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FEELING CLOSER TO EACH OTHER. AN ART-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FROM MARIA LAI'S *LEGARSI ALLA MONTAGNA*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary environmental and social crises expose the limits of a paradigm grounded in separation and human dominion over nature as well as of one man over another. Although ecological and systemic thinking has profoundly challenged this worldview, a decisive gap remains between theoretical knowledge and embodied perception: we often understand interdependence without actually experiencing it. This article investigates how aesthetic experience can help bridge this gap by rendering existing relations perceptible and transforming recognition into responsibility. To address this question, it examines Maria Lai's *Legarsi alla montagna* (1981) as an exemplary form of Art-Based Environmental Education in which aesthetic, territorial, social and ritual dimensions converge. Rather than interpreting the work as a landmark of relational art alone, the article reconstructs its genesis, symbolic structure, and spatial-temporal unfolding in order to show how it reconfigures the sensory conditions through which people perceive themselves, others and the more-than-human world. Finally, discussing the features and the effects of this event, the article proposes aesthetic education as a practice of recognizing the existing relations and cultivating perceptual proximity in order to unlock new possibilities of exchange and care.

Keywords: Environmental education, Maria Lai

Feeling Closer To Each Other. An Art-Based Environmental Education From Maria Lai's *Legarsi alla montagna*

Le attuali crisi ambientali e sociali mettono in luce i limiti di un paradigma fondato sulla separazione e sul dominio dell'uomo sulla natura, nonché di un uomo sull'altro. Sebbene il pensiero ecologico e sistemico abbia profondamente messo in discussione questa visione del mondo, permane un divario decisivo tra la conoscenza teorica e la percezione vissuta: spesso comprendiamo l'interdipendenza senza viverla realmente. Questo articolo indaga su come l'esperienza estetica possa contribuire a colmare tale divario, rendendo percettibili le relazioni esistenti e trasformando il riconoscimento in responsabilità. Per affrontare questa questione, l'articolo esamina l'opera di Maria Lai *Legarsi alla montagna* (1981) come forma esemplare di educazione ambientale basata sull'arte, in cui convergono dimensioni estetiche, territoriali, sociali e rituali. Anziché interpretare l'opera solo come una pietra miliare dell'arte relazionale, l'articolo ne ricostruisce la

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genesi, la struttura simbolica e lo svolgersi spazio-temporale per mostrare come essa riconfiguri le condizioni sensoriali attraverso le quali le persone percepiscono se stesse, gli altri e il mondo oltre l'umano. Infine, discutendo le caratteristiche e gli effetti di questo evento, l'articolo propone l'educazione estetica come pratica volta a riconoscere le relazioni esistenti e a coltivare la vicinanza percettiva, al fine di sbloccare nuove possibilità di scambio e cura**.**

Parole chiave: Educazione ambientale, Maria Lai

This what art should do:
make us feel more united.
Otherwise we're not human beings.

M. Lai[1]

1. QUAESTION

We are experiencing a very deep crisis of civilization. The logic of separation and the paradigm of human dominion over nature – as well as of one man over another – on which Western culture has been built and founded for at least 10,000 years is showing its catastrophic effects at the environmental, social and individual levels. It is a paradigm that has now been scientifically challenged from many points of view and in various ways, yet a new model struggles to transpose itself from the theoretical to the practical level, to become an integrated and widespread perceptual pattern even for those who nurture and profess an ecocentric and systemic thinking. The deepest fracture, therefore, concerns not knowledge itself, but its integration.

Starting from this gap I propose to explore what can contribute to a new way of perceiving and inhabiting the present in order to feel closer to each other. Specifically, there are three questions that move my investigation: how can art disclose relations that usually remain unnoticed? How can such disclosure become embodied experience rather than remaining merely abstract knowledge? And how can the recognition of existing relations generate responsibility, thereby opening up new possibilities for coexistence? Through the analysis of an emblematic example, Maria Lai's *Legarsi alla montagna* (1981), I mean to show how, by reconfiguring the sensory conditions through which the real is perceived, and by recognising the relations that already exist within it, new forms of exchange can be unlocked. To this end, the argument is set out as follows: after a premise designed to justify the case study and the methodological approach (§2), the article reconstructs genesis, symbolic structure, and spatial-temporal unfolding of the event (§3-4). Finally, an analysis of its features and effects – also in comparison with other initiatives – highlights, from a philosophical and pedagogical perspective, why it continues to inspire pratices aimed at fostering a sense of continuity and care amongst all beings, both human and non-human (§5).

