

BODY DOUBLE

by Gary Indiana

(From the catalog)

The prolific art of VALIE EXPORT covers an impressive gamut of aesthetic practices, from drawing and collage to experimental cinema, feature films, sculpture, still photography, video, installation, and performance work. It has associative affinities with most of the important developments in late twentieth-century art and thought, and, in itself, constitutes a formidable corpus, more or less instantly identifiable by its rhetorical nuances, its recurring imagery, its displacements of things from their habitual settings.

EXPORT's work has obvious links to the ontological investigations of such conceptual artists as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, and to the visceral actionism process art of Otto Muhl and Hermann Nitsch; it also recalls the fantasy cinema of Jean Cocteau, Luis Bunuel, and Georges Franju, and bears some family resemblances to the "technofeminist" artmaking of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. It has deep roots in the radical deconstruction of language found in the work of such Austrian writers as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Kraus, and Thomas Bernhard. Broadly speaking, VALIE EXPORT is anti-authoritarian and existential in ways that are related to most of what seems valid in our intellectual and cultural life after World War II, characterized by a sense of em battlement and an approach of often satirical defiance, an opposition to power inflected by power's constant reorganization of itself, and its diffusion in a continually refigured ensemble of oppressive (and increasingly subliminal) structures. Revisiting some of her work from the sixties and seventies, I was struck by how many of its themes were taken up by other artists in the eighties and nineties, and how prescient it was in anticipating the predicament of human beings at the onset of the millennium. I have been writing lately about Pasolini, and am similarly impressed by his early protests against the homogenizing effects of mass culture. For certain artists, at least, it was easier to see, coming off the quantum social disruptions of the late sixties and early seventies, the comparatively primitive stratagems of that period's mass media to organize consciousness—in Chomsky's phrase, to "manufacture consent."

In EXPORT's work, this concern is explicitly centered in a consideration of the body and its status as a "material" in a manipulated world. We exist in our bodies, but our bodies are also figures in the perceptions of others, and monadic objects in the life of our societies. Productive objects, consuming objects, bureaucratically quantified objects, and, in recent years, objects of a previously unimaginable degree of surveillance, which citizens of the West increasingly accept as the cost of physical and economic security. It's hard to claim that we "own" our bodies, when what we do with them is determined by external structures, especially architectural structures, systems of transportation, and systems of language. These systems, in a sense, have a life of their own, meaning that they exist without us, replace us with other figures after our deaths. EXPORT's work investigates the intersections where the individual entity conflicts/meshes with this autonomous life of systems.

How much of our behavior is truly ours? How much of our bodies belong to us? Which parts of ourselves have been taken over? In a deceptively comic scene in *Unsichtbare Gegner* (Invisible Adversaries), two people having an argument are pictured on individual monitors, their images echoing their words on a short delay. Almost imperceptibly, as the argument progresses, the order of language shifts so that the couple's words are spoken first by their reproduced images: Representation is determining reality rather than the other way around. In other works, EXPORT shows language standing in for objects—for instance, the word "boot" printed on a walking foot,

to demonstrate that reality is not only mediated through the symbolic, but, in many respects, has been replaced by it.

EXPORT posits a ghostly relation to our own physicality, created by the doubling of ourselves via representation. Language itself is an “other me” that fills the perceptual landscape, that “represents me,” conditions the perception of “me” and, therefore, as part of a circuit of transpersonal exchange, conditions the behavior of “me” in relation to others, but also in relation to myself. Lacan describes psychotic symptoms as words trapped inside the body; we are also trapped inside the representations of ourselves formed by our language, and the collaborative representations embodied in the man-made environment. This psychological imprisonment is dramatized in EXPORT’s *Body Configuration Series* 1972–1982, among other works, and it’s important to note that the figure is not only shown positioned along the curbing of urban streets, the sides of buildings, and other artificial structures that miniaturize the figure or assimilate it into the structure’s geometry, but is alternately inserted into natural landscapes, where parts of the body echo the contours of sand dunes, rocks, and so on. In these environments, the human figure or its metonymic parts are out of normal scale with the landscape’s elements, magnified in relation to them: We no longer “fit” into nature but dominate it as a massive presence, a superimposition, while we only “fit” into our own world as a sort of architectural ornament or accessory.

