas: writing (textual and visual), memory and community.

Paintings, sculptures, looms, sewn canvases, books, maps, actions in public spaces, etc. Different supports that harbour the strength of a thought, works that nurture each other, based on personal, local and universal history. Each of her series displays a continuity and an internal logic that weave together the different stages of her life, adding experiences and reflections of different kinds based on that which is social, collaborative and pedagogical.

Thus, with the aim of being as faithful as possible to the way in which the artist understands artistic practice, “Maria Lai: Woven Writing” is structured on the basis of the three aforementioned concepts and exists in its entirety as a living and porous organism, aware of the fact that time is not always linear and that space goes beyond the limits that appear in the very materiality of the works.

ART AS A TOOL FOR THINKING: MARIA LAI’S REASONS FOR ART

Maria Alicata

Art is not a gift from heaven, it is a conquest.
—Maria Lai

Maria Lai’s artistic journey is deeply entwined with her life story, and her path cannot be retraced simply through dates and places. After moving from her parents’ home at the age of four, Lai continued to elude geographies and definitions for the rest of her life. Attempts to pin down her coordinates or even attach adjectives to her are often hampered by the continuous sense of play that pervades her personal approach to making art. The genesis of her work has more to do with literature and myth than speculations on the combination of materials. Her sculpture transcends its components, be they paper, fabric or a rock cliff.

Maria Lai is an artist whose actions and perseverance have taken her beyond her work and extended the idea of art, like a large stitched fabric stretched over the artistic experience. Her way of being and her transversal interpretations of art constantly defy definitions. She did not belong to any artistic movement and she did not align herself with any particular current. Her artistic journey was truly original. With her lateral gaze, Maria Lai not only crossed paths with many artistic explorations of her time, but also anticipated others. Her distinct, persistently original perspective makes her one of the most fascinating figures in contemporary art.

Her origins in an isolated and peripheral context such as the Sardinian hinterland are a constant presence in her work. The island is understood as an existential condition of being on the margins and is paradigmatic in the retrieval of an archaic and archetypal ancient making which foregrounds the inseparable link between nature and culture. Her existence is isolated, as is her pursued position in the art system, where she rejected imposed, self-referential mechanisms in order to explore alternative paths that would enable art to break free of pre-established tracks and play a genuinely social role. Her heterogeneous activities involved drawing, sculpture, artist's books, installations and pioneering environmental art. In such a diverse oeuvre, each part contributes not only to the creation but also to the restitution of a vision that has ancestral origins. For Maria Lai, past and future are fused in a continuous flow of weaving and free associations.

Maria Lai was born on 27 September 1919 in Ulassai, a small mountain village nestling in the Ogliastra range. The second of five children, she spent her early childhood with her aunt and uncle in Cardedu, on the coast, a move necessitated by her delicate health. The house where she lived still belongs to her family and now houses her archives. She recalled her early self-taught education there, her passion for drawing and the freedom to sketch on the walls of a room dedicated to her. At the age of nine, she moved to Cagliari to begin her studies with Futurist painter Gerardo Dottori, who taught her drawing, and writer and poet Salvatore Cambosu, who taught her literature and Latin and who would become a key figure in her education, especially in terms of how she would relate to literature, poetry and myth.

Her constant drive for art and independence led her to leave Sardinia for Rome, and in 1939 she enrolled in the city's Academy of Fine Arts, where she studied and produced sculpture and ceramics under the guidance of Marino Mazzacurati. In 1943, during the war, she moved to Venice, where she completed her training with sculptor Arturo Martini, a master of rigorous composition governed by anticlassical values and the sculptural importance of voids and shadows—all later recurring themes in her work, from assemblages to environmental art interventions.

Maria Lai was Martini's only female student, which gives an insight into what it meant to be a woman and an artist in those years. We should not forget that in the framework of the international avant-garde, women who were admitted into the art system were often the wives of established artists and rarely acknowledged in their own right, including Sophie Taeuber, wife of Hans Arp; Sonia Delaunay, wife of Robert Delaunay; and Anni Albers, wife of Josef Albers. This handful of significant examples offer a better understanding of the resolve of a young woman who managed to convince her parents to let her leave home and become an artist: "I was aware that the path of art was also the path of my own emancipation,"¹ she would say years later.

