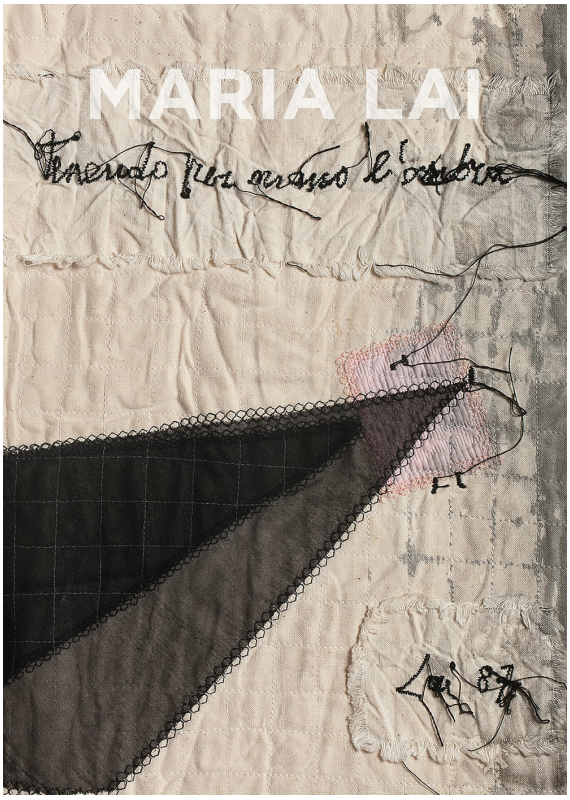
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Maria Lai: Holding the Shadow by the Hand

Elena Pontiggia

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- Maria Lai saw fairy tales as a way to connect with the public and a metaphor for art itself
- Lai's fairy tales go beyond children's stories, offering deep reflections on life and humanity
- ***Holding the Shadow by the Hand*** explores accepting one's shadow, not as a negative aspect, but as a necessary part of oneself

Maria Lai always had a special relationship with fairy tales. She considered them a metaphor for art and a way of communicating with the public in a simple, straightforward way. Starting in the 1980s, fairy tales became central to her art. *Tenendo per mano il sole, Tenendo per mano l'ombra, Curiosape* and *Maria Pietra*, are her most famous "sewn fairy tales" – books created by the artist using castoff textiles.

Maria Lai's fairy tales are not merely children's stories, but profound reflections on life and what it means to be a human being. They are often inspired by Sardinian myths and legends, to which the artist gives a personal twist, adding autobiographical details and philosophical reflections.
This edition of *Tenendo per mano l'ombra* is a printed version of Maria Lai's 1987 tale. The original consists of fabric pages sewn together and collages of dyed textiles, on which the artist has embroidered geometric figures, yarn and other materials. The fairy tale tells the story of a human being (and his double) who must learn to accept shadows, the dark part of the world and of himself. The figure's shadow, in Maria Lai's fairy tale, is not a negative element to be rejected, but an integral part of his personality. To live an untroubled and complete life, one must learn to accept and live with it.

Elena Pontiggia's concluding essay accompanies the reader in a fascinating page by page interpretation of the fable, and discusses Lai's artistic and stylistic approach in the context of an extensive network of philosophical, literary and artistic references: from Kant and Manzoni to Klee and Malevič.

Text in English and Italian.

Maria Lai (Ulassai 1919 Cardedu 2013) went to high school in Cagliari, where the writer Salvatore Cambosu was her literature teacher, passing on to her his love of poetry. Moving to Rome, she attended the Art Institute in Via di Ripetta as a pupil of Renato Marino Mazzacurati; she then studied at the Venice Academy of Fine Arts under Arturo Martini. In 1945, she returned to Sardinia and began teaching. She dropped paint as a medium in favour of "poor" materials such as textiles, creating sewn canvases and books, bread and terracotta sculptures and the first woven works that were to become the leitmotif of her research. In 1967, she created *Oggetto-paesaggio*, a dismantled loom that was both an ancient object and a contemporary installation. In 1981, she created *Legarsi alla montagna* in Ulassai, the first relational work in Italy: the inhabitants of the village tied their houses together with a blue ribbon and then bound them to the mountain above as a symbol of harmony between man, nature and art. Maria Lai returned to live in Sardinia in the 1990s and continued to produce theatrical events and to experiment with various art forms: looms, sheets, books, geographies and sewn fairy tales. On Maria Lai, 5 Continents Editions has published the following volumes: *Maria Lai: Holding the Sun by the Hand* (2019), *Maria Lai: Legarsi alla montagna* (2021), *Maria Lai: I luoghi dell'arte a portata di mano* (2021); *Maria Lai: Mending Pain, Weaving Hope* (2022). **Elena Pontiggia** is an art historian focusing on Italian and international art between the wars. She teaches at the Brera Academy and the Milan Polytechnic.







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