Much of EXPORT’s performance work deals with the idea of endurance, extravagant physical effort, deliberate distress of the body, self-cicatrization, bringing the body into dangerous proximity to harmful substances, all of which illustrate the struggle to reconcile the body we live in with the body that exists for others, the body that’s an object in space, a “political” body that is, to one degree or another, “owned” by the social matrix. These halves of the divided self are often opposed in the area of will, and, certainly, with respect to Freud’s polymorphous libido—for instance, in the way male and female bodies are differentiated by external structures that become internalized as gendered psychology. One of the most compelling aspects of EXPORT’s narrative films is their deft treatment of masculinity and femininity as constructions of a deforming social order, and how this social order manifests itself in its physical minutiae as well as its superstructure. In *Menschenfrauen* (Womankind), simply by exchanging the voices emanating from male and female, EXPORT shows that the same words and the same emotions are read differently, carry different weight and different associations, depending on the speaker’s gender. EXPORT has wittily demonstrated, in a series of signature collages and their video restagings, that the prescriptive iconography of contemporary advertising is simply an updated version of traditional Western picturings of the body, that a Renaissance Madonna can smoothly morph into an advertisement for a vacuum cleaner. The expressive morphology of the official female and the official male has been revised for contemporary needs, but the division of roles, the parceling of human emotions into binary opposite-gender containers, remains a fixed imperative. The look of postpartum joy idealized a few hundred years ago mirrors the worldly ecstasy of the magazine model eyeing anew Toyota. The icons of the past and their electronic descendants don’t truly “fit” real human beings; this is a truism of everyday criticism, of course, but our lives have never been as porously vulnerable to prescriptive imagery, coercive representations, as they are now. We live in an ongoing avalanche of (primarily visual) manipulation, seductive on levels never dreamed of by Goebbels and other pioneers of mass propaganda.

It’s no longer a question of separating ourselves from a false image of life; today, people have to wage a fierce and constant inner war to differentiate themselves from an entirely manufactured consciousness that’s only reinforced by images rather than created by them, a consciousness already installed in each of us by early, deep, and mostly invisible ideological training. In the short film *Ein perfektes Paar oder die Unzucht wechselt ihre Haut* (A Perfect Couple, or Indecency Sheds Its Skin), EXPORT depicts human beings whose gendering has meshed completely with consumerism, whose clothing exposes discrete body parts upon payment of a coupon, who express love by presenting the loved body with an array of confining metal harnesses and plastic restraints. Consumer fetishism sectors the body into menu options: lips, breast, ass, hand, foot, etc., each with its price tag and expiration date.

There is a palpable feeling of incongruously sybaritic pleasure in EXPORT's work, a smiling absence of austerity. She's serious, of course, but her work is a good-natured, if arduous, combination of whimsy and rigor, full of subversive humor that exposes "the essential horror of it all," to use Auden's phrase, without portentousness; the culinary element is very strong. EXPORT's range and handling of materials attests to a high degree of artisanal mastery deployed with a sense of devilish, absurdist fun. The works are things we like to view again and again. EXPORT's sensibility doesn't exclude the marvelous. Her work participates in the adventure of finding what Levi-Strauss called "the crack in the wall of necessity." It gives access to the realm of dreams and fantasies. This is where it's not entirely off the mark to cite surrealism as a departure point for EXPORT's visual synesthesias, and appropriate to celebrate them as gorgeous sensory encounters. They don't just mean something, they are something. The world they reflect is problematical in the extreme, but its materiality offers us the means to refashion it in a more humane and human way, even when it is only an image of another image.