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## The retouching in Maria Lai's outdoor artworks: documenting Ulassai's open-air museum

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**Abstract:** From 1981 to 2009, Maria Lai created a series of site-specific outdoor artworks made of different materials (above all cement, then painted with acrylic colour) located in her hometown Ulassai (Sardinia), which became an open-air museum. This paper focuses on a project regarding each artwork, with the creation of a documentation record on their history and conservation issues. Over the years, retouching and repainting interventions were realized by the artist and local workers without any conservator-restorer being involved in the process. The paper also aims to provide a description of these interventions with a focus on three case-studies, exploring the challenges related to maintenance, particularly the ones involving retouching and repainting.

**Keywords:** environmental art, site-specific, acrylic, colour reintegration, documentation

### El retoque en las obras de arte al aire libre de Maria Lai: documentando el museo al aire libre de Ulassai

**Resumen:** De 1981 a 2009, Maria Lai creó una serie de obras de arte al aire libre, específicas para cada sitio, hechas de diferentes materiales (principalmente cemento, luego pintadas con acrílico) ubicadas en su ciudad natal, Ulassai (Sardenha), que se convirtieron en un museo al aire libre. Este artículo se centra en un proyecto para cada obra de arte, con la creación de un registro de documentación sobre su historia y sus problemas de conservación. Con los años, el artista y los trabajadores locales llevaron a cabo las intervenciones de retoque y repintado, sin ningún conservador-restaurador envuelto en el proceso. El artículo también tiene como objetivo proporcionar una descripción de estas intervenciones con un enfoque en tres estudios de caso, explorando desafíos relacionados con el mantenimiento, particularmente aquellos que envuelven retoques y repintado.

**Palabras clave:** arte ambiental, sitio específico, acrílico, reintegración de color, documentación

### A reintegração cromática nas obras de arte ao ar livre de Maria Lai: documentação do museu ao ar livre de Ulassai

**Resumo:** De 1981 a 2009, Maria Lai criou uma série de obras de arte ao ar livre, específicas de cada local, feitas de materiais diferentes (sobretudo cimento, depois pintados com acrílico) localizadas na sua cidade natal, Ulassai (Sardenha), que se tornou um museu ao ar livre. Este artigo centra-se num projeto referente a cada obra de arte, com a criação de um registro de documentação sobre a sua história e sobre as suas questões de conservação. Ao longo dos anos, as intervenções de retoque e repintura foram realizadas pela artista e pelos trabalhadores locais, sem que nenhum conservador-restaurador estivesse envolvido no processo. O artigo também visa fornecer uma descrição dessas intervenções com foco em três estudos de caso, explorando os desafios relacionados à manutenção, particularmente os que envolvem retoques e repinturas.

**Palavras-chave:** arte ambiental, local específico, acrílico, reintegração de cores, documentação

## Introduction

During her long-lasting career, with a focus on relational art, Maria Lai (Ulassai, 27th September 1919- Cardedu, 16th April 2013) has created a series of site-specific outdoor artworks and interventions in Sardinia, which represent a unique heritage due to their close relationship with art, history, local traditions and the population. She created an open-air museum in her hometown, Ulassai, with sixteen artworks made using different materials that only few years after their ending, they started presenting conservative problems.

Preservation and conservation of outdoor painted artwork present per se complex challenges: painted surfaces cannot be protected to the same degree as paintings or sculptures being housed indoors. In the last years, different conferences and publications focused on outdoor art conservation were held, as for instance Considine et al. (2010) Beerkens and Learner (2014); Sunara and Thorn (2018); Cartisani et al. (2018).

Due to their constant exposure to different weather conditions, the painted artworks in Ulassai were highly prone to surface deterioration. Retouching and repainting interventions were realized by the artist as well as by unskilled workers, without a unitary methodological approach. Conservation became an even more complex challenge in a small town with limited economic resources. Moreover, given the absence of a conservator or a restorer, decisions were taken according to emergencies, with a greater risk of losing precious information.