After her time studying in Venice, Maria Lai returned to Sardinia in 1945, where she stayed for over a decade. It was during these years that she created a series of drawings in which she portrayed faces, objects, landscapes

1. Zaru, Francesca A. "Cosmogonie di tele cucite". In: *A matita. Disegni di Maria Lai dal 1941 al 1985*. Cagliari: Arte Duchamp, 1998.

and animals of the island by composing figures through a geometric pattern and inserting them within linear guide-lines, such as in the untitled pencil drawing on paper from 1947 shown in this exhibition. Here we see signs that criss-cross the space in a projection towards infinity, lines that seem to anticipate others in looms and later works, searching for a point in a space beyond, as if seeking a connection.

Back in Rome in 1956, Lai began experimenting with informal art and polymaterism. Rome at that time was one of the international art capitals, thanks to the tireless activity of the National Gallery of Modern Art, directed by Palma Bucarelli, and galleries such as L'Obelisco and La Tartaruga. For several years, Maria Lai notched up some notable critical and commercial successes, but in 1963, having grasped her potential, she withdrew from exhibiting and sought solitude and a space to concentrate. It was during these years, characterised by a constant back and forth between Rome and Sardinia, that she made her first polymateric looms. The 1960s were a key decade for acquiring artistic maturity, as evident in works such as *Telaio del mattino* [Morning Loom] (1969), which shows an evolving visual culture that deftly incorporated new trends. Maria Lai repeatedly stated that in the works she created during these years she was looking to what was happening in the artistic neo avant-garde of the time, from *Nouveau Réalisme* to *Arte Povera*, and in particular to artists such as Jannis Kounellis, Alberto Burri and Pino Pascali. Her sculpture, while drawing on some formal suggestions from Pop Art and *Arte Povera*, harks back to an entirely renewed archaic and ancestral world. Maria Lai nourishes herself with a spirit of the times that speculates on the deconstruction of the object and language, while at

the same time exploring the concept of the marginal, the multiple and the minor as keys to reading and interpreting contemporaneity.

The 1970s saw her first sewn canvases, completely new kinds of *collages* and assemblages of textiles, often with embroidery inserts. In these series of works, the exposed threads again refer to the idea of weaving and bonding, as in *Paesaggio al vento* [Landscape in the Wind] (1974). In these pieces, the artist abandons painting to work directly with canvas. She thus fits into a context of experimentation that in Italy in particular includes from Burri's sacks to Manzoni's canvases, as well as Scarpitta's bandages and Eielson's knotted canvases. Although Lai repeatedly cites Manzoni among the masters that inspired her, she reveals greater affinities with Burri and his explorations with materials. Despite her engagement with contemporary conceptual art research, she remains mindful of her Sardinian heritage. Maria Lai's works are set apart from mere artistic craftsmanship by their strong conceptual dimension, a distinction that may be more evident today than in the past, when some critics and members of the art world failed to recognise the importance of her approach. However, the sense of immediate harmony and warmth that pervades her works can be traced back to her cultural roots.

During this same period, after some initial, short-lived experimentation with writing and visual poetry, Lai discovered a link between ink and thread. She saw this as an opportunity to give form and body to abstract gestures, leading to the creation of sewn books. Her earliest experiments evoke the appearance of pages from a text written in an unintelligible language composed of indecipherable

signs. She recalls that these initial examples originated from the childhood experience of observing her grandmother mending bedsheets: “I would say to her, ‘These bedsheets have writing on them,’ and she would reply, ‘Read them.’ I would make up stories suggested by the movements of the tangled threads.”²

Between 1977 and 1978, Maria Lai created her first sewn books. During this period, she was invited by Mirella Bentivoglio—a poet, artist and art critic with whom she would forge close ties—to participate in an exhibition entitled “Materializzazione del linguaggio” [Materialisation of Language] (1978). Held at the 38th Venice Biennale, the show explored the relationship between art and writing and included works by avant-garde pioneers such as Natalia Goncharova and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, as well as *performance* writing by Tomaso Binga, object poems by Giulia Niccolai, writings by Irma Blank and feminist manifestos by Anna Oberto. The exhibition revealed several implications of the use of words in art. Bentivoglio suggested that Lai’s sewing was connected to the feminine dimension, tracing a lineage from Greek mythology to modern art: “A really particular connotation of these female operations is the tendency to transform language into textile ... perhaps a sign of the penetration of the unconscious, and of the encounter of the woman with her myth. The thread of the Fates, of Ariadne, of Arachne, the thread of a broken discourse, which now seems to be taken up again.”³ A section of the exhibition was dedicated

2. Elena Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. Arte e relazione*. Nuoro: Ilisso, 2017, p. 151.

3. Bentivoglio, Mirella. *Materializzazione del linguaggio*. Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1978, p. 3 [exhibition catalogue].

