



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy

Literature, Art and Intellectual History

Edited by
Sharon Hecker
Catherine Ramsey-Portolano



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Milan, Italy

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We both wish to dedicate this volume to the creative women in our families.

To Janet, Erzszi, Judith, Tamar, Cecilia and Lena.

— Sharon Hecker

To Florence, Elizabeth, Susan, Jenny, Ashley and Abi

— Catherine Ramsey-Portolano

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Weaving Connections Between Rome and New York: The Role of Gabriella Drudi

Maria De Vivo

GABRIELLA DRUDI'S FORMATION AS A LITERARY AGENT, TRANSLATOR, AUTHOR, AND ART CRITIC

Gabriella Drudi (Venice, 1922–Rome, 1998) was an Italian literary agent, translator, and art critic whose story has often been overlooked. This chapter intends to explore Drudi's multidisciplinary *modus operandi* and the role she played in building connections between Rome and New York. I contend that during the 1950s, in a country that was slowly coming out of the autarchic politics of fascism, it was quite a challenge to propose to Italian readers American authors, such as John Steinbeck and Truman Capote, Graham Greene, and William Burroughs, or to write about artists, such as Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko. This is because during those years, Italian art critics were mostly Francophiles and less oriented toward the American art scene. Drudi did not belong to any single school of art criticism nor did she have a formal education related to the world of

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art. Today, her works and writings can provide an original perspective for observing the rise of American Abstract painters, such as Willem de Kooning and Motherwell, the artists to whom she dedicated monographs—and of one of their main supporters, the art critic Harold Rosenberg. The chapter also critically examines Drudi's meeting with Rosenberg during her first trip to New York in 1956 together with her husband the artist Toti Scialoja, and whose book, *The Anxious Object* she translated in 1967.

Drudi studied law in Siena where she also devoted herself to theatrical activities with the future film historian Mario Verdone,¹ the painter Piero Sadun, and the scenographer Mario Grazzini. In Rome, where she arrived after graduating immediately after World War II, she began working as a literary agent with her sister Lucia.² It was a groundbreaking job, given that at the time in Italy, very few people (and those few were mostly men) practiced this profession. Furthermore, it was a job whose function and importance were not yet fully understood. The Dais agency, which Drudi managed with Fabio Coen in the late 1940s, represented writers such as Greene, Steinbeck, Burroughs, Truman Capote, and E.S. Gardner, the author of *Perry Mason* (Arbasino, 1968). This position allowed Drudi to come into direct contact with the works of these authors. She also exported Italian literature to America, negotiating the rights of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's masterpiece *The Leopard* (1958) to American publishing houses. Drudi was committed to weaving relationships with Anglo-American culture through literature and the practice of translation. Early on in her career, she translated American detective novels of the 1930s, a field defined as part of "a pre-existentialist basin" (Cotkin, 2003, 13–32), formed before contact with European existentialism had been made in America.

Drudi began to write about American art in the second half of the 1950s. She had no specific training in the field of art history, but this granted her considerable freedom. In her writing, she explored a consciously partial territory.³ She drew on what can be referred to as her anxiety: a philosophical quality, according to Rosenberg's perspective, which is inherent in acts of creation and involves an intense interaction between oneself and one's focus, and therefore, between oneself and the work of art. Guided by an impulse of affectivity, she investigated the artworks and the topics that most closely resembled her personality. This is the most fragile aspect of her intellectual profile and, at the same time, the strongest. Fragility is by no means a negative assessment. In my opinion, this

fragility reveals Drudi's ability to put herself on the line emotionally and reveal herself through her thoughts, feelings, and passions.

Weaving personal relationships with art and artists according to her own inclinations, Drudi ensured that her critical interpretation always involved a human and existential approach, rather than using rigorous or established theoretical frameworks. Drudi operated within the same context as other unconventional Italian critics born between 1910 and 1930, such as Emilio Villa, Carla Lonzi, Mario Diacono, and Cesare Vivaldi, who brought to the field "an inalienable contribution of intelligence and passion, commitment, lucid analysis and renewal of critical writing" (Trimarco, 2012, 32) without any pretense or intention of becoming a school of thought.

