

VALIE EXPORT & KETTY LA ROCCA
BODY SIGN

A black and white photograph of a hairy hand, possibly a monkey's, with the word "you" written multiple times in cursive script across its palm and fingers. The word is written in various sizes and orientations, some with lines extending from them. The background is dark.

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Although the artists never met and developed their practices in different contexts – EXPORT in Vienna and LA ROCCA in Florence – their works reveal striking parallels that testify to a shared sense of urgency: the need to rearticulate female identity and ‘to develop other forms of language outside of the system dominated by men’, as EXPORT says of the period. Similarly, LA ROCCA observed: ‘Women have no time for declarations: they have too much to do, and moreover they would then have to use language that is not their own, language that is both alien and hostile to them.’

Hands play a central role in both EXPORT and LA ROCCA’s work, as the primary perceptual organ that allows us to apprehend and interact with the world around us, and as a means to convey meaning beyond words. In LA ROCCA’s video work *Appendice per una supplica* (1972), female and male hands perform a sequence of movements, exploring the unmediated potential of ‘the gesture as opposed to the word, the gesture as a universal language’, as she says. Meanwhile, in her iconic *TAPP und TASTKINO (TOUCHCINEMA)*, 1968), EXPORT invited audiences to touch her breasts through a box, transforming her naked torso into a haptic cinema screen, and the spectator into an active participant. It ‘explored



VALIE EXPORT, *Aufhockung*, 1972–80
Black and white silver gelatin print on baryta paper laid on chip board, overpainted. 230.5 × 170 cm (90.75 × 66.93 in)



KETTY LA ROCCA, *J with dot (3 dimensions)*, 1970
Pvc plastic. 117 × 50 × 11 cm (46.06 × 19.69 × 4.33 in)

the body as material for film in an entirely new way,’ she says. ‘By replacing the screen with skin, for example, you made cinema into much more than just a visual experience. It became a physical experience for the entire body.’ *TAPP und TASTKINO* ironically and provocatively rendered ‘graspable’ what the voyeuristic male gaze seeks to ‘feel’ in the visual mass medium.

This emphasis on the tactile – the immediacy of felt sensation and bodily experience – countered Conceptual art’s dematerialisation of the art object. By asserting the embodied perspective of the female artist in this context, both EXPORT and LA ROCCA expanded the very framework of Conceptual art, declaring the body itself as an accomplice of the conceptual.

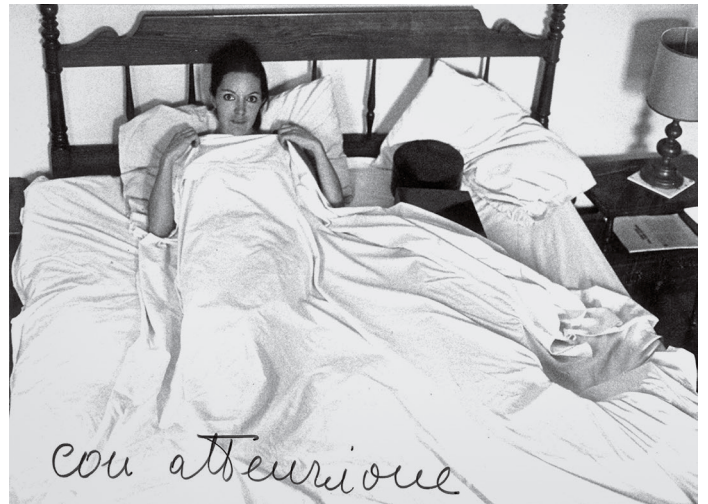
Both artists performed rebellious interventions within the urban landscape to question its infrastructures. In LA ROCCA’s early experiments with the Florentine avant-garde group, *Gruppo 70*, she used public space as a site for linguistic play, distributing her poetry in the streets or slipping her collages into magazines to reach unsuspecting audiences. *Engagement* (1967) was created for the action *Approdo*, during which LA ROCCA and members of *Gruppo 70* installed modified traffic signs along the A1 motorway towards Florence. These linguistic puzzles diverted the authority of signage while drawing on the newly introduced alphanumeric license plate

systems in Italy, exposing the tension between personal expression and the shared – often imposed – codes of communication. In EXPORT's *Body Configurations* (1972–82), the artist contorts her body to fit spaces within Vienna's urban and natural environments – niches, edges, curbs and corners – at times posing like a pointing or measuring device. Through these interventions, EXPORT examines how identity is shaped by the tangible structures of the city – an effect that is accentuated by black and red outlines. She describes these works as a 'visible externalisation of inner states through the configuration of the body with its surroundings.'

This semiotic experimentation is further evident in LA ROCCA's letter and punctuation mark sculptures created in 1970, which she described as 'alphabetic presences'. In her sculpture, *J with dot (three dimensions)* (1970), a human-sized, black PVC 'J' – a letter that is absent from her native Italian alphabet – denotes the French *Je*, or 'I'. In the subsequent photograph *Con attenzione* (1971), LA ROCCA takes this linguistic character to bed, creating a scene of both identification and estrangement between language and self. Locking eye contact with the viewer from beneath the sheets, LA ROCCA makes a wry commentary on the shortcomings of language as a means of communication.



VALIE EXPORT, *BODY SIGN B*, 1970
Black and white photograph. 44.6 × 30.4 cm (17.56 × 11.97 in)
Photo: Gertraud Wolfschwenger



KETTY LA ROCCA, *Con attenzione*, 1971
Photo and ink. 12.5 × 17.4 cm (4.92 × 6.85 in)

In *BODY SIGN B* (1970) – the photo series that lends the exhibition its title – EXPORT also engages with the visual language of sexuality. The artist is depicted hoisting her dress and defiantly meeting the viewer's gaze as she reveals a tattoo of a garter on her thigh. By engaging the social semiotics of tattooing, the artist enacts a radical and ironic reversal of the objectification of the female body by the male gaze.

While EXPORT explores the female body as both literally and culturally inscribed in this action, LA ROCCA considers language's origination from within the body with her *Craniologie* series (1973). X-ray images of a skull are double-exposed with photographs of her hands – one with an outstretched index finger, the other clenched into a fist – and overlaid with the handwritten words 'you, you, you'. Integrating the external and internal, mind and body, and word and image, LA ROCCA exposes the insufficiencies of each medium in isolation, and simultaneously cultivates her own proto-feminist visual language. As LA ROCCA explains: 'The mystifying dimension of language has thus made the face of man, corroded it and for this reason I superimpose the gesture of the hand in all its expressiveness and communicative simplicity inside the skull, where the brain has given birth to the entirety of human thought and human language.'

In their practices, EXPORT and LA ROCCA negotiate language as a tool of the patriarchy. Working with and against this reality, they collude with language as sign, material and system, co-opt it for their own purposes, and circumvent its usage in conventional social contexts. Their visual experiments expand beyond the confines of the page: by inserting their bodies into the realm of language and vice-versa, they reveal the absurdity, and in turn the artistic and societal possibilities, of combining these systems of communication.



VALIE EXPORT, portrait of the artist
Photo: Nicole Toferer

VALIE EXPORT

VALIE EXPORT (1940—2026) was a pioneer in conceptual photography, film and performance art. She produced one of the most significant bodies of feminist art since the 1960s. In 1967, she adopted the name VALIE EXPORT, a bold reinvention that marked the beginning of her new artistic identity. In 1968, she co-founded the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative. She participated in numerous international exhibitions, including documenta 6 and 12 (1977 and 2007) and the Austrian Pavilion at the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980. In recent years, her work has been exhibited at MAK Center for Art and Architecture at Schindler House, Los Angeles (2024); C/O Berlin Foundation (2024); Albertina, Vienna (2023); Fotomuseum Winterthur (2023); Kunsthau Bregenz (2023); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2020); Pavillon Populaire, Montpellier (2019); Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz (2017); Belvedere Museum, Vienna (2010); Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2009); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2007).

EXPORT taught at a number of international institutions, including the University of Wisconsin, San Francisco Art Institute and University of the Arts in Berlin. From 1995–2005 she was professor of multimedia and performance at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne. In 2019, she was awarded the Roswitha Haftmann Prize in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the visual arts. EXPORT received the Max-Beckmann-Prize of the City of Frankfurt in 2022.

With the purchase of her premature legacy, the VALIE EXPORT Center Linz was founded in 2015, laying the foundations for an international research centre for media and performance art. In 2023, the artist established the VALIE EXPORT FOUNDATION in Vienna, which aims to preserve and research the artist's work. Learn more at www.valieexport.at.



KETTY LA ROCCA, portrait of the artist

KETTY LA ROCCA

KETTY LA ROCCA (1938–1976) was one of the most original and influential figures in Italian art between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, standing at the crossroads of Body Art, Visual Poetry, and Conceptual research. In 1972 she was invited to participate in the 36th Venice Biennale, and henceforth her work gained widespread national and international visibility, featuring in the exhibition *Photography Into Art* at the Camden Art Centre, London, that same year. She received a retrospective exhibition at the 38th Venice Biennale (1978) and has been featured in numerous significant exhibitions focused on the relationship between art and feminism, including *Wack! Art and Feminist Revolution* at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007) and *Woman: feminist avant-garde in the 70s* at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome (2010).

Her works have been exhibited at numerous international institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary

Photography, Chicago (2025); EMMA - Espoo Museum of Modern Art (2025); MAMbo - Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (2025); Tate Modern, London (2024); Hamburger Kunsthalle (2022); LE BAL/Jeu de Paume, Paris (2022); Kunsthhaus Graz (2022); MAMAC - Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice (2022); Kunsthalle zu Kiel (2021); MUSEION, Bolzano (2019); Kunsthalle Schirn, Frankfurt (2016); Albertina, Vienna (2012); and MoMA PS1, New York (2007). Today, her works are held in major international collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum Ostwall, Dortmund; Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome; and Mart Rovereto.

Her work was recently the subject of a major solo museum exhibition, entitled *Ketty La Rocca: you you*, at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London (2025).

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