

Interview

‘People were afraid of me’: the artist who turned her breasts into a cinema

Hettie Judah



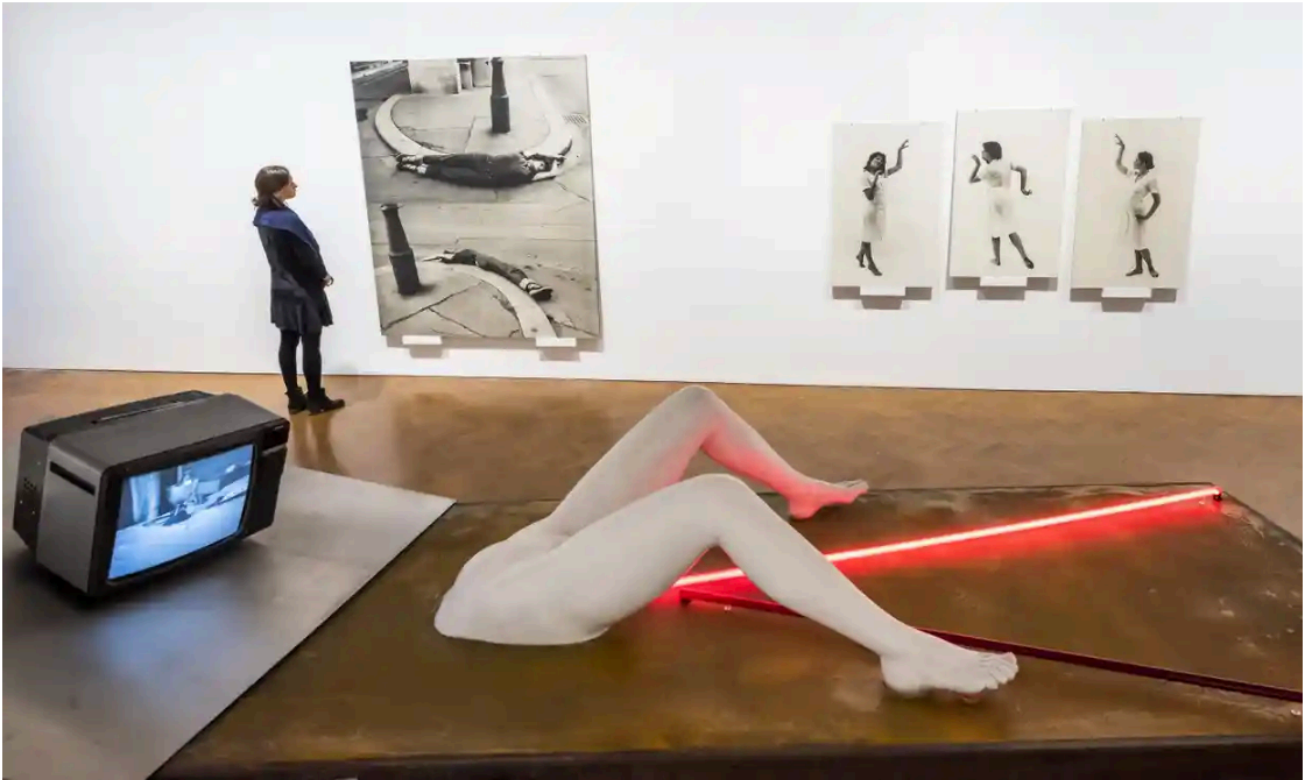
▲ ‘Other film-makers said, Do we have to put up with this?’ ... Valie Export's TAP and TOUCH Cinema

Valie Export outraged Viennese society with her fiercely feminist art – then sent her own audience racing for the exit as she paraded in crotchless clothes. Fifty years later, she still likes to shock

In 1980, women artists represented Austria at the [Venice Biennale](#) for the first time. One was the 60-year-old painter Maria Lassnig; the other was 39-year-old firebrand Valie Export, notorious for plastering Vienna with provocative posters in which her exposed crotch played a central role.

Export was a controversial choice for [Austria](#), to say the least. As the organisers stated in the catalogue, back home she was “exposed to continuous obstruction and defamation”. Fearing uproar at the opening, they scheduled two press conferences on consecutive days in the hope of mitigating full-scale outrage. The first was a small gathering of sympathetic press. The second was everyone else and, as expected, they kicked up a storm. Export became a lightning rod of outrage, accused of everything from killing animals to being – God forbid – a feminist.

