

A self-created personality

Austrian conceptual artist VALIE EXPORT has her works on show at Beit Ticho

• By DAVID STROMBERG

One of the most widely celebrated Austrian artists in contemporary art, conceptual artist VALIE EXPORT got her start in the late 1960s with her *Aktion* piece in Vienna and later began to work in media. She is also a self-invented personality created for the sole purpose of transmitting ideas.

"I created the name," says VALIE EXPORT, "to 'export' myself, to bring ideas out of the harbor." The cigarettes she was smoking at the time were called Smart Export – something she claims is coincidental and that she noticed only after inventing her own name. And by covering the word "Smart" with "VALIE" and putting her picture on the pack, she created her first art object. She also designed a VALIE EXPORT stamp with which she signed works.

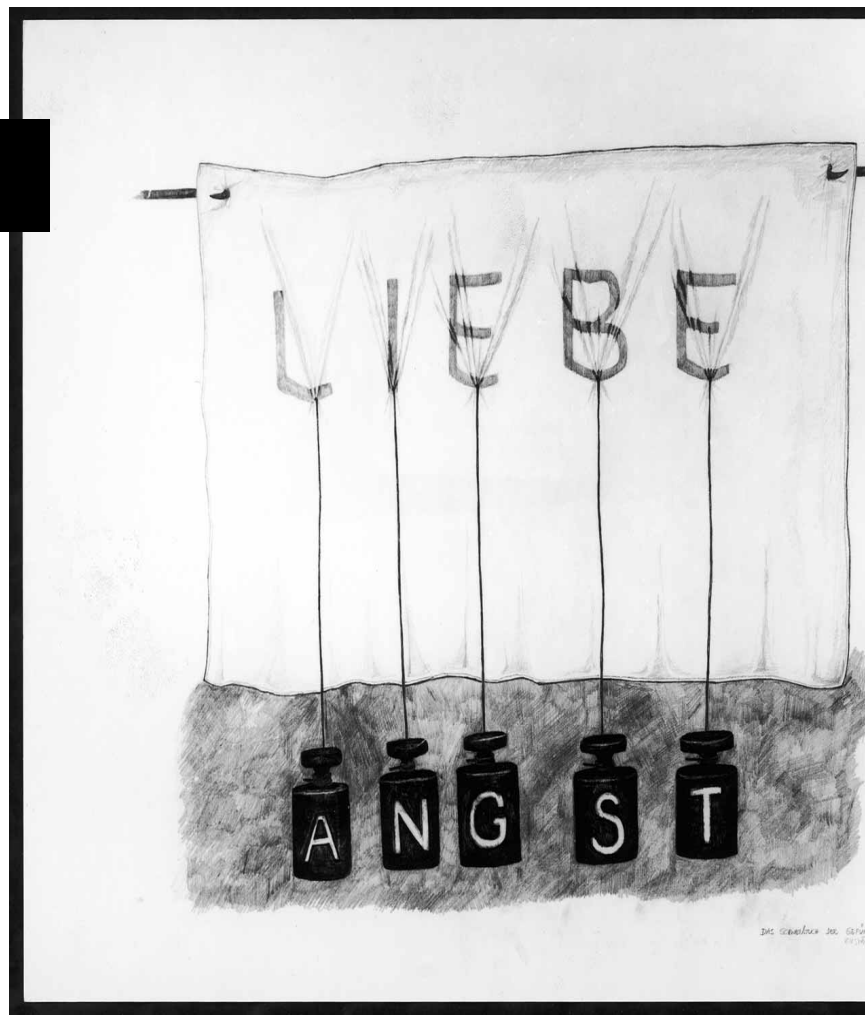
"The branding of herself is in the context of creating her own image and identity as an artist," explains Timna Seligman, who curated VALIE EXPORT's current exhibition at Beit Ticho, "VALIE EXPORT: Jerusalem Premiere."

The result is perhaps paradoxical. On the one hand, it is a self-appointed label intended to dissociate the artist from her husband's or father's name – that is, from the patriarchal tradition of conservative postwar Catholic society in Austria – and help her explore a feminist agenda in which she questions the male gaze, the objectification of the female body, and the agent of control of female sexuality. On the other, from the get-go it binds her to a commodity-object, which will continue to be identified with her and her work.

VALIE EXPORT, however,

insists that the two remain separate. She explains that what's good about the cigarette pack is that "it is nice, small, you can take and handle it" but that it is still just "an art object," whereas she is "a subject." Perhaps for her the cigarette pack was a one-time creation that she immediately moved beyond; but the catchy commercial nature of the image – with the words "always and everywhere" printed in Latin and German – seems to serve enduringly as a kind of symbol.