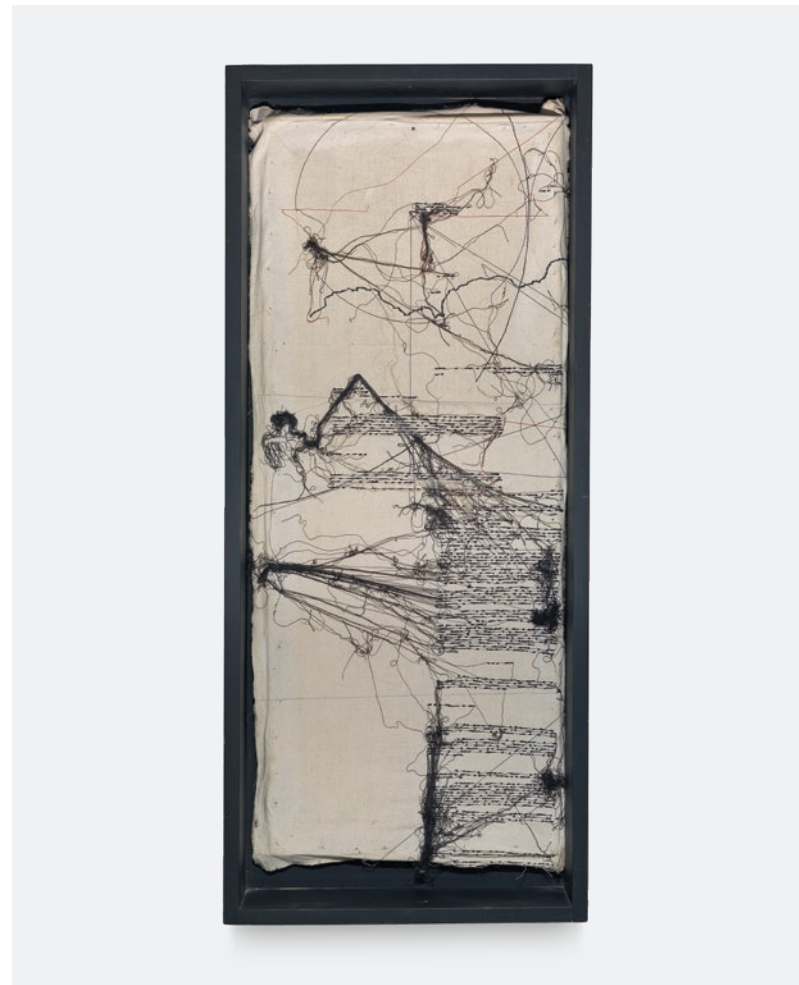
to textile work, and Maria Lai is certainly its most significant presence. The exhibited work *Volume oggetto* [Object Volume] (1978) is a book whose paper pages are criss-crossed by more or less dense parallel lines of black threads that imitate writing.

Maria Lai considered writing to be an essential and enigmatic element that leaves room for personal possibilities and interpretations. The artist repeatedly emphasises the richness and semantic possibilities of her stitched works, such as in the «Geografie» [Geographies] and «Lenzuoli» [Sheets] series, where asemic writing stimulates the mind to conjure up other discourses and narratives.

In the late 1970s, while continuing to create looms, stitched canvases and books, Lai also devoted herself to expressive investigations that extended into an environmental dimension, creating works such as the installation *Casa cucita* [Stitched House] (1979) in Selargius, which simulates the outside wall of a building.