Dressed all in white, her hair the copper of exposed wiring, Valie Export (or VALIE EXPORT as it’s often styled) is now, at 79, a revered figure. Why did her work stir up such fury back then?



▲ Everyday oppression ... Gerburtenbett (Birth Bed), the centrepiece of Export's Biennale exhibition. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock



“The Austrian scene was very traditional, and they didn’t know about conceptual art,” she says. “The second thing was that I am a woman.”

The Viennese underground scene of the 60s and 70s was dominated by the actionists: transgressive and, at times, violent performance artists. They may have been artistically avant garde, but their attitudes toward women and the female body remained old-fashioned.

Export took the energy, aggression and provocation harnesses by the actionists and turned them to very different ends, raising questions about how women were portrayed in film, how their bodies were sexualised, and the everyday oppression they faced at the hands of the state, society and the Catholic church. As a result, even within the avant garde, Export was regarded with suspicion. The attitude was: “She’s a woman, and she’s against us, fighting for feminism.”

At the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in London, Export’s 1980 Biennale exhibition has just been restaged in its entirety. The centrepiece is *Geburtenbett* (Birth bed, 1980) a raised resin platform set with mattress springs from which an outsized female abdomen erupts, legs crooked, with red neon strip lights springing from her vagina like fresh blood. Perched where her head might be, a black and white TV transmits a Catholic mass.



▲ Devout ... Export's version of a Michelangelo Pièta. Photograph: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac



Lining the walls are photographs, among them religious tableaux restaged with domestic appliances, which were portrayed in advertising of the time as women's salvation. One is a version of a Michelangelo Pièta in which a young woman appears devoutly perched on a washing machine as it belches out a blood-stained towel.

Born Waltraud Lehner in Linz in 1940, she rebranded herself Valie Export - a name inspired by Export brand cigarettes - in 1967. In a self-portrait a year later, she appears hand on jaunty hip, cigarette between pursed lips, holding out a soft pack carrying her face and logo. It's irresistibly cool, delivered with a knowing smile - two qualities that are Export's stock in trade. Both were crucial elements in the two works that made her name. TAP and TOUCH Cinema and Action Pants: Genital Panic (both 1968-69) are both forms of what Export terms "expanded cinema". In the first, the "cinema" is a small box strapped to her naked chest, which in turn becomes the screen. The cinema is so small that only one pair of hands may enter and encounter the screen. In Genital Panic, the action enters the space of the audience in a real cinema. Export arrived at a screening in trousers with a triangle cut out of the crotch and started perambulating the rows with her exposed pubis at face level, causing a "genital panic" within the audience, who scuttled for the exit as she approached.

Even as a child, Export had no regard for prim niceties. Her father died during the war, and she was sent with her two sisters to board at a convent while their mother worked as a primary school teacher. The nuns' private world fascinated Export, and her first expulsion came when, aged 10, she snuck into their living quarters. "I had to tell my mother that they'd thrown me out. She slapped my face then took me back to the school. They were nuns, my mother was a war widow bringing up her children alone, so of course they were obliged to take me back." The pattern repeated itself many times.

Despite this, Export is philosophical about convent life. "I learned a lot. I learned that I needed my own territory, my own space, and I had to defend it if I wanted to become strong," she recalls. "Otherwise, it was like any convent - strict discipline." She left at 14 to study at the School of Arts and Crafts in Linz, and, at the age of 18, she got married. Within a year she had a daughter, but the vision of adult independence offered by matrimony turned out to be another trap. "I thought: this is not my life, being married and a mother."



▲ Street protest ... one of Export's works from the Venice Biennale.
Photograph: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac



So she divorced, placed her daughter temporarily in her sister's care and moved to Vienna to study. There she encountered a society that remained intensely conservative. "The students around me knew I was divorced. Mostly the male students looked at me and said, 'She's a divorcee, a young woman, so she must be ...'" Export throws a lascivious look. "It was really awkward." Women, too, were suspicious of her. Her evident sexual experience - and by extension, availability - marked her out as a threat.

