



**Lorenza Böttner**

## **REQUIEM FOR THE NORM**

The work of Lorenza Böttner (Punta Arenas, Chile, 1959 –Munich, Germany, 1994) is one of the sharpest criticisms against the processes of disability, desexualisation, internment and invisibilisation to which transgender and functionally diverse bodies are subjected. Through photography, painting and performance, it constitutes an ode to bodily and gender dissent.

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Overlooked by the dominant historiography of art until relatively recently, the work of Lorenza Böttner—an artist who painted with her mouth and feet, and who used photography, drawing, dance, installation and performance as means of aesthetic expression—emerges today as an indispensable contribution to the criticism of bodily and gender normalisation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exercises of resistance to a medical and exoticising gaze that reduces the functionally diverse or trans body to the status of specimen or object, her works are characterised not only by the use of self-fiction, the dissident imitation of visual styles from the history of art and bodily experimentation, but also by criticism of the disciplinary divide between genders, between painting, dance, performance and photography, between masculine and feminine, between object and subject, between active and passive, and between valid and invalid. This exhibition, which brings together more than one hundred works, is the first international retrospective dedicated to the artist.

In what frame of representation can a body make itself visible as human? Who has the right to represent? Who is the represented? Can an image grant or deny a body political agency? How can a body construct an image to become a political subject? Is there any aesthetic difference between an image made with the hand and another made with the foot, or does this difference lie in a power relationship? These are some of the questions that Lorenza Böttner's visual and performative work poses.

## THE ART OF LIVING

It is crucial to start with her biography, understood as a vitalist manifesto, because the most persistent practice in Lorenza's work is a blurring of the distinction between life and art.

Lorenza Böttner was born on 6 March 1959 in Punta Arenas, Chile, into a family of German migrants. Assigned male at birth, she was recorded in the Chilean register as Ernst Lorenz Böttner Oeding. At the age of eight, Ernst Lorenz suffered a severe electric shock while climbing an electricity pylon in an attempt to get hold of a bird's nest. For several days after the accident, it was touch and go as to whether he would live or die. After the amputation of both his arms, Ernst underwent a long, painful process of hospitalisation, during which he unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide. That relationship between pain and death, which subsequently transmuted into hedonism and the exaltation of life, meant that her own body would become one of her main artworks: a vulnerable, neo-baroque monument to life.

In 1969, his mother took him to Germany so that he could have access to specialised therapies. An armless body, Ernst Lorenz was first institutionalised as a disabled person in the Heidelberg Rehabilitation Centre and then educated at the Lichtenau Orthopaedic Rehabilitation Clinic alongside the so-called “thalidomide children”. Prescribed to pregnant women as a sedative between 1957 and 1963, the thalidomide-based drug (marketed under the trade name ‘Contergan’ in Germany) caused hundreds of thousands of babies to be born with modified limbs. The impact that this drug had in Germany led not only to the establishment of specialised learning centres, but also to the emergence of the “Contergan child” as a pop image of the 1960s. “The greatest contemporary composer is the Contergan child” declared Joseph Beuys in his 1966 performance entitled *Infiltration Homogen für Konzertflügel, der große Komponist der Gegenwart ist das Contergankind* (Infiltration Homogeneous for grand piano [...]), which would later become a reference for Lorenza. The “Contergan children” expression, by which the generation of children affected by the drug

became known, indicated that the process of bodily modification caused by this drug meant that they were considered neither human nor children of their mothers. Spectacularised as invalids and deformed individuals, the “thalidomide children” were the symbolic bodies of a pharmaco-pornographic capitalist transformation taking place in the West after the Second World War: illegitimate children of the pharmaceutical industry and the media, the “thalidomide children” were the new lumpen of the consumer societies. It was there, in that damned, subaltern cradle, where Lorenza Böttner was born.

Lorenza emerged from resistance to the process of transformation from Ernst Lorenz into a “thalidomide child”: she rejected the prosthetic arms that would supposedly have rehabilitated her body into one deemed “normal”; she rejected being educated as a disabled child and spent most of her time drawing, painting and dancing.

## LORENZA'S BIRTH

Going against the medical diagnosis and social expectations that promised her a future of “social inclusion” as a disabled person, Ernst Lorenz was accepted into the Gesamthochschule Kassel (now a School of Art and Design) as a student from 1978 to 1984 under the supervision of teacher Harry Kramer. A sculptor of kinetic pieces as well as a dancer, choreographer and performer, Kramer had an undeniable influence on Lorenza's incorporation of dance and performance into the process of pictorial production.