At stake is ultimately the very possibility of *aesthetic education*. That is, of an education that does not instrumentally employ art for seducing and shaping our aesthetic capacities – as perception, imagination, feeling, taste, intuition, just to name but a few – on an already preconstituted thought, but one that recognizes the mutual making of body and logos together, moment by moment, in a constitutive two-way

[1] M. Lai in C. Di Giovanni, Postscriptum, documentary film, Cagliari 2013.

relationship. Moreover, as Alexander Baumgarten himself wrote in 1750, in the founding text of the discipline of aesthetics, nature does not leap, either in or out of us (§7). Just as noon comes from night by way of dawn, so our clear and distinct representations proceed from confused ones, and it is only by taking care of this confusion – which means fused together, indicating an original co-unity – that we can avoid errors in logical thought and remain faithful to the *continuum* of being, whilst respecting and promoting the richness of its differences.

2. FOCUS AND METHOD

Among the many artistic works that have explored the relationship between art, environment and collectivity during the second half of the twentieth century, Maria Lai's *Legarsi alla montagna* occupies a singular position. It has been approached as relational art, public art, environmental intervention, participatory practice, ritual action. Yet none of these definitions, taken on its own, fully accounts for its complexity[2].

What takes place in Ulassai is not the production of an object but the unfolding of an *event*: temporary, collective, processual, site-bound, ancestral yet radical contemporary. This is why the work may be read first of all as a singular form of Art-Based Environmental Education[3]. Meri-Helga Mantere's formulation is particularly useful here insofar as it situates art as a mode of cultivating environmental sensitivity through perception, imagination and embodied engagement: relation, in this perspective, is not transmitted as information but formed through experience. Lai's work radicalises this possibility and anticipates more recent art practices[4] by relocating it within a collective public gesture that is simultaneously aesthetic, symbolic, territorial, cooperative and educational.

Placed within a broader international debate in environmental aesthetics[5], the specificity of the event becomes even clearer. Arnold Berleant's reflections on *aesthetic engagement* describe environment not as an object contemplated from a distance, but as a participatory field in which perceiver and world are mutually implicated[6]. Similarly, Yuriko Saito's work on everyday aesthetics has shown how aesthetic meaning emerges within ordinary practices of inhabitation, attention and care[7], while Tim Ingold's reflections on dwelling foreground the relational and processual character of living as correspondence between bodies, materials and environment[8]. Without being reducible to any of these frameworks, Lai's intervention resonates deeply with them because *Legarsi alla montagna* is not a representation of environment: it is *an activation of environment as relation*. There are, however, three reasons that make this work a prime example of a certain idea of aesthetic education[9] and that are indicative of a particular approach to this type of practical and theoretical research: the relevance of primitive culture and childhood knowledge; the importance of the

[2] Maria Lai couldn't, by her own admission, find the right word to define the operation, despite the similarities with other events. See M. Lai in F. D'Amico, G. Murtas (a cura di), *Inventare altri spazi*, catalogo della mostra (Cagliari, Cittadella dei Musei, dicembre 1993), Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 1993, p. 87.

[3] H.-H. Mantere (ed.), *Image of the Earth. Writing on art-based environmental education*, engl. transl. by M. Barron, University of Art of Design, Helsinki 1995. See also J. van Boeckel, *At the Heart of Art and Earth. An Exploration of Practices in Art-Based Environmental Education*, Aalto ARTS Books, Helsinki 2013.

[4] See G.H. Kester, *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Content*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 2011.

[5] See E. Brady, J. Prior, *Environmental Aesthetics: A Synthetic Review*, in "*People and Nature*", II (2020), pp. 254-266.

[6] A. Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme*, Routledge, London-New York 2018.

[7] Y. Saito, *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2022.

[8] See T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, London-New York 2000.

[9] See R. Diodato, L. Aimo, *Un'idea di educazione estetica*, Morcelliana-Scholé, Brescia 2021.

relation and the recognition of its quality, regardless of moral or value judgements; the ephemeral nature of the event, and yet its power to leave a lasting mark.

2.1. *Primitive culture and childhood knowledge*

Approaching Maria Lai's poetics forces a twofold movement of *perceptual dislocation*. The first is dictated by Sardinia. An island that is perceived to be other than the continent and Italy itself while constituting a single state identity: a place of separation and new beginning, as Deleuze would say[10]. A land strongly exploited by colonialism in all forms (from the Phoenicians to the Romans, from the Piedmontese to today's economic lobbies), but which has been able to preserve a millenary Nuragic and pre-Nuragic culture. A land where Maria Lai was born and grew up free, during her childhood outside linear schooling paths, "free to learn" – quoting Peter Gray's famous book[11] – but in close contact with the wild and with the daily aesthetics of a population still strongly tied to its traditions: from myths to rituals, from weaving to cooking, which she would take up and make immortal with her artistic works. As she writes: «I was illiterate, but full of fairy tales. The things I did later, as an adult, began at that age»[12].

