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TEXTILE POETICS OF ENTANGLEMENT  
THE WORKS OF ANTONELLA ANEDDA AND  
MARIA LAI

*Adele Bardazzi*

«To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence».<sup>1</sup> This is not some influencer's statement on love and relationships, in which case the scroll on which I am stitching these words should simply be published on an Instagram post, a social medium that from the beginning has given priority to images over words, and that today is unable to keep up with its original exclusion of the latter. Rather, it is at the root of a broader reflection on the concept of «intra-action» as developed by feminist physicist Karen Barad in the opening of their *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. In a more recent piece, *On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, Barad re-asserts how *inter* – which stands for «among or in the midst of» – and *intra* – which stands for «(from) within» – point to a rather different understanding of relationships between entities as well as media: the latter disregards ideas of binary dichotomies, covering most scholarship on the relationship between words and images and within which the textile arts find themselves caught up.<sup>2</sup> It is an

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2007, p. ix. On the notion of «entanglement» and the closely connected notion of «agential realism» and how Barad conceptualises the relationship between discursive practices and the material world, see Id., pp. 71-94, 132-185; Karen Barad, *Agential realism: feminist interventions in understanding scientific practices (1998)*, in *The Science Studies Reader*, ed. by Mario Biagioli, New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. 1-11; Karen Barad, *Reconceiving scientific literacy as agential literacy, or learning how to intra-act responsibly within the world*, in *Doing Science + Culture*, ed. by Sharon Traweek and Roddey Reid, New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 221-258; Karen Barad, *Re(con)figuring space, time, and matter*, in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. by Marianne DeKoven, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2001, pp. 75-109.

<sup>2</sup> See Victoria Mitchell, *Textile, Text and Techne*, in *The Textile Reader*, ed. by Jessica Hemmings, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2012, pp. 5-13. Here Victoria Mitchell challenges the supposed superiority of language as an integral part to the formation of cognition. Similarly, in introductory

emphasis of «intra»-relation, rather than «inter»-relation that is implicated, and intricated, in the textile poetics at the centre of this study.

The intra-action between the language of poetry and that of textile can be understood through a paradigm of entanglements that expand the semantic capacity of both words and textiles. In this study entanglement refers to both content and form: it evokes the actual threads that intertwine and give shape to these textile poems; furthermore, it signifies the dynamic and multi-faceted practice of reading that emerges from the interaction of reader/observer when engaging with these works, one that disregards ideas of linearity, totality, and meaning. Intra-action, as Barad highlights, gives us new ways of thinking about relationships with each other as well as with matter, material, nature, and discourses. It differs from the usual term inter-action, which presupposes that the objects interacting with each other pre-exist the action.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely the kind of entangled intra-relating that animates Antonella Anedda's and Maria Lai's textile poetics – one resulting from the intra-action of the language of poetry and that of textiles – and which will thus be referred to as «intramedial» – rather than the more traditional terms intermedial, transmedia, etc.<sup>4</sup> Although the word is the same, «intramediality» is here conceptualised not within the current debates taking place among scholars focusing on issues of how media relates to each other. In that context, intramediality is understood and rooted in Wermer Wolf's conceptualisation of the term, which is that intramedial relations are within a single medium as opposed to intermedial ones

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note Jessica Hemmings highlights the same issue: «Learning through seeing (and this includes reading) is somehow felt to be a superior or more legitimate way of knowing the world», Id., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Barad, *On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, in «differences» 23 (2012), 3, pp. 206-223. See also Karen Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, in «Signs» 28 (2003), 3, pp. 801-831.

<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on intermediality as well as transmediality, multimodality, and multimodality is vast, and the following studies should be mentioned as representative of contributions of this area of research: Lars Elleström (ed.), *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Niklas Salmose and Lars Elleström, *Transmediations: Communications Across Media Borders*, London, Routledge, 2019; Gabriele Rippi (ed.), *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2015; Jørgen Bruhn, Beate Schirmacher, *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning Across Media*, London, Routledge, 2022; Clodagh Brook, Emanuela Patti (eds.), *Transmedia. Storia, memoria e narrazioni attraverso i media*, Milano, Mimesis, 2014; Pietro Montani, *Immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifygurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile*, Milano, Meltemi, 2022; Christian Mosbæk Johannessen, Theo van Leeuwen (eds.), *The Materiality of Writing: A Trace Making Perspective*, London, Routledge, 2019; Sumin Zhao, Emilia Djonov, Anders Björkvall, Morten Boeriis (eds.), *Advancing Multimodal and Critical Discourse Studies: Interdisciplinary Research Inspired by Theo Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics*, Routledge, London, 2019; Elise Seip Tønnessen, Frida Forsgren, *Multimodality and Aesthetics*, London, Routledge, 2018; Kay O'Halloran, Bradley A. Smith (eds.), *Multimodal Studies: Exploring Issues and Domains*, London, Routledge, 2014.

where one finds a medial contamination.<sup>5</sup> Irina Rajewsky has built on Wolf's earlier reflections on this and proposed that the term (intra)-mediality refers that to the phenomena that only involve a single medium.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of how intramediality has been slightly differently conceptualised over the last decades, all reflections that share the view that intramediality is simply a work that metareferentially works within one single medium have nothing to do with the use of the term in the present study. The point, in fact, is not so much the media that might pre-exist their intra-action because entanglements are not «isolated binary co-productions», but rather intra-actions emerging «through and as part of their entangled intra-relating».<sup>7</sup> This might seem just another irrelevant theoretical rolling up on itself, on its own language, the one around conceptualisations of how media relate to each other.<sup>8</sup> It might well be, but it is also an attempt to work outside the binary-orientated framework of most scholarship on intermediality with the awareness of the impossibility of working completely from outside a certain system of discourse. It is a way of acknowledging a certain corpus of scholarship, but deciding to resist it by engaging with scholarship that is more porous and welcoming, such as the one by Barad, just as the women poets and artists do the moment they choose textile, with its historical feminine resonance, to make something that is not simply a piece of work presenting us with domestic life, diarism, and a corporeality that signals a limiting narcissistic «I» – all elements identified from Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo's introduction to *Poeti Italiani del Novecento* onwards as distinguishable in women's poetry.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Werner Wolf, *Narratology and Media(lity): The Transmedial Expansion of a Literary Discipline and Possible Consequences*, in *Current Trends in Narratology*, ed. by Greta Olson, Berlin, New York, De Gruyter, 2011 pp. 146-180; Werner Wolf (ed.), *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation*, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Irina O. Rajewski, *Intermedialität*, Tübingen, Francke, 2002; Irina O. Rajewski, *Beyond "Metanarration": Form-Based Metareference as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon*, in *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, ed. by Werner Wolf et al., Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009, pp. 135-168.

<sup>7</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, pp. x, ix.

<sup>8</sup> In my theorizing of textile poetics and take on «intramediality», I share Barad's views on what *doing* theory entails as discussed, among other places: «Doing theory requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity surprise, and wonder. Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority. Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world. [...] Spinning off in any old direction is neither theorizing nor viable; it loses the thread, the touch of entangled beings (be)coming together-apart. All life forms (including inanimate forms of liveliness) *do* theory. The idea is to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability». Barad, *On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> «Detto in altri termini, un connotato fondamentale della poesia recente appare l'abbandono così frequente a una scrittura "informale", ma non già ricercata per calcolo sperimentalistico e volontà di interrompere i circuiti comunicativi normali, quanto piuttosto prodotta da libera fluttuazione

In addition, this study aims to re-evaluate how a poetics of making situated in textiles is not of less artistic value, but rather, as the works by Anedda and Lai will enable us to see, it has been one of the most innovative ways in which contemporary poets and artists have been renewing our understanding of poetic language, reading practices, and the involvement of haptic experience when engaging with intramedial works such as textile poems. In her seminal *The Subjective Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker highlights the divide between arts and crafts, fine arts and decorative arts, high art, and textile art.<sup>10</sup> This historical hierarchical division of the arts results directly from the patriarchal structures that see women's production as separate, something that is at the roots of the marginalisation of women's work. Art forms historically associated with women have been continuously downgraded and accorded lower artistic value.<sup>11</sup> Only recently, feminist art and craft historians have re-evaluated the work of women textile artists from the margins of the artistic canon. However, this scholarship puts

