8. Revealing Norms and Sowing Confusion: VALIE EXPORT’s Body

Sophie Delpeux
Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

Abstract

Created in 1968, VALIE EXPORT is a pseudonym that allows an Austrian Artist to explicitly criticize the way the art world and market exclude women then. In an advertising pastiche, she puts her own body in display to reveal the stereotypes coming with such a representation, but also how to escape from it with numerous performances, images and manifests. In this article, her body will be considered as a critical capital, enemy of Capital.

Keywords: performance art; feminism; Austria; VALIE EXPORT; stereotypes; pastiche; art market; gender; self-portrait.

A tightly composed black-and-white photograph framing the face and shoulders of a young blonde woman with her eyes closed, and a cigarette between her lips. Her left eyelid is slightly enhanced by make-up. Her right eye is invisible—in front of it, a packet of cigarettes is held aloft by the young woman, whose fingers seem blurred, cut off by the lower edge of the frame. This figure and the gesture fill the image and even give the impression of going beyond its edges. The packet of cigarettes is thus imposed on the onlooker and presents a second female face, associated with a brand, VALIE EXPORT made in Austria, as well as a motto: Semper et Ubique/Immer und Überall (‘Always and everywhere’). This photograph is titled SMART EXPORT (Figure 8.1). It is dated 1970 and it is not so much an advertisement, as the way in which an Austrian artist introduces the new identity she has just created. In the late 1960s, Waltraud Höllinger, née Lehner, decided to abandon the names of her father and husband, and replaced them with
VALIE EXPORT. This pseudonym may sound like a patronymic, but let us make no mistake: What is involved is an *artistic creation*, no less. The artist says she invented it ‘as if she had made a drawing’.1 By making her own body and identity the object of her artistic research, she was part and parcel of those actionist activities that came to the fore in Vienna in 1963. It was no longer the production of a permanent work that focussed those artists’ attention, but rather how art could interact with the real world through fleeting events, sometimes recorded by photography. The first New York happenings, in the late 1950s, opened up the possibility of getting into

1 ‘comme si elle avait fait un dessin’; Hofleitner, *VALIE EXPORT*, p. 93.
painting and having an experience within it, an experience that Austrian artists would politicize. So, VALIE EXPORT was created within a context in which the artist’s body was already perceived as a critical and subversive agency—her predecessors’ actions had been censored and suppressed. So for the art historian I am, analysis of these ‘performance arts’ that grapple with the historical and political realities of the period is tantamount to examining strategies which aim to upset models of bodily representation, in the broad sense, on a societal scale, and not just in the domain of art.

**Emancipation through Imagery**

The VALIE EXPORT avatar would enable the artist to undertake an investigation into the links between the body—in particular the female body—and its representation. She becomes involved in this, based on this image. It does not escape the attention of the keen onlooker that it is the same woman who holds the packet of cigarettes and who appears on the label on the packet. The woman who is consumed is also the woman who consumes. Here, there is a self-sufficiency which is asserted and which can be associated with the ideas put forward by the artist in her text *Women’s Art: A Manifesto* two years later.² In that essay, the artist asserts: ‘If reality is a social construction and men its engineers’, this infers that women are ‘dealing with a male reality’.³ Because women ‘had no access to the media’, they had never managed to produce ‘a self-defined image’ of themselves ‘and thus a different view of the social function of woman’.⁴ She ends that essay with these words:

> the arts can be understood as a medium of our self-definition adding new values to the arts. these values, transmitted via the cultural sign-process, will alter reality towards an accommodation of female needs.⁵

The image titled *SMART EXPORT* seems to fit into this perspective: In it, the artist self-defines both her name and her image, a process made visible and emphasized by its division. The construction and dissemination of this image are thus a political act aimed to transform reality, so that the latter

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² VALIE EXPORT, ‘Women’s Art’.
³ VALIE EXPORT, ‘Women’s Art’, p. 869.
⁴ VALIE EXPORT, ‘Women’s Art’, p. 869.
⁵ VALIE EXPORT, ‘Women’s Art’, p. 870.
is not just built by men, but jointly created. It remains for us to grasp why the artist makes a pastiche of an advertising image with SMART EXPORT.