2.2. *Relational art*

Legarsi alla montagna is considered the first example of relational art which then boomed into the world in the 1990s[13]. As Nicholas Bourriad writes in 1998[14], this kind of art takes as a theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the affirmation of an autonomous and private symbolic space. What characterizes Maria Lai's poetics, however, is that her art is a "state of encounter" not limited to a group of human beings and their cultural productions but including that which from long before precedes and follows them in terms of space and time, something that in the work under investigation is emblematically embodied by the mountain. In this widening of the field – which goes even beyond the simple intersection between participatory art and geography[15] – I think we can find a particular kind of art-based environmental education able to promote a culture of proximity and correspondence. Furthermore, the event is characterised by the *democratic nature* of the participation process: the artist's *way* of involving the community and the *quality* of the relationships that this reveals and produces allows conflicts to be sustained, not erased, in line with the idea of "relational antagonism" proposed by Claire Bishop[16].

[10] See G. Deleuze, *Cause e ragioni delle isole deserte*, in Id., *L'isola deserta e altri scritti*, it. ed. and transl. by D. Borca, Einaudi, Torino 2007, pp. 3-9.

[11] See P. Gray, *Free to Learn. Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*, Basic Books, New York 2013.

[12] M. Lai in *Museo dell'Olio della Sabina*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2001, p. 57.

[13] See A. Pioselli, *Modelli di intervento e politiche culturali pubbliche in Italia tra il 1968 e il 1981*, in C. Birozzi, M. Pugliese (a cura di), *L'arte pubblica nello spazio urbano. Committenti, artisti, fruitori*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007, pp. 20-38; E. Pontiggia, *Art and Connection, Legarsi alla montagna*, in M. *Lai. Art and Connection*, engl. transl. by R. Bertagnin, Illisso, Nuoro 2017, pp. 178-191.

[14] N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), engl. transl., Les presses du réel, Dijon-Quetigny 2002.

[15] See D. McNally, *Participatory Art and Geography: Politics, Publics, and Space*, in *"Progress in Human Geography"*, XLVIII/5, 2024, pp. 537–551.

[16] C. Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, in "October", CX, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79. See also Ead., *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London 2012.

2.3. *Traces of the ephemeral*

Legarsi alla montagna – unlike much of Land Art and Public Art – has not permanently altered the landscape in which it took place. However, such was the extraordinariness of its conception and inhabitants' involvement process that it marked a point of no return in the memory and life of the village; moreover, such was the impact also externally that it generated (and may still inspire) many other generative projects. A rich documentation of the work has contributed to this: starting from Tonino Casula's video *Legare collegare* ("Bind connect")[17] passing through Piero Berengo Gardin's black and white photos[18] in which Maria Lai highlights in blue the thread that constitutes the key element of the whole operation until arriving at the testimonies of the artist and other participants[19]. This rich material thus makes it possible to reconstruct the genesis and structure of the event and thus be able to extrapolate an indication of work from an aesthetic applied point of view.

2.4. *From genesis to continuum care*

Methodologically, I will proceed by highlighting the two fundamental *coordinates* of the event – *space* and *time* – and taking care of the *details* that have established its canonicity. I prefer to the mere analysis of its structure and outcomes the account of its *genesis* and *development* because it is only from the living force of its birth, the coherence of its passages and the incisiveness of the gestures and symbols that we can perceive its cultural value and its aura – *à la* Benjamin – and grasp equally fertile indications for today. For as Baumgarten writes: «Let the thing be your care, the shining order the second, finally and thirdly, occupy yourself with signs»[20]. Moreover, this choice means to respect the very nature of the work of art in question, as in fact Maria Lai writes: «An artwork is not a piece of scientific research, but an opportunity for contact with the universal. However, the contact must be direct and individual»[21]. Finally, I will share some conclusions on the limits and the possibilities of the event and on singularity of the experience in comparison to other poetics, performances and theories. The aim is that, thanks this deferred and aesthetic reasoning of experience, everyone can draw a mark for himself or herself in order to notice, take care and promote the relationship between visible and invisible, themselves and others and any other polarities in which we fragment the *continuum* of nature.

3. SPACE

Ulassai is the birthplace of Maria Lai, a small village set in rock in the heart of Ogliastra: a place of deep gorges and caves, ponds and waterfalls, including the highest in the whole of Sardinia. Ulassai is a place

[17] Freely avalaible on Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rVoN64Fz-o) it is an artpiece itself.