Whether Drudi was evaluating Italian or American art, she pursued an original discourse, free from restrictions and exegetical conformism. Some examples include her 1960 article about Rothko, where, in order to recount the "incandescent splendor" (Drudi, 1960, n.p.) of the canvases, Drudi concluded with a direct quotation from Dostoevsky, when Prince Myškin's epileptic fit is exalted in *The Idiot*. Drudi's unusual approach is evident in the kaleidoscopic opening of the piece on the New York "Happenings" published in 1961 in the *Almanacco Bompiani*, as if she were restoring their Babelic essence (De Vivo, 2017, 55). When writing about Motherwell in 1984, Drudi followed a pattern of "visual metaphors" (Drudi, 1984, 12) which, in her view, multiplied in the *Spanish Elegies*, citing the rampant blue of Henri Matisse's *La danse* (The Dance) (1909–1910) at the Hermitage and, more unexpectedly, Piero della Francesca's *Flagellazione di Cristo* (The Flagellation of Christ) (1455–1460), whose image she saw displayed among the "trophies" which Motherwell drew on for his paintings (Drudi, 1984, 13). It is a generous and, in its own way, exhausting endeavor, which is a consequence of Drudi's attention to and cross-exploration of diverse worlds and fields.

Certain critics had a significant effect on Drudi: Rosenberg, whose essays and articles she translated; Villa, with whom she collaborated on more than one occasion; the American critics Dore Ashton and Milton Gendel, with whom she shared life experiences and work opportunities; and, in a more subtle way, the author and playwright Samuel Beckett. It was Beckett, not only a playwright but also a translator, who served as a point of reference for the writers of the literary movement *Nouveau Roman* and added a powerful impetus to this constellation of figures. Beckett and his characters (Molly, Malone, and Murphy, for example, who

are mentioned several times in Drudi's diaries) are hidden but inescapably present in her writing, especially in reference to the interpretation of the creative act, the process of making art, and the underlying effort of translation, in which one can reinterpret the original, but only partially, and only through one's own knowledge and sensitivity.

Beckett acknowledged the irreducibility of the visual experience into the verbal act, but also attempted to express the inexpressible. His affirmation that "that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett & Duthuit, 1949, 103), from the three dialogues with Georges Duthuit in 1949, refers to the painter Pierre Tal Coat but in a more general sense summarizes Beckett's thoughts on art criticism. It is a passage that can also explain Drudi's anxiety, which she felt she needed to address. Her efforts to do so, though concealed by the wisdom and variety of language as well as by the power of the images she wrote about, reveal a hint of that "steely, fanatical thoroughness, which leaves nothing to chance" (Fruttero, 1961, xiv) which is an essential feature of Beckett's texts.

Drudi's first attempts at art criticism date back to 1956 in the magazine *Arti Visive*, an international forum connected with *Origine*, a short-lived Italian artistic group founded in 1951 by the artists Mario Ballocco, Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Ettore Colla. *Arti Visive* was first published in Rome in 1952. It was an outpost of abstractionism, a sort of militant organ behind which a serious and circumstantial alternative to the realist front could grow, whilst avoiding critical mediations that were extraneous to this way of thinking.

Drudi took on an active role during the final years of the magazine's existence. Officially, her title was Secretary of the Editorial Staff, but in reality, together with her companion, the artist Toti Scialoja, she had significant responsibilities as a result of her familiarity with the working environment of the Abstract Expressionists whom they had frequented during their first trip to New York in December 1956. During this trip, they met Thomas B. Hess, then editor of *Art News*, who had personally accompanied them to the studios of numerous artists on Tenth Street, such as Ad Reinhardt and Willem de Kooning.