It was actually based on the name of a Virginia cigarette, very well-known in Austria at the time—Austrian Export—that the artist created her new identity. In so doing, VALIE EXPORT moved away from the pseudonym and more towards the brand: for example, the artist demanded that it should always be written in capital letters. In this sense, the self-representation of SMART EXPORT also had to do with self-promotion—two notions which may seem to be removed from one another, if not contradictory at first glance. How are we to interpret this conjunction between the political issue, that is, the possibility for a woman to have her own image, and the commercial issue, not to say the marketing question? To understand this, we must go back to the economic and social situation of women in the 1970s. That was a period of awareness and of demands. Feminist movements ushered in an initial finding in the creative world: the very scant representation of artworks produced by women. This gave rise to criticism, but also to academic research; a first generation of female art historians engaged in those movements deciphered the phenomena of impediments, snags, and erasure, phenomena which barred the way to the careers of many (female) artists, both past and present. Those artists were thus long confined to amateurism and/or oblivion. One of the texts which reveals these phenomena of exclusion was written by Linda Nochlin and published in 1971 in the magazine ARTnews. It was titled ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’6 In it, the author highlights the fact that this debate had always been reduced to the question of talent, hiding the other fact that it was the social and economic context which had invariably been the major obstacle to women’s artistic output:

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male.7

The idea that the art world, as it is constructed and formed, sediment-like, has always, on principle, excluded women thus became something quite obvious, shared by militant female artists all over the world, including VALIE EXPORT.

6 Nochlin, ‘Why’.
The Taboo about the Productive Female Worker

What we mean by the art world, in sociology, is a set of people who make it possible for a work to be identified as art, and thereby assume value, which is as symbolic as it is monetary. With SMART EXPORT, the artist short-circuited those intermediaries who had never been favourable to the artistic work of women, and imposed herself as an artist who was not only professional, but also offensive in the strategic way her image was broadcast—she spilled out of the frame and wanted to impose herself Always and Everywhere. In the context just set forth, there was, needless to say, a healthy dose of irony in this presentation: If what was at issue here was an international artistic career with the use of export, it barely existed for the women of that period, and the artist was fully aware of that. But it did not stop there. With this image, the artist also infringed a tacit and age-old rule, consisting, since the arrival of the Academies in Europe, in the fact that the artist does not play a direct part in the sale and promotion of her work. It is precisely by the creation of intermediaries and go-betweens—dealers, for example, that craftsmanship has become art, and the craftsman/artisan an artist, once the artists was occupied with just creative work and no longer base material considerations. Raymonde Moulin, an eminent French sociologist of art, demonstrated in an article dated 1971—no coincidence—both the arbitrariness and the duplicity of this construct. The essay was titled ‘Champ artistique et société industrielle capitaliste (1971)’ (‘Artistic Domain and Capitalist Industrial Society [1971]’). In it, the author wondered about the ‘historical detours’ that have permitted the artistic domain to become autonomous, and art objects to be radically differentiated from craftsmanship, and then from industrial products. It is worth noting that such a study was contemporary with SMART EXPORT and that, in these undoubtedly different fields, it was the same stereotype that was spoken out against, that idea that artistic activity was above economics. As much with this self-representation as with Moulin’s brilliant text, economics and artists were, on the contrary, drawn together, until they were but one, because VALIE EXPORT was a brand and the sociologist was quite formal about this in her article:

The artist is subjected to a system of organization with regard to the artistic life whose basic principle is the economic order. Slipped into

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8 See Quemin, ‘L'influence’. The first listings of artists date from the 1970s, and, in lists averaging a hundred or so figures, only four or five women artists appear in the bottom half of the chart.
9 Moulin, ‘Champ artistique’. 
capitalist society and grappling with an ever-growing commercialization of art, artists, dealers, and art-lovers will try to disguise themselves and hide from others the economic logic which underpins their attitudes and their behaviour [...]. If the official imagery posits art as something absolute, glorifies artists, and represents the relation between the art-lover and the work as pure, unmotivated love, this is in order to mask the economic combinations to which artists are subjected.\(^{10}\)

In boasting about herself and by selling herself in a direct way with \textit{SMART EXPORT}, the artist revealed the flipside of this ‘official imagery’, just like Moulin, by placing economics, again just like the sociologist, at the centre of her action and her artistic appearance. This was all the more understandable because her argument was part and parcel of a feminist view (which was not the case with Moulin), which associated the financial dependence of women with the impossibility of creating art, a situation they have found themselves in up until now. In a very witty way, Virginia Woolf summed this up in 1929 in her famous essay, \textit{A Room of One's Own}:

\begin{quote}
If only Mrs. Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex, we might have dined very tolerably up here alone off a bird and a bottle of wine; we might have looked forward without undue confidence to a pleasant and honourable lifetime spent in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions.\(^{11}\)
\end{quote}

