

Press release

VALIE EXPORT

13 June - 5 September 2026

Opening 12 June

While we had been working closely with VALIE EXPORT on this exhibition over many months, the artist unexpectedly passed away on May 14, 2026. As we mourn the loss of this formidable soul, Karma International wish to express their profound gratitude to VALIE EXPORT for having had the privilege of conceiving this exhibition together with her.

VALIE EXPORT was born Waltraud Lehner on May 17, 1940, in Linz, Austria. Raised by a widowed mother of three during the Second World War, she attended the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Arts and Crafts) in Linz and graduated from the Höhere Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Textilindustrie (Higher Federal Teaching and Research Institute for the Textile Industry) in Vienna in 1964. In 1967, she abandoned her married name to assume an impersonal identity of VALIE EXPORT, a spin on her nickname, VALIE, and SMART-EXPORT, a cigarette brand. Styling herself defiantly as a female counter-commodity, working against the structural patriarchy—itsself the core of the capitalist enterprise—she gained notoriety for several works she produced from the late 1960s onwards. Against the conservative backdrop of the Austrian society at the time (and arguably, any society), equally critical of Viennese Actionism—male-dominated and characterized by its expressive, symbolic and theatrical qualities—VALIE EXPORT started off with her precise and sober analysis of the politics of language, including the language of mass media, advertising, cinema, and Western European iconography. She carried out numerous actions and performances (the former being interventions in public space with unpredictable results and involving personal risk, the latter being scripted and performed for an invited audience or just the camera), analytical video works (such as performance and installation “Adjugated Dislocations” [Adjungierte Dislokationen], 1973) and photographs, she made drawings and sculptures, using all means available to demonstrate, dismantle and discard the habits of perception, manners of speaking, unreflected behaviours and daily gestures that together contribute to the patriarchal mindset of the society and support the apparatus of the state. As a public intellectual-activist, she also curated exhibitions (including *MAGNA. Feminism: Art and Creativity* in Vienna, 1975) and authored numerous texts and statements. Using her name as a weapon and shield, VALIE EXPORT succeeded as one of a very few conceptual artists whose public actions and gestures performed before the camera and distributed as iconic images through a variety of media have broken the bubble of art world to become part of the common imaginary of social dissent.

Among those was the action “Touch Cinema” (Tapp- und Tastkino) performed in Munich in 1968, and followed by the artist’s statement:

As usual, the film is ‘shown’ in the dark. But the cinema has shrunk somewhat – only two hands fit inside it. To see (i.e. feel, touch) the film, the viewer (user) must stretch his hands through the entrance to the cinema. At last, the curtain which formerly rose only for the eyes now rises for both hands.

The tactile reception is the opposite of the deceit of voyeurism. For as long as the citizen is satisfied with the reproduced copy of sexual freedom, the state is spared the sexual revolution. (...)

Photographs “From the Underdog File” (Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit, 1969) show the artist walking her partner, curator and theorist Peter Weibel, on the leash on all fours, in a busy street. In a dreamlike scene, the inversion of professional and gender roles is blatantly embodied.

In “Action Pants: Genital Panic” (Aktionshose: Genitalpanik, 1969) VALIE EXPORT posed seated in jeans cut to expose her crotch, holding a submachine gun in her hands and with hair wildly teased up, in a cinema during an experimental film evening, going over any conceivable limits of even the most “expanded” notions of cinema.

The statement as part of “Body Sign Action” (1970) that involved tattooing a garter strap on the artist’s thigh—a form of self-inscription that also seems to invoke Austria’s fascist past—reads:

The tattooing of the body demonstrates the connection between ritual and civilization. Incorporated in a tattoo, the garter belt signifies a former enslavement, is a garment symbolizing repressed sexuality, an attribute of our non-self-determined womanhood. A social ritual that covers up a bodily need is unmasked, our culture’s opposition to the body is laid open. As a symbol of membership in a caste which demands conditioned behaviour, the garter belt becomes a memento. The female body peels off and discards the imprint of a world which has never been a woman’s world, to arrive at a human world in which women can autonomously define their existence.

At Karma International, VALIE EXPORT’s performance work “Eros/Ion” (1971) is represented by photographs: First, I roll on broken glass and canvas screen, then on the glass plate, finally on a paper screen. The marks produced on my skin-screen by the splinters of glass leave informal, painterly traces on the paper screen. The splinters are transformed into signs by this reduction into traces of an aesthetic process on the body.

In a group of photographs “Body Configurations” (1972-82), the artist’s body is seen attempting to align with several edifices—for example, a Theseus Temple, Library and Palace of Justice—a mock-analytical exercise in decoding and subverting the authority of buildings in their diverse functions as pillars of social order built on religion, knowledge and law. That authority was instantaneously exposed and made vulnerable through the ephemeral presence of the female body, upsetting the architecture’s aspiration to immutability.

Such alignments, and critical dis-alignments, are also present in a series of photographs of a model holding household utensils in poses borrowed from representations of the Madonna in Old Masters’ paintings (Schoel, nach: Paolo Veronese, die Erweckung des Jünglings zu Naim, 1565, Die Putzmadonna, Die Geburtenmadonna; all 1976).

A series of sculptures “Heads – Apheresis” (Heads – Aphärese, 2002) was conceived in response to the scandalizing content of the book “Death Scenes: A Homicide Detective’s Scrapbook” (1996), containing real crime scene photographs of dead bodies from the files of Jack Huddleston, a Los Angeles police detective, collected from the 1920s to 1950s. VALIE EXPORT’s sculptures, helmet-like, have gaping black void instead of faces, circumventing the graphic representation of death in Huddleston’s scrap book. They “expose the nameless” (to borrow the phrase from Georges Didi-Huberman’s essay) without disclosing their identity. Apheresis originates in the Greek word signifying the act of withdrawal—and relates to meaning, identity, memory, and medical technology (extracorporeal blood therapy). As if anticipating the public outrage following the presentation of Dana Schutz 2016 painting “Open Casket” in Whitney Biennial in 2017 (based on a photograph from the open coffin funeral of Emmett Till, a 14-year old black boy beaten up to death by two white men in Drew, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955, which the boy’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, decided to make available for Jet and The Chicago Defender, the African-American magazine and newspaper), “Heads – Apheresis” offers a dignified antidote to any voyeuristic representation of violence, and against the violence of representing subaltern subjects. And perhaps, in VALIE EXPORT’s void faces of “Heads” we recognize those subjected to damnatio memoriae—defacement of sculptures of men and women who were stripped of their privileges by political and personal opponents and punished post-mortem by having their face smashed or erased and replaced by another face in their statues and paintings. Finally, the work might also connect to VALIE EXPORT’s founding act of dis-identification with her established social position and its related use value by having her name replaced with the one invented herself. She embodied and modified Antonin Artaud’s pronouncement in a letter to his editor in 1946: Je suis né autrement, de mes œuvres et non d'une mère (I was born otherwise, out of my works and not out of a mother)—she was born and named herself VALIE EXPORT, by her own decision, out of her works, in 1967.

Adam Szymczyk