



# VALIE EXPORT

The Photographs  
25.02.–29.05.2023  
Exhibition Texts



# VALIE EXPORT

## The Photographs

VALIE EXPORT (b. 1940) is one of the most influential media artists on the international scene. After graduating from the national school for textiles in Vienna (Höhere Bundes-Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Textilindustrie), she began developing performative works in 1967 in the context of Viennese Actionism – an artistic movement in 1960s Austria that challenged middle-class norms and lifted the lid on social taboos by staging radical, provocative performances. However, EXPORT's practice breaks with the expressive emotionalism of Viennese Actionism by virtue of her critical reflection on media. The artist explicitly couches her media critique in feminist terms: this critique is inextricably linked with a questioning of how the female body and the role of women are represented in patriarchal society. Using a range of different media – from videos and drawings to installations – EXPORT references her own body as she examines sociopolitical structures that have left their painful mark on it.

The exhibition reveals how EXPORT's work has been impacted by photography – an important medium for the artist, who uses it in manifold ways. From the outset, she has designed actions with a causal dependence on photography and staged ephemeral performances tailored to the static image. Here, EXPORT works with photographers who submit themselves to her concepts and ideas, while having an authorial say as co-creators of the image. Beginning in the 1970s, EXPORT shot a large body of conceptual photographs that critically question the equation of image and reality in the mass media. At the point where body art, film, installation and drawing meet, the photographs shown in the exhibition offer new insights into the artist's creative output. Her work is characterised by a probing of the relationship between 'femininity' and representation, body and gaze, performance and image, subject and space.

Please note: VALIE EXPORT's work investigates patriarchal power structures and includes references to the 'female' body and the role of the 'woman'. Her important feminist work, which was realised in the 1960s and 1970s, refers to the binary gender order that was prevalent at the time, although from a modern-day perspective it is viewed as restrictive. Gender identities are now considered to be far more diverse. The terms 'woman', 'man', 'female', etc. used in the exhibition texts should therefore be regarded as historical categories and not as natural or fixed identities.



Room 1

## Tapp und Tastkino

Presented in Vienna and Munich in 1968, *TAPP und TASTKINO* (TAP and TOUCH CINEMA) is one of VALIE EXPORT's earliest actions, part of a body of work influenced by the notion of expanded cinema. This sensational action featured a box strapped to EXPORT's naked torso: fitted with a curtain, the box served as a cinema. Speaking through a megaphone, media artist Peter Weibel invited passers-by on the street to reach into the box and touch EXPORT's breast for exactly twelve seconds, during which time the visitors to EXPORT's 'cinema' were to maintain direct eye contact with the artist. In this way, the body, which is conceived of as a screen, can be experienced as a tactile event, thus exposing the voyeuristic gaze directed at the female body in film, a gaze that is traditionally shielded by the darkened space of the cinema.

In her very first actions, EXPORT was already giving thought to the idea of recording ephemeral processes with video and photographs. These are much more than mere documents of performances. The video of *TAPP und TASTKINO* was recorded specially for Austrian television. For the purposes of the photograph, which was taken beforehand, one of EXPORT's colleagues reaches into the box, acting as a proxy for subsequent viewers.

## VALIE EXPORT – SMART EXPORT Self-Portrait

The artist, whose real name is Waltraud Höllinger (née Lehner), chose her artist's name VALIE EXPORT when she was 27. Written in capital letters and even copyrighted as a trademark, the name freed her from both her father's and her ex-husband's surnames, allowing her to confidently position herself as a female artist within an art scene dominated by men. The self-portrait *VALIE EXPORT – SMART EXPORT* (1970), captured by the freelance amateur photographer Gertraud Wolfschwenger, playfully accentuates the theme of self-assertiveness. Puffing on a cigarette and striking a pose with masculine connotations, EXPORT holds up to the camera a pack of Smart Export cigarettes that has been modified to include her first name and a photo of her face pasted on it like a logo.