The two articles Drudi wrote for *Appia Antica*, dedicated to Motherwell (1959) and Rothko (1960), are inspired by the richness of this experience. Unusual in terms of language and style, they are the result of a montage of the artists' words and Drudi's considerations, based on analytical

scrutiny such as that which one finds in the pages of the writers of the *Nouveau Roman* which she, however, illuminates with traces of life. The articles of the “Paint a picture” series published in *Art News* by Gendel and the 1957 volume *Conversations with Artists* by the writer Selden Rodman may have influenced this unusual method. There may well be traces of the anecdotal touch of Ashton, art historian, and a friend of Drudi’s, whose style, determined by her friendships with artists, left room for the intimacy of dialogue.

DRUDI’S APPROACH TO ART CRITICISM

Drudi’s approach included a way of playfully interpreting, experiencing, and then translating the work, living it wholeheartedly. It was “a way of living,” to quote the title of a book by Judith Zilczer (2014), as has often been said about the pictorial research of the Abstract Expressionists, especially about de Kooning, achieved through critical action. The text, and Drudi herself, meticulously follow the gestures on the canvas, brushstroke after brushstroke. For Drudi, to read the work means to retrace it and to articulate the creative process by “reliving” it, to borrow a term used throughout the book by George Steiner (1976).

Drudi’s understanding of art would not have been possible without Scialoja, the *peintre philosophe* (painter philosopher) with whom she spent a large part of her life. Her proximity to Scialoja’s painting and way of thinking made her vision special, giving her a direct, everyday look at art and its materiality. Paradoxically, the intensity of this relationship could be considered the cause of her unobtrusiveness, of her constant background position, like a translator who does not have the courage to steal the limelight from the author. She suffered because of the guilt that she felt by choosing to remain inconspicuous: “Would I therefore have always eluded myself/my shadow to investigate/move towards the shadow of others? [...] There is a sense of guilt in me/ that coincides with renunciation [...],”⁴ she wrote bitterly in her diary.

DRUDI’S WORK AS A TRANSLATOR

The work of translation, a field in which female input was of the utmost importance (Di Giovanni & Zanotti, 2018), and its metaphorical echo, can offer further insights into an analysis of Drudi, not so much to interpret her work as a particular variant of *ekphrasis*, or vivid description, but

as an expression of her otherness. The act of translation—a place of “linguistic hospitality” (Ricoeur, 2006, 20)—creates a comparison between the original work and the translated work that can raise doubts and encourage reflection. This also occurs in the relationship between the critic and the artwork.

It should also be noted that criticism and translation cannot be looked at individually in Drudi’s work, because the two often went hand in hand. Her translation of *The Anxious Object* by Rosenberg, the most well known of Drudi’s translation works, attests to how the commission she received from Bompiani was due to her profound knowledge of the work of the American critic and to her desire to share Rosenberg’s ideas on art. The translation provided a way of understanding the relationship with artists and, perhaps, a latent melancholy for a world and an idea of art that were fading away. In its many characteristics, “the experience of translation”⁵ is a useful feature of Drudi’s work, uniting the many aspects of her work and highlighting the unorthodoxy of her critical approach. Is it not perhaps the close contact with the text (and with the artworks) that requires a practice in actu⁶ (Bassnett, 1998, 137) which recognizes a solution in the process of rewriting without claiming to be a verbal equivalent of the visual experience?

Does Drudi practice translation by using the language of criticism to explore the possibility of “reawakening the echo of the original” (Benjamin, 2010, 47), the (unreproducible) echo of the artist’s action, thereby fully experiencing the limits and impossibility of an integral restitution of the original text? Translation carries within itself traces of partiality, because the target text is only a temporary space that cannot be definitive. Translation work characterizes, pervades, and defines Drudi’s critical production throughout the 1960s and beyond. The intense, feverish, and yet (almost) invisible nature of this work is a measure of her dedication to art.

DRUDI AND ROSENBERG

Through Drudi’s work behind the scenes, we can reconstruct her outlook, choices, and approach with respect to American art, in particular the art revolving around Rosenberg and Abstract Expressionism, a figure and a field with which she was familiar thanks to knowledge she had acquired during her many trips overseas. Furthermore, if translating means not only finding equivalents but also focusing on words while immersing oneself in a particular culture, then first-hand experience is an additional value which

should be taken into account. In Italy, the Abstract Expressionists were not—as we have seen—completely unknown, but Rosenberg’s presence on the Italian critical and editorial scene was weak.⁷ A few days after the publication of the monograph on Arshile Gorky for Horizon Press in 1962, Rosenberg, in agreement with Hess and Gendel, asked Drudi for help.