The legend surrounding Exports Genital Panic had it that the performance took place in a porn cinema, with an audience of men; in fact, it was at an arthouse screening. Export's intended audience was male and female: her target, conservative Viennese society as a whole.

"Marriage, the Christian church, religious themes and the traditional side of Vienna at the time - this fossilised Nazi realm, really - all this influenced the work I wanted to do," she says. "I didn't want to draw, I didn't want to paint." Instead, she wanted to determine a space for herself, just as she had at the convent. At first, she worked with film and photography, always with her own body at the centre. Both Genital Panic and TAP and TOUCH cinema were initially shown within the context of experimental cinema. Export was co-founder of the Austria Filmmakers Cooperative, but the response from fellow film-makers was hardly approving.

"I first showed TAP and TOUCH Cinema on stage at a small film festival in Vienna," she recalls. "Other film-makers rushed on to the stage and yelled at the audience, 'Is this supposed to be film? Do we have to put up with this?'" Fear that the box strapped to her front would be destroyed by the angry mob forced Export off stage.



▲ 'I learned a lot about convent life' ... Valie Export. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock



Subsequent performances out on the street were less alarming. “There wasn’t aggression because it was so unbelievable. A woman stands there, and you can put your hands in and touch,” she says. The ‘film’ was 33 seconds long, and as payment you had to hold Export’s gaze, her knowing smile firmly in place. Women and children participated (“It was a U-certificate film” she laughs) but most of the participants were male. “They didn’t really touch the screen: they were a little afraid. But I wasn’t afraid, because I knew that no one was going to hurt me.”

Export also brought *Genital Panic* into the public realm through a series of large screen-printed posters in which she appears barefoot in her crotchless trousers, legs spread, hair teased, brandishing a gun. Now retitled *Action Pants: Genital Panic* the image was flyposted across Vienna.

The furore surrounding her participation in the Venice Biennale changed little. Despite international recognition, Export did not receive a survey show in Austria until the 90s.

Canonisation of a very particular kind arrived in 2005, when [Marina Abramović](#) re-enacted seven key performance works of the 20th century at the Guggenheim museum in New York under the title *Seven Easy Pieces*. Alongside works by herself, Bruce Nauman and Joseph Beuys, Abramović performed Export’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. For the record, it was still shocking, 35 years later.

● [Valie Export: The 1980 Venice Biennale Works](#), is at [Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London](#), until 25 January.

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The Guardian

Art Weekly Art

Austria's feminist agitator and Renaissance bling – the week in art

The British Museum wrestles with empire, the Turner prize nears its finale and Spider-Man defends Bolton – all in your weekly dispatch



▲ Defying the patriarchy ... Valie Export. Photograph: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac



Jonathan Jones

Fri 29 Nov 2019 16.00 GMT

Exhibition of the week

Valie Export

The incendiary feminist art of an Austrian revolutionary who named herself in defiance of patriarchy and nationalism.

● [Galerie Thaddeus Ropac](#), London, from 28 November.

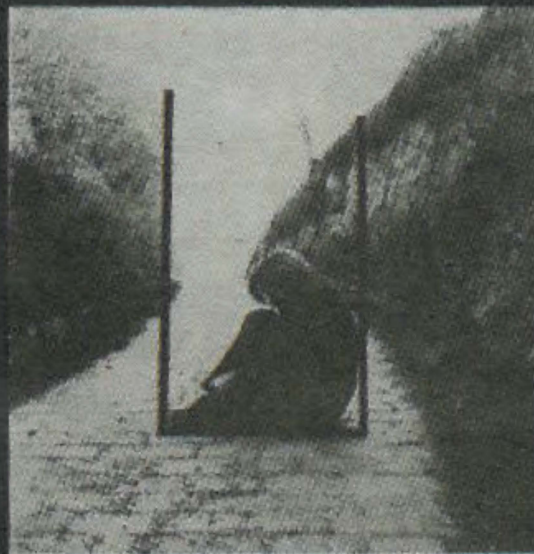


THE GUIDE

7-13 December 2019

Daft as a brush

**Vic Reeves, Josie Long and other
comics show off their artworks**



Valie Export

**Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, W1, to 25 Jan**

Artists in 1960s Vienna rebelled against the conservatism of Austrian society and the pretence it was innocent of the Holocaust with art that revelled in outrage. While the Actionists bathed in gore, Valie Export created revolutionary feminist art that is celebrated here with a reconstruction of her hit show at the 1980 Venice Biennale.

