



# Body Image

*Well known in Europe for her body-oriented performance, video and photographic work, Austrian artist Valie Export recently received her first U.S. solo show, spanning 30 years of feminist provocation.*

**BY MICHAEL RUSH**

In 1968, at age 28, Austrian artist Waltraud Höllinger changed her name to VALIE EXPORT, using the uppercase to announce her presence on the male-dominated Viennese art scene. Swept up in the cultural changes then occurring worldwide, and eager to counter the misogyny of the so-called Viennese Actionists—Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler—she sought a new identity not bound, as she says, “by her father’s name (Lehner), or her former husband’s name (Höllinger).” Waltraud morphed rather easily into VALIE, but EXPORT, the name of a popular brand of cigarettes, was another matter in the still-repressive society of Cold War Vienna. By appropriating this trade name, she was engaging in an act of provocation that, along with her future performances, was to bring her censure that included the loss of her apartment at the hands of a landlord repulsed by her public persona.

Though long celebrated at international festivals in Europe,<sup>1</sup> Export, whose artistic practices have extended from performance and body art to film, video, photography, installation and digital art, has received little attention in the U.S. Except for sporadic showings of her films in San Francisco and New York and a few teaching residencies, she has been largely anonymous here until this first solo exhibition of her work, spanning 30 years, at Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia. Organized by the director of the galleries at Moore, Elsa Longhauser, as part of the college’s International Discovery Series, “VALIE EXPORT: Ob/De+Con(Structure)” features more than 60 works, including conceptual photography, video and film installations and documentation of early performances.

When Höllinger arrived in Vienna from her hometown of Linz, Austria, in 1960 to study design at the National Technical School, Viennese Actionism was in full swing. Though she was never a member of this group, she was aware of its performance actions and was deeply influenced by them. The Actionists, whose work had much in common with the lively antics of the international Fluxus movement, were responding to a complex set of variables, bringing Viennese socioreligious repression, Freudian psychoanalysis, Artaudian Theater of Cruelty, linguistic philosophy and experimental poetry into their extreme, often harrowing performances. Repelled by war and Nazism, they sought a declaration of the “real” (as opposed to the mimetic) in an art that was decidedly sensational. Self-mutilation, animal sacrifice, blood rituals and orgies were all at various times brought into play by the Actionists. And all of these artists, like the Americans Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine and Robert Rauschenberg, early practitioners of performance art, started out as painters. Not Export. From the beginning, her work was media based, beginning with photography and performances that challenged images of women in cinema.



*Valie Export's multimedia installation 1 (Beat [It]) (on floor, in foreground), 1980, with several of the artist's performance-based photo series (on walls); in the "Ob/De+Con(Structure)" exhibition at Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia. Photo Will Brown. Photos in this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Moore College of Art and Design.*



Above, Export during the first performance version of *I (Beat[It])*, 1978, wearing lead shackles and pouring motor oil around a life-size photo of herself; at Galerie Mike Steiner, Berlin. Photos Dieter Kirves. Below, the artist in the second *I (Beat[It])* performance, 1978; at the International Performance Festival, Oesterreichischer Kunstverein, Vienna. Photo Robert Fleck.



To this extent, she lends credence to the notion that '60s performance art developed through the cross-fertilization of many arts—including dance, theater, film and video—and not simply in reaction to the perceived excesses of Abstract Expressionism (or, less contentiously, as natural outgrowths of the gestural or performative vigor of Abstract Expressionism), as some accounts suggest.

**E**xport's most controversial action was one of her first, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968), during which she marched into an art-film house in Munich (not, she says now, a porno theater, as was once alleged), wearing pants with the crotch cut out.<sup>2</sup> Walking up and down the aisles among the mostly male patrons, she challenged them to "look at the real thing" instead of passively enjoying naked women on the screen. She extended the action to posters picturing her seated, wearing the same pants, but also sporting a machine gun. With her hair wildly teased she stares directly at the camera. At Moore, 60 copies of this poster, which had originally been disseminated throughout Vienna, were neatly aligned in rows on a wall, looking very much like an Andy Warhol installation. But unlike Warhol's *Jackies* or *Maos*, Export's images and actions are overt expressions of sexuality and feminist ardor. For her, the body (her own body) is always the starting point. Though one is tempted to associate this approach with Günter Brus's 1966 declaration "My body is the aim, my body is the event, my body is the result," Export's use of the body has much more of a sociopolitical purpose than Brus's hermetic performances. Along with her peers Carolee Schneemann and Shigeko Kubota, both of whom made their bodies the centerpiece of their work in the 1960s, Export committed herself to unmasking the politics of the female body, in what can rightly be called feminist actions. In a 1972 manifesto she wrote:

It is high time that we women use art as a means of expression to influence everybody's consciousness, to allow our ideas to enter the social construct of reality. . . . The question of what women can give to art and what art can give to women can be answered like this: transferring the specific situation of woman into the artistic context establishes signs and signals that are new artistic forms of expression that serve to change the historical understanding of women as well.<sup>3</sup>

Among other actions documented in the show are *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968), in which Export, bare-chested save for a box attached to her upper body and

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fronted by a mock theatrical curtain, invited people on the street to reach into the box and feel her breasts; and *Homometer II* (1976), during which she approached people in a crowded shopping district and offered them the opportunity to cut a slice of bread from the large loaf hanging around her neck over her stomach. In a wall statement that at Moore accompanied the photographs of this street action, Export explains: "Bread is a symbol for motherhood and grain is a symbol for the seed, for life. The bread gives my body the appearance and prestige of a pregnant woman."

These two interactive performance pieces illustrate the seemingly contradictory messages of Export's work: she wants to provoke as well as engage, and, perhaps, entertain. As the photo-documents and videos of these actions demonstrate, Export, appealing and unselfconscious, created a vulnerable persona that even strangers found irresistible. Rather than shying away from this bizarrely decked-out, albeit attractive, young woman, both males and females approached her with ease, eager to play her game. She projected an innocence and simplicity that had the effect of gentle persuasion.





Above, *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, posters, 1969; installed at the Moore College of Art and Design. Photo Will Brown. Inset, *Export wielding a machine gun and wearing crotchless Action pants*, 1969. Photo Peter Hassmann.

Left, *Expectation*, 1976/80, photo-object, 56 inches in diameter. (Not in the exhibition.)

Even the steely punk staring down the viewer in the *Genital Panic* poster exudes a certain purity along with her defiance. Of course, Export can also be a trickster, seducing us with surface tranquility, then challenging our sympathies. In her so-called “photo-object,” *Expectation* (1976), she offers a revised version of Botticelli’s *Madonna della Melagrana* (ca.

1482). To the front of a large reproduction of the 15th-century Virgin she attached a cutout photo of a contemporary Madonna seated, holding a portable vacuum cleaner instead of an infant. Export offers the machine gun and vacuum cleaner as feminist icons.

**H**er public persona is especially cogent in what she calls her “Body Configurations” photographs, which, in addition to those displayed at Moore, were shown concurrently in an exhibition devoted exclusively to them at the Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Gallery in New York’s Chelsea district. In these black-and-white photographs Export uses her body as an extension of architectural or landscape elements, curving herself around concrete columns and street curbs, or stretching along the ledge of a staircase or within the confines of a ditch. Echoing the body sculptures of Robert Morris and others from the early ‘60s, Export’s works take the vocabulary of Minimalism and make it resonate with personal as well as social meaning. In *Encirclement* (1976), for example, she wraps herself around the curb of a deserted city street, not impassively, as, say, Morris presents himself in his *Standing Box* (1961), but almost passionately, arms over her head, face leaning gently to the side, eyes closed. As if to insist that her body be recognized amid the barren anonymity of her urban setting, Export altered

the black-and-white photograph by painting the edge of the curb red, thus emphasizing her body as “outside” the law and its boundaries.

She uses this device of painting in red or black on the finished print of several works from the “Body Configurations” series, most often to introduce a geometric element into the naturalistic scene. For *Carceri* (1972), shown at Gasser & Grunert, Export photographed herself lying on a staircase, back to the camera. On the surface of the print she painted an inverted triangle in red to highlight the essential connection between architecture and the body. So, too, in *We are prisoners within ourselves* (1972), she painted strict black lines on a print of herself seated on a staircase holding one of the wooden slats of the handrail. The painted lines extend the caged-in feeling of the subject on the stairs.