The Ulassai's artworks passed, throughout thirty years, through numerous retouching and repainting interventions. Documenting their history requires a multidisciplinary study in order to understand the artist's role in the conservation's practice as well as the other parties involved in the process (workers, friends, Municipality). A research in this direction also allows us to understand the best practice to intervene in the future for the artwork's conservation.

## Maria Lai and her site-specific outdoor artworks in Sardinia

During her long-lasting career, Maria Lai was able to compare contemporary art with local traditions, history, literature, education and the relationship with the community. As Pietromarchi stated, her artistic vision partook in many instances of artistic research and anticipated many others, while remaining in an independent and original position (Pietromarchi 2019: 11). At the end of the 1960s, she was interested in the movement of *Arte Povera*, and started to experiment the use of new materials, like pieces of looms, bread, sand and plastic spoons. After a few years, Maria Lai began to work with communities, realizing relational and environmental art. In 1979, she made her first site-specific outdoor artwork *La casa cucita* (*The sewn house*) in the

town of Selargius (Cagliari), made of iron and steel on a wall (Battista 2013:187). Starting from this work, Maria Lai came up with a series of site-specific artworks and interventions on the territory, especially in her homeland, Sardinia.

The main core of this production consists of sixteen site-specific artworks, which were made for the small village of Ulassai from 1981 to 2009. With *Legarsi alla montagna* (*To Be Tied to the Mountain*) in 1981, the entire hometown was involved in a relational artwork using a long blue ribbon fashioned from jeans, which ran from house to house and was tied to the mountain, too (Berengo Gardin and Finelli 1982; Pioselli 2015:103-104). From 1982 Maria Lai had realized other 15 monumental outdoors artworks: *Telaio Soffitto* (*Loom-Ceiling*) in 1982, *Via crucis* in 1982, *Capre cucite* (*Sewn goats*) in 1992, *La strada del rito* (*The ritual route*) in 1992, *La Scarpata* (*The Scarp*) in 1993, *Il gioco del volo dell'oca* (*The game of the flying goose*) in 2002, *Libretti Murati* (*Walled up booklets*) in 2003-2005, *La lavagna* (*The blackboard*) in 2003, *Muro del groviglio* (*Wall of the tangle*) in 2004, *La casa delle inquietudini* (*The house of worries*) in 2004-2006, *Pastorello mattiniero con capretta* (*Early riser little sheperd with a little goat*) in 2005, *Fiabe intrecciate. Omaggio ad Antonio Gramsci* (*Intertwined fables. In homage to Antonio Gramsci*) in 2007, *Telaio del vento* (*The wind's loom*) in 2007, *Olio di parole* (*Word oil*) in 2006-2008 and *La cattura dell'ala del vento* (*The capture of the wind's wing*) in 2009. In 2006, *La Stazione dell'arte* was founded inside an old railway station: in the artist's intention this place was not to be a museum, but a research centre with a strong educational and social value (Pontiggia 2017:324). Maria Lai donated several artworks to this institution and made three site-specific outdoor artworks in its garden: *Fiabe intrecciate*, *Omaggio ad Antonio Gramsci* in 2007, *Telaio del vento* in 2007, *Olio di parole* in 2006-2008.

Ulassai has thus become an open-air museum, its artworks became particularly important for the artist, as Maria Lai stated during an interview for the documentary *Ansia di infinito* "Even if all the other artworks burned down, I would not care as much as I care about the ones in Ulassai. [...]. This is what I would like to be remembered for: for the history of Ulassai." (Di Giovanni 2009).

The defining characteristics of the main public artworks in Ulassai, like the other Lai's outdoor artworks, are: the connection with the territory and its people, the strong political and social significance, the use of diverse materials (namely: concrete, iron, steel, ceramic, acrylic painting and forex panels) and the preservation and maintenance issues. They are the least explored amongst Maria Lai's works: at present there is no existing critical catalogue nor publication entirely dedicated to her environmental art. In 2018 art-historian Davide Mariani curated in Sassari the exhibition *Maria Lai. Art in Public Space* (Sassari, ex Convento del Carmelo, 23/11/2018-31/01/2019), but for the time being, no catalogue has been published yet (Press release 2018). For this reason, fragmented and incorrect information are common to be found in the existing

publications about Maria Lai and online, starting from the artwork's names and the date.