While still an art student, it was in Kassel where Ernst Lorenz changed her name to Lorenza and assumed a publicly female identity. She then began a visual and performative exploration in which the self-portrait and dance served as techniques of experimental construction. Her degree

project at the Kassel School of Art in 1984 involved the unprecedented use of the self-portrait as a dissident embodiment of the norm. It was a large oil on canvas mural painted using footprints like impressionist brushstrokes. The mural—shown for the first time in the school’s exhibition room in the same year—returned to the city to take up one of the emblematic spaces at the exhibition in the great hall of the Neue Gallerie during documenta 14 in 2017.

For Lorenza, transvesting herself in images of the norm was a requiem for undoing the norm. The drawings, prints, paintings and performances she did over the intense 16-year period of her life as an artist (1978 to 1994) show her occupying a plurality of positions, not only of sex and gender, but also in history and time: an Elegant Victorian lady, a muscular young man with glass arms, a ballerina, a punk girl, a Greek statue, a flamenco dancer, Batman’s bride, Miss World, a sex worker, a model, a traveller, a breastfeeding mother, a young BDSM enthusiast, an ephebe with the wings of Icarus, etc. Lorenza was interested in the simultaneity of embodiments and not identity as a static place. Her transvestism was not mimicry of femininity as an identity—it was usual to see her with a beard or naked—but rather an enlargement of the body’s gestural repertoire, an expansion of the possibilities of action. In this sense, a photo that can be considered emblematic is the one of Lorenza with a beard and chest hair posing nude in front of a painted self-portrait, in which she had portrayed herself with smooth skin and female breasts. Both faces look straight at the viewer. Both assert: I am Lorenza. Because Lorenza was transition and not identity. Rather than transvestism, it would be more appropriate to speak of transition practices as counter-learning techniques through which the body and subjectivity deemed “disabled” or “sick” claim the right

to represent and invent their own life practices. It would therefore not be accurate to say that Lorenza transvests her feet and mouth into hands, or that the artist transvests into a woman, but instead that she invents another body, another artistic practice and gender: neither disabled nor normal, neither male nor female, neither painting nor dance.

### THE POLITICISATION OF FREAKS: FROM DISABILITY TO CRIP PRIDE

Besides the Impressionist-style self-portrait mural, Lorenza graduated from Kassel in 1984 with a dissertation entitled *Behindert?! (Disabled?!)*, in which she examined the place that the non-conforming body had occupied in artistic representation. The dissertation, which included a first-person chronicle of her accident, and the processes of healing and learning to paint and dance, criticised the normative representation of the non-conforming body and advocated for an artistic practice capable of recognising an armless body as a social and artistic agent.

Until the Renaissance, the functionally diverse body, inscribed in a theological epistemology, was deemed to be an anti-natural monster that should be exterminated or could be the object of social ridicule. During the industrial revolution, a change in the politico-visual regime occurred: the functionally diverse body was considered an object of scientific research and institutional internment, a “specimen” for which society demanded remedy and rehabilitation through plastic surgery and adaptive prostheses. The industrial revolution invented a new productive body, a new materiality in which the hand—and the male hand in particular—occupied a central place as an organ that enabled an articulation between body—as the productive

force—and machine. It was within this context that the model of deficiency and disability emerged: a body whose hands had been mutilated was a body that heterosexual capitalism considered unproductive and asexual.

In resistance to this politico-sexual model, the dual process of artistic and gender vindication enabled Lorenza to construct a corporeality that was dissident and desirable at one and the same time: on the one hand, it was about resexualising a body that had been desexualised by medical and institutional discourse. It was the need to escape from the orthopaedy of the norm and to activate the political potential of the different gesture of a functionally diverse body that led Lorenza to transition from painting to dance, and even to the creation of her own dresses. On the other hand, Lorenza demanded political equality across all artistic practices, regardless of whether they were done with the hands or with any other living or technological organ.

The dissertation was accompanied by a performance project entitled *Lorenza, das Wunder ohne Arme. Freaks* (Lorenza, the armless miracle. Freaks). Lorenza researched the Freak Shows at the Leipzig Fair, the Tivoli in Copenhagen, the Prater in Vienna, the variety of Panoptikums (wax museums) in Germany and Austria, the Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly Circus, and the Théâtre des Variétés in Paris, among others.

