

VALIE EXPORT: Retrospective

C/O Berlin, 27 January to 22 May

Who was VALIE EXPORT? The name – a spoof on a cigarette brand – sounds like something to do with international travel (VALIE = Valise?) when that was still considered glamorous, as much as the name from which it was changed in 1966 – Waltraud Höllinger – and sounds lumpenly local to the Austria (Linz) EXPORT came from. It is characteristic that this antinomy seems simplistic, only to open onto messy complexity: she was Höllinger *née* Lehner, so EXPORT was her *third* name. She had it copyrighted, capitals and all.

I ask who she ‘was’ because, although this exhibition is titled ‘Retrospective’ and she is still alive, it consists almost exclusively of art that she made in a 15-year period between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, most of it between 1967 and 1972. Does this imply that she assumed and inhabited her persona as an end-limited performance? That this issue is not raised anywhere in the presentation appears as curatorial timidity or negligence.

At the outset, her name brand-stamps 12 silkscreens of the same image, that repeat, Warhol-style, in a spectrum of snazzy tints. She is pictured on a bench, pointing a small machine gun to one side, her jeans cut open at the crotch to reveal her nakedness. Freudians would no doubt see a compensatory exchange between phallicism and castration, but that would play into her hands by insisting on finding maleness in its absence, even from behind the camera: it’s a 1969 self-portrait. Perhaps I am falling into the same trap in seeing her wild thatch of hair as recalling the grotesque wigs in which Andy Warhol resembled an old woman. At least the association reverses the gender ruse at the last. Like Warhol’s self-portraits, EXPORT’s seem to be pitching an identity clear-cut enough to carry a poster, only for the image not to add up to one. What is she presenting herself as here: an urban bandit, deranged derelict, sex worker, victim of abuse, otherworldly angel set on avenging that abuse? Try pinning her down as a feminist activist and she assumes the studious androgyny of conceptualism. See her as an anarchist, with her sights set on postmodern capitalist culture, and she has slipped into a garter belt to insist that she is only out to seduce. Her flagrancy, like Warhol’s, is a decoy.

A film clip of the performance *Tap and Touch Cinema*, 1968, observes her in the street, poker-faced and elaborately coiffed, with a white box strapped to her chest, into which anonymous, leering men can reach to touch her breasts. Feminist critique is cast as a circus turn. Contemporaneous photographic self-portraits of her raising her skirt to show off a tattoo of a garter on her thigh contrast the ink’s blatancy with the unreadability of a self-portrait too ambiguous and opaque to draw the garter image and the woman donning it into a straightforward tautology: sign on accommodating sign. Subsequent art, of which hers now looks prescient, hardened up the projection of female identity to be more efficiently theatrical (Cindy Sherman) or raised its stakes to a cartoonish vulgarity to riff more blatantly on the tabloid culture that would relish castigating it (Sarah Lucas). In contrast, EXPORT’s image is a sticking point, as if devised to represent performance art’s



VALIE EXPORT, *The Portfolio of Dogness*, 1968 (in co-operation with Peter Weibel)

resistance to being too easily usurped by its documentation.

Portfolio of Dogness, 1968 – in which she leads her partner Peter Weibel around on a dog lead – has her looking positively genteel on the pedestrian precincts of *bürgerlich* Vienna, coyly oblivious to the S/M act she is leading. Is this beaming bourgeoisie the same person as the frazzle-haired seductrix, brandishing her tat? I was reminded of Mona Hatoum’s 1985 video *Roadworks* – in which Hatoum traipses barefoot around Brixton like a holy supplicant, ghosted menacingly by the pair of Doc Martens tied to her ankles (when those were still seen as big men’s *bovver* boots), which appear to be following her at the same time as slowing her down – and how comparatively neutral (short-haired, dressed in cool black) is her styling, so as not to compound her parable of social and cultural ostracism. Whereas Hatoum solemnly deflected reactions to her performance, EXPORT’s guise of pertly conventional femininity courted the response of passersby, only to repel their assumptions.

In works of the early 1970s, photography comes into its own as a theme, and the context of C/O Berlin – a photography institution – begins to make sense. Photographic self-reflexivity deepened EXPORT’s reflections on how, as a woman, she was being framed by the camera, while opportunistically aligning her practice with conceptualist trends. Yet the brutality of some of these works spurns the Anglo-American conceptual mainstream as hands-off and puritanical. The predominant Austrian art movement of the time was still Vienna Actionism (Weibel was part of the milieu), which associated violence with authenticity of expression. EXPORT pours hot wax on a sparrow that was ‘probably’ already dead, and cuts her cuticles until she bleeds. ‘Cutting’ – in a work of that title from 1967 – is also related both to film editing, and the articulation of linguistic meaning through the forming of letters (in the form of a Marshall McLuhan quote).