## BODY SIGN ACTION

As a locus of social and cultural imprinting, the female body is at the centre of VALIE EXPORT's work through its susceptibility to being read as a vessel of meaning. In a radical action carried out in Frankfurt in 1970, the artist had a garter tattooed on her thigh. Viewed as a symbol of bondage, of what EXPORT herself terms the 'repression of sexuality' and 'non-autonomous femininity', the garter exposes the social role of women as sexual objects



moulded by the male imagination.

This painful work is characteristic of EXPORT's strategy of subsequently developing her actions further through photography. The artist uses the camera's self-timer to allow her to focus on the garter and her naked crotch. Displayed as faceless and fragmented, her body is de-individualised and generalised. By contrast, photographer Gertraud Wolfschwenger's full-body portraits show the artist as an individual who confronts the patriarchal gaze by looking defiantly at the camera.

## Aktionshose: Genitalpanik

*Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (Action Pants: Genital Panic) began in 1969 with a scandalous 'expanded cinema' action: during an avant-garde film festival, VALIE EXPORT walked between the rows of viewers in a Munich cinema wearing trousers with the crotch cut out. The basic idea was to reflect the audience's voyeurism back to them, a theme that she subsequently developed for a photo series shot by Peter Hassmann that same year. In the pictures, EXPORT once again poses in crotchless trousers, but the confrontational aspect is accentuated by the male connotations of her get-up and pose: sitting with legs spread wide and sporting a leather jacket and machine gun, EXPORT subverts female stereotypes. The shot has a particular immediacy because of its frontal view of the artist and EXPORT's forthright gaze, which is directed straight at the camera: it was later reproduced as posters that could be put up around the city. In a gesture that not only evoked Actionism but also reflected on the medium itself, EXPORT appealed to a broader audience, expanding out from a specific group in a closed cinema to include all potential viewers in public space.

Room 2

## ASEMIE – Contact Prints

VALIE EXPORT enacted *ASEMIE – die Unfähigkeit sich durch Mienenspiel ausdrücken zu können* (ASEMIE – The Inability to Express Oneself through Facial Expression, 1973) for a photo session. The action was attended by two photographers with different cameras. The contact prints on display here were made by Alfred Damm, who photographed the scene with a 35 mm camera. Ludwig Hoffenreich, who had already photographed the performances of Viennese Actionists and can be seen taking pictures in his colleague's photos, was responsible for the medium-format images. While Damm's pictures are taken from a relative distance, giving the sequence of events a theatrical quality, Hoffenreich elaborates the physical dimension of the action by means of close-ups. The photos show that performance and photography are inextricably linked in EXPORT's work. The artist had to adapt the flow of the action to suit the conditions of the photographic shoot and needed to pose over and over again for still images. Viewed through the lenses of the two photographers, the action manifests as two different versions of the same event.



# ASEMIE – die Unfähigkeit sich durch Mienenspiel ausdrücken zu können

*ASEMIE – die Unfähigkeit sich durch Mienenspiel ausdrücken zu können* (ASEMIE – The Inability to Express Oneself through Facial Expression, 1973) was the culmination of a series of performances in the early 1970s in which VALIE EXPORT made reference to medical conditions. The artist's thematisation of *asemia* – an impairment of a person's ability to communicate with the world around them using signs, symbols and gestures – was a means for her to examine the condition of the socially oppressed woman. During the action, the artist began by dousing a bird – a symbol of freedom – with wax. She then proceeded to cover her feet and hands with the boiling hot material and was frozen into a lifeless figure as it set. Using a knife held in her mouth, she eventually managed to cut herself free again.

As with the tattooing action *BODY SIGN ACTION* (1970) or the film *...Remote...Remote...* (1973), in which the artist cuts at her cuticles until they bleed, the staging of pain also plays a key role in *ASEMIE*. It is a characteristic feature of the social processes that are inscribed in the female body. The reiteration of pain brings these contextual associations to light and allows them to be overcome in the momentary act of self-empowerment.

## Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit

In the action *Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit* (From the Portfolio of Dogness, 1968), VALIE EXPORT led media artist Peter Weibel through the heart of Vienna, having him crawl on all fours along Kärntner Strasse with a leash around his neck like a dog. The allusion to sadism and masochism and the staging of Weibel as a passive man being led in a demeaning posture by a proactive woman turns conventional power relations on their head and exposes socially constructed gender roles. The confrontation with a startled audience in the urban space – invariably an embodiment of sociopolitical norms – is still clearly influenced by Viennese Actionism. Weibel's 'doggish' behaviour can thus also be seen to express the mechanisms of power and suppression prevalent in the conservative, patriarchal climate of post-war society.

The performers engaged two film-makers and photographer Joseph Tandler to follow the action. Tandler's photos show the public's reactions. The pictures are taken over the shoulders of passers-by, such that subsequent viewers of the photos become part of the audience themselves.



Room 3

## ZUG II

In 1970 VALIE EXPORT embarked on an extensive series of conceptual photographs – a rigorous investigation of the photographic rendering of space, time and perspective. For *ZUG II* (Train II, 1972), the artist deconstructs the motif of the train, breaking it down into individual images by panning the camera, which is set up in a fixed position, and then joining the shots together like a cinematic sequence. The shifts in perspective give the image a dynamic spatial depth; at the same time, the mismatched joins reveal the photographic camera's technical constraints and the image's visual constructedness. This practice aligns the conceptual images with EXPORT's feminist concerns. Her studies reveal photographic mimesis as incongruent with reality. Instead, photography, like the body and language, is shown to be a matter of ideology.

EXPORT's works often proceed from written concepts. In the realm of conceptual art, photography is generally just a technically inferior document representing an idea formulated as a text; in EXPORT's work, however, the materiality and character of the work are important. In *ZUG II*, she transfers the images to glass plates, which she ingeniously layers to create a relief.

## Glasplatte mit Schuss

*Glasplatte mit Schuss* (Sheet of Glass with Bullet Hole, 1972) is an excellent example of EXPORT's strategy of interlacing performance with media reflexivity. Standing among the dunes on the Belgian coast, EXPORT holds a glass plate with a hole in it in front of her body. She takes turns positioning the hole in front of her eyes, forehead, chest and genitals. The bullet hole in the glass brings to mind the metaphorical idea of 'shooting a picture' – an expression of an aggressive, voyeuristic gaze that puts the photographer, clearly mirrored in the sheet of glass, and his model in a hierarchical power dynamic based on codified gender relations.

## Adjungierte Dislokationen

VALIE EXPORT's spatial studies are characterised by her exploration of the boundary between subjective and technical perception. She systematically subverts the central perspective in order to expose it as an ideologically connoted way of constructing an image in the camera – one that is inconsistent with human vision. In *Meer – Dünen* (Sea – Dunes, 1973), she uses photomontages to render two opposing sightlines as if the camera had panned. In *Fotonotizen für Film* (Photographic Notes for Film, 1974), the artist turns the camera 20 degrees every hour to create a panoramic view. What human perception can only incrementally extrapolate thus becomes visible all at once.



In the film *Adjungierte Dislokationen* (Adjunct Dislocations, 1973), EXPORT moves through urban and natural landscapes with two 8 mm cameras strapped to her chest and back like prosthetic attachments. Her surroundings are revealed in relation to the way she moves her body, thereby inscribing a sense of subjectivity into the technical medium. The performance was also recorded by her colleague Hermann Hendrich. In the final work, his shots are combined with EXPORT's films, a didactic exposition of how media represent the world.

