

## Chiara Bersani

Deserters

27.10.2023—

7.1.2024

### Chiara Bersani. Re-signifying the body

Chiara Bersani is a performer, interpreter, director, and choreographer with a decades-long career behind her. The one at Kunsthaus Baselland is the first time her practice extends to include the permanence of visual and sound works in the exhibition space, remaining beyond the end of the performative intervention.

The exhibition is as a multimedia device made up of various interrelated parts. This implies the performance staged on the large carpet designed by the artist cannot exist without the carpet itself and the accompanying sound environment, realized with the composer Lemmo. Added to these elements are a series of drawings depicting non-conforming bodies, embedded in the woven surfaces hanging from the walls.

The hand-knotted Nepalese carpet—made in collaboration with CC-tapis—graphically elaborates the performance narrative: the intertwining of bodies and plant shoots directly refers to the performers' actions, while the long fringes of yarn, placed along the four sides of the carpet, invade the environment, beckoning to the audience to enter the stage space. At the same time, the series of wall-mounted works—where the woven surfaces are disproportionately larger than the drawings they host—refers to the presence of real bodies on stage, ideally taking their place when they are absent.

Chiara Bersani's creations always emerge in dialogue with the spaces that host them, and are principally addressed to an audience close to the scene. In addition to constituting a new challenge for the author—a new field of action beyond that of the stage—the carpet, the sound elements, and most of all the drawings/objects made for this occasion are a way of staying true to the principle of proximity even in the absence of actual bodies defining the scene. Specifically, *Deserters* exhibits a set of disabled bodies—in the case of MuttENZ/Basle, the artist's body and that of two other non-professional performers (Anna Maria Pes and Chiara Pintus)—called upon to leave a mark of their passage on the large carpet that includes and figuratively represents them. The gestures and moans generated by this encounter undermine stereotypes related to the intimate, identity, and sexual spheres, ones which

frequently affect people with disabilities, attributing political value to the presence of the bodies on the stage—the vulnerable body representing all existing bodies.

The title of the exhibition draws on the words of Virginia Woolf in her essay "On Being Ill" (1926). In illness, the essay reads, "we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters."

Indeed, the artist's invitation is to abandon the upright position, in keeping with a self-styled state of health and conformity, and to adopt an alternative communal perspective.

Drawing on the language of philosopher Judith Butler, we might say that Chiara Bersani's work "re-signifies" the notions of identity and subject through the common lever of vulnerability (see *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 2016). Through the acceptance of the self as a vulnerable and unidentifiable entity—that is, one lacking any fixed identity—*Deserters* deconstructs the concept of subjectivity by referring it—potentially—to the sole context of a scene inhabited by others. To the subject's own exposure to alternative forms of otherness.

The exposure of vulnerable bodies and their meeting on stage challenges the common logic of identity by constituting a form of resistance to social exclusion, segregation, and ableism. According to Chiara Bersani, staging the body means going beyond the simple critique of power mechanisms in order to recognize the interdependence and vulnerability of life itself, taking on the new responsibilities that each opening entails.

*Deserters* thus focuses on the issue of vulnerability viewed equally as a subjective, identity dimension and also as a shared bodily condition. Vulnerability is configured as a fundamental paradigm capable of redrawing the underlying principles of personal and political discourse. The disabled body, encountered in a state of proximity and exchange, opens up to the resignification of identities by amplifying the sense of participation.

For years, Chiara Bersani has been exploring a collective practice aimed at training groups of performers, called upon to participate in a constant communicative flux, fed by the presence of the bodies themselves in space. *Deserters*—as already experienced in the play *Sottobosco*, one of the artist's latest creations—focuses particularly on the disabled body, embracing and re-signifying it through a vibrant score. The artist "performs" her own nonconforming body by seeking an alliance of sharing and change, in collaboration with other bodies on stage and the audience.

*Deserters* by Chiara Bersani thus explores with a new relational practice by testifying to the political

value of the disabled body through the unraveling and sharing of intimate gestures and sounds. Beyond the risk of metaphor already denounced by Susan Sontag in the late 1970s (see *Illness as Metaphor*, 1978), Chiara Bersani's work is a liberation from the cascade of rhetorical appropriations that often afflict the universe of disability in order to confront us with the transformative power of vulnerability.

One day Chiara sent me a quote from the American writer Harriet McBride Johnson, taken from an article in the New York Times: "Since my backbone found its own natural shape, I've been entirely comfortable in my skin." What she later wrote to me I quote here unedited:

"Harriet spoke about when she finally stopped wearing the orthopedic brace and her body settled down, following its own natural course. She spoke about her skeleton's desire to pursue another form. One not contemplated; to be rejected or modified. A form so disruptive that as soon as you loosen your grasp on it, it explodes. And she talked about how that made her feel. In that sentence, there were a body forced to adapt to structures, ones aimed at imposing a form, and a body free to readjust by finding balance within its distortions.

Mountains  
Canyons  
Cliffs

Which of these two is a beautiful body?  
Can they converse?  
Is there a parameter of desirability that they share?  
What if the body you describe to me as desirable does not correspond to the one I desire to have?  
Can I desire a crooked shape?  
When I took off my brace at the age of 20, I started making love. Before that, there had been a wall between me and the world." (Lorenzo Giusti)

Kunsthaus Baselland  
St. Jakob-Strasse 170  
CH-4132 Muttenz/Basel  
+41 (0)61 312 8388  
kunsthhausbaselland.ch  
@kunsthhausbaselland

Opening Hours  
Tuesday to Sunday  
11 am – 5 pm

Many thanks to the Kunsthhaus Baselland's partners, the exhibition sponsors, and our supporters who wish to remain anonymous.

**GAMEC**

italianCouncil  
Bringing our Contemporary Art to the world

**BASEL**   
**LANDSCHAFT** 

AMT FÜR KULTUR

 Gemeinde  
Muttenz **burck  
hardt**

 Direzione Generale  
Creatività Contemporanea