From a conservation point of view, all the outdoor artworks made in Sardinia present different issues, which have never been the subject of documentation or a conservation project, and none of the works has ever been restored so far. In the last years, the public opinion in Ulassai has shown interest in conservation issues so that in 2013 the *Local Tourism Institution* promoted *Ripuliamo l'arte (Clean up art, Ulassai 6/10/2013)*, an initiative aiming to invite all citizens to clean the works of Maria Lai, with buckets, rags and brooms. The research that I subsequently carried on showed that apparently, during this initiative, the works were only cleaned by brushwood (Vanali 2013). In 2019, after a national campaign called *I luoghi del cuore* (a public online census dedicated to cultural places), the National Trust for Italy FAI, decided to finance the restoration of the artwork *Il muro del groviglio*, which was entrusted by the Municipality of Ulassai to Architect Doctor Federico Pusceddu (Coretti 2019: 37).

### Project and methodologies

I started this project for my post-degree specialization thesis in Historic and Artistic Heritage at the University of Pisa. The thesis, entitled "La vita delle opere: arte ambientale di Maria Lai a Nuoro e a Ulassai" (The life of works of art: environmental art by Maria Lai in Nuoro and Ulassai) was completed in October 2018 with supervisor professor Antonella Gioli. My interest towards Maria Lai's works began during the writing of my Bachelor's degree thesis, an occasion that also gave me the chance to meet and interview the artist herself (Salis 2006). Over the years, during several field observations in Ulassai I noticed that the conservation problems were becoming even more evident. Maintenance, and especially retouching interventions on concrete works, had been made in different moments by the artist herself as well as by workers guided by her and, after her death, by workers guided by the Municipality. As previously mentioned, these interventions were realized as emergency operations and there upon no written documentation was produced. My historical and artistic research has therefore originated with the aim to analyse the least studied artworks in a systematic way, the purpose of this being to track down the different maintenance interventions made in the past.

During the first research phase, it was discovered that for three works only (*Capre cucite, La strada del rito* and *La scarpata*) an executive project by the engineer Gian Paolo Ritossa had been produced. The lack of documentation, which concerns both the genesis of the works and the artwork's history, makes it extremely challenging to deepen a chronological reconstruction of the artworks.

Consequently, it has been decided to integrate different research methods: a source analysis, an historical and

artistic research; an analysis of the archive sources (primarily the Municipality Archive and the Maria Lai's Archive); interviews with Maria Lai's only heir, friends and staff, research and comparison of the historical photos and videos.

After the art-historical research phase, five interviews have been realized:

- with the heir of the artist, her niece Maria Sofia Pisu, that had assisted the artist in the last part of her life;
- with the art-historian Chiara Manca, who had worked for five years inside Maria Lai's Archive;
- with the artist's friend Teodolinda Puddu, who had been her collaborator since 1981;
- with librarian Giuseppe Cabizzosu, in charge of cultural sector in Ulassai's municipality since 1993, that had assisted to the realization of ten artworks and also different maintenance and retouching interventions;
- with architect Franco Niffoi, for the realization of the artwork *Andando via (Going away)* 2011-2012 in Nuoro.

Additionally, during the research four short questionnaires and phone interviews have been done with: Claudia Contu, tourist guide of Stazione dell'arte, with art historian Davide Mariani, curator from 2019 of *La Stazione dell'Arte*, with Emilio Chessa owner of La casa del ferro, a company that realized the artwork *Fiabe intrecciate. Omaggio a Antonio Gramsci*, and finally with architect doc. Sergio Aruanno.

Interviews and questionnaires were particularly useful to clarify the relationship that these people had with Maria Lai, their involvement in the realization of the artworks and conservation issues. These people had also participated directly in the retouching interventions so after the realization interviews questionnaires and phone interviews have been compared in order to provide a truthful and accurate description of the conservation conditions.

