

Press release

VALIE EXPORT

3 October - 9 November 2024

Opening 2 October, 6 - 8 pm

VALIE EXPORT is an artist of exceptional standing - a “doyenne” of the Austrian art scene and a global pioneer of media art, performance, video art and feminist body art. Her works are firmly rooted in art history. Born in Linz in 1940, she studied at the School of Arts and Crafts and began experimenting with photography and various media at an early age. In 1960, she moved to Vienna, where she initially worked as a screenwriter and editor in the film industry. In 1967, she began her so-called ‘conceptual photography’. She made a decisive contribution to the documentation of performances and artistic actions for the ‘Image Compendium of Viennese Actionism and Film’. Through her provocative and critical approach, EXPORT created some of the most influential works in feminist discourse, conceptual photography and performance art.

EXPORT's work often revolves around the female body and the ‘gaze’ - especially the male gaze that defines women into fixed cultural and political roles. Her artistic counter-designs expose it and scrutinize the visual language of the media that reinforces such regimes of perception. A particularly impressive example is the poster for ‘Aktionshose: Genitalpanik’ from 1969, in which EXPORT poses dressed in a black leather jacket, a machine gun in her hand and trousers slit open at the crotch. Her gaze is direct and challenging, her legs spread provocatively in an exaggerated masculine pose. This uncompromising staging shatters traditional cultural expectations of women and demonstratively rejects oppression with the submachine gun - a symbol of male violence. The ‘Genitalpanik’ goes back to a performance in which EXPORT walked through the rows of seats in a Munich cinema with her trousers slit open and challenged the audience with her direct presence. This gesture reversed the usual viewing habits and transformed the cinema, normally a place of passive image consumption, into a place of direct, physical confrontation.

EXPORT's subversive strategies and skillful shifts in context always expose the cultural mechanisms of seeing. Another iconic work is ‘TAPP und TASTKINO’ from 1968, a performance in which EXPORT asked passers-by to touch her naked breasts through a cardboard theatre hanging on her upper body. The gaze literally becomes a touch. The woman, who is portrayed as an object of desire and consumption, is exposed in this action and at the same time, reflected, in a radical way. This direct physical interaction forces the audience to become aware of their role as passive observers and questions the boundaries between looking and touching, publicity and intimacy.

In her ‘Body Configurations’, EXPORT places her own body in relation to architectural structures in order to challenge the patriarchal orders of space and form. The rigid, geometric forms of architecture become symbols of power and oppression, which EXPORT confronts with her body in order to reveal their deeper meanings. Her art is both analytical and combative: she kneels on the corners of buildings, lies down on pavements, or moulds her body according to geometric structures in order to deconstruct the body as a carrier of meaning and architecture as an expression of power.

Early on, EXPORT intensively explored the voice - as a medium and physical organ of expression. Similar to the cut in film, which creates a break, the voice also plays a role in separation and fragmentation. This theme can be found not only in her conceptual photography but also in her sculpture ‘Scissor Dancers’, where two scissors pushed into each other metaphorically embody the theme of splitting and are reminiscent of the figures of a female dancer.

Under the impression of the Russian war of aggression and the renewed threat of nuclear weapons, EXPORT created a ‘clay sculpture’ made of organ pipes for the Kunsthau Bregenz. This sculpture played Charles Mingus' “Oh Lord, Don't Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb on Me” (1962), a song that captures the fears of the Cold War. EXPORT's work combines sound with the threat of violence and destruction. The exhibition features bundles of original organ pipes from a pilgrimage church in Linz that look like “Stalin's organ” or ballistic missiles. By interweaving sound, sculpture, and history of war, EXPORT creates a haunting reflection on the hidden violence of the present.

tdt, Bregenz 9 Sep 2024