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psicologica e dall'immersione nello scorrere indifferenziato del vitale e del quotidiano. Osando una formula, si potrebbe parlare di identificazione tendenzialmente assoluta della lingua poetica col registro del privato, del vissuto-quotidiano personale: equazione realizzata per la prima volta e coi risultati finora poeticamente più efficaci, io credo, dalla Rosselli, un'iniziale atipica che anche per questo oggi si rivela un'anticipatrice. E forse si possono già indicare i pericoli di tale atteggiamento. Che non stanno tanto, direi, nel fatto che i tentativi di ricostruire un tessuto "espressivo" (e comunicativo) e di recuperare dimensioni diaristiche comportano spesso scivolamenti in forme di intimismo neo-crepuscolare. Quanto proprio nel venir meno del senso della specificità del linguaggio poetico» [In other words, a fundamental feature of recent poetry appears to be the so frequent the frequent use of an 'informal' style of writing, but one that is not sought out of an experimentalist calculation and a desire to interrupt normal communicative circuits, but rather produced by free psychological fluctuation and immersion in the undifferentiated flow of the vital and the everyday. If we dare to use a formula, we could speak of a tendentially absolute identification of poetic language with the register of the private, personal everyday experience: an equation realised for the first time and with the most poetically effective results to date, I believe, by Rosselli, an atypical original who also for this reason today proves to be a forerunner. And perhaps the dangers of such an attitude can already be pointed out, which do not lie so much, I would say, in the fact that the attempts to reconstruct an «expressive» (and communicative) fabric and to recover diaristic dimensions often lead to slips into forms of neo-crepuscular intimism. As much as in the loss of the sense of the specificity of poetic language]. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Introduzione*, in *Poeti Italiani del Novecento*, Milano, Mondadori, 1978, p. LXI. For an in-depth discussion of how Mengaldo's critical posture influenced the canonization of Italian women's poets see Roberto Binetti, *Voices from a Minor Literature* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oxford, 2022). Among the numerous cases up to the present day where it is possible to identify a similar critical posture, Binetti mentions the one regarding the poetry of Patrizia Cavalli as analysed in Andrea Afribo, *Poesia postrema*, Rome, Carocci, 2018, pp. 131-132.

<sup>10</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London, Women's Press, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> On issues of gender in contemporary textile arts, see Chapter 3 of Marina Giordano, *Trame d'artista. Il tessuto nell'arte contemporanea*, Milano, Postemedia, 2012, pp. 103-154.

forward another limiting dichotomy: the one of textile language that privileges touch as an element over the written language of words, of literature, that privileges other senses as a superior way of *making* and *transferring* knowledge. The engagement with textiles, like embroidery and weaving, has been historically consigned to women's hands. However, it was not only a means to educating women in a particularly gendered way, and thus seen by some as an instrument of oppression, but also a key medium for women to resist the constraints of femininity.<sup>12</sup> Textile media have been used by women as an effective medium to comment on their condition using the same tools – textiles – originally used to marginalise them. This subversive strategy is at the core of most of the poets and artists investigated in this book. In addition, this book aims to shed light on how contemporary women poets and artists have challenged the dichotomy between textile arts and the written word of poetry and brought together, at the core of their textile poems, different languages, senses, practices of *making* meaning. The intra-action of these works is fundamentally subversive as far as it problematises conceptualisations of what poetry is or should be, and textile arts, how we make sense of both, how we read artworks, what is women's writing and, more broadly, women's production, and, most importantly, how we think about *relationships* between entities: be it subjects and objects.

Parole e immagini sono *media* opposti e in guerra fredda fra loro. Le separa una differenza cui qui si può solo accennare e che passa dal confine, costitutivo della condizione umana, fra il mondo esterno e il mondo interno. Il rapporto col primo passa per lo più dal senso della vista, il rapporto col secondo è mediato dal linguaggio.

[Words and images are opposing media in a cold war with each other. They are separated by a difference that can only be hinted at here, and which passes through the border, constitutive of the human condition, between the external world and the

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<sup>12</sup> This is a viewpoint shared by many feminist textile historians. Among whom, Parker in *The Subversive Stitch* as well as Corinne Segal, who highlights how, throughout history, the needle was perceived as «a political tool for women involved in resisting authority». Corinne Segal, *Stitch by Stitch, A Brief History of Knitting and Activism*, on *PBS News Hour*. Similarly, Alice Dolan and Sally Holloway contend that: «Textile production has been a vehicle used by the dominant (male) discourse for the definition of women and their roles in society. But it has also served as a vehicle for women to construct their own alternative to the dominant discourse, allowing them to expand their power and societal roles. Women have traditionally used needlework as a way to build and solidify community through group activities such as quilting bees and knitting groups. Many of these groups took activist stands with the textiles they produced.» Alice Dolan, Sally Holloway, *Emotional Textiles: An Introduction*, in «TEXTILE», 14 (2014), 2, pp. 152-159 (p. 157).

internal world. The relationship with the former is mostly through the sense of sight, the relationship with the latter is mediated by language.]<sup>13</sup>

These words are what Andrea Cortellessa identifies as one of the *agudezas* presented by Guido Mazzoni in his recent interview on the relationship between poetry and the medium of images, and which, as Cortellessa highlights, reminds us of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding media* (1964) and its division of «cool» and «hot» media.<sup>14</sup> This view of the relationship between written language and visual arts as engaged in a cold war is shared by most scholarship on textile arts too, who emphasise that the contribution of textiles lies in overturning the idea that sight – seen as the sense linked to the language of written words – is a superior medium of cognition as opposed to touch – seen as the sense linked to the language of textiles. What the intra-relating entanglement of poetry and textiles creates is subverting both above-mentioned views which remain caught in dichotomies and hierarchical divisions among forms of language that prevent us from fully appreciating what an intramedial discourse and practice does: attempting to work outside a binary system. It is difficult to work outside dichotomies to which, it seems, scholars from both literary and textile fields are bound in order to make sense of things. Women, as we know, in various contexts, from socio-political to cultural and literary contexts, are well-accustomed to being seen as the «weak» part of a gendered dichotomy and, as Constance Classen has suggested, have had and continue to have their work downgraded because linked to the presence of a body, and thus to the sense of touch, as opposed to the male authorial counterpart of the written language of poetry.<sup>15</sup> It is from this viewpoint that it is interesting to see how textile poetry rewrites the potential of both language and textiles in order to break those very binaries that are at the roots of the de-evaluation of so-called «women's work». Textile poetry asks us to participate in a reading that involves both the sense of touch and the one of sight for *all* the media woven together in these works, without attempting to establish the binaries of the media involved and a hypothetical hierarchical division among them. There is another binary blended in Anedda and Lai which is the one of local and transnational. Local textile practices of Sardinia are key for

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<sup>13</sup> Guido Mazzoni, *La guerra fredda tra immagini e parole*, in *Che ci faccio qui? Scrittrici e scrittori nell'era della postfotografia*, ed. by Maria Teresa Carbone, Trieste, ItaloSvevo, 2022, pp. 71-144 (pp. 78-79). All translations from English into Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Cortellessa, *Post-letteratura?*, in *Che ci faccio qui? Scrittrici e scrittori nell'era della postfotografia*, pp. 223-239 (pp. 236-237). Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964. See Sarah Sharma's and Rianka Singh's problematisation of McLuhan's work in *Re-Understanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Constance Classen, *Women's Touch*, in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen, Oxford, New York, Berg, 2005, pp. 203-206.



both of them, but they are not separable from an openness and engagement with the contemporary questions on art and poetics developing elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

*Antonella Anedda's Threaded Language*

Non ho voce, né canto  
 Ma una lingua intrecciata di paglia  
 Una lingua di corda e sale chiuso nel pugno  
 E fitto in ogni fessura

[I have no voice, no song at all,  
 only a language mixed with straw,  
 a language of rope and salt clenched in the fist  
 and to fill every crack]

(A. Anedda, *Per un nuovo inverno, Notti di pace occidentale*)<sup>17</sup>

Anedda was born in Rome but her Sardinian heritage goes back generations. Engaging with extra-literary textile practices is for her a key tool to explore her Sardinian identity. The work that best illustrates Anedda's intramedial practice is *Antologia 2010-2012* [Anthology 2010-2012], also known as «lenzuolo» [bedsheet]. While referring to this work, Anedda stated that the installation (fig. 1) aimed to echo the loom, the memory of women, among all those threads that fascinated her when she was a girl.