During this time, she returned more frequently to Sardinia, a place she never really left. In 1981 she initiated an action that would introduce a new idea of art by involving people. This anticipated what French critic Nicolas Bourriaud would later define in 1998 as *esthétique relationnelle*, where the work arises as a function of its ability to produce social relations, and where people, rather than the artist, become the real authors of the event. The action, entitled *Legarsi alla montagna* [To Tie Oneself to the Mountain] (1981), is among the first relational works made in Italy. It imposes a symbolic weaving of a bond between human beings and the landscape, prefiguring Beuys’s project *7000 Eichen* [7000 Oaks] made for documenta 7

a year later. The event was held in Ulassai and drew its inspiration from the local legend of a girl who was saved from a landslide by leaving the cave where she had taken shelter to chase a blue ribbon that appeared in the sky. On 8 September 1981, all the inhabitants of Ulassai tied their houses to each other with a ribbon, which was secured to the mountain above. As Elena Pontiggia points out, *Legarsi alla montagna* and the later collective action *Essere è tessere* [To Be Is to Weave] (2008) are ideal works of weaving by an invisible and infinite loom that continues to engage and connect: what emerges is the essential action of weaving together places and people through the act of sewing.



Scrittura [Writings], 1979.
Thread on cloth, 109 × 46 × 10 cm.
Private Collection



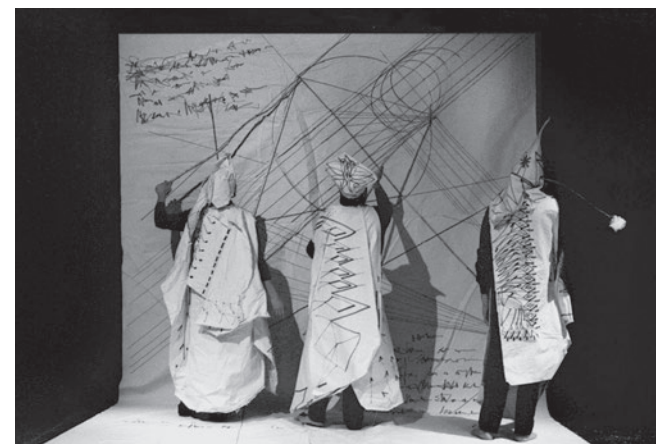
Tenendo per mano l'ombra
[Picking Up the Shadow By the Hand], 1987.
Thread and cloth, 33 x 28 cm.
Walter Baldi Collection



Untitled, 1997.
Thread on fabric, 120 x 200 cm.
Walter Baldi Collection



Legarsi alla montagna [To Tie Oneself to the Mountain],
Ulassai, 1981. Photocopy intervened with marker pen,
17,5 × 25 cm. Courtesy of Ilisso Edizioni



Maria Lai, *Fueddu e Gestu*:
Performance of *L'albero del miele amaro*
[The Tree of Bitter Honey], 1997 (1);
Performance of *Naschimentu*, Villasor, 2002 (2).
Courtesy of Archivio Fueddu e Gestu



Maria Lai during the preparations for the exhibition *Like a Game in Nuoro*, 2002. Courtesy of Archivio Maria Lai

L'ARTE CI PRENDE PER MANO

Pilar Bonet Julve

Maria Lai, with her personal history and her art, is one of the women whom we wish to compensate for a blundered and patriarchal chronicle of the history of Western art. She is part of a luminous trail of visionary artists that we now, in these devastating times, need to relate to and value, seeing as they guide us towards new paths and attitudes that are not stylistic but political. The artist herself, in one of her urban interventions, writes: "*L'arte ci prende per mano*" [Art takes us by the hand]. And perhaps it can guide us towards the world we need.

We use the concept of *visionary artist* to refer to those women artists who transcend the mere material and commercial world, representing an expanded vision of inner knowledge and in search of collective transformation. Spiritual experiences with a cross-cultural slant. Works with this purpose germinate into an ethical consciousness of radical beauty, which some women share in order to contribute to transforming the world, as could be seen in many of the projects at the Venice Biennale in 2022. For the most part, these heterodox creations possess a particular language resulting from their relationship with a nature we must protect and a culture we must preserve. In the words of Cecilia Alemani, curator of the most recent Venice Biennale, we are referring to women artists who act in dissident orbits, opening up paths that inspire other women. Artists, in the deepest sense of the word, who use diverse media connecting prehistory with contemporaneity, magic with technology and spirituality with astrophysics. We know that

harvest time has come and that their seeds, sown in the 20th century, now germinate and encourage other ways of thinking and acting that allow us to share complex meditations on the relationships between people and cultures, as well as on the sacred value of life.

