

KUNSTHAUSBASELAND

Chiara Bersani

Deserters

27.10.2023—

7.1.2024

“I needed that space amid the shapes and visitors to be occupied by bridges, lines, and roads.”

Chiara Bersani in conversation with Ines Goldbach

IG: I'd like to start with a topic that seems to me to be essential with regard to the exhibition here in Basel: on the basis of a beautiful drawing of yours that places the body and movements at the center, you made a huge fringed carpet for the exhibition here at the Kunsthhaus. Measuring about eight meters by eight, the long fringes almost reach the space where the audience is and will be.

Talking together and looking at various sketches and drawings, some of them on small-sized sheets, I get the feeling that drawing and body movement are like a poetic pendulum movement for you, whereby both things are accomplished not one after the other but in parallel. Do you think this is true? Is drawing functional for you in terms of devising a concept or an idea, for a performance you are working on, or is it more of an image derived from them?

CB: Like writing, I have always experienced drawing as a private gesture. It was what I could do at home to stoke the embers, so as to then generate movement in bodies.

When I guide bodies, whether professional ones or not, I never suggest movements but work to create imagery and stimulate techniques that then allow performers to blossom into a more or less natural movement, one that belongs to them. One that comes from their universe, from their imagination. So to create imagery, you need to create images. Writing, drawing, and keeping everything secret, and then letting the bodies translate: this has always been my path.

I recently began to think these other languages might be coupled with performance actions instead. Words were involved, and now it's time for drawings. It is like a declaration, putting on display what has in fact always happened: bodies move following lines, imagery, and stories. Usually all this remains hidden, but now it takes its own space. The main space, I might say.

IG: I really like the way you talk about creating embers with images, a smoldering base, and then creating other images that can burst into flames, movements. When I think of the flame-red carpet you made for

your exhibition here at the Kunsthhaus and the drawing on which it is based, which abstractly shows three physically disabled performers, I think of that. I think it's also an image that, by virtue of its strength, is able to inhabit the room even after the performance is over. It can create movements that will further be inscribed in it through the action of the bodies, and that in turn will remain as an image that can enter the mind and body of the viewer. Perhaps this also answers the question of what remains after the performance: these images of movements, your hand, your thoughts, your drawing, your performance...

CB: I began working on the carpet design—prompted by a deep-seated anger—thinking how bodies dissonant from the norm have no collective history to speak of their past. They don't have legends, myths, heroes and heroines. They have no narratives about what the lives of those who came before them were like if not a few things from the last century.

I started drawing the carpet with the same urgency with which spirits might be summoned. I wanted to evoke these ancestors of mine, these millennia-old bodies that have never been told. And I wanted to say that among them there were undoubtedly heroes and wizards, witches and sorceresses, priestesses and intellectuals... and if they didn't make it, it's only because their potential was trampled on.

Thus, my carpet is supposed to be a place of return for all the bodies that have crossed the Earth without enjoying it. A place for their pleasure, for their wellbeing. My carpet belongs to such spirits. And we performers, living bodies in this time, as guardians of their space, heiresses of their breath, must take care of the time and space we dedicate to them.

So, yes. Everything flows between the woven lines, those drawn and those embodied by our own soft bodies. Times are blurred, as are geological eras, traces are left behind and picked up.

IG: Talking of the carpet, the idea emerged that visitors might be invited to sit or even lie down on it—without shoes—to experience the same bodily sensation, to adopt the same posture as the performers and feel comfortable in different positions. A range of yarns were chosen and you produced several different drawings. You also wanted to offer blind people the opportunity to experience this work. I think these reflections bring a totally new approach to the exhibition in general, as it can be perceived and experienced through multiple senses: touch, hearing, and especially awareness of our own bodies. Can you tell us a little bit about this?

CB: Everything is about the body, always, even when

we try to kid ourselves that it isn't. We know through the body, we study through the body, we create through the body... There is no human experience that does not pass through the body. I have always worked on the responsibility viewers have toward the work, whether they are seated or moving audiences. People who go to see a work must take responsibility for being there, in that space, with their bodies, never still and never neutral, ready to fill the space with information and change the course of events through the mere act of observing.

In my work, I wish to make this explicit: reminding each person that it is a private choice, one for which s/he will be called upon to take responsibility: whether to look from the side or from the center, with touch or without, in proximity or solitude, in a vertical or horizontal posture, etc.