The activity of sewing is not only associated with her personal and cultural memory of Sardinia and its women weaving and stitching as a form of expression beyond the written language, but also acquires an important function as an act that can keep together what has been cut off, lost. «L'ago» [The needle], Anedda writes in her recent essay on Lai while drawing a connection to the artist Louise Bourgeois, «non è uno spillo, lo spillo è transitorio, punge ma non unisce, l'ago ridà vita al tessuto, trasforma l'inerzia della materia in qualcosa che può avere a che fare e vedere con la vita, la pelle, il cibo» [is not a pin, the pin is transitory, it pierces but it does not unite. The needle restores life to the fabric, it transforms the inertia of the material into something that can be associated with life, skin, food].<sup>18</sup> For Anedda the needle is never aggressive, but rather becomes a powerful tool in this

<sup>16</sup> On how Maria Lai's innovative textile art finds its roots in Sardinian textile traditions linked to ideas of collectivity and collaboration, see Chapter 2, section 5 of Giordano, *Trame d'artista*, pp. 87-96. Anedda's practice shares the same entanglement between local Sardinian practices and broader contemporary poetic and artistic issues. See also, Enrico Crispolti, *Maria Lai, Io sono Sardegna*, ed. by Silvia Loddo, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Antonella Anedda, *Archipelago*, trans. by Jamie McKendrick, London, Bloodaxe, 2014, p. 92.

process of repairing damage and recovering loss, of moving through loss and mourning.



Fig. 1: Antonella Anedda, *Antologia 2012-2012* (2012) as reproduced in *Lontano da dove: uno sguardo sulla scena artistica sarda contemporanea* [exhibition catalogue], ed. by Maria Rosa Sossai (Citta di Castello, PG: CTS Grafica, 2012).<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 2: Antonella Anedda, *Antologia 2012-2012* [detail] (2012).

The bedsheet emerges from the entangled intra-relating of various media,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Figures 1 to 5 are reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

<sup>20</sup> Scholarship on Anedda is increasingly rich and offers in-depth and interesting analyses of her poetics, without missing out the presence of the role that visual arts play in her poetic practice.

including photographs, fabrics and fragments from previously published poems which are sewn together. It was exhibited as part of *Lontano da dove: uno sguardo sulla scena artistica sarda contemporanea* [Far From Where: on the Contemporary Sardinian Artistic Scene], which was held in Rome at La Pelanda, at the ex-slaughter house Macro Testaccio in November 2012. The exhibition brought together contemporary Sardinian artists living outside the Island and invited them to reflect, from faraway, on their Sardinian identities. Anedda refers to the bedsheet in the exhibition catalogue as follows: «Ho utilizzato un vecchio lenzuolo di lino appartenuto al corredo di mia nonna come un grande foglio su cui mettere quanto aveva accompagnato le mie pubblicazioni dal 1991 a oggi. Ho usato non solo colla ma filo e aghi» [I have employed an old linen bed sheet that belonged to my grandmother as if it were a big piece of paper to put down what was happening alongside my publications from 1991 to today. I used not only glue, but also thread and needles].<sup>21</sup> Old photographs, fabrics, leaves as well as words and isolated lines are sewn on the bedsheet, but appear as alienated and dislocated from the traditional space of the page. In doing so, the bedsheet becomes a floating textile poem that is fundamentally mobile, errant.

In this textile poem, Anedda also engages with performance. Indeed on the exhibition's opening day, the audience would find Anedda *in the making* of this work – present in the room where the bedsheet was exhibited, sewing with a needle all the photographs, fabrics, leaves, and words. The space of the performance was originally a slaughterhouse and during the performance the bedsheet was hung on the original machine that was used to drain blood from animals. The intra-action between the presence of the creator, exposing herself and becoming an active and a living part of the creative process and the textile poem, enhances the system of various entanglements present in this artwork. The moment the artist enters the performative action, she becomes part of the artwork itself in constant process of becoming that affects the artist and the bedsheets simultaneously. The performance becomes the entangled system containing the various artistic practices and intra-

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However, they do so by keeping separate the poetic medium and the artistic medium rather than pointing out how they are intimately caught up in an entangled intra-relation. This is not just in Anedda's *Antologia* but also in *Donna Luna*, in collaboration with Lino Fiorito, Nola, Il Laboratorio, 2014 and parts of *La vita dei dettagli. Scomporre quadri, immaginare mondi*, Rome, Donzelli, 2009. The latter is discussed by Eloisa Morra in *Scomporre Quadri, Immaginare mondi. Dinamiche figurative e percezione nella poesia di Antonella Anedda*, in «Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana», 40 (2011), 3, pp. 167-184. Recent contributions that have guided my own reading are Riccardo Donati, *Apri gli occhi e resisti: L'opera in versi e in prosa di Antonella Anedda*, Rome, Carocci, 2020 and Andrea Afribo, *Poesia italiana postrema. Dal 1970 a oggi*, Rome, Carocci, 2017, pp. 80-86.

<sup>21</sup> Antonella Anedda, *Antologia*, 2012, in *Lontano da dove: uno sguardo sulla scena artistica sarda contemporanea*, ed. by Maria Rosa Sossai, Città di Castello, CTS Grafica, 2012, p. 44.

actions. This performative space allows us to see the artist and the bedsheet as two separate entities that lack an independent and self-contained existence, one developing into the other and *viceversa*. Anedda's authorial presence in the exhibition space is part of a recent dynamic which sees the entrance of literature to the art-world, something discussed in depth by Annette Gilbert in *Literature's Elsewheres*.<sup>22</sup> The point is to explore the non-semantic, spatial, and visual qualities of language, something that we will see as an essential element of Lai's asemantic threaded language in her sewn books. The innovative element of textile poetry is that it is not, as in most of the cases discussed by Gilbert, a literary media located in an artistic context to show its vital presence within the contemporary cultural discourse as other art forms, but rather an experiment in the readability and socio-cultural reception of a new intra-medial medium.



Fig. 3: Antonella Anedda, *Antologia 2012-2012* [detail] (2012).

In a recent interview, Anedda explained how words and the act of sewing relate to each other by tracing them to her Sardinian roots. «Le parole sono anche pezzi di stoffa che poi combaciano, e rivelano una storia, una trama. Io poi sono sarda, per cui ho il tappeto nel mio DNA» [words are also pieces of cloth that then match each other, and reveal a story, a plot. Besides, I am Sardinian, thus carpets are part of my DNA].<sup>23</sup> The bedsheet is, for Anedda, a key medium through which stories

<sup>22</sup> Annette Gilbert, *Literature Elsewheres. On the Necessity of Radical Literary Practices*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2022. See especially the last chapter, *Coda. The (Literary) Work as a Matter of Negotiation*, pp. 329-341.

<sup>23</sup> Claudia Crocco, "La poesia crea uno spazio, che è un luogo in comune". *Intervista ad Antonella Anedda*, on *Quattrocentoquattro*.

emerge from their entangled intra-actions of words and textiles in order to explore and negotiate her Sardinian cultural inheritance, in particular the textile traditions of Isili. This is also closely connected to the idea of exile, with which she partly identifies, as she lives in Rome, far away from her motherland:

I luoghi ai quali sono legata in Sardegna sono sostanzialmente due. Il primo è Isili, un paese agricolo del centro-sud dell'isola. Il nome viene da *exilium* perché vi fu deportata dai Romani una colonia ebrea alla quale nel tempo si è aggiunta una comunità zingara [...]. È un centro di produzione e sede di un museo di tappeti. L'installazione del lenzuolo [...] risent[e] della memoria del telaio, del ricordo delle donne tra tutti quei fili che da bambina mi affascinavano.

[The places to which I feel closely connected in Sardinia are essentially two. The first is Isili, an agricultural town in the central-southern part of the island. Its name comes from *exilium* because a Jewish colony was deported by the Romans to which over time a gypsy community was added [...]. It is a manufacturing center and home to a carpet museum. The installation of the bedsheet [...] reflects the memory of the loom, the memory of women, among all those threads that fascinated me as a child].<sup>24</sup>

The other place in Sardinia that is evoked in the bedsheet is the archipelago of La Maddalena, from where part of Anedda's family originates.

La Maddalena entra nell'installazione soprattutto come meditazione sul vento che è un grande maestro, ci insegna la nostra insignificanza, ci fa capire che quello che chiamiamo Io non è che una folata. Ed è il motivo per cui ho pensato il lenzuolo come un'antologia instabile, esposta alle correnti, agli spostamenti, agli sguardi.