The paths of artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Lygia Clark, Mary Beth Edelson, Suzanne Lacy, Cecilia Vicuña, Ana Mendieta, Fina Miralles, Teresa Lanceta and Maria Lai, among many other contemporary 20th century artists we admire, inspire us and offer spaces for transformative experiences. Places between art and life, past and future, body and soul. With them in mind, weaving new relationships, the feminist generations of the 21st century challenge conventional approaches and explore the role of images and art in a dying society, overturning stereotypes and recovering the history and memory of women's culture, their crafts and the strength provided to them by their mission in life: the protection of the environment. A culture that is common across all continents and ancestral traditions, in prehistoric languages, in holistic philosophy and in a space of psychic experiences that can be explained both through quantum science and through the eternal akashic records of the shamans.

Lucy R. Lippard delves into these creative and social uprisings in several of her studies on the buried layers of the history of women and culture. For this activist, it is important to penetrate deep into the history of a world made by men in order to rescue the hidden layers of a women's history that is more fraternal and capable of providing meaning to the cohesion between art and place.⁴

4. Lippard, Lucy R. *Mixed Blessing: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Maria Lai's story comes from a deep place and is a writing woven between eras. We know that needles and looms were the foundational tools of culture (of writing) before charcoal, brushes or chisels. Textile arts are not secondary in the history of language and art: they are language itself: "*Éssere è tessere*" [To weave is to be], writes the Sardinian artist.

An Island

Artist Maria Lai, the second of five children, was born on 27 September 1919, under the constellation of Libra, in Ulassai, in the interior of an island of stony morphology sculpted by the persistence of a geology of immemorial waters: Sardinia. An arid and rocky landscape where an archaic culture of herding, vineyards and olive oil production endures, a culture that was to mark her body and soul as a solitary child.

Shy and of delicate health, Maria spent part of her childhood with relatives who looked after her at their home near the coast. Those years of solitude, during which she missed school, allowed her to discover in drawing a vital time of introspection and identity. Later, in 1932, in the city of Cagliari, she attended school, but felt maladjusted and disconcerted by the loss of inner silence. One of her teachers became aware of her creative potential and guided her towards the beauty of poetry and the discovery of words and rhythms that sculpt immaterial verses, like water sculpts rocks. This inner gaze brought peace to her soul.

She continued her studies and explored various artistic languages at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where she searched for her aesthetic and spiritual grounding

among the tools of art, technique and the imposed standards of the time. Maria remained shy and discreet, but was emancipated from her destiny as a housewife or supervised woman.

The Academy

At the onset of the Second World War, Maria Lai relocated to Venice and was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts. There she sought her liberation, but found that her womanhood was a hindrance to her ability to take flight and returned to Sardinia in 1945, leaving behind her enthusiasm for sculpture. During these years she cultivated a friendship with artist and poet Foiso Fois.

The return to the Eden of her childhood allowed her to recover fragile materials and popular scenarios, drawing everyday situations and portraits that bound her to the place and its strata. She dedicated herself to teaching drawing classes and to surviving on an island plagued by the violence of banditry. Following several kidnapping attempts, criminals ended the lives of some of the members of her family and Maria returned to Rome, where she aspired to a more peaceful life.

In 1957, the young artist presented her first exhibition of drawings at the L'Obelisco gallery in Rome, a space directed by Irene Brin that was well known among collectors and cultural institutions. The success of her works brought her recognition, but Maria then decided to withdraw completely from the art scene. A gesture driven by an inner desire to seek true freedom in rural culture and nature, not in the markets and discussions of academic art.

Exile

To break away from the art world was not a surrender for her, but an achievement, the only way to find herself and reconnect with an inner voice. It was a voluntary exile, not one that was imposed, as in the case of many other visionary women artists. For ten years, between 1961 and 1970, she kept her distance from the art world, immersed in a contemplation of the rocky landscape, artisanal traditions and Sardinian folklore. This personal crisis brought her back to literature, to everything that she could cultivate in her intimacy and share with the social fabric of the place. During this time, she collaborated with writer Giuseppe Dessi.