Standing in a sand dune, she holds up a square sheet of glass punctured with a hole, which in a sequence of photos she aligns, in turn, with her eye, crotch, nipple, head (*Glass Plate with Shot*, 1972). ‘Shot’ suggests a bullet hole – an act of violence against her – and conflates it with the perfunctoriness of the

camera's seizing and sexualising of her image. Her dark clothing registers as a shield against visibility. There's an echo of the reflective squares, flashing in the daylight as though communicating in Morse, that were attached to the coats worn by a pair of figures fighting their way across a beach in gale-force winds in Joan Jonas's *Wind*, 1968. Another work about the deceptiveness of representation, emerging from a feminist oeuvre, *Sight Text: Finger Poem*, 1968, is photography as performance, instead of merely representing it. In each of 40 prints, EXPORT articulates sign language, the sequencing evolving in parallel with its semiotic disclosure. Language is a power in her hands that could counter the groping hands of *Tap and Touch Cinema*. With the prints arranged in a tiled geometric pattern, formalist abstraction is added to the mix, as if – with a nod to Clement Greenburg's version of modernism – this were a logical consequence of stripping a medium to its essentials, which applied to photography as well as painting.

These parallel strands – photography, performance and abstraction – coalesce in the 'Body Configurations' series, 1972–82. EXPORT is pictured lying on a flight of steps, wrapping herself around columns or fitting herself into the curves of stone alcoves. If she submits to Vienna's neo-classical architecture, she capitalises on its rigidity by making it the pivot of her performance. Geometric shapes – triangles and curves – have been applied to the prints with a marker, or masked off during printing (the photo stripped back to its white ground), echoing the poses she strikes. The triangular voids appear as a violence done to the image as harsh as that self-inflicted on her bleeding hands.

The larger scale of these later prints underscores an association with modernist pictoriality. The maleness of European modernism seems to be reaching out of a past synonymous with the patriarchal heft of the cityscape to place EXPORT's malleable figure in a mimetic vice. But the shapes she applied to the prints, erasing and qualifying the view, make her prostration synonymous with her art's ability to liberate her from its strictures.

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Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: THE REBIRTHING ROOM

Studio Voltaire, London, 31 January to 28 April

'Warning! A Rebirthing Room has Opened Here' reads the sign outside Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's latest exhibition. Bracing myself for the experience ahead, I part the brightly coloured curtains upon which multiple pairs of glowing eyes stare eerily back at me. This ominous motif, one common to Brathwaite-Shirley's animations and videogames, is a foretaste of what's to come. For although I'm about to enter a realm shrouded in darkness, an alternate world where day is always night and the forest of my fears will come alive, *THE REBIRTHING ROOM*, 2024, is a space that surreally turns what you view back onto yourself. The process of rebirth is then as much about the mind – or the mind's eye – as it is the body.

Standing under a psychic canopy of cloth-clad boughs and long grass, with an unnerving sound-score rumbling underneath, we are invited to confront our 'anxiety', 'low self-esteem', 'fear of failure', 'addictions',

'self-doubt' and 'intolerance', all of which are monstrously portrayed on the three screens at the far end of the 'room'. Using the 'anchor', a ghoulish, material-wrapped, head-shaped console that also invokes the uncanny, visitors take turns at tackling these inhibitions. Every attempted assault on our own projected issues almost always results in loss; there is no escape from or triumph over our most vulnerable and fragile sense of self. But this is precisely Brathwaite-Shirley's point: it's not in the vanquishing of our insecurities but in the painful recognition of them that the rebirthing process begins. Turning the viewer's passive gaze into one of active, participatory introspection through game-playing and instructive texts, Brathwaite-Shirley recreates therapeutic practices and spaces, as well as the embodied response to both. The result is a rebirth as traumatic as it is truly transformative.

Of course, the 'rebirthing room' in question is not exactly a room per se. Christened a 'Pro Black/Pro Trans Space' – one, it must be added, that was a former Mission Hall in the 1890s and is now a converted gallery – the 'room' could be seen as a congregational and confessional site, as well as an area of delivery and natal intent. Using her practice to bring people together, particularly those from the black trans community, Brathwaite-Shirley creates a unique locale that is as much about communal dwelling and collective healing as it is about a church-like battling of inner demons. In fact, for all its use of lo-fi glitching graphics of luridly coloured apparitions and grotesque ghosts, *THE REBIRTHING ROOM* is not a sanctum of exorcism in a Catholic or Pentecostal sense, rather, the artist's reclamation of religious architecture, iconography, terminology and philosophy – to be reborn is to be saved by the Son of God in Christianity, after all – is a subversive statement about salvation itself. Though trans individuals may undergo a kind of rebirthing process of their own, in no way are they in need of being saved, nor are they in need of being converted (in any sense of the word). The chapel-like, salvational atmosphere Brathwaite-Shirley channels is one that allows black trans individuals to be and to feel, to recognise hurt and to heal together.

It is this ethic of collective care for black trans people that Brathwaite-Shirley has sown in past works. Videogames such as *BlackTransArchive.com*, which was co-designed by black trans collaborators specifically for black trans participants, posits a quest through surreal and textured worlds in search of black trans ancestors, knowledge, healing and belonging. In this, *THE REBIRTHING ROOM* is no different. Ancestors may not be brought back from the depths of the earth,



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley:
THE REBIRTHING ROOM, 2024, installation view