As for the blind or visually impaired audience, I know that there are various art accessibility services even for those who do not use sight as their primary sense, but I want my work to be written in a language that I can communicate in myself down to the last detail. The text written by Camilla Guarino in collaboration with Giuseppe Comuniello to narrate the carpet is the result of dialogues between us, one of stories, of words chosen and then discarded, of paths proposed, modified, and then rewritten. Making a work accessible is a process that cannot and should not allow itself to slip into mere description, as no one enjoys a work in "neutral" terms: we are all accompanied by the vision of those who created it and then, once inside it, we move and modify it with our own presence. But the contours must be those of the creator.

To make a work accessible doesn't mean working only for the blind or visually impaired audience, but creating an additional gateway that may be passed through by anyone, that may simply constitute another way, an option.

Again, the demand is for the user to take responsibility for how the work is experienced.

IG: You mainly work, or have done in the past, as the sole interpreter of your performances. For this show you included two female performers. How did you identify and choose these performers? How does your performance practice change with this interaction with other performers and their bodies? Both performers are non-professionals. How important is improvisation in general to you during your performances? I imagine that—as in this case—working with non-professionals, not seeing them and being with them for a long time besides rehearsals requires a great openness and willingness on your part to embrace improvisation.

CB: Every creation has a different story to it. In this case, the performers are people I have known for a

long time and with whom I had already shared studio space and opinions. When I found myself choosing the cast for the work, I started from what I had so as to try and focus on what was missing in the construction of the show.

What was clear to me were the balances between the two extremes: the form on the one hand, and the bodies which "visit" that form on the other. Form is embodied here by the carpet, the sound, and the drawings. The bodies of the visitors are that unpredictable variable whose approach, however, we know only in broad terms: they will enter the place and observe the form.

But what happens in the space between the form and the visitors? What is there in that void, in that distance? Did I want the performers to be form or something else?

IG: You're dealing with a very important theme: the responsibility we have when we move through space, be it alone or with others, towards ourselves and others. Your work is always about this responsibility, whether in your drawings, texts, or sound, but also in the way we approach each other. At the same time, you open up a very large but also an intimate, private space for others to enter, through the experiences you share: experiences of vulnerability, but also of tenderness and sexuality. An experience with a disabled body is potentially an issue for everyone, because our bodies are never the same throughout life: they change, they can become stronger or weaker—while always remaining political bodies within society. Direct experience I think is essential, especially in the context of a performance where the audience is directly present and called upon not to wander off but to spend time with you, with your fellow travelers, transforming them from spectators to participants. Is that why the language of performance is so important to you?

CB: In my work, I deal with issues many people feel distant from, ones they think do not affect them. But they're wrong because disability is an issue that concerns anyone with a body, and the same goes for desire and pleasure.

So I needed that space between the forms and the visitors to be occupied by bridges, lines, and roads. I needed it to be a space devoted to reducing distances.

The authoritativeness of three professional performers would not have bridged that gap. They would have been form in their own right, perhaps seductive and engaging form, but the artistry of the skilled body generates the same distance as a beautiful painting does.

While compromising the body if they so wished, viewers would have been left to wallow in the certainty of cautionary distance: the form on the one

hand and their own reality on the other. The questions raised on one side, their own bodies on the other. But if the performers vibrate with all the emotion of those who really experience that event for the first time, if I lay down the weapons of technique with them so as to stand on the shores of vulnerability, if the onlookers read in the performers' eyes something that evokes within them that same sense of being ill-at-ease as their own, due to their not knowing quite what's about to happen, then perhaps the distances can be shortened; the passage becomes more fluid; those bodies communicate by acknowledging themselves and, by doing so, the forms become less sharp and distant, along with all the questions they entail.

IG: During the award speech for the Swiss Performance Art Award 2023 here at Kunsthaus Baselland, the participants were asked if there was a gesture, a thought, a color, a phrase, a movement, a theme, or a sound that they would like the audience to remember—like a kind of echo of the performance itself that appears, takes place and then disappears. What kind of echo or resonance do you dream of your audience remembering, even over time?

CB: I hope people are left with a thought of pleasure, be it felt or seen, not too identifiable, perhaps simply sensed or evoked. Pleasure bound up in all its mystery.

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