[18] «The legend representes us. At the end of the day, it's all of us, with our fears and our endless desire for freedom and miraculous safety, who have created it, and you, dear Piero, with your photos will make sure i twill never be forgotten again» (M. Lai in R. Prunas, *Ulassai. The Legend and Its Photographers*, in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. Legarsi alla montagna*, 5 Continents Editions, Milano 2021, p. 130). These photos are stored in Maria Lai Archive but they are reproduced in the book above-mentioned.

[19] See B. Pietromarchi, L. Lonardelli (a cura di), *Maria Lai. Tenendo per mano il sole*, exhibition catalogue (MAXXI, Rome), 5 Continents Editions, Milano 2019, pp. 198-209; C. Liliu, G. Moccia, *Legarsi alla montagna di Maria Lai*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2008 (documentary); G. Orru, *Un'ora con Maria Lai*, Centro Documentazione Regione Autonoma della Sardegna 2003 (videointerview); E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. Legarsi alla montagna*, cit.; *Ulassai. Da Legarsi alla montagna alla Stazione dell'Arte*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2006.

[20] G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Frankfurt a.d. Oder 1750-1758, §13.

[21] M. Lai in *Maria Lai. Lo scialle della luna*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2000, p. 48.

that we would call aesthetically *sublime*, but also and more than anything difficult to reach and impervious to inhabit: a place of landslides, floods, droughts, of severe natural disasters that make the survival of the human species complex. But Ulassai is also a place where heinous violence has been carried out by man toward man. As Giuliana Lai said: «In ancient times this was the area most infested by bandits, who would attack either to rob or in vengeance»[22].

In 1955 Maria and Giuliana Lai's brother Lorenzo was murdered in an ambush actually aimed at kidnapping her other brother Gianni (who, by the way, would still die tragically in a plane crash in 1971). Maria, stricken by this event (and determined not to want to know the identity of the murderer), leaves the island to move to Rome where she will remain for more than 20 years and where she will witness the rise and eventual consecration of her artistic career, marked by its share of highs and lows. However, in 1980 Mayor Podda invites her to return to her hometown and commissions her to draw up a war memorial. The mayor thus hopes, thanks to her fame, that the village will enter into history. Maria Lai refuses, saying she wants to do something for the living. She proposes to make history not by commemorating what has been but by doing something that has never been done elsewhere, though she does not yet know what. This is a central point of Maria Lai's poetics, closely connected – as we shall see – to her idea of myth and art: *memory* is not an archive, a mausoleum or a collection of monolithic data, but a *living laboratory* of traces, ghosts, possibilities yet and always to be fulfilled.

This idea thus allows us to move on to the other fundamental coordinate of the work, time, and to articulate the birth and development of the work in 4 steps, indeed in the 4 acts of a true transformative *rite*[23].

4. TIME

4.1. *Act I - Waiting*

Maria Lai's proposal is discussed in the municipality for a year and a half. And it is at that moment, in that process of *encounter* and *confrontation*, that the work begins for the artist. In the village there was no dialogue until then: she gives to think and is able to wait. Nothing guarantees the start of the work, but she is not afraid. The conception and gestation of a new creature have to take into account the possibility of an untimely death.

4.2. *Act II - Between Myth and History*

Once the proposal is accepted, Maria Lai seeks inspiration and help from the *past*. She interviews the elders, the living memory of the country, collecting myths and legends. She looks backward to move forward. There is one myth in particular that strikes her: "Sa Rutta de Is'Antigus" (The Cave of the Ancients). It is a myth linked to a true story: a fragment of rock from the Tacco (the imposing rocky complex above the

[22] G. Lai in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. An Event Created in Concord*, in Ead., *Maria Lai. Legarsi alla montagna*, cit., p. 108.

[23] Reflecting on the atmosphere of those days in Ulassai, Maria Sofia Pisu compares the event to a *wedding*. Indeed, there are many similarities with this rite of passage that sees the constitution of a new family. However, there are many forced implications in this parallelism that do not take into account the collective dimension – it is not just two individuals who are uniting – and the multi-level interpretation of the relational work in question – the inhabitants re-establish an original unity not only among themselves, but also with the mountain and with the Madonna, symbols of a systemic consciousness, of a universal matrix that is both sensitive and intelligent at the same time. See M.S. Pisu, *Parallel Rhythms*, in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. Legarsi alla montagna*, cit., pp. 124-129.

village) had detached and swept away a house in Ulassai (some say in 1861). Only a little girl had been saved, who was reportedly holding a celestial ribbon.

The myth, however, was much older than that event[24], and since – as the philosopher Gian Battista Vico says – if stories are preserved and handed down it is because they have a «reason for truth»[25], Maria Lai realizes that in that tale time and eternity, particular and universal become close until they coincide: that myth is a "fantastic universal" that springs from and attests to a particular apprehension and expression of the world, but it is also a starting point for possible new discoveries and creations.