Officially entrusted to Lydia Magliano, the Italian translation was actually revised by Drudi and Gendel, as shown in the Rosenberg–Drudi correspondence of those hectic days.⁸ The book was published by Rizzoli just in time to accompany the Gorky retrospective at the Biennale in 1962, before Rosenberg’s 1959 *The Tradition of the New*,⁹ the collection of essays that brought him considerable fame, was printed in Italy.

Rosenberg’s star shone brightly in the 1950s when his definition of “American Action Painters,” coined in 1952, became the appealing formula for emphasizing not only gestures but also the construction of an identity through the artistic act. In the following decade, however, Clement Greenberg’s formalist criticism overshadowed Rosenberg’s existential perspective. The distance between the two critics was enormous. However, as the Italian art critic Mauro Cianchi points out, “something less concrete and more conceptual, unspoken but deeply felt” (Cianchi, 2006, 23) animates Rosenberg’s pages, creating a sense of restlessness. “The attack made [...] on the autonomy of art at a time when it was declared that the fences separating it from life had been knocked down” is not reassuring, so much so that Rosenberg remained divided between “two impulses, one forward in the name of action, the other backwards in the name of action painting: with the two terms inseparable” (Cianchi, 2006, 24), because if the action painting “slips too far into action [life] it is no longer painting; if it is content to be painting it turns into apocalyptic wallpaper” (Cianchi, 2006, 24). The alternative, discussed by the artist Allan Kaprow in his 1958 article “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” which came at a time of the academicization of Abstract Expressionism, seemed to hold no appeal for Rosenberg, whose faith in painting remained unshakeable because he believed it was better not to challenge the integrity of the canvas. If “from the action paintings to the *happenings* that transferred painting and sculpture into the theatre, there was only one logical step, one definitive step” (Rosenberg, 1967, 97–98), Rosenberg doubted the appropriateness of taking that step. In *The Anxious Object*, he wondered whether it might be wise to hesitate.

When the portrait of Gorky came to life through Rosenberg and was officially translated in Italy, another significant event took place during the

XXXI edition of the *Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia* in 1962. This was the year in which prizes were awarded to Jean Fautrier, Hans Hartung, and Emilio Vedova, exponents of the informal movement, thus highlighting the deferential nature and limitations of the *Biennale* in its interception of incoming new movements. Two years later, however, the *Leone d'Oro* went to Robert Rauschenberg, and Pop Art burst onto the scene at the Venice *Biennale*. Furthermore, the Italian American dealer Leo Castelli's arrival in Venice and his colossal presence on the market, as well as the decline of art critic Giulio Carlo Argan's supremacy meant that things were changing; new artistic movements and new critical positions were emerging.

Within this scenario, a herald of things to come, Drudi became Rosenberg's privileged interlocutor in his relations with Italian artistic and critical circles. It was a bond that would last throughout the years, consolidated by exchanges of visits between the Italian capital and New York and by a frequent correspondence in which they discussed the editorial sphere as well as problems linked to methodology.¹⁰ Furthermore, it was thanks to Drudi and her professional friendship with Fabio Mauri that *The Anxious Object* was published by Bompiani in 1967.

In Italy, Rosenberg was a critic who was known for the witty oxymorons in the titles of his books rather than for his critical ideas. His militancy fascinated Drudi so much so that between the two Bergs of American criticism, Drudi could not help but lean toward "our own Baudelairean *flaneur*" (Ashton, 1980, 615). If an echo of the concepts dearest to Rosenberg had already appeared in the articles published by Drudi in the *Almanacco Bompiani*, the comparison with *The Anxious Object* leaves even more evident traces in her later writings. Their respect was mutual, and Rosenberg held Drudi in high regard. In fact, in one of the numerous letters he addressed to Drudi in 1966, it is evident that their exchange of opinions was one of the inspirations for the preface entitled "Toward an Unanxious Profession," found in the second American edition of the book.