[La Maddalena enters the installation mainly as a meditation on wind, which tells us that we are unstable, that a gust is enough to unhinge us and that we are not the centre of anything; and this is why I thought of the bedsheet as an unstable anthology, exposed to currents, to movements, to gazes].<sup>25</sup>

The elements of instability and mobility are an innovative means through which Anedda experiments with poetic forms and comes into conversation with other contemporary poets, such as Anne Carson, in particular with her poetic collection *Float*.<sup>26</sup> *Float* comes in a transparent plastic box where the various pieces of writing (originally performance pieces) float freely; the small chapbooks can be rearranged and read in any order the reader wishes. In so doing, the traditional view

<sup>24</sup> Anedda, *Antologia*, 2012, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Anne Carson, *Float*, New York, Knopf, 2016. On a reading of Carson's *Float* with references to Anedda, see Roberto Binetti, *On Floating: Sistema estetico e temporalità lirica nell'opera di Anne Carson*, in «Trasparenze», 8 (2022), pp. 98-119.

of a poetic collection meant to be read in a particular order with a certain trajectory of thought or feeling is deliberately eschewed. A similar «mobile» reading is encouraged in Anedda's hanged *lenzuolo*. It is from this viewpoint that I would like to suggest a reading of one of the objects that predominates on the bedsheet: the leaves. They constitute a further reference to mobility, via reference to the wind, as they are no longer attached to branches, but rather naturally float freely. The leaves reinforce the idea that nothing is fixed and that the needle can help in keeping things together that otherwise would «fly away». Furthermore, one cannot avoid thinking of the reference to the Italian word for leaf, «foglia», which evokes so profoundly the word «foglio» [paper] – the page on which a poem would generally be printed on. However, there is no «foglio» in the traditional sense in Anedda's *Antologia*, instead it is replaced by the mobile white bedsheet that moves freely and the «foglie» that no longer belong to a tree stably rooted in the land.

Anedda creates a work that emphasises the process of making and encourages the reader to engage with it as material. She highlights this further in the exhibition catalogue, when stating that: «L'idea di dare concretezza alla scrittura [...] mi interessava da tempo. Volevo (rispettando l'etimologia della parola "poesia") fare un oggetto su cui trovassero spazio forme diverse, memoria e immagini» [The idea of giving solidity to writing [...] is something that has interested me for a long time. I wanted to create an object on which different forms, of memories of images, could find a space].<sup>27</sup>

Most of the lines on the bedsheet come from a section entitled *Cucire* [Sewing] from the poetry collection entitled *Salva con nome* [Save As] and most of them refer to this installation.<sup>28</sup>

Cuci una foglia vicino alle parole, cuci le parole tra loro,  
guarda una foglia come viene soffiata lontano.

Il tempo mentre scriviamo vola, noi moriamo a noi stessi mentre intorno ci cresce la vita e la realtà si addensa, s'intreccia, diventa una radice che sale fino a un tronco e ridiventa foglio.

Da sempre ci mancano le parole e io ne ho nostalgia.  
Per questo cucio, cucio, cucio.

[Sew a leaf next to the word, sew a word between,  
See how far away a leaf is blown.

Time flies while we write, we die to ourselves while life increases around us and

<sup>27</sup> Anedda, *Antologia*, 2012, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Antonella Anedda, *Salva con nome*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012.

reality thickens, becomes interwoven, a root that turns into a trunk and then into a leaf again.

I've always lacked words and longed for them.  
Because of that, I sew and sew and sew.]<sup>29</sup>

These last two lines were stitched on another object that was exhibited next to the bedsheet (fig. 4). The installation also included a second pillow hanging on a rope, like the bedsheet (fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Antonella Anedda, *Antologia 2012-2012* [detail] (2012).



Fig. 5: Antonella Anedda, *Antologia 2012-2012* [detail] (2012).

One could argue that in both the bedsheet and the pillows, Anedda does not create an intra-action of poetic and textile materials, but rather juxtaposes these elements. However, I would contend that these elements are no longer relevant in their individuality but are perceived by the viewer/reader as entangled, as one single unity where it is no longer worth discussing them as separate binaries, hence a poetic textile. In looking at/reading them, we are asked to engage with them as

<sup>29</sup> Unpublished translation by Jamie McKendrick.

entangled intra-relating objects in all their poetic textility, one that combines both tactility/materiality and reading/visuality. A different scenario would be if either the poetic or the textile core of this work would function as a complementary element to read the other, as an additional and separate tool that would add something that can be read on its own. Rather, it is clear that Anedda, just as Lai, creates in her *Antologia* something that should be seen as *the making* of one single unity in all its intra-action of textile and poetry. In both Anedda's and Lai's, the stitches themselves convey meaning, not just words, and at the same time words emerge in all their textile materiality through the thread that gives form to them. In her seminal essay *The Needle or the Pen?* (1991), American feminist Elaine Hedge highlights the dilemma to accept or reject femininity. However, in these textile poems, an important shift occurs. There is no longer a pen or a needle, but an act that fuses everything in one single intra-relating act: a creation of a textile poem.

The section *Cucire* opens with a quotation from artist Louise Bourgeois, which is also sewn on the bedsheet, and is significant as it further confirms what sewing represents for Anedda in her poetic practice:

Quand'ero piccola, tutte le donne di casa maneggiavano aghi. Mi hanno sempre affascinato gli aghi, hanno un potere magico. L'ago serve a ricucire gli strappi. È una richiesta di perdono. Non è mai aggressivo, non è uno spillo.

[When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I have always had a fascination with the needle, that magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive – it's not a pin].<sup>30</sup>

On these words by Louise Bourgeois, it is worth mentioning Andrea Lui, who interestingly comments on this quotation as follows:

Bourgeois creates a distinction between the needle and the pin. The obvious difference between the two is that the needle has an eye at the blunt end to allow you to pull a thread, while a pin does not. The needle can stitch and mend, whereas the pin can only hold fabric together in preparation for sewing. Hence, with the pin, the action is as Bourgeois describes «aggressive», stabbing, piercing and goring. The needle, on the other hand, repairs, forgives and heals. Stitching allows for slow reflection, understanding and empathy. This is where the magic lies within the needle. As well, allegorically, the needle can be seen as a symbol of femininity, and the pin as masculinity. Bourgeois could possibly be claiming the power of femininity.<sup>31</sup>

The needle then in its act of perforating things, keeps them together. This

<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Anedda, *Salva con nome*. Andrea Lui, *The Needle as the Pen. Part 2: The Magic Power of the Needle*, on *Stitched Voices*. See also Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>31</sup> Lui, *The Needle as the Pen. Part 2: The Magic Power of the Needle*.



becomes particularly relevant to memories and Anedda's Sardinian identity, which she never fully owned and which she attempts to thread together through her poetry. From this viewpoint, stitching becomes a central element in the experience of mourning for Anedda. As Anedda writes in another poem from the section *Cucire*: «Quello che la morte smembrava poteva essere unito di nuovo» [What death had put asunder could be joined again].

Anedda situates the origins of the bedsheet in her reflection (if not «ossessione» [obsession] as she herself calls it) on details, that lead her to put together her experimental prose work entitled *La vita dei dettagli* [The Life of Details], a meditation on the way specific, chosen details of works of art can be recomposed, recontextualised, and re-imagined:

Durante la costruzione del libro e in coincidenza con un lutto ho cominciato a riflettere sul tema della perdita attraverso frammenti, fotografie, stoffe e naturalmente parole, ma straniare e dislocate rispetto allo spazio tradizionale del foglio

[During the construction of the book which coincided with a moment of mourning, I began to reflect on the theme of loss through fragments, photographs, fabrics and of course words, but alienated and displaced from the traditional space of the sheet of paper].<sup>32</sup>

Loss and mourning are therefore central elements with which Anedda engages in this work. For her, as she states in the catalogue, «la Sardegna [...] è un luogo di perdita e lontananza. Un luogo [...] che ha l'intensità di un saluto» [Sardinia is a place of loss and distance. A place [...] that has the intensity of a farewell].<sup>33</sup>

The sewn photographs are other elements that are woven into the bedsheet. Anedda's use of photography, I would suggest, relates to the element of loss and mourning. Roland Barthes' foundational study of photography can help us to better understand this aspect of Anedda's *Antologia*. In his last book, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* [*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*], which is still one of the most quoted books in the photographic canon, Barthes introduces new ways of thinking about photography by establishing terms such as *studium* and *punctum*, words which have by now entered the canonical terminology of scholarship on photography.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, as Otto von Busch highlights, «most of the examples that Barthes used regarding photography are in fact a

<sup>32</sup> Anedda, *Antologia*, 2012, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard, London, Vintage, 2000.