If these ideas are about literary creation, they can be readily generalized to cover the entire field of creation. When Woolf laments the fact that women had remained poor from generation to generation, and had not had the \textit{art} of earning money, and that, as a result, those who had enjoyed the

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\(^{10}\) ‘L’artiste se trouve soumis à un système d’organisation de la vie artistique dont le principe fondamental est l’ordre économique. Insérés dans la société capitaliste et aux prises avec une commercialisation grandissante de l’art, artistes, marchands, amateurs d’art vont tenter de se dissimuler et de dissimuler à autrui la logique économique qui sous-tend leurs attitudes et leurs comportements [...]. Si l’imagerie officielle pose l’art en absolu, glorifie les artistes, représente la relation de l’amateur à l’œuvre comme amour pur et désintéressé, c’est pour masquer les combinaisons économiques auxquelles sont assujettis les artistes.’; Moulin, ‘Champ artistique’, p. 43.

\(^{11}\) Woolf, \textit{Room}, p. 33.
independence necessary to undertake creative activity had been few and far between, the creation of the VALIE EXPORT brand resonates with this history of women. In the manner of exaggeration and a certain outrageousness, this image has a powerful symbolic content: This art of business which the artist plunged into was the art that was missing for her female forebears and her sisters, whose invisibility she lamented in her 1972 manifesto.

To finally assume the full measure of this self-representation, it will help to emphasize a final factor: It was her body and her face which the artist involved in this publicity pastiche. In it, she associated not only her artistic praxis, but her actual person with an economic activity. In so doing, she was once again close to what Moulin spelled out in her article. According to Moulin, the artist, in capitalist society, had become a ‘productive worker’, no sooner than exclusive contracts had been signed with art dealers: ‘It is not only the product that finds its way into an economic circuit of supply and demand, but the producer, too, whose material means of producing depend on his capacity for inclusion in the market.’12 This producer—read: the artist—had become more important than the object produced, which Moulin summed up thus: ‘The fetishism of the author has taken over from the fetishism of the work: it is the signature that has become merchandise’,13 with the consequence that: ‘From the moment when the artist has made a name for himself, his behaviour is, at every moment, and no matter what he does, the very definition of what a real artist is.’14 The interest of the art world had thus shifted to what the artist is, rather than to what he or she does. The corollary of this was that the person, moral and physical alike, of the artist had thus become the guarantee of a value on the market. This, give or take, is what the SMART EXPORT self-representation highlights, with the artist and her attitude having become products and assuming as much: To have a career, it would seem that there is nothing else to do than to introduce yourself. VALIE EXPORT, however, is not the first to have made this phenomenon visible. To take just the most famous example, Andy Warhol realized very early on that his attitude, far more than what he produced, could be the object of a media-based and financial investment. For this

12 ‘ce n’est pas seulement le produit qui entre dans un circuit économique d’offre et de demande, mais le producteur, dont les moyens matériels de produire dépendent de sa capacité d’insertion dans le marché’; Moulin, ‘Champ artistique’, p. 42.
13 ‘le fétichisme de l’auteur a pris le relais du fétichisme de l’œuvre : c’est la signature qui est devenue marchandise’; Moulin, ‘Champ artistique’, p. 47.
14 ‘à partir du moment où l’artiste s’est fait un nom, son comportement est à chaque instant et, quoi qu’il fasse, la définition même de ce qu’est un véritable artiste’; Moulin, ‘Champ artistique’, p. 47.
reason, he took great care to construct nothing less than a mise-en-scène-like production, staged around his own persona and his studio, known as The Factory, with ever more self-portraits and shocking statements, and more and more relations with the world of show business. As never before in the history of artistic activities, Warhol became a star attracting adulation and loathing, drumming up commissions, and, at the same time, giving rise to nothing less than fascination. He also agreed—and there was nothing haphazard about this—to become associated with brands of alcohol and microcomputers, and he even went so far as to publish a list of items, with which he would accept to link his identity, in a small advertisement in *The Village Voice* in February 1966. On the list—coincidence! coincidence!—we find cigarettes.

I’ll endorse with my name any of the following: clothing, AC-DC, cigarettes, small tapes, sound equipment, Rock ‘n’ Roll records, anything, film and film equipment, Food, Helium, WHIPS, Money; love and kisses ANDY WARHOL. EL 5-9941.15

As a former advertising man well-versed in the art of selling things, Warhol highlighted, with both delight and cynicism, the secret link existing between art praxis and industrial praxis, by creating nothing less than a brand image. But, precisely where he always laconically averred that he had nothing more to say about such phenomena and, on the contrary, was pleased about that (fame and money being the two rare values that he laid claim to), VALIE EXPORT does her utmost to use this link to turn her artistic person and her artist’s body into a critical body. It is not a matter, for her, of speaking out against the power (and the value) that have trapped the artist’s attitude, but of making use of them to political ends—herein lies all the determination displayed by the split woman of *SMART EXPORT*.

