



FURLA SERIES

ANDREA BOWERS. *Moving in Space without Asking Permission*

Critical Essay by Bruna Roccasalva

Andrea Bowers's first solo show in an Italian institution, *Moving in Space without Asking Permission* offers an immersive experience within the work of the artist and her commitment to the struggle for gender equality and women's emancipation.

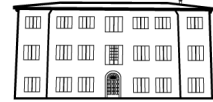
Andrea Bowers is an American artist and activist whose research combines aesthetic practices and political engagement from a feminist perspective. For almost thirty years, the artist has investigated fundamental issues such as gender equality, women's and workers' rights, immigration, and environmentalism through a formal approach connoted by a strong visual impact. She makes use of a variety of media, from drawing to video to neon installations, rendering complex topics through an accessible and direct vocabulary.

The exhibition *Moving in Space without Asking Permission* is part of a broader reflection on feminism that Bowers has been developing for some time, and focuses in particular on the relationship between feminism and bodily autonomy, building on issues from the present and the past.

Each of Bowers's projects begins with in-depth research into the context in which she operates and an encounter with its social fabric. In this case, *Moving in Space without Asking Permission* takes its starting point from the artist's confrontation with some of today's Italian feminist experiences, in particular the work of the philosopher and activist Alessandra Chiricosta, who studies and teaches the practice of martial arts as a form of bodily self-awareness, thus offering a break with gender stereotypes.

The neon sign *Another Kind of Strength* (after Alessandra Chiricosta's book "Un altro genere di forza. Costruzione sociale e filosofica della debolezza del corpo femminile e del mito della forza virile", 2019) (2022), which opens the exhibition, was created precisely in reference to the title of a book by Chiricosta, *Un altro genere di forza*, in which the author deconstructs the traditional concept identified exclusively as "masculine strength" in dichotomous opposition to "feminine weakness," and highlights the possibility of other forms in which strength may be conceived and expressed, overcoming the nexus between "gender" and "strength."

This statement also serves as an introduction to the new video production, *In the Ballroom – Overcoming the Myth of Masculine Force* (2022) which features Chiricosta herself. The work is part of a series of key documentary videos in Bowers's production, in which the artist gives voice and visibility to contemporary activist figures and protest movements. *In the Ballroom – Overcoming the Myth of Masculine Force* documents a "feminist combative self-awareness" class given by Alessandra Chiricosta to a group of female students in the GAM spaces. This practice was created with the goal of removing sociocultural blocks from the body and mind that prevent female subjectivities from expressing their combative and assertive potential. Androcentric and patriarchal cultures have long defined women as "the weaker sex," thus unable not only to defend themselves but to act completely and fulfil themselves if not within the limits imposed by the superiority of masculine strength. However, this weakness is not a natural element but the result of cultural



conditioning that not only limits the expressive potential of those who do not belong to the categories of the stronger, but also imprisons that very strength in a logic of eternal overpowering.

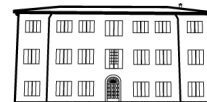
In the video, shot meaningfully inside the sumptuous ballroom of Villa Reale, Chiricosta and the students are engaged in a “dance” that no longer has anything to do with the type once housed in those spaces: like sensitive warriors or amazons of the new millennium, these women invite us to reconsider the very concept of strength, which is not only destruction and overpowering, but can also be a balanced mixture of care and combat, assertiveness and empathy, effectiveness and sensitivity. *In the Ballroom – Overcoming the Myth of Masculine Force* also emphasizes how important it is—in an era such as our own in which the issue of gender violence is finally considered a political and cultural problem—to develop practices and tools that can investigate this issue in depth, challenging the common sense underpinning stereotypes and prejudices that lead us to perceive as “natural” conditions that are in fact only cultural constructs.

Visitors enter the room housing the video by passing through the striking environmental installation *Political Ribbons* (Fondazione Furla / GAM Milan), (2022): hundreds of colorful satin ribbons, on which slogans used in protest demonstrations are silkscreened, completely cover the walls of the room. Inspired by early 20th-century political graphics and the ribbons used by Suffragists in nonviolent protests, Andrea Bowers’s *Political Ribbons* reactivates these materials from the past while urging us to take action: visitors are invited to take these ribbons with them and display them in solidarity with the struggle for women’s rights and gender equality. First presented in 2016, the work has been displayed in various institutions, with different slogans each time, reflecting the specificity of each context and project.