The two essays Rosenberg wrote on de Kooning were influential. In these essays, Rosenberg presents de Kooning as "always extremely conscious of the painting process, endowed with a synchronic and dynamic vision of the history of art, in open opposition to the progressive conception typical of modernism" (Caliandro, 2002, 122). Drudi felt a deep affinity with Rosenberg; his studies in law, his love of theatre, his tense, lucid and captivating prose, and his acknowledged ability to rise above mere artistic analysis to make incursions into the world of literature,

philosophy, and traditions were all factors that brought them together. However, in all probability, the trait that most united them was not only the idea (and the necessity) of an impassioned, partial, political criticism but also *ennui*. The melancholic feeling of unresigned loss did not undermine Rosenberg's lucidity of analysis or his capacity to observe the world of art and the present, even if the art in which he believed was under threat and the extreme consequences of a non-aligned critical position clashed with the opinions in vogue. His intuitions on the passage from the artwork-object to artwork-event and the definition of mobile, active, theatrical art with which *The Anxious Object* concludes are still quoted today to recount the radical changes of the 1960s (Desideri & Matteucci, 2006). The critic demonstrated that he was able to offer a cure for the anxieties of thought because "the uncertain nature of art is not, however, without its advantages. It induces experimentation and continuous questioning. Much of the best art is part of a visual debate about what art is." (Rosenberg, 1975, 10). Drudi seemed to feel at home with this *ennui*. She lived the experience of loss to the full (mourning the eclipsing of painting), using it to understand the reasons for change.

In addition to her work as a correspondent for the American magazine *Craft Horizons*, Drudi tackled the problematic issue of de Kooning, the man who most closely embodied Rosenberg's idea of art as action. With an intrepid writing style, at times an onslaught, at other times a gradual bringing into focus, Drudi wrote her first monograph on the Dutch artist. Completed in April 1970, it was published two years later. At the time, the critical debate in Italy was oriented toward other issues and even a return to painting on both sides of the Atlantic was still embryonic. Working on de Kooning does not, however, have a retro flavor nor does it turn Drudi into a pompous scholar. Meaning is not to be sought in the mere tribute to Rosenberg or in the desire to retrieve Abstract Expressionism from the recent past. It is a critical choice on Drudi's part. She looks back (to the moment when the concept of action comes to occupy a crucial place in art) to discuss the relationships between the generation of Action Painters and the Neo-Dada artists, as she had done in the articles for the *Almanacco Bompiani*. However, in all likelihood, her work on de Kooning expressed her preference for an affective nature: for the anti-dogmatic attitude that the artist adopted and for his relationship with his craft, synthesis of a fruitful mixture of academic studies and artisanship (Drudi, 1972). Drudi also empathized with de Kooning's frank relationship with the key figures of avant-garde art and admired his knowledge of the art of the past. De

Kooning thrived on a kind of art with no geographical or temporal boundaries, and for this reason, he allowed himself to traverse time, unlike someone such as Warhol, who, according to Drudi, renounced “obscure dealings” with the past, “floating in the present, having thrown overboard the ballast of the past and the future” (Drudi, 1977, 38). During these meanderings, which defied any chronological order, the Dutch artist instead left questions open by working within the contradictions and meshes of a never-ending discourse. Taking sides can be harmful, it can extinguish the creative anxiety and the spark that illuminates the slippery but prolific space between existence and art. De Kooning was not the “great American painter,” as Pollock had been hailed by Greenberg in 1948 (Greenberg, 1948, 107). His profile as a transplanted European did not allow him to embody the American myth as well as the pride of an American art.

This plurality of motivations allowed the Dutch artist to best embody Drudi’s thought that criticism was, and would remain, a way of life which found its continuation on the page. Despite existential crises and unresolved issues, Drudi always placed writing at the heart of the matter, with a clear interpretative function. Her frequentation of and familiarity with art infuses her language, but in a courageous direction that is fraught with danger. Drudi wrote: “As with the creative act, in welcoming the work of art, one first faces bewilderment: a going towards” (Drudi, 1991, 3). This is her way of meeting the world of art and experiencing it, and it is the most emblematic expression which synthesizes her style. “Dire il quadro è mal dire” (Drudi, 1984, 12), “to say the painting is to say it badly” wrote Drudi, quoting Beckett’s *Mal vu, mal dit*: a text she said she read every morning. If, as the French philosopher Alain Badiou writes in his reflections on the playwright, to say something well is merely “a reiteration of already established meanings” (Badiou, 2005, 35), a conveyance of meaning via ordinary language, to say something badly, on the other hand, is an expression of essential freedom that defies any attempt to be tamed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we might ask whether these events and Drudi’s approach are able to stand the test of time and whether they still resonate today. In what is now a completely transformed context, I believe that Drudi’s *modus operandi* remains exemplary in order to fully grasp forms of dissent in the current debate and to clearly understand forms of counter-strategies

toward a criticism that acted without getting involved, avoiding any emotional participation. Hers is an interpretative practice that exalts the singularity of the encounter with art, safeguarding its epiphany and making room for doubts rather than certainties, for shadows rather than the blinding clarity of a single truth.

NOTES

1. In 1955, Drudi, with Mario Verdone, translated a key text on German expressionist cinema from French into Italian: *L'Écran démoniaque*. Eisner, Lotte H., 1955. *Lo schermo demoniaco*. Rome: Bianco e nero.
2. Her sister, Lucia Drudi Demby, known as Tatina, was also a translator. One of her best known works is the translation into Italian of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (*La mia Africa*), published in 1959 by Feltrinelli. For the cinema she worked as a screenwriter for Franco Zeffirelli (*Camping*, 1957), Luigi Comencini (*Incompreso*, 1966) and many others. She was also author of two novels, *Donna che dorme*, 1973. Rome: Cooperativa Prove 10 and *La lezione di violino*, 1977, Milan: Adelphi. In 1980 she published a collection of stories about female figures entitled *L'icona: racconti*. Milano: Edizioni delle donne; in 1953 she married the African American writer William Demby.
3. Here I use the adjective "partial" according to Charles Baudelaire's definition of criticism. In a section of an essay by the French poet entitled "What is the good of criticism?" he wrote, "to be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons." Baudelaire, Charles. 1956. *The mirror of art. Critical studies by Charles Baudelaire* (trans: Mayne, Jonathan) New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
4. Drudi, Diaries, undated, most probably early 1970s (Fondo Gabriella Drudi, Archivio Fondazione Toti Scialoja, Rome, from now on AFTS, Rome).
5. Antoine Berman speaks of the "experience of translation" using a direct quotation from *Unterwegs Zu Sprache* (1959) by Martin Heidegger. Berman, Antoine, 1999. *La traduction et la lettre ou L'auberge du lointain*. Paris: Seuille.
6. «Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. It is language in actu (enunciation, positionality) rather than language in situ (*enoncé* or propositionality)». (Bassnett, Susan. 1998. The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies. In *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translations*, ed. Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevere, 123–139. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

7. Compared to his numerous theoretical articles, there are actually few texts on Rosenberg published in Italian, and few critical contributions in which his profile is analyzed. The most recent essay about Rosenberg regarding his relationship with pop culture was written by Riccardo Venturi (Venturi, Riccardo. 2020. Harold Rosenberg. Pop Culture: Critica “Kitsch”. Riga 41: 279–285). In 1972, on the occasion of the *American Action Painters* exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in Rome, Drudi accompanied the substantial iconographic apparatus with a selection of Rosenberg’s writings which she had translated.
8. Harold Rosenberg to Gabriella Drudi, Letters: 2nd and 25th of May 1962 (Fondo Gabriella Drudi AFTS, Rome).
9. The collection of articles *The Tradition of the new* was only published in Italy in 1964 with a translation by Gian Paolo Brega. Rosenberg, Harold, 1964. *La tradizione del nuovo*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
10. Harold Rosenberg to Gabriella Drudi, Letter: 10th of July 1967, (AFTS, Rome).

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