The Nativity Panto

Created by Charles Court Opera.
King's Head, Islington, N1 (020-7226 8561) Sat & Sun 3pm, Sat, Tue-Fri 7pm, to 11 Jan, £20, under 10s £10. [DA]

Potted Panto

Seven quick pantos with CBBC's Dan and Jeff. Southwark Playhouse, SE1 (020-7407 0234) Sat 3pm, Sat, Tue-Fri 7.30pm, Sun 6pm, 2pm, to 11 Jan, £25, family £80, concs £20.

Sleeping Beauty

Written by Andrew Pollard and directed by James Williams. Palace Theatre, Watford (01923 225671) Sat, Mon-Thu 2pm, Sat & Fri 7pm, Mon-Fri 10.30am, £16-£26, concs £14-£24. [DA]

Sleeping Beauty

Starring Debbie McGee. Beck Theatre, Hayes (020-8561 8371) From 7 Dec, Sat & Sun 5.30pm, 1.30pm, Tue-Fri 2pm, Tue & Wed 10.30am, Thu & Fri 7pm, to 29 Dec, £24-£29.50. [DA]

The Snow Queen

Abigail Anderson directs Charles Way's adaptation. Park Theatre: PARK200, N4 (020-7870 6876) Sat 3pm, Sat, Mon-Fri 7pm, Mon & Tue 11am, Thu & Fri 1pm, to 4 Jan, £18.50-£32.50, concs £16.50-£23.50, under 16s £15-£30.

Snow White

Christmas show. Chickenshed: Rayne Theatre, N14 (020-8292 9222) Sat 3pm, Sat, Thu, Fri 7pm, to 11 Jan, £14-£2.50, concs £15 & £17.50. [DA]

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Starring Jo Brand, Jon Clegg and Jason Sutton. Richmond Theatre (0844-871 7651) From 7 Dec, Sat 2pm, Sat, Tue-Fri 7pm, Sun, Tue-Fri 1pm, Sun 5pm, to 5 Jan, £12-£52. [DA]

Aga Khan Centre N1 (aku.edu)

Bahia Shehab: At the Corner of a Dream

Five digital works by the Lebanese-Egyptian artist. Sat-Fri 10am-6pm, to 5 Jan, free.

Artsdepot N12 (020-8369 5454)

Climate Emergency! Student artists respond to global warming. From 9 Dec, Mon-Fri 10am-4pm, to 3 Jan, free. [DA]

Barbican Centre EC2 (020-7638 8891)

Into the Night:

Cabarets & Clubs in Modern Art Works of art and life-size recreations of avant-garde spaces. Sat, Wed-Fri 10am-8pm, Sun-Tue 10am-6pm, to 19 Jan, Mon-Fri £15, concs £11 & £13, Sat & Sun £17, concs £12. (Art Gallery) [DA]

Trevor Paglen: From Apple to Anomaly

Exploration of the forces at play in artificial intelligence. Sat-Wed 11am-8pm, Thu & Fri 11am-9pm, to 16 Feb, free. (The Curve) [DA]

Bloomberg SPACE EC4 (londonmithraeum.com)

Daniel Silver: Human Activity Monumental, figurative works. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, Sun 12noon-5pm, to 11 Jan, free.

The British Library NW1 (0843-208 1144)

Buddhism Scrolls, illuminated manuscripts and artefacts. Sat 9.30am-5pm, Sun 11am-5pm, Mon, Wed-Fri 9.30am-6pm, Tue 9.30am-8pm, to 23 Feb, £12.60, concs av. [DA]

British Museum WC1 (020-7323 8299)

Sir Stamford Raffles: Collecting in Southeast Asia 1811-1824 See Preview. Sat-Thu 10am-5.30pm, Fri 10am-8.30pm, to 12 Jan, free. [DA]

Troy: Myth and Reality Archaeological artefacts and works of

art, shedding light on the Trojan war. Sat-Thu 10am-5.30pm, Fri 10am-8.30pm, to 8 Mar, £20, concs available. [DA]

Camden Arts Centre NW3 (020-7472 5500)

Christodoulos Panayiotou: Act II - The Island Works that draw on the artist's background in dance and theatre. Sat, Tue, Thu, Fri 10am-6pm, Wed 10am-9pm, to 5 Jan, free. [DA]

Chats Palace Arts Centre E9 (020-8533 0227)

Gillian Hyland: A Photographic Retrospective Staged, supernatural images. Sat 9am-1pm, Tue 4pm-9pm, Thu 6pm-9pm, to 21 Dec, free.

