

Bodywork: Discomfort and Existence

Pina Bausch, Shannon Cartier Lucy, Jordan Casteel, Aaron Garber-Maikovska, Sayre Gomez, Johannes Kahrs, Bruce Nauman, Carol Rama, Kathleen Ryan, Kaari Upson

The body is a means of communicating to oneself and to others. Life starts inside a body and ends with it. Any new situation that calls into question conventional standards and uses of this powerful perceptual tool can generate different experiences and new awareness, perhaps even a sense of discomfort, physical as well as mental. The exhibition *Bodywork: Discomfort and Existence* investigates these aspects by bringing together artists from mixed backgrounds who have reflected on the idea of physicality at different periods of time and social context. It is impossible to calculate the loss of hugs, handshakes and physical proximity over the past few months, and research is still underway to estimate economic and existential implications of the pandemic and its distorted physical interaction, artists have been addressing these issues prior to this moment in time. The current turmoil can only amplify the ideas and reflections that have already come to life in their work.

Thus, *Bodywork: Discomfort and Existence* gathers recent works by artists such as Shannon Cartier Lucy, Jordan Casteel, Aaron Garber-Maikovska, Sayre Gomez, Johannes Kahrs, Kathleen Ryan and Kaari Upson, with the historical works of figures such as Bruce Nauman, Carol Rama and the choreographer Pina Bausch, that were conceived in a completely different context between the late thirties and early eighties.

Just like a mosaic composed of several individual pieces, the historical works by Carol Rama, characterized by anatomical fragments full of eroticism, the video extract of a choreography by Pina Bausch, and the single-channel videos of Bruce Nauman's solo performances, are interwoven across the gallery rooms, where they have an intimate conversation with the most recent art works. The works not only interact with each other but also to the interior of the exhibition space. It is useful to remember, the gallery was formerly a private residence and, despite its elegant and sumptuous architectural details, was conceived for a domestic and intimate dimension. In such an environment, the widespread layout of the works by Nauman, Bausch and Rama, rather than a conceptual backdrop for the exhibition narrative, emphasizes how the experience of the body, its changes and its decomposition are all essential to investigate our place in this world, understand ourselves and the times we live in.

Since the Sixties, Bruce Nauman (Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1941) - one of the most radical and

important living artists - has been obsessed with the exploration of the human condition and psyche through the physical perception of the body. In his work, the body is more than an instrument, it is almost a prop to be used in all its forms and possibilities. For Nauman, the human experience emerges within the tension between our psyche and perception of time and space. The six black and white videos exhibited were all shot by the artist in his studio, with only the presence of the camera. It is precisely the repetition of self-reflective and very simple activities - such as measuring space with his own movements (*Wall/Floor Positions*, 1968), turning around himself (*Revolving Upside Down*, 1968), or rebounding into a corner (*Bouncing in the Corner, N. 1*, 1968) - that generates self-awareness and, therefore, knowledge. Pina Bausch (Solinge, 1940 - Wuppertal, 2009) also maintained that the repetition of the same action could generate a whole new feeling in the dancer as well as in the spectator. Starting in the late seventies, the method by which the German choreographer conceived her ballets, the so-called *Tanztheater*, was able to demolish any existing convention by selecting dancers not only for their physical qualities and abilities but also for their personal backgrounds, traumas and experiences. The gestures and movements of the choreographies are the synthesis of an exhausting mission of self-exploration that takes shape in the choral and public dimension of the scene. The film *Un jour Pina a demandé* by the artist and director Chantal Ackerman (Brussels, 1950 - Paris, 2015), describes precisely this journey, following Bausch and her corps de ballet between rehearsals and performances during a five-week tour around Milan, Venice and Avignon. Without ever showing the scene in full, the film focuses on close-ups, as if to penetrate the heart of Bausch's dance. The short excerpt on display presents the relationship between one female body and one male body that seem to join together and quickly repel each other. The work prevents the recognition of traditional hierarchical male-female relationships and explores a new and more ambiguous idea of gender interaction, including seduction, the exercise of power, affection and violence.

The body as subject and object is also at the centre of Aaron Garber-Maikovska's oeuvre (Washington DC, 1978). Through a practice that combines performance and dance, his abstract paintings originate from body's movements, gestures and proportions, later translated into a personal and colourful non-verbal alphabet that conceptually

recall that of the mandala's practice or the automatic writing – although, in this case, the artist is fully aware of the process. The body as intended by Garber-Maiakovska is not only a tool to relate to the world around us but also the mirror of an inner, emotional and spiritual dimension. In the large canvas on display (*TBT*, 2021) the artist, with a pictorial language that seemingly derives from Abstract Expressionism, records a sequence of his gestures linked to a specific environment and its objects, making the artwork a cosmological representation. Always pursuing an idea of improvisation, freedom and resistance, Garber-Maiakovska's performances often take the form of guerrilla actions and take place in private as much as in public spaces, the latter associated with a neoliberal and capitalist notion, such as a parking lot or a chain of restaurants.