This is Maria Lai's version of the myth, highlighting a thread that unravels through time and beyond time:

> A girl is sent to take some bread to shepherds up on the mountains. When she gets there, she hears a rumble of thunder and realizes a storm is about to break. So she quickly makes for a big cave and there she finds all the flocks of sheep and their shepherds taking shelter and waiting for the storm to blow over. As she peers out at the rain she suddenly sees a pale blue ribbon being tossed around by the wind. The shepherds see it too, but don't' give it a second thought, believing it to be just something someone has mislaid. But the little girl is still capable of wonder and lets her imagination run riot. She runs after the ribbon, heedless of the rain. At that very moment the cave's roof collapses, crushing both sheep and shepherds[26].

From this written drafting of the myth, another salient character of Maria Lai's poetics immediately emerges: art is something simple, often a discarded material, just like a thread carried by the wind, considered superfluous, useless, and yet *saving*. How? By giving «direction»[27], breaking out of solidified habits and perceptual-cognitive patterns and opening up new possibilities, taking us out of the logic of calculation and control and immersing us in the free experience of wonder.

And it is precisely from this thread that the intuition of the work for Maria Lai comes: the idea is to tie the houses of the village to each other and finally to unite them all to the mountain, that is, to nature and the transcendent, to something that exceeds man, his finiteness but also his egoic presumption of dominance. This is a crazy idea because in the village neighbors do not talk to each other and Maria Lai knows this well: she too is animated by conflicting feelings. Yet it is still the grandeur of the mountain, of what is there, of what cannot be ignored and that even in stillness proves to be alive and in constant metamorphosis that suggests the answer. Maria Lai understands that if one is to pull a thread to symbolize the need for a relationship of unity and reciprocity, one must begin by acknowledging and attesting to the state of the relationship at the active moment, however *negative* it may appear.

«I face everything, exactly the way it is»[28]: they are psychotherapist and phenomenological philosopher Bert Hellinger's words – "father" and developer of the Family Constellations Method in the same years – but they also well summarize Maria Lai's approach. Therefore, the artist proposes to lay a different thread depending on the relationship between one house and another:

1. In the case of a bond of affection or kinship a typical local bread is tied, the one baked for feast days.
2. If there is simple bond of acquaintance and friendship a simple knot is tied.

[24] «We've established that the story has been passed down from generation to generation for around four hundred years», M. Lai in E. De Cecco, *Maria Lai. Le fila del racconto*, in "Flash Art", XXIX/199, 1996, pp. 70-72, qui p. 72.

[25] G.B. Vico, *Principi di Scienza Nuova*, ed. by A. Battistini, Mondadori, Milano 2023, first book, second section, XVI element (the translation from italian is mine).

[26] M. Lai in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. An Event Created in Concord*, cit., p. 110.

[27] M. Lai in B. Della Polla, E. Guerrato, *Sospesa tra cielo e terra*, documentary, Ulassai-Cardedu 2007.

[28] See B. Hellinger in B. Hellinger, G. ten Hövel, *Aknowledging What Is*, engl. transl. by. C. Beaumont, Zeit, Tucker & Co., Phoenix, Arizona 1999.

3. In the case of enmity or conflict the thread is allowed to run smoothly, taut.

Many arguments are raised against the project, even by those who are very close to Maria. These are technical-logistical concerns – how to find such a long thread (26 km!)? – but mostly perplexities related to human factors and meaning: how to convince people who are largely illiterate and who hate each other to participate in this joint action? But above all, for what purpose? Not to mention all those who wonder: is this art?[29] But this is precisely where Maria Lai's vision, confidence, and determination make a difference by etching history, because in the end the event happens and decrees a new incipit for the country and for the history of art and culture.

4.3. *Act III: For an Aesthetics of the Continuum*

The event is planned for September 8, 1981. This choice is indicative of the action and poetics of *continuity* that can make a difference in these times of separation, conflict and war. Since it is the day dedicated to the nativity of the Virgin Mary, the performative action joins the Christian procession dedicated to her by tying the threads passed among the houses to the blue dress of the Madonna. For Maria Lai, there is no opposition between art and religion just as there is no clear separation between culture and nature. The celestial of the Virgin's mantle as well as that of the ribbon springs from and flows to the same source. For the artist, these are two sides of the same coin, two faces of the same plexus, capable together of becoming a tangible symbol of the interpenetration of spiritual and material and any other polarity of which life consists but to which it is not reducible[30]. As she writes: «Man needs to put that which is visible along with the invisible in order to draw up fables, legends, feasts, songs, art»[31].