Chris Beetles SW1 (020-7839 7551)

The Illustrators: The British Art of Illustration 1865-2019 Annual show of cartoons and illustrations. Sat, Mon-Fri 10am-5.30pm, to 4 Jan, free.

Copperfield Gallery SE1 (copperfieldgallery.com)

Jane Bustin: Blindspot Paintings, textiles, ceramics and sculpture exploring sensory deception. Sat, Wed-Fri 12noon-6pm, to 20 Dec, free.

Cristea Roberts Gallery SW1 (020-7439 1866)

Howard Hodgkin: Strictly Personal - Part II A retrospective of prints by the British abstract artist. Sat 11am-2pm, Mon-Fri 10am-5.30pm, to 21 Dec, free.

Design Museum W8 (020-3862 5900)

Moving to Mars An immersive experience set in a full-scale Mars home. Sat-Fri 10am-6pm, to 23 Feb, Mon-Fri £14.50, mems free, child £7.25, NUS/concs £10.75, family £21.75-£32.50, Sat & Sun £16.30, mems free, child £8.15, NUS/concs £12.15, family £26.50-£37. [DA]

Dulwich Picture Gallery SE21 (020-8693 5254)

Rembrandt's Light Investigating the Dutch artist's use of light in his paintings. Sat, Sun, Tue-Fri 10am-5pm, to 2 Feb, £13.50, OAP £12.50, concs £7, under 18s free. [DA]

Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art N1 (020-7704 9522)

Lithography from Leningrad: Eric Estorick's Adventure in Soviet Art Graphic works by 15 artists from a 1961 exhibition. Sat, Wed-Fri 11am-6pm, Sun 12noon-5pm, to 22 Dec, £7.50, concs £5.50, Art Pass mems £3.75. [DA]

Fashion and Textile Museum SE1 (020-7407 8664)

Zandra Rhodes: Fifty Years of Fabulous A retrospective of the fashion designer. Sat, Tue, Wed, Fri 11am-6pm, Sun 11am-5pm, Thu 11am-8pm, to 26 Jan, £9, concs £8, NUS £7, under 12s free.

Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill W1 (020-495 1500)

Cy Twombly: Sculpture Mixed-media sculptures. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 21 Dec, free.

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Ely House W1 (020-3813 8400)

Valie Export: The 1980 Venice Biennale Works See Preview. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 25 Jan, free.

Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert SW1 (020-7839 7600)

Eduardo Paolozzi: Hollow Gods Early sculptures, collages and drawings. Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, free.

Horniman Museum and Gardens SE23 (020-8699 1872)

Meltdown: Visualising the Climate Crisis Photography on the importance of glaciers. Sat-Fri 10am-5.30pm, to 12 Jan, free. [DA]

14-20 December 2019

THE GUIDE

PAID CONTENT

See
inside for
this week's
issue

19 May 2018 Prince Harry and Meghan Markle tie the knot

15,130

streams of
Marry You by Bruno
Mars on this day

24 April 2018

It is announced that streaming has overtaken digital downloads and CD sales

91,846

streams of
Shape of You by
Ed Sheeran on this day

What a decade!

Play it back with
Spotify Wrapped

from a 1961 exhibition. Sat, Wed-Fri 11am-6pm, Sun 12noon-5pm, to 22 Dec, £7.50, concs £5.50, Art Pass mems £3.75. [DA]

Umberto Boccioni: Recreating the Lost Sculptures Digital artists Matt Smith and Anders Raden recreate four sculptures by Boccioni. Sat, Wed-Fri 11am-6pm, Sun 12noon-5pm, to 22 Dec, £7.50, NUS free, concs £5.50, under 18s free. [DA]

Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill W1 (020-495 1500)

Cy Twombly: Sculpture Mixed-media sculptures. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 21 Dec, free.