**VALIE EXPORT’s Body: A Capital Enemy of Capital**

It is most interesting to observe that, in the very same period, Jean Baudrillard was also interested in this issue of the body invested by capital, not within the art world, but on the scale of Western society, where, to use his own words, the body had become ‘the most beautiful consumer item’.16 He

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16 ‘le plus bel objet de consommation’; Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*. 
noted that, after centuries spent ‘persuading people that they did not have a body [...]’, people today systematically persist in persuading them about their body’,17 and giving them a status in such a pivotal way that, for the author, they have ‘literally replaced the soul’.18 A reflection which, needless to say, resonates with the shift from interest in the object to the artist, as mentioned above. The originality of Baudrillard’s idea was that it showed that the ubiquity of the body in the 1970s and its promotion were not signs of a liberation after centuries of taboos and moral and religious prohibitions, but, on the contrary, of a new alienation, this time by profit:

The body thus ‘re-appropriated’ is done so right away in relation to ‘capitalist’ goals: in other words, if it is invested, it is to make it bear fruit. This re-appropriated body is not so treated in accordance with the autonomous end purposes of the subject, but based on a normative principle of pleasure and profitability.19

The interest of this analysis also resides in the fact that it puts forward a differentiated approach to women’s bodies within this phenomenon. For Baudrillard, ‘woman and body have shared the same bondage’, and the ‘emancipation of woman and the emancipation of body are logically and historically connected’;20 the consequence of this is that control is exercised more on this body, because, together with that of young people, it has ‘the most revolutionary virtuality’, and thus runs ‘the most fundamental risk for any kind of established order’.21 In the way in which he described emancipation as relative—what he called a ‘myth of emancipation’—Baudrillard associated it with the advertising man, whose purpose is to sell things, rather than free things up: ‘We give women Woman to consume, to the young Young People, and, in this formal and narcissistic

17 ‘à convaincre les gens qu’ils n’en avaient pas [...]’, on s’obstine aujourd’hui systématiquement à les convaincre de leur corps’; Baudrillard, La société de consummation, p. 200, emphasis in original.
18 ‘littéralement substitué à l’âme’; Baudrillard, La société de consummation, p. 200.
19 ‘Le corps ainsi “réapproprié” l’est d’emblée en fonction d’objectifs “capitalistes”: autrement dit, s’il est investi, c’est pour le faire fructifier. Ce corps réapproprié ne l’est pas selon les finalités autonomes du sujet, mais selon un principe normatif de jouissance et de rentabilité’; Baudrillard, La société de consummation, p. 204.
20 ‘la femme et le corps ont partagé la même servitude’, ‘l’émancipation de la femme et l’émancipation du corps sont logiquement et historiquement liés’; Baudrillard, La société de consummation, p. 215.
21 ‘la virtualité la plus révolutionnaire’, ‘le risque le plus fondamental pour quelque ordre établi que ce soit’; Baudrillard, La société de consummation, p. 216.
emancipation, we manage to ward off their real liberation.\textsuperscript{22} If we follow Baudrillard, it seems clear that this false emancipation represents, on top of the age-old history of women being represented and depicted by men, a resistance to the project of self-definition and self-representation, which it is VALIE EXPORT's intention to undertake by way of the media. In this regard, the historical moment in which SMART EXPORT might be described as a standard is a complex one because, in it, attempts at emancipation are stifled by their being transformed into consumer products. Because this standard becomes just one of the aspects of this ‘myth of emancipation’ as described by Baudrillard, this liberated and slightly arrogant woman, who smokes and seems self-sufficient, can thus be reduced to the simple role of creating more consumption. Whether she is an artist or not...