Moreover, September 8 is the date of the Italian government's armistice during World War II, a day that marks the beginning of chaos and civil strife on the peninsula. There are no texts documenting a reflection by Maria Lai on this matter, but it is hard to believe that this coincidence goes unnoticed by her. Certainly, as art historian Filippo Menna writes, «Legend becomes reality [...] art succeeded where religion and politics had failed to do so»[32]. At least for one day Maria Lai is able to create the conditions for people *to feel closer to each other*, to work all together and to perceive as one what they daily experience as distinct and irreconcilable[33].

The fact that the action begins in a large field on the edge of the village, from 13 pieces of light blue fabric donated by a local merchant, a uniform surface that is torn and divided by the inhabitants themselves

[29] Giuliana Lai reports sister's feedbacks: «Maria was almost always in Ulassai, but in the evenings she would phone and tell me about how the day's meetings and arguments went, especially as regards her discussions with the townsfolk. "Who is paying you?" "*No one's paying me*" "You're asking us to do something useless, and you're not giving us any money" "*Excuse me, do you like dancing?*" "I love it" "But dancing's useless too, you don't get any money out of it"». G. Lai, *Ritagli*, Illisso, Nuoro 2012, pp. 28-29.

[30] See Maria Lai's work on the Nativity Scene. As she writes: «Is Art not the highest tribute that can elevate man to God?» (M. Lai, *Fuori era notte. I presepi*, engl. transl. by I. Cameron, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2004, p. 133).

[31] M. Lai, *Curiosape*, with G. Murtas's texts, eng. transl. by J. Cameron, Cagliari, Arte Duchamp 2022. I have taken the decision of changing the translation of 'feste' to "feasts" rather than 'parties' because it is more consistent with Maria Lai's discourse and thinking.

[32] F. Menna, *Per Ulassai*, June 1982, now in *Maria Lai. Come un gioco*, exhibition catalogue (Nuoro, Man Museo d'Arte Provincia di Nuoro, July 11-September 29 2002), ed. by E. De Cecco, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2002, pp. 54-55.

[33] As Maria Lai said: «I went back to my hometown on that occasion at the requests of the Christian Democrat mayor. On account of the rivalry between the Christians Democrats and the Communists, this appeal was alone enough to cause a split in the town between those in favor of my taking on the job and those against. I had never been a member of any party; I had never taken an interest in politics; all I knew was that forty million [lira] had been earmarked for a war memorial. I asked why. […] The first step was to get the town to discuss things and to come to a collective decision: the real problem in Ulassai is the lack of the communication, the simmering, widespread ill feeling. This was an opportunity for people to meet and talk things over» in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. An Event Created in Concord*, cit., pp. 108-109.

into several strips is also relevant. What is evoked is a «bloodless sacrifice»[34], the separation and individuation at the origin of life and its movement, but also its ever-underlying and final unity: the B&W photos later colored by Maria Lai with a blue marker portray this well, emphasizing the bonds between women, children, men, the elderly, pieces of concrete and rock that the thread binding highlights.

4.4. *IV: Active Surrender*

The ritual closes the following day with a double action in which the inhabitants seem to be no longer protagonists, but which actually allows them to refine and integrate the experience they have had.

First, musician Angelo Persichilli plays the flute throughout the village. It is a gentle, vibrational *release* after the intensity of the previous day's melee. An invitation to be silent, to refine feeling, to move from the materiality and visibility of the tape and the links it highlighted to their more intangible and subtle dimension, to a harmony and frequency to be grasped and tuned in to. Finally, six professional climbers connect the blue thread to Mount Gedili, the highest peak behind the village. It is a gesture of *recognition* and *respect* toward the power of nature, a strengthening of the bond that unites its fortunes with those of man, a kind of votive offering and request for peace. As Maria Lai says: «The wire looked like a stream of water gushing from the rock»[35]. But in this operation one can also see an invitation to change point of view, to raise and widen one's gaze, to adopt a vertical perspective with respect to the horizontal plane of relationships and problems highlighted the previous day.