Not only do these added elements contribute a sense of vibrant abstraction to the stillness of the staged scenario, but they also announce that the artist is in control of the medium—that is, that Export, as artist and subject, is the author of the work, fully in command of the camera and what it records. This control is essential to all her work. As a woman, Export is not subservient to the image-makers, she is the image-maker.

What she cannot control, however, is the viewer’s reaction to her images, based on the persona she projects in them. Like any per-

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former who lends her body to her audience, Export must yield some of her conceptual intentions to the indefinable "character" that the camera creates and upon which viewers project their fantasies. In most of these photographs, though she wants to appear emotionally neutral or simply corporeal, she doesn't. In photo after photo, we see Export as a vulnerable loner, bent over or curled up, as if protecting herself from the elements, or simply fallen down, dejected. In *Body with wood pile* (1972), she sits on the ground—hair windswept, arms wrapped around her knees—in front of a pile of broken wood. She lies on her side curled into the topmost step of a staircase in *Fitting in* (1972), and leans hunched against a wall, arms folded across chest, head drooped over, in *Squatting* (1972). She lies clutching her head, her legs bent into a semifetal position in a darkened alley near garbage cans in *Embraced inwards* (1972), and so on. Yes, she makes her point that the body is her medium, her subject, her focus, but the situations she chooses for her particular body and face make for dramatic scenarios that call forth genuine emotional responses. This is particularly evident in *Metal Gestures* (1973), shown at Moore, in which Export, facing the camera, lies twisted up in the snow behind a bundle of barbed wire. Perhaps in 1973 it was feasible to view such a shot dispassionately and appreciate its conceptual underpinnings (though I doubt it), but from our present vantage it is virtually impossible to encounter this evocative scene and not think of winter war victims in Stalinist Russia, Sarajevo or Chechnya.

It is this abundance of possibilities in Export's work that, perhaps paradoxically, makes it so evocative. Her photos communicate an openness to interpretation that supersedes the occasional temporal markers of bell-bottom pants or early punk hairdos.

If issues of identity are recognizable in all her early performance work, Export's film and video installations illustrate how she injected this concern into formal explorations of the mechanisms of cinema, an approach she shared with avant-garde artists like Michael Snow, Joan Jonas, Hollis Frampton and Dan Graham, to name a few. In *Split Screen: Solipsism*, a 1½-minute 8mm film from 1968, she shows a man

boxing with his own image in a mirror. At Moore, the film was projected into a corner, so that the artifice of the mirror was both heightened and minimized. The mirror's role was obvious, but the corner projection, which placed the man's image on both walls, made it look as if he really were fighting with himself. Thus does Export, like Michael Snow in his 1965 performance piece *Right Reader* and his 1967 film *Wavelength*, expose the illusion of cinema, while at the same time using it and enjoying it.

Returning to an earlier theme, as she does throughout her work, Export introduces her surreal 1986 video, *A Perfect Couple, or Indecency Sheds Its Skin*, with a man boxing, wearing the same shiny red shorts as the "solipsist." But this time there are no mirrors. The man is punching the air on a nameless street, in front of a garish campaign poster for Kurt Waldheim, who was at the time running for the presidency of Austria. In these rare examples where Export places a man center stage, her characterization is none too sympathetic.

Adopting critic Gene Youngblood's notion of "expanded cinema" to describe installations that use film but are not in themselves "films," Export in 1973 created *Adjunct Dislocations*, a complex work for three 16mm projectors.<sup>4</sup> Strapping two 8mm cameras (the film was later transferred to

16mm) to her body, one in front, one in back, Export "performed" the filming of her environment from these two perspectives, as she moved in a variety of ways (walking sideways, bending over, bending backwards, etc). She projected the results, a dizzying array of fragmented shots of the sky, the earth, buildings, trees and the like, from two of three projectors, which were arranged to create a square divided into three parts on the wall. On the left half was projected footage, shot by someone else, of the performance, i.e., Export filming, and on the right half, itself divided into two halves, one above the other, were the images from the two cameras she wore on her body. The reflexive nature of cinema is here made explicit: the viewer watches Export being filmed as she herself is filming. No doubt Export was pleased during the opening of her show at Moore, watching people with their camcorders filming the film of her filming.