description of the photographic representation of cloths.»<sup>35</sup> Whereas Anedda's photographs were printed on a fabric material (instead of a sheet of paper). In his investigation into the nature of photography, Barthes focuses on photography's relationship to death and mourning. According to Barthes, some photographs produce what he calls the *punctum*, which is a detail, a partial object, that has the power to prick, to create a wound, to mark the viewer like a wound. «In every photograph», he writes, there is «the return of the dead» and, he adds, the implied message of «That-has-been».<sup>36</sup> Every photograph, for Barthes, presents us with what «has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred».<sup>37</sup> From this viewpoint, he argues that the photograph «is a certificate of presence», of «a reality one can no longer touch».<sup>38</sup> In other words, in the photograph there is a «superimposition [...] of reality and of the past» and «by shifting this reality to the past (this has been), the photograph suggests that it is already dead».<sup>39</sup> This is the wound that photography creates in us, that pricks the reader/viewer. The photographs that Barthes analyses in his study are mainly portraits; the same is also true for Anedda. She presents the viewer with a series of faces that remind us of «That-has-been»: they are there and yet they are already dead. «Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph [presents us a] catastrophe. [...] There is always a defeat of Time in [photographs]: *that* is dead and *that is going to die*».<sup>40</sup> The discovery of this equivalence is what pricks the viewer/reader, what creates the *punctum*, the wound at the core of the photograph. The peculiar temporality of lyric poetry, on which I shall return in more detail towards the end of this article, is enacted by Anedda by way of the materiality of these objects sewn on the bed-sheet. Stitching these photographs of familiar people as well as strangers is intrinsically linked to the experience of loss and mourning; concurrently, it reveals a connection with the many ways through which poetry voices loss, or rather, as in this case, materialises in its very fibres that collapse of linear time in its a-temporal presence of «That has been» and so presents a reminder of what has been lost, of death. The *punctum*'s drive towards life and death displays its atemporal power of expanding and contracting time in a non-linear system where it is pointless to proceed from past to present and future. This is different from an idea of timelessness just as it is in the atemporal present of lyric poetry. One example is to be found in

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<sup>35</sup> For a «textile» application of Barthes' reflections on the concept of *punctum* and its connection to mourning, see Otto von Busch's essay and his investigation of an embroidered stain. Otto von Busch, *Textile Punctum: Embroidery of Memory*, in *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources: Identity*, ed. by Catherine Harper, vol. 4, London, New York, Berg, 2012, pp. 240-250 (p. 242).

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 9, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Id., p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Id., p. 87.

<sup>39</sup> Id., pp. 76, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Id., p. 96.

the photograph representing a hand on the lower part of the bedsheet, which is also included in the section entitled *Collezionare perdite* [Collecting Losses] from *La vita dei dettagli*. In the book, we find written beneath the photograph the following: «Guarda questa immagine: una mano è mia, quella che sembra la sua ombra è l'orma della mano di un corpo assente» [Look at this image: one hand is mine, the other that seems like its shadow is the print of the hand of an absent body].<sup>41</sup>

### *The Unreadable Textile Poetry of Maria Lai*

Queste opere tessute cambiano la storia del mondo. La creatività femminile contagia il maschile. Le immagini passano dai fili alle pietre, dai simboli ai significati. Nasce l'alfabeto, la comunicazione attraverso il tempo e lo spazio, la memoria. La memoria si allarga e si fa ritmo, con la memoria matura la trasformazione dell'essere umano: nasce il poeta, un concentrato di uomo, donna e divinità.

[These woven works change the history of the world. Female creativity infects the masculine. Images move from threads to stones, from symbols to meanings. The alphabet is born, communication through time and space, memory. Memory expands and becomes rhythm, with memory the transformation of the human being matures: the poet is born, a concentrate of man, woman, and divinity.]  
(Maria Lai, *Le ragioni dell'arte*)<sup>42</sup>

«One doesn't make art», Lai says, «except by working with material».<sup>43</sup> Throughout her prolific career, Lai's engagement with textile has enabled her to explore issues of materiality and spatiality, starting in 1967 with the creation of *Oggetto paesaggio* [Object landscape], one of her most famous looms. The loom has been a central object in Lai's works and it is possible to find traces, echoes, and references to it even in later artworks. I am referring to her loom-books, sewn canvases, pages, and sheets. The loom has a double origin in Lai: on the one hand, it can be seen in tune with the artistic tendencies of her time, specifically the one of bringing everyday objects into artworks, as introduced in the 1960s by Pierre Restany and the Nouveau Réalisme. On the other hand, the loom is also deeply connected to Sardinia. For Lai, the loom stands for a magical tool that is reminiscent of her childhood, an object used by Sardinian women for centuries, if not millennia. It is therefore not only a conceptual object but also a personal object infused with her personal memories and Sardinian heritage.

Tellingly, if for Anedda there is an interest in visual arts and art history – the latter being the subject she studied at university and that remained a central focal

<sup>41</sup> Anedda, *La vita dei dettagli*, p. 169.

<sup>42</sup> Giuseppina Cuccu, Maria Lai, *Le ragioni dell'arte*, Cagliari, Arte Duchamp, 2002, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

point of her poetic explorations – for Lai, poetry and the nature and limitations of writing are central elements. An often-cited episode by critics when highlighting the «poetical» and «lyrical» quality of her artworks, is that one of her teachers, the writer Salvatore Cambosu, while handing her a book of poetry, told her «Non importa se non capisci, segui il ritmo» [It doesn't matter if you don't understand. Just follow the rhythm].<sup>44</sup> Rhythm is indeed an aspect that, as we shall see, has a key role in her artworks. In Lai, as Anedda interestingly points out, rhythm is closely linked to the artist's passion for space and materiality as well as language:

Una sperimentazione teorica, linguistica e, come dice Lai stessa, architettonica, che si lega a una passione per lo spazio, senza la quale non si capirebbe la forza delle sue opere. Lai percepisce il ritmo delle proporzioni, la sua visione

[Hers is a theoretical, linguistic, and – as she herself claims – architectural experimentation, tied to a passion for space, without which it would be impossible to understand the power of her works. Lai perceives the rhythm of proportions].<sup>45</sup>

It is interesting to note that Lai's personal poetic anthology<sup>46</sup> includes poets such as Emily Dickinson, Marina Cvetaeva, and Emily Brontë, all authors with whom Anedda is also known to be in close dialogue with her poetry, and all authors for whom «il senso dello spazio è più forte di ogni cronologia» [the sense of space is stronger than any chronology] and on whose texts included in Lai's anthology, «i testi sconfinano in fogli bianchi e puntinati che chiamano chi legge a completare con le sue preferenze, le sue parole, il libro» [the texts digress into blank and speckled sheets that call upon the reader to complete the book with their own preferences and words].<sup>47</sup> On her anthology Lai states, «Chi avrà tra le mani queste pagine bianche potrà forse riprendere il filo di queste memorie, coi propri poeti, i pensieri e i sogni» [those who hold these blank pages will perhaps be able to take up the thread of these memories with their own poets, thoughts, and dreams].<sup>48</sup> This is the same space that is key in Lai's artistic search and the same freedom given to the viewer to read without any preconceived linearity and with the possibility of creating an infinite number of meanings through her sewn threads.

Although born in Sardinia, Lai also lived her relationship with her island from afar, just like Anedda. Leaving Sardinia to pursue artistic studies in Rome and later in Venice, she then continued to return, intermittently, to the island. «Il ritorno» [The return], Lai says, «è il viaggio stesso» [is the journey itself] and returning to

<sup>44</sup> Elena Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, in *Maria Lai: tenendo per mano il sole*, pp. 54-67 (pp. 54-55).

<sup>45</sup> Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Lai, *Memorie*, Cagliari, Arte Duchamp, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>48</sup> Lai, *Memorie*. Translation into English as quoted in Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 84.

Sardinia was also a way to «ricominciare a giocare» [start to play again]; «giocare» is an element at the core of her sewn fables like *Tenendo per mano il sole* [Holding the sun by hand] (1984-2004).<sup>49</sup> As Anedda writes in her article on Maria Lai:

Per imparare a giocare quel gioco degli adulti che è l'arte, Maria Lai ha dovuto – come sa chi vive in un'isola – attraversare il mare, l'aria, quel vuoto che è fisico e non può essere riempito se non dall'andare e tornare, tornare, andare di nuovo. Un movimento in cui il ritiro non significa chiusura, l'insularità si espone e come scrive Achille Bonito Oliva, «dialoga con la globalità».

[[i]n order to learn to play the adult game of art, Maria Lai – like all those who live on an island – had to cross the sea, the air, that void that is physical and cannot be bridged except by going and coming back, coming back, and going again. Within this movement, withdrawal does not mean closure and insularity is exposed and «dialogues with globality», to quote Achille Bonito Oliva].<sup>50</sup>

Sardinia, with its rural customs and traditions, and the weavers she had seen during her childhood, remained a central theme throughout her works. It was in the 1950s that Lai first started to become closer to mixed-media art and Informalism. After leaving Sardinia to return to Rome in 1956, she found herself immersed in a city that in that period was one of the centres of action and material-based art, something that had an influence on the directions that her art would take, particularly her attention to the materiality and signs of her artworks. After 1963, Lai did not exhibit her work for several years and it was at this time that she started creating her first mixed-media looms (these were at first two-dimensional elements and then became three-dimensional).