The Freak Show was a crucial device in the modern invention of disability because it situated the non-conforming body on the boundaries of being human, while at the same time including it as part of a social spectacle. The Freak Show constituted a moment of transition between the theological regime in which the non-conforming body was seen as a monstrosity and its transformation into the object of scientific research and of the disability industries. It was within that narrow frame of visibility that Lorenza

sought to act: between the regimes of popular spectacularisation of the body in Freak Shows and of medical devices rendering the body visible as sick. Lorenza obsessively returned to the images from the film *Freaks* (1932) by Tod Browning, collected Freak Show posters, and included freak motifs in her performances.

During Ernst Lorenz adolescence in the 1970s, bodily diversity was defined in the German Federal Republic's disability policies as an individual and functional deficit with regard to work and productivity. Integration demanded the reconstruction of the disabled body with the help of prostheses that should contribute to the visual normalisation of the body and its adaptation to the productive process.

Against this medical narrative, Lorenza sought to inscribe her body, her subjectivity and her artistic production in a political lineage of armless painters that went from Thomas Schweiker to Louis Steinkogler. But it was Aimée Rapin, whose work became an attraction at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition, that she seemed to identify herself with the most. Rapin's eminently feminine themes, her floral compositions, the attention paid to the hair in her portraits, etc., were constant motifs in Lorenza's pictorial work. In the 1980s and '90s, during her trips to New York, Lorenza Böttner actively took part in the Disabled Artists Network with Sandra Aronson, but criticised the charitable and humanist models that framed disabled people as marginal artists. Unlike them, Lorenza understood the relationship between the hand and the foot, between the medico-pornographic and the artistic gaze, as a power struggle.

In the same way as feminist artists use works of art as a conceptual space in which to negotiate representations of the female body as an object of the heterosexual gaze, Lorenza's work questioned the technologies of normalisation, objectivisation and institutionalisation that had led

to a functionally diverse body being constructed as disabled. In this sense, an extension of Lorenza's pioneering work can now be seen in the work of Jennifer Miller, Del LaGrace Volcano, Mat Fraser, Amanda Baggs and Park MacArthur.

### THE FACE THAT IS NOT ONE

In the same way as Lorenza had turned the ground of the streets into a new pictorial and performative space, she turned her own skin into a canvas that allowed her to rewrite a critical dialogue with the imposed norm and identity. Many of Lorenza's "danced paintings" and performances began with the initiatic act of painting her face. Holding the brush with her foot, she would redraw the contours of her eyes, cover her cheeks and forehead with triangles, or draw lines that divided the face. The notion of transvestism is narrow and conventionally trivial to succeed in describing the constant erasure and rewriting of the face that was activated by that process. By turning it into a surface of inscription, Lorenza denaturalised the face as the site of identity—of gender, race, humanity—and asserted it as a socially constructed mask that she could help to redraw.

In 1983, the year of her graduation from the Kassel School of Art, she created a series of photos called *Face Art* in which the face is the operator of a never-ending metamorphosis: masks of femininity and masculinity, with variations that alluded to other times and places, appeared one after the other. The face is dehumanised, animalised or transfigured by lines reminiscent of tribal markings. Pigments were not the only substance that Lorenza painted with: she used head hair and body hair—beard, eyebrows—as formal and chromatic motifs to construct a face that was not one.



*Untitled*, (1982), black-and-white photograph



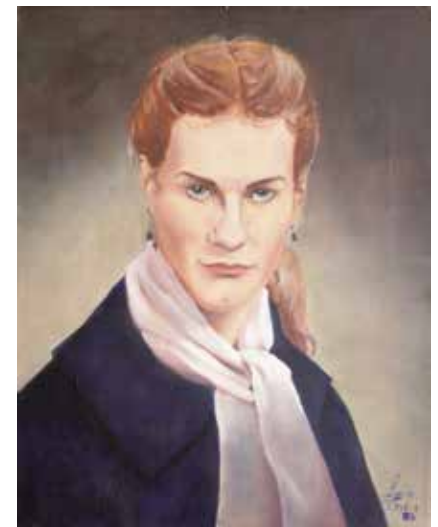
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Lorenza Böttner, *Untitled*  
(1985), pastel on paper

Lorenza Böttner, *Untitled*  
(1982), polaroid

Lorenza Böttner, *Untitled*  
(1980), etching on paper

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Lorenza Böttner y Johannes  
Koch, *Untitled* (1983),  
black-and-white photograph