In exile, Maria rediscovered the deep connection with her origins and activated the union with the traditions and legends of the island, developing a vision beyond modern art, which Catalan artist Fina Miralles reaffirms with her statement: "I don't want to be a modern artist, I want to be an ancient artist." Through this abandonment of rootless art, she discovered her own language in the places populated by myths and archetypes, among sediments of reality that are at once primordial and universal, that which Lucy R. Lippard describes as primitive and contemporary in her study of the hidden layers of prehistoric culture in *Overlay*. She also recovered poetry, finding inspiration in the alternating rhythms of words and in the punctuation that follows silence. Drawing, writing, weaving and sharing feelings and desires became a form of active meditation that immersed her in an experience of the unknown and the sensed: *Ciò che non so* [That which I do not know].

Maturity

Like many other artists, Maria Lai achieved her unique, personal language in her maturity. In 1971 she presented new work, marked by an intimate and primitive sensibility that led her to abandon the use of brushes and focus on using thread. For her, to weave, sew or embroider was to recover a language that predates the history of civilisation. Weaving is an archaic and foundational gesture that unites cultures and eras, as well as being a great allegory of the connections and exchanges between the beautiful and the sacred.

Thus Lai began to develop her unique form of deconstructed writing with scraps of canvas and stretchers, creating illegible texts and imagined maps that she drew with stitches of thread. Her sewn books, *Libri cuciti*, and bread sculptures were exhibited on several occasions, and she participated in international events such as the Venice and São Paulo biennales in 1979 and 1981, respectively. The rhythm of the shapes and colours, the coded messages and the vein-like filaments that emerge from the pages evoke ancestral writing and artisanal crafts, rather than abstract painting. The weaved material acts as a visual score, halfway between music and poetry.

In 1981 she carried out one of her first community-based actions in Ulassai, *Legarsi alla Montagna* [To Tie Oneself to the Mountain], inspired by a local legend. The action involved tying all the houses in the village, lying by a cliff, to the mountain, by means of a ribbon made of blue cloth. Maria does not consider it an intellectual piece, but a relational one, an opportunity to connect with the universal from a unique ecosystem. A process similar to the quipus that Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña weaves and

places in certain locations or landscapes, activating and renewing a form of writing made of wool and knots that was the first system used by the Incas to record information. There are countless mythological and biblical passages, children's stories and popular songs about women weavers, recalling them and letting us know that there is a weaver who inhabits the souls of all women, teaching us to see time as a ball of energy and needles as tools to create our lives with.

In Cardedu

The artist moved to Cardedu in her later years, but remained committed to her origins in Ulassai, where she continued to carry out actions, sculpture-based interventions and creating work for the small community, as well as collaborating in the foundation of a weavers' cooperative and developing a project for the Sabina Oil Museum. She once stated that her interest was not, and never was, in the art world but in creating life and connections through art. The titles of her projects are poetic and evocative: *Lalveare del poeta* [The Poet's Hive], *La scarpata* [The Precipice], *La casa delle inquietudine* [The House of Restlessness]. In 2006, the Museum of Contemporary Art, known as Art Station, was inaugurated in Ulassai, with the donation of 140 works by the artist.

The writing woven into Maria Lai's books, true diaries of the soul, is at once a metaphor for freedom and a secret coded message. Throughout the monotony of a repeated action, stitch by stitch and line by line, the artist concentrated on the sound of her own breathing: the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling is that of pushing the needle through and pulling the thread out. A time of balance that allowed

her to connect with her inner self and thus reach the vision of the universe she wanted to enjoy: to feel the sun in her hand and fly across her astral plains.

Maria Lai never allowed herself to be trapped by conventions, neither in art nor in social life. She was guided only by fables and unconscious perceptions, without ceasing to create her own cosmogony in the strokes and stitches of her messages. Her works tinkle between the creative action of mystical vision and the collective anonymity of traditions, two profiles of great reforming commitment, seeing as they invalidate the paradigm of authorship and the originality of modern art. She knew how to weave the stories and legends of her place, played with her neighbours in the streets and on cliffs, exercised reflection and devotion, used the written and woven word, without seeking recognition, but searching for the invisible links of what it means to be human through the cooperation and harmony between body and soul. She died at her home in Cardedu on 16 April 2013, aged 93.