From the 1970s, Lai started exhibiting again and it was then that her looms began to be at the centre of her shows. During this period, her first sewn canvases also started to be created and it is at this point that she abandoned painting. During these years, Lai created a series of works that engaged with non-painterly material, just as Anedda engaged with extra-literary material and objects in her *Antologia*, though Lai's dialogue with painting was never interrupted and can be seen throughout these artworks. Thanks to her encounter with Mirella Bentivoglio, who was an artist, visual poet, and art critic, Lai became more and more interested in language, which she saw as a natural continuation of her work on thread. «La scrittura» [Writing], Lai says, «mi ha suggerito un rapporto tra l'inchiostro e il

<sup>49</sup> Elena Pontiggia, *Maria Lai: Arte e relazione*, Nuoro, Ilisso, 2017. English translations as quoted in Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 82.

filo» [gave me the idea of a relationship between ink and thread].<sup>51</sup> This led her to participate in the *Materializzazione del linguaggio* [Materialisation of language], a show curated by Bentivoglio as part of the 1978 Venice Biennale and that aimed to explore how women artists often «trasforma[no] il linguaggio in tessile» [transform language into textile].<sup>52</sup> The exhibition included, among others, Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncarova, Irma Blank, Mirella Bentivoglio, Lia Dreai, Chiara Diamantini, Elisabetta Gut, Ketty La Rocca, Lucia Marcucci, Simona Weller, Carla Vasio, and Giulia Niccolai. On the exhibition, Bentivoglio interestingly stated: «Perché il linguaggio è lo strumento del potere, della storia, della legge. Ha emarginato la donna nel pubblico silenzio [ma] la donna ha con esso un rapporto intimo. È lei a trasferirlo al bambino» [Because language is the instrument of power, of history, of the Law. It has marginalised women into public silence [but] women have an intimate relationship with it. It is they who transfer it to the child].<sup>53</sup> It is in this period that Lai also created her sewn pages, sheets, and books. These present a non-verbal language and are formed by threads only rather than graphic elements; these illegible signs made by thread highlight the limitation of writing, of language, and consequently, of reading and meaning themselves.

There is not one linear reading of these illegible signs of threads, but infinite possibilities of meaning that the viewer, through imagination, can create. These mute books do not ask for a reading, but for a vision, they do not belong to the realm of «words», as one of the artist's latest works, *Orme di leggi* [Traces of Laws] (2011) exemplifies. *Orme di leggi* won her the Premio Camera dei Deputati in 2011 to mark 150 years since Italy's Unification. Here Lai creates a large panel covered with rows of fabric pages, which are filled with illegible writing that evokes the Italian Constitution; in doing so she highlights how the abstract essence of legal language can be countered by a «legible» law, readable and made for the people.<sup>54</sup>

Later in her career, Lai continued her exploration of textiles and also intensified her desire to involve people in her artworks, in a way that echoes what in 1998 the

<sup>51</sup> Maria Lai in a letter to Angela Grilletti, Rome, 25 September 1978, now in *Arte Duchamp dal Moderno al Postmodern*, ed. by Angela Grilletti, Cagliari, Arte Duchamp, 2004, p. 98.

<sup>52</sup> Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, p. 63. The exhibition included, among others, Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncarova, Irma Blank, Mirella Bentivoglio, Lia Dreai, Chiara Diamantini, Elisabetta Gut, Ketty La Rocca, Lucia Marcucci, Simona Weller, Carla Vasio, and Giulia Niccolai.

<sup>53</sup> As quoted in Cristiana Campanini, 1978, *l'arte delle donne femministe*, on *La Repubblica*.

<sup>54</sup> «[S]u un grande pannello si allineano pagine di tessuto, riempite di scrittura illeggibile che evoca la Costituzione (la zona più bianca al centro dell'opera), le orme, cioè le tracce della legge, ma anche i drammi del presente (le parti in rosse sulla destra).» [The large panel is covered with rows of fabric pages, filled with an illegible writing that evokes the Constitution (the whiter zone at the central of the work), the traces of the law, but also the dramas of the present (the parts in red on the right)]. Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, p. 65.

French philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud will refer to as «relational aesthetics».<sup>55</sup> *Legarsi alla montagna* [Binding oneself to the mountain] (1981) and the later *Essere è tessere* [Being is weaving] (2008), two of Lai's most famous works, perfectly capture her need to draw a link between nature, people, and the infinite.

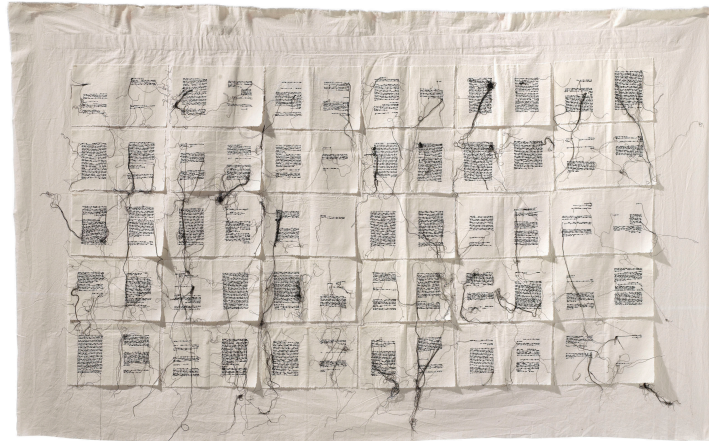


Fig. 6: Maria Lai, *Lenzuolo* [Bedsheet]; signed and dated «Lai 89» (lower right); thread and fabric laid down on fabric; 141.7x230 cm.  
Courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2022

For the scope of this article, I would like to focus on Lai's series *Lenzuolo* [Bedsheet] (1989), which is representative of Lai's production in the 1980s when she started experimenting with the connection between the fabric and the rectangular form of the bedsheets, sewing, and writing. It also highlights Lai's interest in the materiality and the body of the work, not just in the concept and the idea that it should evoke. Lai's *Lenzuolo* is striking because of the way it manages to transform what is traditionally denigrated as a craftwork into an artistic object, a conceptual work of art. What we find are small rectangles of fabric sewn together onto a large bedsheets. Each of the rectangles, whose shape resembles that of a page, is punctuated by lines of black threads. The thread is stitched on the rectangles of fabric as words would be on a page: mimicking their linearity across the page. This linearity, however, is also challenged. Indeed, the thread does not give form to any words belonging to any language that a viewer might recognise. Moreover, the sense of continuity that the threads give is opposed to the discreteness, the fragmented nature of the single words. The sign moves beyond any possible signifier. The words remain illegible, disrupting any form of writing, giving form, paradoxically, to an immaterial, unrecorded, unspoken language, and stories. Significantly, *Materialie*

<sup>55</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, Dijon, les presses du réel, 2022.

*Immateriale* [Immaterial Material] is also the title of an exhibition centred on the link between words and visual art curated by Nicoletta Boschiero with Cecilia Scatturin and Valentia Russo in 2016 that included works by Lai. In this illegibility lies a key difference between Lai's and Anedda's bedsheet. The stitching strongly suggests the presence of words and lines as written on a page, but this indecipherable writing presents the viewer/reader with infinite possibilities of reading and interpretation. Lai's illegible signs that reproduce words echo other works such as Man Ray's *Untitled poem*, 391, no. 17 (1924) with its blackened lines that present words no longer readable and Emilio Isgrò's *Libro cancellato* [Erased book] (1964), among other of his artworks. These works blur the boundaries between visual and literary art, endowing viewers with a freedom for different interpretations and, at the same time, reminds us of the fallibility of writing as a means of communication, of meaning. Here lies one of the most important contributions of Lai's work. Moreover, as Maria Damon states with reference to Ray's work, although it holds true for Lai's *Lenzuolo* too, the «thick, obscurantist and hyper-tactile lines can be understood to prospectively thematize the suppression of language, of culture and people and foretell their potential obliteration; and simultaneously it enacts a coding that enables the invention of a gestural language without national boundaries, based on a need for art and expressive culture. If we were to voice it then, it might be in all languages and none, all sound smooth and striated, meaningful and chaotic, Dionysian and Apollonian, the birth of creation in a textual tapestry».<sup>56</sup>

Another key aspect of Lai's *Lenzuolo* is the loose thread dangling from the sheets, which I see as a continuation of the flowing threads stitched on the «pages» that prolongs the disintegration of writing beyond the lines of the «text» – the untold/unreadable story present in the page continues beyond it, thus remaining immaterial and unrecorded. The loose thread unravelling outside of the work returns throughout Lai's several books, such as *Libro scalpo* [Book scalp].



<sup>56</sup> Maria Damon, *Text, Textile, Exile: Meditations on Poetics, Metaphor, Net-work*, in «*Electronic Book Review*», 2 (2009), 13, pp. 1-15.