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Export did not shy away from the more extreme modes of performance in vogue in the late '60s and early '70s among an international group of artists including the Viennese Actionists, Chris Burden, Gina Pane and Stelarc, all of whom engaged in some form of



Photo documentation of the "street action" *Homometer II*, 1976. Export, with a loaf of bread hanging from her neck, invites passersby to cut their own portion. Photo Hermann Hendrich, Vienna.





Encirclement, 1976, from the "Body Configurations" series, ink on black-and-white photograph, 16½ by 24¼ inches.  
 Photo courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York.

body mutilation. Though tamer than the original action it was based on, the installation *I (Beat/It)*, 1980, provides some idea of the lengths to which the artist went to communicate her response to the oppression she felt as a woman. Three video monitors, each with images of a loudly barking German shepherd, surround a shallow pool of black oil in which seems to float the life-size cutout photo of the naked artist with shackles on her legs and arms. In her 1978 performance of the same title, Export, wearing these same heavy restraints, struggled to move on the floor as she poured oil on a life-size photo of herself. For her wall text she wrote, "Life is in our hands even if we slip and move in it with difficulty. But if we never beat against it, we will disappear. A woman working at a machine, as an extension of it, moving to its rhythm like a puppet—is it still her body that is moving? The body is working for the machine, not for itself."

Export takes this metaphor of the woman shackled to a machine to a monumental level in her 1998 *The Un-ending -ique Melody of Chords*, a 25-monitor installation in which a pounding sewing machine turned on its side is displayed on each monitor. With the posters

from *Genital Panic* in the same gallery room at Moore, it was clear that this artist knows the power of the repeated image. She creates an atmosphere at once exhausting and frightening: the sewing machine, implacable instrument of "women's work," plunges on, while from the posters Export's youthful self, gun in hand, stares out, defying us to respond in some way.

Export's work provides a treasure trove for anyone seeking to engage a cross-section of the intellectual and esthetic issues of late-20th-century art. Her inspirations, ranging from Russian avant-gardists Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein to Antonin Artaud, Gertrude Stein and Ludwig Wittgenstein, from John Cage and Arnulf Rainer to Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, encompass a broad field of inquiry. These are but a few of her sources. Along with a handful of other women, Valie Export has brought a new, intensely female perspective to contemporary art and the issues it engages. She has fulfilled the promise of her 1972 manifesto: "So far art has been largely produced by men, and it has usually been men who dealt with the subjects of life, the problems of emotional life, and contributed only their statements, their answers, their solutions. Now we must articu-

late our statements . . . and create new concepts that correspond to our sensitivity and our wishes." At Moore, perhaps the world's only remaining art college exclusively for women, her wish was granted. □

1. A full retrospective of Valie Export's work, "Split : Reality VALIE EXPORT," was presented in 1997 at the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna.

2. See Export's 1999 clarification in Kristine Stiles, "Corpora Vilia, Valie Export's Body," *VALIE EXPORT: Ob/De+Con (Struction)*, exh. cat., Philadelphia, Moore College of Art and Design, 2000, Note 7, p. 32.

3. Valie Export, "Woman's Art," 1972, reprinted in *Split : Reality VALIE EXPORT*, exh. cat., New York, Vienna, Springer-Verlag, 1997, p. 205.

4. For a full description of the notion of "expanded cinema" see Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York, E.P. Dutton and Co., 1970.

"VALIE EXPORT: Ob/De+Con(Struction)" appeared at the Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia [Jan. 18-Feb. 27], and will be on view next year in a joint presentation by the Santa Monica Museum of Art and the Otis School of Art and Design, Los Angeles [Mar. 9-May 5, 2001]. "VALIE EXPORT: Body Configurations, 1972, '74, '76" was exhibited at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Gallery, New York [Jan. 18-Feb. 27].

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