In a complementary way to what was done with the procession dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the artist thus urges *active surrender*. Life cannot be controlled, predicted, solved, optimized. Landslides and storms as well as conflicts and death are the order of the day, yet if we try not to identify with the forms, differences and positions achieved, if we recognize and renew our belonging to a larger unity in constant transformation, a future is always still ready to unfold.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. *Limits and Possibilities*

Maria Lai knows the *limits* of her work. As she herself writes, «I tried to convince people to make the work. People made it, appreciated it but did not understand it»[36]. As Elena Potiggia points out, her art is «purposeful, but never consolatory or naively optimistic»[37]. The artist looks for – and perceives – a «superhistorical truth», something that usually escapes modern culture and intellectualism, but also unlearning: it is something dealing with «wisdom»[38]. At the same time, Lai knows that what happens in Ulassai is a true «miracle»[39]. His fellow villagers have the opportunity to recognize the bonds that constitute them, but also to engrave in their

[34] *Ivi*, p. 117.
[35] *Ivi*, p. 120.
[36] M. Lai in G. Cuccu, *Le ragioni dell'arte. Cose tanto semplici che nessuno capisce*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari 2002, p. 72.
[37] E. Pontiggia in Pietromarchi B., Lonardelli L. (a cura di), *Maria Lai. Tenendo per mano il sole*, catalogo della mostra tenuta al MAXXI di Roma, 5 Continents Editions, Milano 2019, p. 60. *Tenendo per mano il sole* ("Holding the Shadow by the Hand") – her famous handwritten and hand-stitched fairy tale – ends with "they lived" and not "they lived happily ever after".
[38] E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. An Event Created in Concord*, cit., p. 110.
[39] M. Lai in G. Spadetta, *Viaggio nel cuore dell'Ogliastra*, documentary film, directed by. P. Jones, 2009.

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memory a new trace: a trace made of closeness and peaceful coexistence and cooperation despite differences.

The entire performance process is an invitation, a kick-off, an initiation, to be cultivated, relaunched and recreated every day. Recalling the famous textile metaphor in Plato's *Phaedo*[40], it is as if the inhabitants had the chance to become aware of the great loom to which we work every day, spinning and unravelling the relationships that constitutes us as body-soul. As the artist writes:

> The loom = item of re-creation
> Place of daily weaving, interweaving threads of life.
> A clear invitation to continue weaving, respecting the circular motion of time echoed by the slow binding action.
> The poetry that springs from a plain pale-blue ribbon.
> Imparting life, human interaction[41].

As a 2011 survey shows[42], the village is thus transformed in the following years into a *community-laboratory*, generating joint projects, alliances between subjects and social and economic development. For example the women's textile is reestablished and with the money saved for the war memorial, the women are able to apply to restore the old wash house and have a public space to meet. In addition, many other works are co-designed: the park, the wind power system, the nursery and its outdoor spaces, the library/cultural centre to document local culture.

On her part, the artist does not cease to be *present* and to create new generative process[43]. If indifference is contagious, says Maria Lai[44], so can be creativity if one shares the same emotion. And so she does not give up and starts her «secular evangelism»[45] on aesthetic matters. She collaborates with the locals to promote projects and to awaken the country through art works that are minimal yet dense with meaning: starting from the wash house – where the artist creates in 1982 a loom-ceiling to better integrate structural elements into the overall composition – passing through scarp – where in 1993 Maria continues the work of nature by securing land at risk of landslides – to the "walled books" that from 2003 have dotted one of the oldest streets in the village reminding that "the most living social gathering is chorus, dance, art"[46].

But the list could go on, all the way to the Art Station, a museum opened in 2006 following the artist's donation of more than 140 works[47]. It rises in the premises of the ex-railway in Ulassai to show once again the continuity between the everyday and extra-everyday dimensions of existence and still tries to bring art closer to ordinary people through exhibitions, performances and simple and profound participatory actions. Maria Lai's poetics is characterised by works that open up and extend themselves, far removed from monumentality and immobility, but also from the desire to occupy space, to fill it. «What

40 Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. by C.J. Rowe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, 86e-88b.
41 M Lai in E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. Legarsi alla montagna*, cit., p. 1.
42 C. Sardu, A. Mereu, A. Sotgiu, P. Contu, *A bottom-up art event gave birth to a process of community empowerment in an Italian village*, in «Global health promotion», XIX/1, 2011, pp. 5-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975911423074. Among other effects: textile workshops, the park, the wind power system, the nursery and its outdoor spaces, the library/cultural center to document the local culture, Ulassai as an open-air art workshop and tourist company, economic development and the resulting improvement for the health status and quality of life.
43 See R.P. Ladogana, *Maria Lai a Ulassai e Alberto Burri a Gibellina*, in Ead., *Isole, arte, spazio pubblico. Interventi di arte ambientale in Sardegna e in Sicilia*, Postmedia Books, Milano 2025, pp. 29-41, especially p. 34.
44 M. Lai in G. Cuccu, *Le ragioni dell'arte*, cit., p. 20.
45 E. Pontiggia, *Maria Lai. An Event Created in Concord*, cit., p. 118.
46 This is one of the phrase painted on the wax tablets that serve as walled books.
47 See https://www.stazionedellarte.com/ .