An art-historical comparative research was as also been carried out through the interviews with the artist and other archival and bibliographical sources, in order to understand Maria Lai's position regarding maintenance and conservation of her works.

The results of this research work finally merged in a documentation record of all the artworks, which included the information gathered during the research divided in 11 principal sections: description; history; conservation; the work and the artist; location; connection with the public; documentary section; archival sources; bibliography; tables and graphs; photographs.

### Results

#### —Maintenance of Ulassai's artworks

At present, all the works made of cement present different forms of deterioration, amongst which we can observe:

cracking, delamination, corrosion, deformation, erosion, dusting, discoloration, biological colonization. Six artworks (*Telaio-Soffitto*, *La scarpata*, *La strada del rito*, *Il gioco del volo dell'oca*, *La casa delle inquietudini* and *Pastorello mattiniero con capretta*), all made of cement and later painted with acrylic colour, few years after their ending had started showing preservation issues, particularly a widespread discolouration.

The research showed the intense and deep interest of the artist towards the artworks' materials and conservation. While she was alive, Maria Lai always tried to solicit the Municipality and the entire community to do maintenance activities on the artworks and on the surrounding environment. The artist also carried out many spirited debates with the Municipality, owner of the works, for example after they had taken the decision to plant some trees in front of *Capre cucite*. Despite the artist's intervention, the trees were not removed, and the work is currently only partially visible.

As it emerged from the interviews, in particular from the interview with the artist's friend Teodolinda Puddu, the artist paid great attention to the selection of materials to be used and always bought them in the same shop, using the same brands. As Giuseppe Cabizzosu confirmed in his interview "the artist provided very precise indications about colours, she also knew some experts in the field who advised her on the most suitable ones to resist outdoors, if I am not mistaken it was called 'absolute black'" (Salis 2018:328). The fragmented memories of the people interviewed and the lack of historical photos or documentations regarding the choice of colour, prevent us from determining which were the specific products used by the artist.

Some retouching actions upon direct request from the artist were initiated in the 90ies. These interventions were never documented nor registered so that, through the years, different shades of colours had overlapped.

The work *La casa delle inquietudini* was realized in 2004 by painting some monsters on the façade of a house. For the artist, these were the symbols of a corrupt society that had built an ugly facility accommodation amidst nature, right next to the artwork *La Scarpata*. Two years after the work had been completed, Maria Lai chose to realize a repainting intervention, changing the background colour from green to white to make monsters stand out even more [Figure 1]. For all other cases, the artist continued to use the same colour used during the realization phase also for retouching and repainting. As previously mentioned, for most of the artworks she used black colour.

Over the years, the black-painted works needed to undergo retouching every year, the artist herself followed the work and chose the paint to be used for these interventions. Since the artist was old at the time, most of the retouching was entrusted to trust-worthy local workers. After her death in 2013, some retouching was carried out by local



**Figure 1.** - Maria Lai, *La casa delle inquietudini*, after the repainting intervention of 2006; on the bottom part a particular of: Maria Lai, *Muro del groviglio*, 2004, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019 [E. PONTIGGIA, Nuoro 2017].

workers. However, in recent years, the Municipality and the entire community have developed an increasing attention for the art-historical value of the works.

The artworks did not suffer any significant act of vandalism, aside from two spray-painted writings on the work *Capre cucite*, which have faded already. The participation to the initiative *I luoghi del cuore*, undoubtedly increased the attention towards conservation, however, a cataloguing campaign, as the one started by this research, could certainly assist in broadening the knowledge on the subject.

### Case studies

I decide to analyse three different case studies that made it possible to understand in depth the issues connected to retouching interventions.

