

VALIE EXPORT

THE 1980 VENICE BIENNALE WORKS

LONDON ELY HOUSE

28 Nov 2019 - 25 Jan 2020



My art was aggressive ... aggression is provocation, and my viewers do not have to think like me, but they have to be provoked into forming their own opinions, their own reactions.

– VALIE EXPORT, 2019

My artistic work centres on the human body as medium of information, as signal bearer of meaning and communication. I occupy myself with the pictorial representation of mental states, with the sensations of the body when it loses its identity, when the ego gnaws its way through the scraps of skin, when steel casings straighten the joints and the worn-out identity is nailed with steel pins to modern mythomania... I try to shape the social structures (power current) and standards (mutilations) of life into a meta-narrative of pictures.

– VALIE EXPORT, 1980

The 1980 Venice Biennale Works presents VALIE EXPORT's innovative multimedia installation from the 39th Venice Biennale, which embodies the fierce and fearless interrogation of oppressive power structures and hierarchical systems of control at the heart of the artist's practice. Her first solo exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London, the exhibition marks a key moment for the internationally acclaimed artist. Originally shown alongside Maria Lassnig in the 1980 Austrian Pavilion, the sexually charged Venice Biennale installation employs a combination of investigative photography, sculpture and novel image-making techniques, challenging audiences by examining the politics of the body, eroticism, the male gaze and liberation.

The installation includes large-scale prints mounted on panels from her important photographic series, *Body Configurations* (1972–1982), centred around the monumental sculpture, *Gerburtenbett* (1980): a large, rusted steel bed from which a pair of detached female legs rise, a looped video recording of a Catholic mass transubstantiation playing from a television monitor at the bed's 'head', with a stream of red neon running from between the severed legs. Begun in the 1972, the *Body Configurations* photographs see EXPORT explore the body in novel and shocking ways, entering into her compositions by twisting, contorting and positioning herself in a variety of environments. From complex embraces of recognisable and historical symbols of urban architecture to discerning interactions with the natural landscape, EXPORT questions the presumed division between the physicality of the body and its surroundings.

By re-presenting this important installation four decades after its conception, the exhibition highlights enduring concerns with female liberation and the shifts that have occurred since the late 20th century. EXPORT's artistic representations of the self are equally representative of society past and present, and raise numerous ongoing questions concerning the (female) body as signifier and bearer of information. In 1980, the multimedia installation presented a new form of totalising experience, combining video, photography, paint and sculpture, a trailblazing shift in conceptions of media and the possibilities of representation. Today, the artist's innovative explorations into video and new media art continue to probe the possibilities and effects of proliferating technologies, considering the body as a site of surveillance and communication.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, I have addressed – through actionism, photography and drawing – the subject of representing body posture as an expression of inner states – shown in architectural or landscape settings, as arrangements of the body, as installation, as aligning the body with its surroundings. Landscape and architecture are a manifestation of time and space. I associate architecture with the female body. In different forms, positions and impressions, I set the architecture of the female body within the architecture of nature or the urban environment. The body becomes the

extension of the architecture, extending architectural elements and structures. – **VALIE EXPORT**, 2018

The exhibition includes a number of additional photographs from the renowned *Body Configurations* series, displayed alongside a selection of pieces documenting her early performances and photographic works from the *HOMOMETER* performance, which was first staged in 1973. Presented together in *The 1980 Venice Biennale Works*, these pieces highlight the breadth of the artist's radical innovations and her boundary-pushing explorations of the past five decades.

A pioneer in film, video and installation art, EXPORT has produced one of the most significant bodies of feminist art in the post-war period. Awarded this year's Roswitha Haftmann Prize, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the visual arts, her groundbreaking films and performances throughout the 1960s and 70s introduced a new form of radical feminism to Europe and were among the most revolutionary - and definitive - statements of their time. Experienced as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, the sculpture and photographic works on display are demonstrative of the multi-disciplinary nature of EXPORT's 'Expanded Cinema' practice and emblematic of her iconic use of her body as an artistic medium, positioning her as one of the earliest performance artists alongside Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow.

Simultaneously exploring the physical, urban fabric of her environments and the metaphysical structures of the behaviours they incite, EXPORT's practice not only pre-empted the radical performances of the self by (female) American artists at the turn of the 21st century, but the proliferation of discourses concerning imposed behaviours and identities in society today. In the wake of the digital revolution, the boundaries between the real and the virtual and their socio-cultural impact have sparked continued debate, and VALIE EXPORT's early explorations into the effects of such boundaries position her as an artist ahead of her time. Emblematic of an oeuvre built on bold experimentation and provocation, this exhibition will reposition EXPORT's interrogations into 'the drama of human self-realisation' within the context of the present cultural climate.

The body as canvas on which the society arranges its daily slapstick, making man its showman. In this sense my artistic self-representation is also the representation of society. In the same sense the discourse with my body as venue of sexual, social, emotional and other signals, which in society finds its expression in a formalised body language, always implies a discussion with society and calling-in-doubt of society, because the signal- and information-bearing function of the body includes not only the personal but also the societal code. – **VALIE EXPORT**, 1980