Lorenza Böttner, *Untitled*  
(1980), acrylic on canvas







Lorenza Böttner, *Untitled*, (n.d.),  
black-and-white photograph

Unlike the post-modern strategies of Cindy Sherman and Orlan, the proliferation of masks in Lorenza's case was not the result of a random combination of social signs or historic and cultural signifiers. Her self-portraits belong to an artistic lineage that uses self-fiction photography against disciplinary photography. Like Claude Cahun, Jürgen Klauke, Michel Journiac, Suzy Lake and Jo Spence, Lorenza used the self-portrait as a technique of resistance to colonial, medical and police photography, in which the image served to identify the "other", constructing it as primitive, sick, disabled, deviant or criminal. With regard to these taxonomies, she experimented with the making of dissident faces: constant variation produced de-identification rather than a quest for a simply female identity. Lorenza's masks criticise the systematic erasure of the trans-crip body as a political subject, its exoticisation or its reduction to a sickness, while at the same time asserting plurality, transformation and relationality as profound structures of subjectivity.

Erasing the face and transforming it into a mask is taken to the limit in the photo where her entire face, like a work by Malevitch, is painted black. With a sardonic white smile, Lorenza's face disappears and becomes a comic theatrical mask hung on a mutilated body. Who has the right to laugh? Who has the privilege to look? Who can be seen? Who remains hidden?

### THE MUSEUM OF DESIRE AND MELANCHOLY

While the vast majority of Lorenza's photos and oil paintings are self-portraits, her wax paintings document the different places she visited from 1984. Thus, she portrayed the lives of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century politico-sexual lumpen in the cities to which she travelled. Her paintings introduce a



gallery of socially subaltern characters with whom the artist established an alliance through drawing: Amsterdam prostitutes, African Americans as the object of police violence in New York, lesbian sexuality under the shadow of the male gaze, and gay sexuality. In these choral frescoes, the figure of Lorenza appears and disappears, blending into other bodies and into other lives to the extent that all the bodies are hers too.

The wax and pastel paintings, most of which were done on the street, stand out for their mode of execution as well as their thematic content and their dialogue with the history of art. Mouth and foot painting artists, situated in a relationship of subalternity with other artists who use their hands, are forced to paint in the street, to choose realistic techniques and to mimic the conventions of art from every period to demonstrate their “ability”. Again, Lorenza does not desert that position. Instead, she occupies it eccentrically. Her painting critically dialogues with the history of art and queers it. Lorenza transforms the act of painting in the public space into a vitalist dance performance and a trans-crip happening.

A dual distortion is at work here: one that arises from perspective and another comes from introducing the presence of the subaltern body within representation. First, the two fundamental scales of Lorenza’s pieces—large pastel formats or small pencil or pen drawings—are, above all, linked to these two modes of production: the foot situates the work at a distance of more than a metre and a half from the eye; whereas the mouth means that painting is less than 50 centimetres away from the gaze. Second, there was a desire in Lorenza to queer the entire history of art, to distort it from her own subaltern position. Like a kind of queer Mannerism, Lorenza Böttner’s museum of desire and melancholy includes Fauvist, Expressionist, Impressionist,

Cubist and Neorealist versions, among others, of armless ballerinas à la Degas, gay saunas in the style of Michelangelo or Ingres, punk prostitutes that could be by Toulouse-Lautrec, the Expressionist-like 1980s disco scenes or the Goyaesque self-portraits as an armless mother breastfeeding her child.

## THE BODY AS A SOCIAL SCULPTURE

The dual relationship of embodiment and criticism of the norm is present in many of Lorenza’s works: the Greek sculptural canon serves as a public signifier through which the ideals of perfection, beauty and value can be questioned. In different performances in the 1980s, Lorenza produced—taking her mutilation as a bio-cultural material—a sculpture that emulated the classical works *Venus de Milo* and *Victory of Samothrace*. The Hellenic sculptures were called upon because of the tension between a mutilated body and a canon of beauty, between a ruin and norm. Thus, for example, in New York in 1986, first at an informal meeting of artists in East Village and then at a charity concert at Hunter College, Lorenza had her body covered in a fine layer of plaster until it was transformed into *Venus de Milo*.<sup>1</sup> According to the Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel, her performance cushioned the blow to the shoulders and transvested the mutilated evidence into Hellenic surgery. Lorenza decided not only to become the armless sculpture, but to embody Aphrodite, moulding breasts on her torso and combing her hair like the Greek goddess. The gender tension is clearly visible in the discontinuity between the

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1 The same performance was done at Alabama-Halle in Munich in 1987, and at the Tonight performance festival in the *Künstlerwerkstatt* (Artist Studios) in Lothringerstrasse, also in Munich, in 1988.