Fig. 9: Maria Lai, *Libro scalpo*, 1990. Collezione Stazione dell'Arte di Ulassai.  
 Courtesy © Archivio Maria Lai by SIAE 2022

This loose thread together with the illegibility of its words again produces something close to Barthes' *punctum*. The *punctum* «rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me».<sup>57</sup> As Otto von Busch highlights, the *punctum* «acts like a wound in the system of perception, a sensitive point that disturbs the first perception» of the *studium* and this, in textiles, could translate in making a hole, a cut, or, as in the case of Lai into a loosing thread. «A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)»: the «accident» of the loose thread is what pierces the viewer in Lai's work.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the *studium* of Lai's work could be identified with the participation in the reading of the lines as culturally guided, but this is deliberately evaded, and instead the illegible signs of the thread do not generate a general interest as in the *studium*, but something that pricks the viewer. The illegibility of Lai's *Lenzuolo* is a detail that comes to dominate the whole work, just as for Barthes' conceptualisation of *punctum*, which is essentially a «detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration».<sup>59</sup> As von Busch suggests, a «detail that flows to dominate the whole impression of the photograph. This detail might tell a completely different story than that in the rest of the photograph or the *studium*, the *intention* of the photograph. It is in their polyphonic tension and dissonance that the full potential of the *punctum* appears as narrative. [...] *Punctum* has the power of expansion [as Barthes states]; it enriches and adds layers of meaning far above and beyond its original intention.»<sup>60</sup> Lai's illegible fabric-words affect our interpretation and lead to a shift of focus touching on something beyond language and create a poetics of visual/textile materiality through which stories can be heard by way of an uncoded, textile language of memories. Indeed, storytelling is a key focus of interest for Lai.<sup>61</sup> As she states: «[a]s a child, every time I saw my grandmother mending [...] I would tell her, "These sheets are written" and she would reply, "Read them." I invented stories suggested [to] me by the movements of the tangled thread».<sup>62</sup> «What does sewing mean» Lai asks, «a needle», she continues, «enters and exits something leaving a thread behind: a

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Id., p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Id., p. 49.

<sup>60</sup> von Busch, *Textile Punctum: Embroidery of Memory*, p. 244. On Barthes and his claim that the *punctum* has the power of expansion, see *Camera Lucida*, p. 45.

<sup>61</sup> On Lai and storytelling see the already cited essay by Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*.

<sup>62</sup> As quoted in Elena Pontiggia, *Maria Lai: Art and Connection*, Cagliari, Ilisso, 2018, p. 151.

trace of its path which joins places and intentions».<sup>63</sup> Although there is not a direct connection to mourning and loss as in Anedda, for Lai threads and needles are also a tool to unite, connect things, which is ultimately the primary function of the loom: a machine that connects threads to threads, creating weaves of fabric; it is a «strumento di unione» [tool of union], as the art critic Elena Pontiggia suggests.<sup>64</sup>

In *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*, Don Paterson introduces a helpful connection between poetry and space by way of rhythm. Patterson encourages us to see how poetry's representation within the space of the page has given it «very strong spatial features» and the way this spatial marker manifests itself in poetry is rhythm, which, together with metre, creates the patterns of a poem just as visual patterns creates the spatial rhythmic quality of a textile work.<sup>65</sup> «Poetry's urgent engine», he argues, «is rhythm, in the sense of both what draws it forth and what drives it forward [...]; it injects its own excitement, its agitation, its dance into the minds of our readers. More than any other aspect of poetic composition, rhythm reminds us that the way up and the way down are indeed one and the same».<sup>66</sup> Moreover, poetry brings music into language: «Like the musical note, the word is an event in time but despite this, words [...] can be recalled in one another's presence and have their meaning yoked together by the careful repetition and arrangement of their sounds».<sup>67</sup> Music, like poetry, offers «rejection of our sequential, quantised sense of time that, in the end, serves only to divide us from one another. Music time is rhythmic, cyclical, non-linear».<sup>68</sup> Orpheus, as Patterson reminds us, «used song to cross the ultimate dividing border, and defy death itself».<sup>69</sup> The Orphic project can be seen as a way to unify «the domain of the temporal, the passing and the living with that of the atemporal, the eternal and the shade».<sup>70</sup> This is how, by way of creating patterns and repetitions embedded in textile-poetic rhythm, both Anedda and Lai highlight the connection between space and poetic time, thus emphasising in their textile poems one of the most unique generic markers of lyric poetry: its atemporal present – «a small stay against the *passage* of time and, in their Orphic way, cheat death a little too».<sup>71</sup> Patterson's viewpoint sheds light on two key elements of Lai's *Lenzuolo* – also present in Anedda – namely, seriality and reiteration, which both create a specific kind of rhythm. For Lai, however, the

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<sup>63</sup> As quoted by Benedetta Ricci in *Los (and Found) Artist Series: The Visual Poetry of Maria Lai, on Artland*.

<sup>64</sup> Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Don Paterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 341.

<sup>66</sup> Id., pp. 661-662.

<sup>67</sup> Id., p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

objective resides in communicating the singularity of the action, and in this way she translates repetition into countless entangling of threads.<sup>72</sup> On rhythm, Lai once said that «[s]enza respiro l'opera d'arte è inerte [...] leggevo solo ritmi, non li capivo ma poi questi ritmi li ho trasformati in immagini» [Without breath the artwork is inert [...] I only read rhythms, I didn't understand them but then I transformed these rhythms into images].<sup>73</sup> Rhythm and repetition, two core elements of poetry, become in Lai, through her use of thread and fabric, a material and spatial element of her work, a tactile element that transcends language and sound, and becomes a spatial presence.

What emerges in Lai's works as well as Anedda's is a reflection *in the making* of what constitutes the grammar of the poetic, or rather, of perceptions of certain founding structures of poetic language. On the one hand, the question of rhythm and how rhythmicity can be applied to a practice of needle-stitching, needle-punching, the continuation of the thread through the repetitiveness of the act; on the other hand, the question of weaving and grammage, that is, how stitching the non-semantic is an element that is also present in poetic language as well as in textiles. This third element is interesting when drawing a parallel between these two types of grammar: an element that creates a pattern precisely, a repetition, an element of metonymy, that is, the fact of isolating within a weaving, within a design, a part, an expression within a pattern of a whole. It is a plot that can be replicated and replicated in some way, and this can work both at the level of the written word within the textile and at the level of the stitching whereby the repetition is also accompanied by a metonymic suture that is replicated. From this viewpoint, it is clearer how rhetorical mechanisms arise from the entanglement between the semantic or asemantic elements that characterise the intra-action between textile and poetic.

«A woman's touch». The expression evokes women as media of softness, comfort and refinement, the symbolic and tactile counterpart to rough and tough men. On its underside, it alludes to the corrupting effects of feminine sensuality, which can seduce and enfeeble the most hardened warrior or rigorous ascetic. Behind the notion of a woman's touch lies the concept of woman *as* touch. This declares that, while men are inherently rational, women are all body, all feeling.»<sup>74</sup> This is what Classen writes in *The Book of Touch* and that resonates with the philosophy of vocality presented by feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero in her book *A*

<sup>72</sup> On this aspect of Lai's artistic practice see also Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, p. 58.

<sup>73</sup> Giuseppina Cuccu, Maria Lai, *Le ragioni dell'arte. Cose tanto semplici che nessuno capisce*. Translation into English as quoted in Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> Classen, *Women's Touch*, in *The Book of Touch*, p. 203. See also Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002, in particular Chapter 4, section 2: *Touch in Aesthetic Forms* (pp. 160-178).

*più voci*. As she highlights in the introductory chapter while discussing the weight of discrete dichotomies, «the symbolic patriarchal order that identifies the masculine with reason and the feminine with the body is precisely an order that privileges the semantic with respect to the vocal.»<sup>75</sup> This ancient association of women and the asemantic has been resisted, re-worked, and reclaimed by women. Given the primary role that tactility and corporeality play in textile arts, intramedial textile poetics is a particularly rich texture through which this has been done over the century as well as in the present day. A work that asks to be *felt* in its tactility, textility does not equate to its being outside the realm of written language. «La stoffa», Lai says, «per me è un elemento tattile molto importante. Io sento la differenza delle grane, delle stoffe, dei velluti, delle tele, delle sete. Creare un'emozione è mettere insieme tutte queste tattilità diverse» [for me cloth is a very important tactile element. I feel the difference of the grains, the cloths, the velvets, the canvases, the silks. Putting all these different textures together creates an emotion].<sup>76</sup> Lai also comments on the impossibility for the viewer to actually touch and feel the material of her artworks: «[t]occare le stoffe indubbiamente sarebbe importante, però già guardarle – ci sono delle tattilità nello sguardo – è come toccarle» [Touching the cloths would undoubtedly be important, but even just looking at them – tactile aspects can be experienced with the eyes – is just like touching them].<sup>77</sup> One thing to add here is that the impossibility of touching the objects – that so openly ask to be approached in their tactile essence – invites the viewer/reader to proactively engage with them, to bring back the memory of that tactile experience, to continue the coming into being of their work by looking at it. Lai deprives the poem of a supposed autonomy of its workings and positions the viewer/reader at the centre in its very making. The textile and tactile core of the work activates a desire (and tactile memory) of that fabric. In this way, the viewer/reader connects to it via their physical being, their body. One might say, that the role that «touch» and tactile memory play is a way through which the reader/observer intra-relates with the textile poem and activates Culler's triangulation. Here it is worth mentioning Barad, who states:

All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the «self», and touching the «self» entails touching the strangers within. Even the smallest bits of matter are an unfathomable multitude. Each «individual» always already includes all possible intra-actions with «itself» through all the

<sup>75</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 6-7.