The artist is not just another myth in the history of official art, but a guide and an opportunity to move towards the world we need in the face of the effects of the collapse of planet Earth. She encourages us: “I’m happy if I’m able to transmit to you, at this time of global uncertainty, the feeling of holding hands with the sun—*Tenendo per mano il sole*—and of longing for the heavens, for it is the sun and the heavens that give us first the knowledge and then the expansion to live more happily.”

ROOTS, POETRY AND WEAVES: FOLLOWING MARIA LAI’S THREAD

Enrica Sirigu and Úrsula San Cristóbal

“Le mie radici profondamente sarde penetrano nella profondità di un terreno ricco e duro, che alimenta la mia pianta. Non è per odio o per amore ma è per natura che ogni pianta dirige i suoi rami lontano dalle radici” (Pontiggia, 2017).¹ This quote by Maria Lai shows how deep her attachment to Sardinia always was, although her desire for knowledge, freedom and solitude led her to leave the island several times during her life. However, the distance never weakened the memories of her childhood and her country, and it is precisely from these reminiscences that her poetic artistry was born.

The years of study—first at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and then in Venice with sculptor Arturo Martini—were the final step of a training process that began in the 1930s, when Maria developed her passion for poetry thanks to her teacher Salvatore Cambosu. The practice, learnt from him, of reading poems out loud left its mark on the young student. In fact, as an adult she found inspiration for her art in the poems of great writers such as Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Emily Dickinson and many others. She herself composed verses, sometimes fully fledged poems, and other times just brief thoughts or aphorisms. The strength of a poem is

1. “My deeply Sardinian roots grow into the depths of a rich and hard ground, which nourishes my plant. It is not out of hate or love, but by nature that each plant directs its branches away from the roots.”

given by its rhythm, and choosing the right way to breathe when interpreting it depends on the reader. Rhythm became a key element in the artist's work: "Non importa se non capisci, segui il ritmo";² is what Cambosu used to say to her over and over again, and Maria never forgot it. Art belongs to everyone and is for everyone; guided by the right rhythm, we can come to understand it.

Along with a love for poetry and for the poetic sense of life itself, Cambosu passed on to his pupil a curiosity for the stories and legends of Sardinia. Since she was a child, Maria loved to tell stories, many of them invented while she pretended to read the sheets her grandmother mended as if they were books. And she also enjoyed drawing these stories, scribbling things on the wall that would then inspire the events to be told. She remembers: "Sono stata molto debole e malata fino all'età di nove anni, quindi non sono andata a scuola. Quindi io non ho imparato a scrivere prima di disegnare. La mano che scrive usa il polso. E la scrittura è un disegnare minuto. Ma io, che non scrivevo, pigliavo il carbone del caminetto e facevo nei muri grandi grovigli, che non si potevano dire disegni, anche perché non tentavo di rappresentare delle cose; io facevo degli scarabocchi che mi suggerivano storie da raccontare, perché avevo sempre la mania di raccontare storie" (Crispoliti & Lai, 2021).³

2. "It doesn't matter if you don't understand, just follow the rhythm."

3. "I was very weak and sick until I was nine years old, so I didn't go to school. Therefore, I didn't learn to write before I learnt to draw. The writing hand uses the wrist. And writing is a meticulous form of drawing. I didn't know how to write, but I used to take pieces of charcoal from the fireplace and make huge, tangled messes on the walls, which couldn't really be called drawings, because I didn't intend to represent things; I scribbled things that suggested stories to tell, because I was always obsessed with telling stories."

It was years later that her friend and teacher Cambosu, already seriously ill, dictated to her the texts of the legends that make up his book *Miele amaro*, an essential source of inspiration for Maria's work. The book's characters and stories became protagonists in the works of the Sardinian artist, who enjoyed sewing books steeped in narration.

But Maria Lai was not only inspired by literature to translate stories into art. She also collected elements from episodes of her childhood, from observing the unmistakable Sardinian landscape, from the legends handed down to her, from the work of women. The bread, the looms and the sewn fabrics are all an expression of ancient Sardinia, and Maria Lai knew how to take these traditional materials and translate them into folklore-free art, perfectly in line with the European forms of artistic expression that began in the 1960s.

Poetry, literature and the need to fabulate suggest a way of drawing lines and weaving vital storylines where the personal and the collective, the local and the global converge. These ideas materialise in Maria Lai's work via the thread that evokes ideas of continuity, process and change, as Mario Ciusa observed: "Il filo unisce e segna continuità, svolge la trama e l'ordito della vita" (cited in Ciusa, 2017, 21).⁴ In this way, the thread that gets entangled with others, generating textures, suggests a metaphor for the passing of time, a process in which neither the beginning nor the end matters, but rather the thread itself. In Maria Lai's woven books and looms, these textures that evoke a constant becoming seem to have their own rhythm, a kind of vital sonority that invites the

4. "The thread unites things and marks a continuity, unfolds the warp and weft of life."

viewer to resonate with them. Thus, the idea of “following the rhythm” becomes a point of connection between the work and the public.

In Lai’s work, the thread and the weave are also associated with the ability to create bonds in complex environments, as seen in the collaborative action *Legarsi alla montagna* [To Tie Oneself to the Mountain] (1981), carried out in Ulassai, her hometown. In an environment where there was no lack of tensions between families and where the mountain constantly threatened landslides, the artist proposed to the inhabitants to tie their houses, along the rest of the town’s buildings, to the mountain that dominates the landscape. To carry out this action, a sky-blue ribbon was created collectively, in reference to a traditional story known to the entire town. According to the legend, a girl who took food to the shepherds ended up being the sole survivor of a landslide during a storm, thanks to having stepped out of the cave where she was taking shelter after seeing a sky-blue ribbon swaying in the wind. Lai uses both the ribbon and the fable to unite people, nature and landscape, showing how the poetic thread of the weave can expand into the social fabric. In this way, the artist reveals a social conception of art that anticipates the notions of relational art in the 1990s, providing a contextual rooting and significance that many later European proposals were not always able to achieve.⁵

As Ponteggia points out, *Legarsi alla montagna* introduces art as a means for salvation in the work of Maria Lai (2017, 12). The girl survives the landslide because she allows herself to get carried away by the amazement caused

5. For a summary of the critical debate surrounding relational art, see Prado (2011).

by the unexpected presence of the sky-blue ribbon. She leaves the shelter to step out into the unknown, an idea that resonated with Lai, who defined herself as “una capretta ansiosa di precipizi” (Trasia & Piga, 2001). The apparent fragility of the subject and their ability to take risks in the name of imagination give rise to a vision of artistic practice as a tool for generating possibilities. In Lai’s own words: “[L’arte] non occorre a risolvere problemi pratici, non promette niente, ma indica direzioni di salvezza a chi è capace di stupore” (Porru, 2014).⁶ Lai acknowledges that art can have a vital importance, but does not consider it the panacea for all our problems. On the contrary, she sees it as a practice that can open up a path towards other ways of living, through the joint work of wonder and imagination. The threads Maria Lai weaves lead us all the way from fables to the social relevance of art.

Lai’s vision of art seems to resonate at a frequency in tune with that of writers such as Audre Lorde and Annie Ernaux. Lorde argued that for women, poetry is not a luxury, but a vital necessity that allows them to articulate their dreams and hopes for change (Lorde, 1977/2007, 518). For Ernaux, the creation of literature cannot end unemployment or stop a war, but it can make the reader sensitive to certain realities of which they were previously unaware, and it also enables them to say what they had never dared to say before. It allows us to “mettre toutes les ressources de l’art dans le désir de dire et transformer le monde” (Ernaux, 1989/2020, 42).⁷ Maria Lai’s poetic threads seem to invite

6. “[Art] isn’t there to solve practical problems, it doesn’t promise anything, but it indicates directions towards salvation for those who are capable of being amazed.”

7. “Put all the resources of art into the desire to speak of and transform the world.”

us to imagine this transformation through the sensitive gaze of someone who is open to exploring the precipices and to being amazed by the nuances of life itself. She invites us to go hand in hand with the light and the darkness that surround our existence and to accept that we are part of a story that we will have to continue weaving together.

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Woven Writing

Maria Lai

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to 3rd September 2023

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