female torso and the small line of body hair growing from the navel until becoming hidden under the tunic. What is interesting here, however, is not so much the petrification of Lorenza, but rather the process of destruction of the sculpture as a socially normalising orthopaedic mould. The first moment of embodiment of the canon, when the artist transformed herself into a sculpture, gave way to a corrosive criticism of the role of art in the social normalisation of the white, cis-gender<sup>2</sup>, valid, heterosexual body. On top of a mobile podium, Lorenza as Venus, was moved from the back of the stage to the centre, seeking a direct encounter with the public gaze. That was when the sculpture's eyes opened, looked inquisitively at the audience and spoke: "What would you think if art came to life?" asked Lorenza, coming down from the podium and dancing in front of the audience. That was a constituent moment when the relationships between power and gaze in the public space were reorganised: against the passiveness and silence imposed on the functionally diverse body, dance and voice are techniques of social empowerment that seek to increase the power to act.

### PAINTING AS A PERFORMATIVE TRANS-CRIP GUERRILLA ACTION

For mouth and foot painting artists, the street was both a workplace and begging space, at least from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since galleries and institutional areas were only for hegemonic artists—those who worked with their hands. In the same decade that feminist practices and non-white artists questioned the patriarchal and colonial foundations of the museum as a democratic institution, Lorenza transformed the street into an improvised studio, gallery and

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<sup>2</sup> Cis-gender: when the gender assigned at birth coincides with the social and psychological gender. Cis-gender is the opposite of trans-gender.

museum, making that "outside" a place for creation and political revindication for an armless artist. Lorenza's pictorial statements are revolutionary, not only because they represent another body, but also because they imply the invention of a new site of enunciation. It is not simply about turning positions of power upside down, but about inventing a space in which the contradictions of the established order can be made visible.

Indeed, it was in 1982, during documenta 7—the polemic international exhibition led by Rudi Fuch in which no works by mouth or foot artists were shown—when Lorenza, who was still an undergraduate student, transformed the streets of Kassel into a guerrilla exhibition space where she gave visibility to her *Erinnerungen* (Memories).

Standing in the middle of the busiest street leading to the renowned Fridericianum, with just a piece of paper and some pastel chalks on the ground, she painted, danced and bared her armless body to the surprised gaze of the passers-by. Lorenza invented a new genre of artistic intervention that she tentatively called "danced painting" (*Tanz Mallen*) or "pantomime painting" (*Pantomime Mallen*). The artist sought this closeness to the public that only the street allows: a precarious, frictional space, the street also becomes a place where the public unlearns the way it looks at a body or a canvas.

Without a frame separating them from the street, Lorenza's paintings should be understood as part of a direct action and as pieces of public art. Closer, in this sense, to the performative works by other contemporaneous artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Coco Fusco, Annie Sprinkle, Beth Stephens, Guillermo Gómez Peña and Tania Brugera, and also to the mural interventions by Keith Haring, Lorenza's pictorial works are the material vestige of an urban intervention in which the public action of the trans-crip body is as important as the final painting.

In 1984, Lorenza started taking a series of trips to the United States and Europe, during which she did hundreds of “danced paintings” and numerous performances. She moved to New York with a “disabled artist” grant to study dance and performance at New York University Steinhardt. In 1985, she presented *Lorenza’s Unfall* (Lorenza’s accident, or her fall) and *Das Leben* (Life) at New York University, as well as *Angst vor persönlichem Kontakt* (Fear of personal contact) in Washington Square Church. When going through her archives, it is surprising to find the huge number of artists’ names and contact details that Lorenza had in her diary after her time in New York. Maybe that was how she came into contact with Joel-Peter Witkin and Robert Mapplethorpe, for whom she posed as a model. These pictures, radically different to the ones that Lorenza made of herself, reinforced the exoticising representation of her as a fantastical monster.

## PETRA AND THE OLYMPICS OF NORMALISATION

The fact that this exhibition begins in Barcelona and then travels to the Kunstverein in Stuttgart is due to the importance that the Catalan city had on the artist’s life. Lorenza first came to Barcelona in the 1980s, where she established links with many of the city’s artists. That was how, in 1992, she became Petra, the Paralympic Games’ mascot designed by Mariscal. Embodying Petra, Lorenza plays again with the tension between being the object of representation of the disciplinary gaze and resisting that gaze through a dissident performance. Lorenza’s functionally diverse body, which the Paralympics aimed to represent, paradoxically disappeared under the voluminous disguise of Petra. It was Petra who disabled Lorenza and turned her into an invalid.