<sup>76</sup> As quoted by Maria Lai in an interview with Tonino Casula in 1977, now available online as *Tonino Casula incontra Maria Lai*, on *Youtube*. English translation as quoted in Pontiggia, *Elena Pontiggia*, p. 60.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

virtual others, including those that are non-contemporaneous with «itself». That is, every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time.<sup>78</sup>

Highlighting the infinite possibilities that touch entails is in line with Lai's textile poetics that aims to emphasise the instability, mobility, and infinite possibilities of reading and, thus, meaning, of her entangled, intra-relating, unreadable threads. This key element of her poetics is activated through the way touch works via the intra-relation with the reader/observer and his body.

This mode of critical/creative engagement that textile poems enact involves appropriation, restaging, repurposing, recreation, interpretation, as well as modifications on the part of the viewer/reader, something that produces «different exploratory paths of cognitive and artistic experience through an artwork that, in turn, creates different outcomes».<sup>79</sup> «Chi guarda può completare la sua forma, immaginarne il resto raccontarlo variandolo» [Those who look can complete its form, imagine the rest, describe it by varying it].<sup>80</sup> The possibility of continuation in the works highlighted by Anedda while commenting on Lai's work (and that is also present in her *Antologia*) functions in a way that echoes, I suggest, the apostrophic address, that «strange habit of address' in lyric poetry and the notion of «triangulated address» as proposed by Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric*.<sup>81</sup> Apostrophic address is closely linked to lyric a-temporality as «poetic hailing seeks to become an event itself rather than to narrate events».<sup>82</sup> The «[a]ddress to someone or something gives the poem a character of event» which is what, in turn, creates the lyric present where a collapse into one time takes place, the time of

<sup>78</sup> Barad, *On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Although in a different context, Álvaro Seiça's reflections on the subversive nature of modifications in electronic literature provides relevant insights into similar processes that textile poems involve in their engagement with the viewer/reader. Álvaro Seiça, *Lit Mods*, in «Electronic Book Review», 6 (2020), 14, pp. 1-30.

<sup>80</sup> Anedda, *Antonella Anedda*, p. 86-87.

<sup>81</sup> On the concept of triangulated address see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 34, 186-201. The apostrophe can be defined as the «poetic address, especially to unhearing entities, whether these be abstractions, inanimate objects, animals, infants, or absent or dead people.» As quoted in the entry on apostrophe by William Waters in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene, et al, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 61-62 (p. 61). On apostrophe see: Jonathan Culler, *Apostrophe*, in *The Pursuit of Signs*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 149-171; Barbara Johnson, *Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion*, in *A World of Difference*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 184-199; Heather Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and early Modern England*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003.

<sup>82</sup> See entry on apostrophe by William Waters in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 61.

articulation, the *now*, and the time of the reading.<sup>83</sup> The poetic textiles such as those by Anedda and Lai enact this collapse of linear time and the activation of a triangulation by engaging with the viewer/reader and their senses, mainly tactile rather than of sight. If, according to Culler, the triangulation involves the speaker, addressee, and reader of a poem, in these textile poems the third party is their viewer/reader, who enable the re-iterability and re-enactment of these works.

At the core of lyric's unique temporality is a key characteristic of the genre: a genre that resists ideas of progression, teleology, and most importantly, closure. This aspect of the lyric has recently been discussed by Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden in their *Possibilities of Lyric*.<sup>84</sup> Anedda beautifully captures this aspect of the lyric when stating that poetry has the power to «annul time so as to make it live again in the space of language», a viewpoint that echoes Barthes' own conceptualization of temporality in relation to photography.<sup>85</sup> However, this atemporal present (*achronia*) of lyric poetry emerges in her *Antologia* and Lai's *Lenzuolo* in all their materiality by way of interacting with the viewer/reader and demand a practice of reading that privileges touch over sight, non-linearity of reading and meaning over linearity, movement and instability over stasis and completeness (*outopia*).

### *Weaving a Conclusion*

As the visual artist Anne Wilson recently highlighted in an interview, textiles «are carriers of cultural narratives globally: textiles can tell a story about class, about belief systems, about gender, about identity, about labour, about economics and trade.»<sup>86</sup> Lai's works are no exception and their fibres are imbricated in Sardinian cultural histories, especially of women. Moreover, textiles, Wilson continues, enable us to acknowledge how «both personal and cultural histories [are] embedded in materiality and process, work freely across disciplinary boundaries, combining features of ancient handwork disciplines with what is most contemporary».<sup>87</sup> Anedda's and Lai's works enact precisely this movement between local and global,

<sup>83</sup> Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 188, 197.

<sup>84</sup> As quoted in Manuele Gragnolati, Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy*, Berlin, ICI Berlin Press, 2020, pp. 86-87.

<sup>85</sup> Antonella Anedda Angioy, *Radure / Clearings*, trans. by Jamie McKendrick, in Manuele Gragnolati, Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy*, in «Cultural Inquiry», 18 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 163-184 (p. 165).

<sup>86</sup> As quoted in Anne Wilson, *Talking Textiles with Anne Wilson*, on Phaidon. See also Jenelle Porter, *Vitamin T: Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art*, London and New York, Phaidon, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

personal and universal, ancient Sardinian female craftworks and contemporary artistic tendencies of their time. Both Anedda and Lai are interesting cases to look at in so far as their works present a complex imbrication of local and global perspectives: they re-work the textile traditions of rural Sardinia *together* with an engagement with questions about the nature of language and poetry and the relationship between media in the *making* of language that goes beyond that island, beyond mainland Italy. They weave together a glocal practice. What we find in these works is an attempt to reappropriate a poetic/artistic language by returning to origins and to transcend the limitations imposed by canonised, and highly gendered, media. With this in mind, this article has shown how a poetics of entanglement such as the one enacted by Anedda and Lai resists a supposed superiority of sight (e.g. reading) as well as ideas of linearity and completeness in favour of notions of movement, instability, and tactility.

«Learning through seeing (and this includes reading) is somehow felt to be a superior or more legitimate way of knowing the world», writes Jessica Hemmings in her introduction to *The Textile Reader*.<sup>88</sup> One of the most important textile artists of the twentieth century, Anni Albers, asserts throughout her work the importance of resisting words as a supposed superior instrument of thought and presents the practice of making through materials, especially textiles, as a powerful way for the formation of cognition.<sup>89</sup> Poetic textiles such as Anedda's and Lai's are subversive works in the way they challenge this supposed superiority of both language and sight, which includes traditional forms of reading as generally employed when reading poetry; like in the works by Albers and other textile artists, they ask us to re-think the undervalued place that touch and tactility have often been given as modes of knowledge and as ways of constructing meaning. They do so by posing the senses of touch and sight as entangled and through the intra-action of these senses, the viewer/reader can experience, feel, and read these works. This viewpoint is at the core of Anedda's and Lai's textile poetics of entanglement. Written language is no longer perceived as a superior mode of cognition and poetry is no longer viewed as something that should involve a linear act of reading or be confined within the space of the page. Rather, key elements of what makes a poem a poem, such as rhythm or its peculiar a-temporality, are given a prominent role in the working of these textile poems, which, therefore, retains a fundamental poetic quality. All this becomes possible for the shared intent of both Lai's and Anedda's of *making*, in all its materiality, intramedial works that can be both touched and read. This is the result of the intra-action of poetry and textiles into one single

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<sup>88</sup> Hemmings, *The Textile Reader*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> See Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017. Similarly to Albers, in her essay, Mitchell challenges the supposed superiority of language as an integral part to the formation of cognition (Mitchell, *Textile, Text and Techné*).

entity, the textile poem where textile cannot be disentangled from poetry and the meaning of the work is the result of their entanglements. It is because Anedda's and Lai's artistic practice is so hybrid that our approach to these works should equally be hybrid and combine, as we have seen, discussions from both the field of textile arts and that on poetry and poetics.

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