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Ely House W1 (020-3813 8400)

Valie Export: The 1980 Venice Biennale Works Recreation of the artist's multimedia installation from the 39th Venice Biennale. Sat, Tue-Thu 10am-6pm, to 25 Jan, free.

Hauser & Wirth W1 (020-7287 2300)

Mark Bradford: Cerberus Paintings that reference the dog guarding the entrance to Hades. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 21 Dec, free.

Horniman Museum and Gardens SE23 (020-8699 1872)

Meltdown: Visualising the Climate Crisis Photography highlighting the importance of glaciers.

Sat-Fri 10am-5.30pm, to 12 Jan, free. [DA] ICA SW1 (020-7930 3647)

Rirkrit Tiravanija: Untitled 2019 (The Form of the Flower Is Unknown to the Seed)

A sake bar containing artworks and special lighting. Sat, Sun, Tue, Wed, Fri 11am-6pm, Thu 11am-9pm, to 28 Jun, free. [DA]

Marian Goodman Gallery W1 (020-7099 0088)

Nan Goldin: Sirens Videos and digital slideshows exploring drug addiction. Sat, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 11 Jan, free.

The National Gallery WC2 (020-7747 2885)

Gauguin Portraits Paintings and works on paper. Sat-Thu 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-9pm, to 26 Jan, £20-£24, mems free. [DA]

Young Bomberg and the Old Masters Works by David Bomberg alongside various Old Masters' works. Sat-Thu 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-9pm, to 1 Mar, free. [DA]

National Portrait Gallery WC2 (020-7312 2463)

Pre-Raphaelite Sisters Paintings by 19th-century female artists including Joanna Wells, Fanny Cornforth and Evelyn de Morgan. Sat-Thu 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-9pm, to 26 Jan, £18-£20, concs av. [DA]

The Observatory Photography Gallery WC1 (020-7813 9877)

Steve Best: Comedians Back to Front The comedian and photographer combines his two passions. Sat 9am-6pm, Mon-Thu 8.30am-6pm, to 30 Jun, free.

Parafin Gallery W1 (020-7495 1969)

Hamish Fulton: A Decision to Choose Walking Only Photographs, paintings and printed texts. Sat 12noon-5pm, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, or by appt, to 8 Feb, free.

The Photographers' Gallery W1 (020-7087 9300)

Mimi Onuoha: The Future Is Here! The artist and researcher makes visible the human labour behind machine learning. Sat, Mon-Wed,

Fri 10am-6pm, Sun 11am-6pm, Thu 10am-8pm, to 31 Jan, £5, after 5pm free.

Royal Academy of Arts W1 (020-7300 8000)

Lucian Freud: The Self-Portraits Paintings, prints and drawings.

Sat 10am-8pm, Sun-Thu 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-10pm, to 26 Jan, £16, concs £14, under 16s/disabled carer free. [DA]

Saatchi Gallery SW3 (020-7811 3070)

Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh Artefacts from the boy king's tomb. Sat-Fri 10am-6pm, to 3 May, £16.50-£28.50.

Sadie Coles HQ, Davies St W1 (020-7493 8611)

Car Park: Hilary Lloyd Video, painting and installation. Sat, Tue-Fri 11am-6pm, free.

Sadie Coles HQ, Kingly St W1 (020-7493 8611)

Guy Ben-Ner The Israeli artist presents three

films. Sat, Tue-Fri 11am-6pm, free.

Serpentine Gallery W2 (020-7402 6075)

Albert Oehlen Major show of new paintings. Sat, Sun, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 2 Feb, free. [DA]

Serpentine Sackler Gallery W2 (020-7402 6075)

Patrick Staff: On Venus Site-specific installation. Sat, Sun, Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, to 9 Feb, free.

South London Gallery SE5 (020-7703 6120)

Bloomberg New Contemporaries See Preview. Sat, Sun, Tue, Thu, Fri 11am-6pm, Wed 11am-9pm, to 23 Feb, free.

Southbank Centre SE1 (020-3879 9555)

Bridget Riley Comprehensive survey of the op artist's work. Sat-Mon, Wed, Fri 11am-7pm, Thu 11am-9pm, to 26 Jan, £16.50-£18.50, concs available. (Hayward Gallery) [DA]

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