Room 4

## Aus dem humanoiden Skizzenbuch der Natur: Ontologischer Sprung I, II, III

VALIE EXPORT explores how the female body is represented using picture-within-the-picture constructions that combine performance and conceptual photography. In the three-part work *Aus dem humanoiden Skizzenbuch der Natur: Ontologischer Sprung* (From the Humanoid Sketchbook of Nature: Ontological Leap, 1974), EXPORT starts by taking a black-and-white photo looking down at her feet standing in the sand. The second photograph, this time in colour, is another top shot, showing the artist standing on the first photo directly next to the image of her feet. In the final picture, the artist is standing on the second shot, although it is now in an indoor space. EXPORT uses the motifs of sand and carpet to show the body as a part of nature and an element of culture. For the artist, the female body is causally cleft: it is thus always associated with the mass media's systems of visual representation. EXPORT elaborates this too in her film *Syntagma* (1983). Here, the artist duplicates the body of the actress using large-format photos, which are presented for the first time in this exhibition.

The video installation *Touching. Body Poem* (1970) also shows a media-based representation of the body conveyed by the act of touch. While in *Ontologischer Sprung* the photograph is shown as a haptic object, in *Touching. Body Poem* the feet – filmed from below through a glass panel – seem to kick at the screens.

## Körperkonfigurationen

VALIE EXPORT's group of works *Körperkonfigurationen* (Body Configurations) was made between 1972 and 1982 in four distinct phases. The earliest images include photos taken by Eric Timmermann in a dune landscape. They are closely related to EXPORT's conceptual photographs, showing her out in nature squatting, lying down or bending over: the artist sets up a relationship between body and landscape based on formal analogies and relational proportions.





*Körperkonfigurationen* (1972–1974) are complex studies of the sociopolitical dimension of space and the way it is structured as a means to regulate human behaviour. For EXPORT, the female body experiences itself in terms of its difference from the environment around it, the ‘surrounding body’. According to the artist, the postures it assumes are ‘expressions of interior states’ or ‘visible externalisations of interior states through the configuration of the body in its surroundings’. The neologisms used for the titles – such as *Verkreuzung* (Intersection, 1972) – emphasise the psychological dimension relative to the physical posture.

## Nachstellungen

In her *Nachstellungen* (Reenactments, 1976), VALIE EXPORT uses a model to reproduce poses with female connotations drawn from classical paintings by artists like Sandro Botticelli and Rogier van der Weyden. Setting out, as she says, ‘to surgically remove an archive of physical postures’, EXPORT seeks to reveal the way gender roles are handed down through a process of visual transmission. The artist departs from the original images by dressing the model in contemporary clothes or creating an installation that combines the photos with reproductions of the paintings they are modelled on. Female stereotypes and roles – like the woman as Mother or as one of the Graces – are made apparent by the disparate reiteration of the poses.

### Room 5

## Körperkonfigurationen

In most of VALIE EXPORT’s *Körperkonfigurationen* (Body Configurations, 1972–1982), the physical intervention takes place directly in Vienna’s urban space at the point where the psychological dimension intersects with cultural norming. The early photographs taken by Hermann Hendrich in 1972 show EXPORT in a setting characterised by post-war buildings, signifying a society still traumatised by the catastrophic events of the Second World War. For the photographs taken in 1976, EXPORT steps behind the camera herself and works with a model in amongst Viennese landmark buildings, including the city hall. These buildings are manifestations of sociopolitical power materialised in stone; on another level, they represent patriarchal structures, analogous to a law made by men.

VALIE EXPORT frequently augments her photographs by means of graphic editing. The lines and geometric shapes accentuate the relationship between the body and its surroundings, energising the space and abstracting the body. In the closely related work «*Blitz und Donner*» (‘Lightning and Thunder’, 1976), EXPORT transforms the body by changing the perspective to create linear patterns, which she also transfers into a drawing. The late-phase *Körperkonfigurationen* made in 1982 return to the practice, using top shots to translate EXPORT’s body – photographed on Heldenplatz or at the Palace of Justice – into geometric forms.