In the late 1960s, after working for several years as a script-girl, editor and extra at Ciné-Film, VALIE EXPORT developed her idea of "expanded cinema," which meant taking the cinematic moment beyond the movie-making apparatus and directly into the street. In VALIE EXPORT's words, "to make



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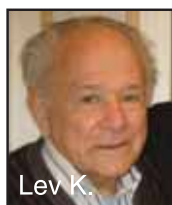
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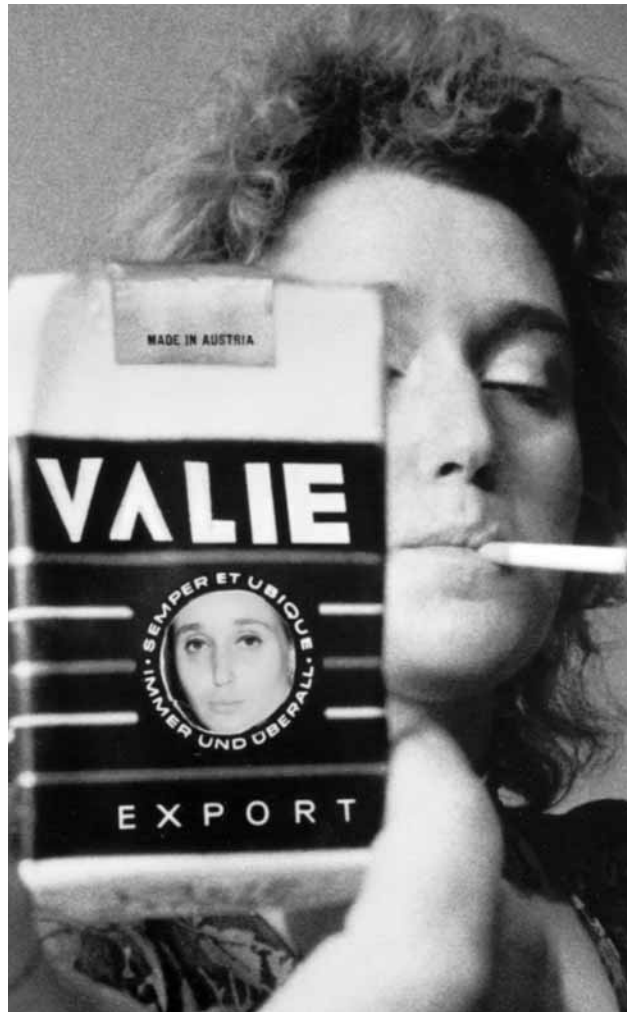
"The pain in my body disappeared"



Harel B.

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VALIE EXPORT brands herself to create her own image and identity as an artist, says Timna Seligman, the curator of the Beit Ticho show of the Austrian artist's works.

something against cinematic reality."

Her concept of cinema is not just what happens on celluloid, explains Seligman. "Any action of her body, including being on the street in public, is a kind of cinema."

Much of this action involves the use of VALIE EXPORT's nude body – described by some as her most important artistic tool – in awkward, painful or unusual positions or representations, which Seligman says is not a problem for VALIE EXPORT. "For her art," says Seligman, "she has no moral issue, no shame, no fear about being touched or exposed."

But not all her works focused on interpersonal situations. VALIE EXPORT also put her body up against various important architectural sites in Vienna in a series of photographs called "Body Configurations." As VALIE EXPORT explains, "The body is a kind of sign extended into the [architectural] lines." Indeed, she seems to be using her body either as an extension of or a contrast to the architectural ornaments, physically grafting herself in a way that sometimes follows

and sometimes counters the form of the architecture itself.

Also included in the exhibit at Beit Ticho are VALIE EXPORT's drawings from the early and mid-1970s. Several of them make up a series called "Identity," in which VALIE EXPORT probes internally rather than externally. They include reflections on childhood – including "Desire of Child" and "Dream of Child," two scenes sketched in a naive or childish style – as well as realistic pencil reproductions of VALIE EXPORT's own fingers.

The third group in "Identity" constitutes a minimalist yet amusing play between thread and glue on paper. As VALIE EXPORT says, "The material – a line or thread – has one identity. But if you close the line, you have a circle. And if you open the circle, you have a line." For her, this is an exploration not only of the thread's identity but of the way in which identity itself works.

"I created my own name," says VALIE EXPORT, "but I never could create my own identity. It shifts from one point to another. It's not stable."

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