The first is *Telaio Soffitto*, which was made in 1982 on the ceiling inside the wash-house by Maria Lai, together with some locals and friends. As Teodolinda Puddu remembered during the interview, the artist did not use the scaffolding, but guided them from below and told them which colours had to be employed [figure 2-a]. Probably, already between 1987 and 1988, a first retouch intervention was made in occasion of the installation of *Fontana sonora* (*Sound Fountain* 1987-1988), a work by Costantino Nivola placed in the wash house. As shown by the historical pictures, the walls were coated with grey paint, of a different shade than the one used for the ceiling [figure 2-a]. This darker sign recalled the outline of the local mountains, visible just behind the wash house, using the same idea adopted in 1993 for *Capre cucite*. This outline had been possibly cancelled by the artist herself during the installation process of *Fontana Sonora*. On a section of the ceiling it is possible to find a date which could refer to this intervention, but research through the archive material did not provide further information on



**Figure 2.-** A- Maria Lai during the realisation of *Telaio-soffitto*, 1982, Ulassai, inside the wash-house, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019 [E. PONTIGGIA, Nuoro 2017]. B- Maria Lai, *Telaio-Soffitto*, 1982, photo taken in 2018. It is possible to notice the white wall after the repainting and retouching with dark grey and white paint on the side wall, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019.

the matter. However, at least two more interventions were discovered: retouching with dark grey and white paint on the side wall (only noticeable from comparing the pictures) [Figure 2-b] and at least one intervention of repainting with white paint on the bottom part of the counter façade (which also led to a partial covering of some names in the signatures).

The second case study is the large *La Scarpata*, made with the aim to reclaim a plot of land, abandoned by the community, which hosted a dump [Figure 3]. For the project Maria Lai imagined inserting around the artwork some grass grafts and vegetal essences typical of the territory, with green grass all around, just like a brush stroke of colour that could help the concrete and steel stand out. However, due to financial issues and differences with the local administration, she never managed to put her idea into practice. As her niece Maria Sofia Pisu stated in her interview, in the artist's intentions this artwork would have needed a repainting in black every year. From the interviews that I carried on, I found out that starting in 1993 Maria Lai and some workers instructed by her intervened several times on *La Scarpata*, repainting the biggest triangle with black paint in various shades, some opaque, some polished. Probably, some of these interventions also concerned the retouching of the white bones of the animal represented, that recalls a dinosaur. Comparing the artwork's photos, it is possible to notice that a retouching had been conducted after the death of the artist in 2013, even if the interviews did not reveal any information about this matter. The state of conservation of *La Scarpata* is not good, being situated in a steep terrain it is subject to different surface damages caused by the water infiltrations. Alongside the bottom edges it is possible to notice traces of dripping colours in different shades of black [Figure 4].



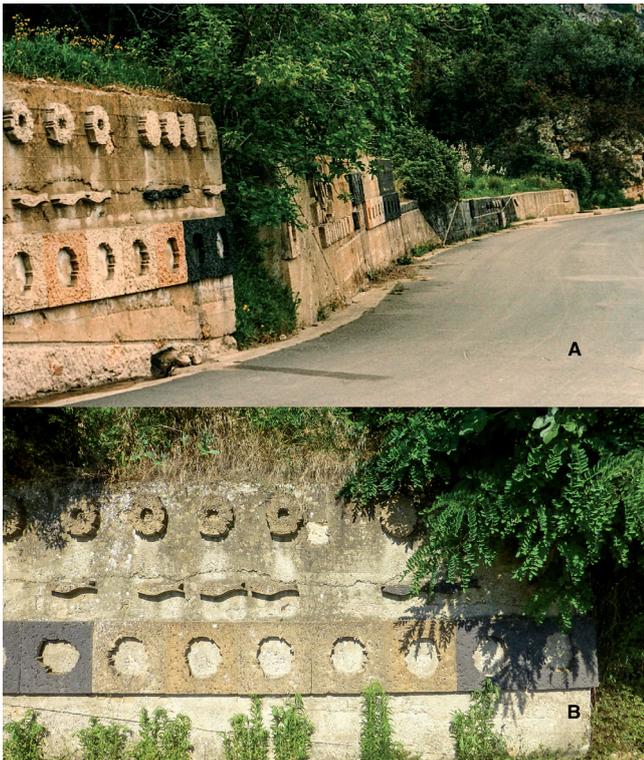
**Figure 3.-** Maria Lai, *La Scarpata*, 1993, Ulassai, photo taken in 2017, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019.