The free use of her own body combined with that of other people leads to a reflection on identity in the work of American artist Kaari Upson (San Bernardino, California, 1972). The subjectivity in Upson's work is non-linear and absolutely flexible: in her videos, installations, and performances, the artist explores the idea of psychological splitting, staging disorienting situations that cause turmoil, such as in *There is No Such Thing As Outside* (2017-19), presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019. The same applies for the sculptures made in 2021 titled *Oma (R.Y.B)* and *Grandma (R.Y.B.)*. The two half-busts - a genre, that of the half-bust, traditionally associated with official portraiture and the idea of power - are made of MDF covered with several layers of acrylic and oil paint. The layering, however, is not only textural but also conceptual: the figure portrayed is in fact the result of the combination of the artist's face with that of other women: her mother, her grandmother and an alter ego friend, meaning that it is only through the union and the "reflection" with others that our truest self can emerge.

The idea that the experience of the self goes through the experience of others, communities and social phenomena is at the core of the work of other artists featured in the exhibition such as Jordan Casteel (Denver, 1989) and Sayre Gomez (Chicago, 1982). Before devoting herself to painting, when she was in college Jordan Casteel studied anthropology and sociology, those disciplines that in fact investigate man and his

behaviour within society. It is no coincidence that her paintings take inspiration from and represent the relationship with people who belong to her community and her daily life, such as the inhabitants of the Harlem neighbourhood where the artist lives. Casteel paints the subjects of her portraits from her own photographs and the scenes of the paintings are never the result of a *mise-en-scène*: the protagonists ordinarily pose within their natural environments, and the pictures are the result of a personal relationship and a human exchange. The canvas thus shows a moment of sharing and proximity which is also reflected in her nearly life-size paintings. The majestic work titled *Royal* (2020) belongs to the *Subway series* and presents a great deal of life: the spontaneity of a mother holding her little girl on her knees, captured in a hieratic and frontal pose typical of classical sculpture and official portraiture, makes the painting a universal image, creating a sense of intimacy and empathy. Contrary to Casteel, Sayre Gomez describes the urban social context through the absence of human figures, or rather through the signs and traces human beings leave in their environments. In his work, Gomez employs hyperrealism techniques often used for cinematic or commercial purposes such as *trompe l'oeil*, stencil or airbrushing, making it difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction. Also known as *X-Scapes*, his canvases portray the urban landscape of Los Angeles through seemingly insignificant details, such as street signs, advertising posters, graffiti or tags. The small painting displayed, *Untitled* (2021) belongs to a series in which Gomez meticulously reproduces details of what appear to be doors, windows, gates or lockers. By including any signs of wear, through time and use, as well as customization of the surfaces by stickers, writings, or advertising of all sorts, Gomez restores to us an image of alienated society, stuck between individual freedom and artificiality.

The use of objects to symbolically represent life and, on the contrary, reducing the body as an object to dissect and observe, are two different processes explored respectively by Kathleen Ryan (Santa Monica, California, 1984) and Johannes Kahrs (Bremen, 1965). A student of Charles Ray from whom she learned how to use and choose materials for their value and mental load, Ryan creates sculptures with found and specifically made objects, joined together for their ability to

generate opposing forces and trajectories. The sculpture *Bad Lemon (Baroque)* (2020), for example, made of synthetic materials, still appears to be organic, natural and fragile. Formed by hundreds of industrial semiprecious stones, in a wide variety of gems, shapes and colors, the work reproduces the decaying surface of a lemon, something far from perfect. Like a modern *vanitas*, *Bad Lemon (Baroque)* associates several concepts related to the symbolism of lemon - allegory of purity and resilience ('when life gives you lemons, make lemonade') but also of decadence (in American slang a broken car is called a lemon) - to the infinite interpretations of gems' properties, thus creating a complex allegory of the cycle of life. Similar to the repertoire of arts and crafts objects collected by Ryan, Johannes Kahrs' paintings originate from images taken from advertising and media, popular culture and historical documentation. The subjects of his works, extrapolated from their original context and deprived of their initial connotation, are rather anonymous bodies, objectified under a magnifying glass that scrutinizes them with a certain fetishism. In both paintings on display, *Untitled (dead man)* (2007) and *Untitled (pink nude)* (2013), the human face is cut off and the closeup composition makes the viewer a voyeur of a scene hard to classify.

The representation of the body as an oneiric subject characterized the paintings of Shannon Cartier Lucy (Nashville, Tennessee, 1977) and Carol Rama (Turin, 1918-2015). Raised in an unconventional context with a schizophrenic father, Cartier Lucy paints seemingly ordinary and familiar scenes in a realistic style - as a dancer performing a split (*Living Room*, 2019) or a woman in a domestic setting (*The Humble Woman*, 2021) - that also appear alienating for their surreal details, poses and composition. The bodies are faceless and their actions are set in situations violent and intriguing at the same time, such as the man's foot resting on the ballerina's back or the woman's rigid and hypertensive hands, whose move resemble an epileptic fit rather than a humble gesture. Similarly, Carol Rama's works are disturbing for their exploration of the human body and its emotional and sensual charge. Amputated, dissected, dismantled, reduced to prostheses, associated with a repertoire of objects attributable to the artist's mother (furs, containment beds, nail polish and lipsticks), the body, especially the female one, is represented by

Rama with extreme audacity and ahead of her time. Since the forties, her work shows the most primordial impulses and challenges conventional gender roles, suggesting a liberating vision that is still relevant today. Now more than ever, the view of Carol Rama's works, and those of the other artists on display, urges us to rethink the way we see ourselves and the world: ultimately, even a foot can be beautiful and 'kissable'.

Roberta Tenconi, Curator
Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan