

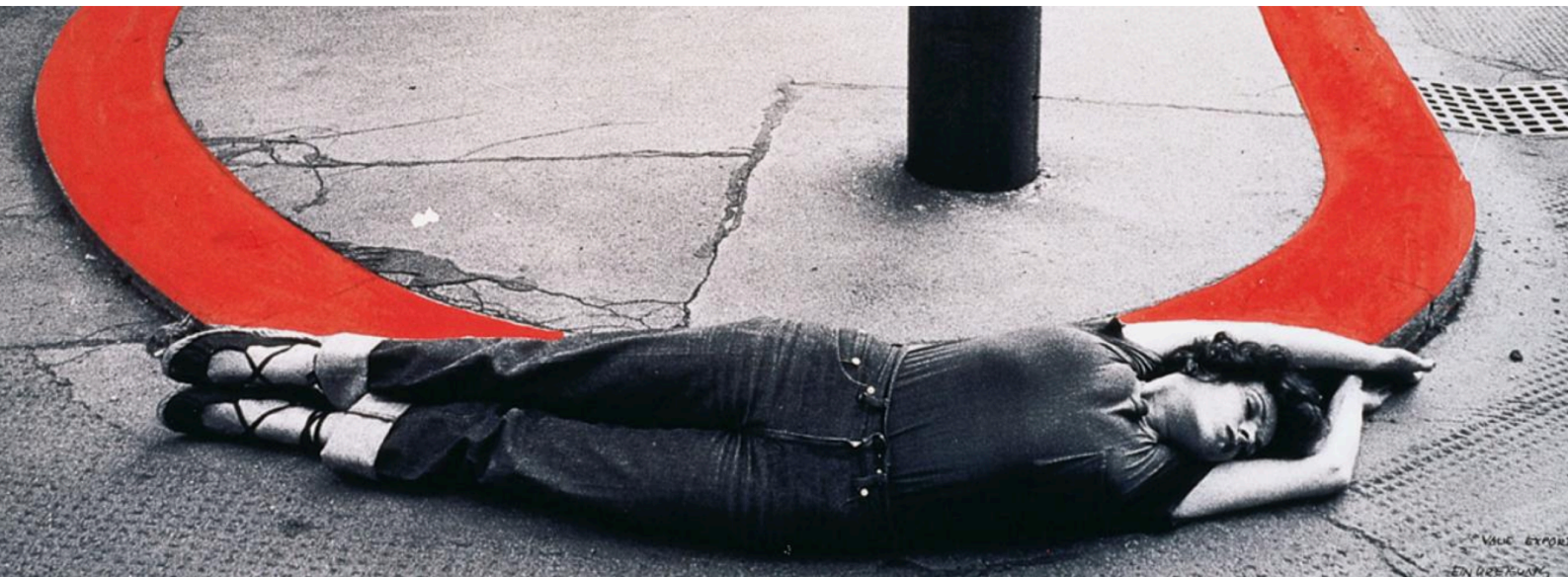
Reviews /



BY ALICE BUTLER
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VALIE EXPORT's Transgressive Show for the 1980 Venice Biennale Reappears in London

40 years on, the fight for reproductive rights, and against sexual violence, has never been more pressing



If you fixated on the monument captured in VALIE EXPORT's photograph, *Elongation* (1976/1980), you might miss the woman sprawled beneath it. You might step on her – bruise her – as you ascend the concrete steps towards the Austrian parliament's Athena fountain in Vienna. Her elongated body is turned away from the camera lens. With the tips of her fingers, she rubs the government architecture, entangling body and building.

Developed as part of EXPORT's 'Body Configurations' series (1972–82), *Elongation* appears alongside others from the group at London's Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. The show restages the artist's presentation in the 1980 Venice Biennale, incorporating other photographs, videos, sculptures and a vitrine of archival ephemera. By excavating a particular event in time, rather than showing a 'complete' retrospective, the exhibition foregrounds EXPORT's radical reimagining of the body as a site of flux and becoming.



VALIE EXPORT, *Elongation*, 1976,
b/w silver gelatine print on
baryta paper laid on chip board,
82 x 56 cm. Courtesy: the artist
and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac,
London/Paris/Salzburg;
photography: Ben Westoby

EXPORT began to 'transform' her identity more than a decade earlier, when she changed her name from Waltraud Hollinger to the uppercase VALIE EXPORT – a name taken from a brand of cigarettes. It was a way to free herself from the patriarchal associations attached to her previous names, and announce her presence in the Viennese art scene, which was then dominated by the male actionists. From her choice of alias to her work titles to the manifesto-statements vinylated onto the wall, I am struck by EXPORT's political commitment to fluid acts of translation and open-ended verbal forms.

Stamped with the artist's hallmark, the photographic works in 'Body Configurations' (all 1976/1980) capture EXPORT using her own body – and other people's – as a pliable material in various urban and rural environments: to be curved (*Einkreisung*); stretched (*Verkreuzung*); crouched (*Starre Identität*); and contorted (*DER MENSCH ALS ORNAMENT*). These body actions hum with a quieter feminism than the artist's signature gun-wielding, crotchless-trouser-wearing performance, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968), though they are no less forceful. Calling her body 'the seam' – a term that implies rupture, but also repair – EXPORT challenged social and sexist conventions across physical, political and psychic domains. She conjured a 'body-language' that not only questioned, but also *reconfigured*, the relationship between the architectural male gaze and the marginalized bodies shaped by it.



VALIE EXPORT, *Die Geburtenmadonna* (The Birth Madonna), 1976, chromogenic colour print laid on chip board, 1.5 x 1.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg; photography: Ben Westoby

When EXPORT was commissioned to represent her country at Venice in 1980 (along with Maria Lassnig), her contemporaries in Austria reacted with hostility and fear. The ensuing exhibition pushed the minds of those doubters with powerful provocations, opening up the ambiguities of female desire and the body. In the photo-collage *Die Geburtenmadonna* (The Birth Madonna, 1976/1980), a woman sits upon a washing machine, legs akimbo. From the open door gushes a blood-soaked towel: a feminist reimagining of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–99), wherein the mother is made abject by repetitive cycles of domestic labour. Or does the machine give moments of autoerotic pleasure?

Similarly, in the monumental sculpture, *Geburtenbett* (Birth Bed, 1980), a woman's dismembered legs rise from a rusty steel bedframe, opening onto ruby-red strip lights, which radiate from her closed-up hole like streams of blood. At the 'head' of the bed runs a looped video recording of a Catholic priest consecrating bread and wine during Mass. EXPORT contrasts the ritualistic rebirthing of Christ's body and blood with the violent realities of childbirth, an experience to be endured over and over again.



VALIE EXPORT, *Geburtenbett* (Birth Bed), 1980, installation view, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg; photograph: Ben Westoby

To re-stage the 1980 Venice exhibition is to remember the gender inequalities of the time and the double standards by which transgressive women artist's works were judged, such as EXPORT's self-mutilating video, *Remote Remote* (1973), shown here. It is to open up a political conversation between past and present feminist struggles, forging reparative attachments across time and place. 40 years on and the fight for reproductive rights, and against sexual violence, has never been more pressing. As Rebecca Schneider writes in her book, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), 'in the syncopated time of reenactment... then and now punctuate each other.' History becomes as porous as the bodies it documents in this exhibition-cum-archive.

VALIE EXPORT, 'The 1980 Venice Biennale Works' runs at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, until 25 January 2020.

Main image: VALIE EXPORT, *Einkreisung (Encirclement)*, 1976, b/w silver gelatine print on baryta paper laid on chip board, 79 x 130 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg; photograph: Ben Westoby

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