**Figure 4.-** Maria Lai, *La Scarpata*, 1993, Ulassai, photo taken indicatively in 2005, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019.

The third and last case study is *La strada del rito*, located alongside a 7-kilometer-long country road. This work consists of 366 elements in cement on a reinforced concrete wall, which recall the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. In this case, during the realisation phase, Maria Lai had used both raw concrete and coloured cement with ochre and brown paint, often adding to the mixture some pebbles in different shapes and shades of colour. After the carrying out, the artist decided to paint only some parts of the work in white and black, but as it comes up from the interviews of Maria Sofia Pisu and Teodolinda Puddu, she did not like the final result [figure 5-a]. As opposed to the previous work, Maria Lai's intention was that the artwork reflected the colours of the nearby mountains. Discussing the matter with relatives and friends, she also started to appreciate the relation with the plants and the microorganisms that slowly started to colonise the surface of the artwork. Nowadays, the state of conservation is not good: it is possible to notice damaged, broken and missing parts, as well as some areas that are almost completely covered by the vegetation.

A retouch intervention was implemented after the death of the artist, using white and black acrylic paint in around



**Figure 5.-** A-Maria Lai, *La strada del rito*, 1992, Ulassai, photo taken indicatively in 1993, courtesy ©Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019. B- Maria Lai, *La strada del rito*, 1992, Ulassai, detail of the first section of 5-A after the retouching intervention, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019.



**Figure 6.-** Maria Lai, *La strada del rito*, 1992, Ulassai, after the retouching, photo taken in 2018, courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2019.

130 elements [figure 5-b]. The implemented modifications were carried out by unskilled workers in a sloppy manner, which significantly altered the meaning of the artwork. Looking in detail it is therefore possible to notice broken elements subsequently retouched, drippings, retouching on elements that were not originally coloured as well as a degradation of the acrylic colour used [figure 6]. In this case an intervention aiming towards the elimination of the recently repainted areas shall be advised, also including a reintegration of the damaged elements and a relocation of the detached parts.

## Conclusions

Maria Lai's outdoor artworks have had a profound influence on the collective memory, they build a dialogue with the community creating shared events, which have linked Sardinia with its history, its rituals and its legends, together with contemporary artistic production. The rich and dense panorama that emerges from this research, highlights the crucial role that these artworks, scattered in the Sardinian territory, play in the artistic production of Maria Lai.

The research revealed the importance of documenting the artworks' history of conservation and use a multidisciplinary approach. As of today, it has not been possible to retrace the specific colour brands chosen by the artist. However, the interviews and questionnaires which were carried out allowed us to understand the importance of the choice of materials, as well as the will of the artist to preserve the artworks for posterity.

Given the promising results, the documentation project should be brought forward with an analytical study of Maria Lai's Archive and of the Stazione dell'Arte's Archive. Interviews and questionnaires should be extended to the artist's friends and to some locals, in order to reconstruct the artwork's history of conservation. A planned and preventive conservation project for all the artworks and the surrounding environment should also be developed together with a restoration project.

During my thesis research, I have had the chance to study the last outdoor artwork realized in Nuoro by the artist *Andando via* 2011-2012- The piece presented similar forms of cement deterioration, but, for the time being, no repainting works have been carried out. A comparison with the conservation state of the other outdoor artworks made by the artist in Sardinia and in Castelnuovo di Farfa (RI), would certainly be advisable in order to make a cross-reference with regard to any repainting intervention.

Preserving and conserving the outdoor works of Ulassai pose a major challenge. These works represent a unique heritage, but they also present several problems from the conservation's point of view.

The importance of the research lies in the opportunity it offers to understand how to intervene on artworks that already underwent retouching, and to determine which colour has to be used in these cases. Most importantly, the study would help raising awareness on the importance of a correct preservation intervention within the administration of small municipalities, offering practical responses to the challenges that need to be faced in the field of outdoor art's preservation.

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