By hiding her body and face, the Petra mascot was, in itself, infantilising and desubjectivising.

But Lorenza saw in Petra the possibility to subvert disabled identity through trans embodiment. At the close of the Paralympic Games ceremony, Petra kept her balance on the back seat of a motorcycle doing laps around the stadium. Transformed into a cartoon character with an enormous head and short skirt, Lorenza—who the commentators greeted as “Lorenzo Bötter, a Chilean male athlete and artist”—dodged the athletic pirouette and danced femininely while holding a bunch of flowers with her foot: “She is Cobi’s girlfriend”<sup>3</sup>, concluded the journalists. The last public face of Lorenza, Petra was the symbol of triumph—in the 1990s—of postmodern diversity inclusion policies, of the charity telethon, and of the disability industries, in which the functionally diverse body was included in society at the price of social submission: personal heroism, prosthetic readaptation and athletic achievement kept the non-conforming body in a position of political subalternity. In Catalonia, this process of identity-related commodification of the body, of the territory and of the language was implemented through language normalisation, gentrification of the city centre, and urban redevelopment of the marina. Within that context, the drawing artist Lluís Juste de Nin created “La Norma”, a kind of counter alter-ego of Petra, also a girl, who encouraged the Catalans to “normalise” the use of the Catalan language, embodying a new citizenry exempt from the dangers of Francoist repression and *xarnego* miscegenation.

The tension between normalisation and somatopolitical subversion was resolved more positively when Lorenza accepted to be the visible image of the Faber Castell paint

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3 Cobi was the mascot for the Barcelona Olympic Games.

brand in 1992. The advert, produced by Michael Stahlberg, showed Lorenza as a mentally-ill person in a straitjacket trying to escape from a psychiatric institution by drawing a window on the wall of the cell with her feet. In the same year, Michael Stahlberg produced the documentary entitled *Lorenza-Portrait of an Artist-Docu Short*. Focusing on Lorenza's daily life as a "work of art", the film shows the close relationship between trans-crip activism and art.

After travelled extensively throughout Europe and the United States, drawing and doing performances, Lorenza returned to Germany with HIV and not feeling well. The last few months of her life were a destruction of the gender transition processes to which she had paid so much attention. Physically weakened and now bodily and financially dependent on her family, Lorenza was—with short hair and dressed as a man—re-masculinized and, for the first time, lost most of her political or artistic agency. At the age of 34, in January 1994, Lorenza died in Germany following AIDS-related complications. A pioneering critic of the hegemony of artists that "paint with their hands" and the frames of visibility in which bodies are seen as normal or pathological, Lorenza Böttner's work is now an indispensable reference for conceiving visibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### TRANS-CRIP KNOWLEDGE: DON'T ASSUME YOU KNOW WHO I AM

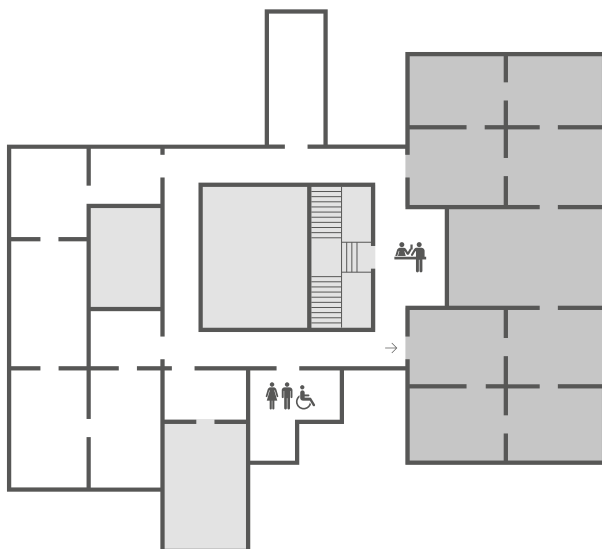
This space brings together a series of publications, references and texts from trans and intersex movements, the Independent Living Movement, anti-psychiatry and the politics of functional diversity, which seek to generate knowledge based on subaltern bodily and neurological positions. Surpassing the politics of identity, trans-crip knowledge is a

radical criticism not only of the scientific and technical discourse inherent to the humanist ideology, which conceives of difference as a sickness, but also of the "disability industries", which commodify care and precariousness.

Paul B. Preciado

Curator: Paul B. Preciado  
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