voids do your works suggest?» – asks Giuseppina Cuccu – and she answers: «Perhaps those indicated by the oblique lines as trajectories towards the outside, which are always present in my drawings, in the frames, in the geographies, in the sewn books, in the concrete walls, in the intervention on the territory *Legarsi alla montagna*»[48]

5.2. *Background and Exceedance*

Legarsi alla montagna can be approached to different artistic currents of the second half of the twentieth century: from the *Happening* to *Land art*[49] – where, however, there is no public participation in the monumentality of the work – or *Public Art* – Maria Lai anticipates by a year Joseph Beuys who for Documenta in Kassel realizes *7,000 Eichen*, 7000 oaks planted by the inhabitants[50]. But what distinguishes Maria Lai's artistic operation? According to my argumentation, the Ulassai event is marked by a strong *ritual force*, rooted in *symbolic power* anchored in the *territory* and the *bodies* that made the event possible, capable of recognizing and investing every gesture and living form with holiness. Its *aura*, in Benjamin's sense, derives from the unrepeatable appearance of a relation made perceptible in a specific place and time. Its profoundly cultic nature – expressed in a contemporary key – lies in the fact that the community does not merely look at an artwork, but becomes involved in a sensory reconfiguration through which the mountain, the village, memory, conflict and care are temporarily bound together.

Then there is a *philosophical* and *pedagogical intent* alien to many artists, even contemporary ones. Maria Lai is interested not only in highlighting the relationship between art and life but that people can have *direct experience* of the salvific value of art, the concrete possibility and necessity of a harmony between people and with nature, a communion between the visible and the invisible which do not erase, but sustain the differences. As Elena Pontiggia writes:

> But what interested Lai wasn't so much the linguistic or stylistic aspect of this collective action, or even its chronological primacy – that she was the first to attempt such a work. She was attracted to the ethical and social implications of her involvement: she had managed to persuade people to speak to one another, to collaborate, and, yes, to "bind together" and not be intimidated by the mystery of art[51].

The *fragility* of this relationship and personal *responsibility* in this regard are the focuses of Maria Lai's research. In the action she proposes in Ulassai, for example, the "surprise effect" is missing: the inhabitants know very well how the event will unfold and have to choose for themselves how to pull the thread. This is an assumption of awareness of the relationships in place, but also a commitment with their continuation. Moreover, from the very beginning the work – a kind of *Non-ument*, citing Gordon Matta-Clark's neologism, as used by Andrea Pinotti[52] – is planned and destined not to endure: with

[48] M. Lai in G. Cuccu, *Le ragioni dell'arte*, cit., p.16.

[49] During the event planning phase, Maria Lai often refers to the ephemeral installations of Christo and his partner. She is interested in their use of materials to emphasise the landscape, create spectacular images and evoke metaphorical meanings. See R.P. Ladogana, *Maria Lai a Ulassai e Alberto Burri a Gibellina*, cit. p. 33.

[50] See E. Pontiggia, *An Event Created in Concord*, cit., pp. 113-116 but also

[51] E. Pontiggia, *An Event Created in Concord*, cit., p. 109. I consider Alessandra Pioselli's interpretation to be rather limited, as it emphasises the artist's interest in anthropological roots in the territory and the recovery of identity memory, while minimising her tendency towards a transformative process. See A. Pioselli, *Arte e scena urbana. Modelli di intervento e politiche culturali pubbliche in Italia tra il 1968 e il 1981*, in C. Birozzi, M. Pugliese (eds), *L'arte pubblica nello spazio urbano. Committenti, artisti, fruitori*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007, pp. 20-38.

[52] A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un paradosso della memoria*, Jona & Levi, Monza (MB) 2023.

autumn the wind carries away all the ribbons. This means for Maria Lai to educate to the value of process, of evanescence. It means training, on the one hand, to a lightness of gaze and step on the earth, on the other, to a deep and daily intimacy with the invisible that inhabits it. Finally, through the blue thread Maria Lai also indirectly gives an environmental lesson about the need to respect and honor water, within and without: just as emotions, if denied or compressed, are in danger of exploding, so rivers, seas and waterfalls if not kept clean and not respected in their cycles and courses will sooner or later overflow.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that in the global crisis we are experiencing, we need all the help we can get to find the way forward. No person, no group, no branch of science, no doctrine or philosophy, no art already holds the key to the future, if there ever is one. We must create our future together. From my point of view, Maria Lai shows what are some of the conditions of possibility for this to happen: starting from the *existing* – the genius loci, but also from ongoing conflicts or fragile links between the sacred and the profane, the physical and built environment, the people and objects that inhabit its world – in order to recognize them, take responsibility for them, and thus *unlock* new possible connections and futures.

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