Slogans come back with a vengeance in the major installation *Feminist Fans* (2022) in which 158 colorful fighting fans—the same ones used by Chiricosta and her students in the video—cover the floor of the central hall. As with the ribbons, an object customarily considered prissy and “feminine” becomes a symbol of self-assertion and an instrument of protest. “Trust Women,” “Mother Earth is coming for you,” “Trans is Beautiful,” “The personal is political”: these and other slogans follow on from one another, forming a sort of carpet in which ornamental motifs are replaced by words, whereas in the next room, the luminous sign *Fight Like a Girl* (2021), made out of recycled cardboard silhouettes and LED lights, reiterates and reinforces that invitation to believe in that other kind of strength which opens the exhibition.

A series of paintings created using recycled cardboard collage testifies to the way Bowers relates to archive materials and incorporates them within her own work. The images represented on these cardboards, some monumental and some more intimate in size, come from the very iconographic materials collected by the artist over the course of her research, particularly from the history of political graphics: Bowers reinterprets and reworks these images, transforming them into icons of contemporary feminist issues.

In the exhibition, key works from the artist’s past production, such as *Sisters be Strong* (2013), *Suffragette as a Puta Feminista* (Originally a “Votes for Women” postcard from the Ann Lewis Women’s Suffrage Collection, 1905-1910), (2018) or *Tell Somebody It Happened, the God of the Sea is a Sexual Harasser* (Originally from “The Faerie Queene,” Book III, Part VII, illustrated by Walter Crane, 1895-1897), (2018), are accompanied by *Total Bodily Autonomy*, (Originally from a



poster for the costume ball “Femminismo” held on March 3rd, 1911 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, illustrated by Riccardo Salvadori, 1911, Museo Nazionale Collezione Salce, Treviso), (2022): a new painting conceived especially for this project. The cartoon is inspired by a 1911 Italian poster, illustrated by Riccardo Salvadori, announcing “Femminismo” a costume ball held at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala. Andrea Bowers portrays the same woman in the original poster depicted in underwear while wearing men’s pants and, in restoring contemporaneity to that image that was already then a symbol of emancipation and freedom, pays tribute to all those female figures who fought to change women’s status in Italy throughout the last century.

Archive materials have always played a central role in Bowers’s practice: not only do they become sources from which she draws inspiration for her work, but they are sometimes put on display alongside the artist’s own works, as in the case of this exhibition. Indeed, the exhibition comes to a close with **various materials from the archives of the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, the Fondazione Anna Kuliscioff and the Unione Femminile Nazionale (National Women’s Union)**. These include pamphlets, books, newspapers, magazines, and iconographic material dating from between the second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, covering central themes of the women’s debate such as the right to vote, with key female figures such as Anna Kuliscioff, Anna Maria Mozzoni, and Leda Rafanelli, and accounts of early organized movements such as the Italian National Women’s Union and the Socialist Party.

Bowers’s choice to exhibit these documents was made in response to the specific nature of the GAM exhibition context: a museum whose collection refers to the historical period around the turn of the 20th century, when the women’s emancipation movement in Italy was in its infancy. The presence of these materials on display offers a different image of women than the “conventional” one represented in GAM collection, thus providing a more nuanced portrait of that period, and testifying how many of the ideas that arose then remain radical and relevant to this day.

Through a show that combines iconic works and ambitious new productions that, among other things, testify to the artist’s great versatility, *Moving in Space without Asking Permission* restores the strength of a work capable of shifting between very different times of fruition, as short as the slogan that may be understood at a glance, or conversely as dilated as the video that requires a much longer attention span. Highlighting the importance of research in which political activism and artistic practice are inextricably linked, the exhibition tells how the aesthetic power of art can convey socially relevant messages, shake consciences and raise awareness of the most pressing issues.