

A CONVERSATION WITH LUISA GARDINI

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I.G. It was in the Rome of the 1950s that you began the work you have continued ever since. Can you tell us about your first steps and the people you met?

L.G. I was studying at the academy in Rome and chose Toti Scialoja as my teacher there. He was my first real contact with contemporary art. There was a small group of us taking his courses (he was teaching set design at the time), some of whom then became very well-known artists. His lectures gave us first-hand information about everything that was happening in Italy and America, all the most important developments. Having Scialoja as a teacher, and soon as a friend, was also a form of self-defence against the academic character of so much abstract painting.

After the academy, the group I belonged to remained in contact with him and his partner Gabriella Drudi. We would gather in Toti's studio, where we talked about art, poetry and music. And he used to take us to the studios of his friends, artists like Afro, Burri and Capogrossi. That was also how we met Twombly, who had just returned to Rome, this time to stay. It must have been in 1957. That was an important meeting too.

I.G. What did you have in common, apart from your love for Scialoja's work and ideas?

L.G. There was great enthusiasm for the idea of the avant-garde and for theatre. Our works obviously circulated inside the group, there was great interest in the exchange of views. We grew up together and drifted apart later.

I.G. What about your early works?

L.G. I was influenced at first by work derived from Dada and the use of found objects. Working quickly and instinctively, I produced a large quantity of sculptures, few of which have survived, in the 1960s and 1970s. These were assemblages, associations of ideas, objects I found close to hand, even pieces of bread, and put next to or on top of one another. My canvases instead consisted of large pieces of writing understood as signs, enlargements of writing that I could have done in an exercise book.

I.G. How did you see this writing and what attracted you to the word?

L.G. When I was about five, I imitated the writings of adults, as many children do. I filled pages and pages of exercise books with scribble. It was a way to enter their world, an unknown place for me. Writing helped me in the rapid creation of signs and introduced me to automatism. I think that mine is a drawing-sign. I write instead of drawing and draw instead of writing. The incomprehensibility of my writing perhaps encloses the freedom of an intimate feeling that cannot be deciphered from the outside. I am interested in scribble, the quick sign, immediate action. Rossini and jazz improvisation have been important points of reference for me. Music accompanies me in my work, among other things, and has occasionally provided titles for works.

The sign represents the most authentic link between all my works. The work was perhaps more intimate in the 1960s, when paper and canvas were my diary. I later dismembered the writing, destroyed the forms and obliterated the letters. The material has also changed a great deal over the years. I used perishable materials at first but then my matter took on a different consistency and became more resilient.

I.G. The compilation of albums in which a subject is addressed in all its possible forms and senses is a practice you have never abandoned. What meaning do you attach to the serial repetition of sign and form?

L.G. I draw and distort an object that I have before me. It was in following Matisse that I began to work on the rapid sign and repetition. That was the start of intense and constant work on albums with a focus on seriality. Distortion and the repetitive gesture became a way of producing the sign, which always plays the leading role. I use shapes and vary them to derive others that can be developed in sculpture. I am interested in the possibility of making signs, of occupying the space I have before me. There is no drive for representation. My interest is rather in the potential of the various forms of objects.

I.G. Superimposition and assemblage appear in many of your collages. How has your choice of materials and composition of elements altered over the years?

L.G. I have no subject before my eyes in the collages, only materials to be assembled. There is no repetition and distortion. Collage is closer to the production of sculptures. I assemble materials on the basis of connections similar to the association of ideas. Some elements have remained constant over the years, like the stratification of words, images and illegible texts or the use of Vinavil. I have often included anatomical shapes and figures too. The early collages, where the image was more evident, were more Surrealist in derivation. Then the original form was changed. The sculptures I am producing now also consist basically of found objects that I assemble. I am attracted by the relationship between form and matter.

I.G. Your drawings, canvases and sculptures are therefore derived from processes of the transformation of sign but also of matter. Can you tell us how you establish dialogue between the different techniques?

L.G. I have always been interested in seeking a sort of "indistinction" between the different techniques. I cannot always separate sculpture from painting in my work. Some works on canvas sometimes give me the impression of being almost sculptures by virtue of their physicality. The collage-sculptures and hyper-material collages can instead be regarded as hanging or leaning objects. I work through the accumulation of matter and its destruction. Shoes, gloves and clothes are taken from life and subjected to whatever happens, covered over with another material or another colour. The principle is basically the same as in my writing: the material becomes indecipherable just as the writing is illegible.

I.G. Photographic images that you have found and collected, often featuring anatomical details, are present in many of your works. What attracts you to particular subjects?

L.G. I have been collecting black and white photographs found by chance for a long time now. I take these random images, pick out details that interest me and enlarge them, thus making them different, no longer telling the story they were supposed to tell. They are often anatomical details such as an eye, a mouth, a hand, an arm or a leg. It is a way for me to freeze the emotions.

I.G. Your application of paint, drawing of signs and moulding of material is quick and instinctive. The gesture is one of placing more than pinning down. Unfinished works are sometimes transformed, taken over by new operations.

L.G. Obliteration can become a new "figure". The elements of the work combine in this case, but what was already there can still be seen. I do not completely eliminate what I did before. I do not create a tabula rasa but leave traces of what lies beneath. My works often go through several stages. It is a way of proceeding by associations. Speed remains a constant in any case. The fact of leaving a work to ripen, not looking at it for some time, enables me to find a new impulse. I work on various projects simultaneously precisely because I want to have the time for detachment and then rediscovery. I have to create periods of waiting and concentration if I am to resume the work later.

I.G. Traces of your lost sculptures sometimes survives in photographs. Here too, you have taken up the works again and transformed them.

L.G. Some of the sculptures were lost because they were very fragile. They practically self-destructed. Predestined to disappear, they were placed at the disposal of time. Some were photographed over the years. At a certain point I felt the need to produce some series of box/sculptures. I call them *Appoggiature*. The photographs inside can be leafed through, and the sculptures thus seems to take on a new life.

I.G. Do you regard any of your roots as still vital today?

L.G. At the academy I planned to write a thesis on Gorky, he used oil like watercolour. His works on paper had the same strength as his canvases. The evident and dramatic sign was already painting. I recognized a spatial affinity between Gorky and Twombly, despite their differences in sign and technique. Then there is De Kooning's speed of execution and invasion of space, and Rauschenberg's use of material. I found everything I was looking for in action painting. I saw it as the possibility of working in a new way and broke free of the rigidity of the academy. The other figures of fundamental importance for me include Dubuffet, an artist I love above all for the continuity between painting and sculpture, Matisse, the "painter-sculptor" Picasso, Burri with his Futurist-derived (multimatter) transformation of material, and Brancusi. All of these are distant roots but ones with which I can still identify.

I.G. What would you indicate as the most interesting aspects of contemporary art?

L.G. Photography, video and installation have undergone complex development and structural transformation in a very short space of time. They have been used in the most disparate ways, crossing a whole variety of boundaries. In my view, however, the theatre can be regarded in particular as the most suitable terrain for the art of today.

I.G. You considered your artistic production in intimate seclusion for many years. Why did you decide not to exhibit your works for so long? What did you feel when you put them on show for the first time?

L.G. It is not easy to explain why. The decision not to exhibit was characteristic of the group formed around Scialoja, perhaps it was out of a misunderstood sense of modesty or perhaps, to use a concept formulated by Gabriella Drudi, I was unduly led by anxiety for perfection. In any case, it was due to a combination of personal needs. Scialoja "forced" me to hold my first solo show in 1981 at the Grafica dei Greci in Rome. I exhibited works I had already produced on that occasion and finally realized what physical detachment from one's work means after years of solitude and work in the studio.

I.G. You have now had to dig up the past and reconsider your work for this monographic study.

L.G. There has been a change in my focus on work. It is difficult for me to say anymore than that.