It would seem that the artist was fully aware of this threat of retrieval and profitability. At the same time that she embarked upon this task of self-representation in 1968, of which SMART EXPORT is an example, she involved her artist’s body in various acts and events, in the public place and in places given over to art. This offered her the possibility of incarnating many different aspects of femininity in real life, by way of experiences undergone, and experimental situations. She could thus identify with certain stereotypes in order to speak out against them, when she had a garter and the top of a silk stocking tattooed on her thigh in 1970 (\textit{Body Sign Action}, 1970, Figure 8.2) or, in another vein, displayed herself in outfits and attitudes that were offbeat in relation to those norms. Three famous performances were part and parcel of this logic. The first was titled \textit{Tapp und Tastkino} (‘Tap and Touch Cinema’, 1968, Figure 8.3), during which, with her torso hidden by a small portable theatre, she allowed passers-by to touch her breasts in Munich, and then in Vienna. The second, in 1969, was titled \textit{Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit} (‘From the Portfolio of Doggedness’); in this work, she walked her friend Peter Weibel on all fours and on a leash in the streets of Vienna. For the third, which was held in that same year, she entered a cinema, armed with a mock machine-gun, and wearing a pair of jeans with a triangle cut out of the crotch to show her pubis. The performance was called \textit{Genitalpanik} (‘Genital Panic’, Figure 8.4). A famous poster of the artist in that combat gear was published. In it, she appears with her hair combed back and her face unsmiling, presenting a figure of a fearsome and unusual fighter. Three

\textsuperscript{22} ‘On donne à consommer de la Femme aux femmes, des Jeunes aux jeunes, et, dans cette émancipation formelle et narcissique, on réussit à conjurer leur libération réelle’; Baudrillard, \textit{La société de consommation}, p. 216.
years later, with a performance such as *Hyperbulie*, she presented herself naked inside a structure of electrified wires confining her (Figure 8.5). The assignation to a small space, along with the issue of the danger incurred by wanting to move about freely, were emphasized. These are just a few small examples, in a far larger output, which show that the creation called VALIE EXPORT could be seductive, aggressive, commonplace, androgynous, dominating, imprisoned, and a victim, which is not an exhaustive list. If there is a question of creating a ‘different social view of woman’—I am borrowing the artist’s words—it would seem to be through the splitting of the VALIE EXPORT subject into various subpersonalities. Subpersonalities which permit an endless number of tests, an endless amount of role play,
and an endless series of duplications. The female figure she incarnates can never be frozen in a single definition, or image.

By this yardstick, the duplication of SMART EXPORT is just one example of an overall increase within this artist’s praxis, lending her full weight to the motto Semper et Ubique. In a recent interview, the artist confirms as
much: ‘Showing the different identities of my self has always been one a concern of mine as an artist.’ This smithereening may be disquieting—it is probably the artist’s aim to put the stereotypical representation of woman in a state of crisis. Needless to say, this ushers in a questioning about what we call the reality of a gendered identity and the way in which we can grasp it, or not. But to never be the same is also tantamount to withstand the logic of the profitability of the artist’s body: Coherence and a unique and constant face make identification easier, and thereby commerce. Here, we should think again about the way Warhol, on the contrary, cultivated a homogeneous image throughout his lengthy career to make business simpler.

I will take a last example within the VALIE EXPORT project, which further indicates that determination to create a productive body in terms of emancipation and not of capital, which seems to me to typify the artist’s approach. What is involved is the film installation titled *Adjungierte Dislokationen* (‘Adjunct Dislocations’, 1973). Three simultaneous projections form this work: In the largest of them (a 16 mm film), the artist strolls about with two Super 8 cameras attached to her torso and back. In the other two, which are smaller, cityscapes and natural landscapes file past. Obeying a reflex, the viewer concludes that he is simultaneously looking at the

23 ‘Montrer les différentes identités que peut revêtir ma personnalité a toujours été une de mes préoccupations d’artiste’; Delpeux, ‘VALIE EXPORT’, p. 71.
movements that the artist is making with her brace of cameras and the two resulting films. Her body thus appears in the image as also a producer of images.\(^{24}\) A division which makes us see three ways and further enables the artist to question the standards for representing the female body, as well the possibilities of her experience. To film with two cameras attached to her body, the artist is obliged to restrict her movements, in both their nature and their scope. She takes slow chassé steps, she arches her body rearwards, lies down on the asphalt, and makes all these unusual gestures at a very slowed-down pace, which is also unusual. Her entire behaviour sidesteps ordinariness, and dodges what seems usual as movements and gestures in the urban space (Figure 8.6).

The behavioural reasons are thus revealed to us, just like the low tolerance threshold which governs them. Without being as outrageous and weird as the ‘silly walk’ adopted by John Cleese in the famous Monty Python sketch, this different way of moving has nothing less than a disruptive potential.\(^{25}\) When she refers to *Adjungierte Dislokationen*, VALIE EXPORT defines this piece as an ‘investigation about the environment’ undertaken ‘through the body’.\(^{26}\) So the artist offers us a chance to see her experiment and have contact with this experimental process. By feeling her environment in a different way, she permits herself and us to have another body, in the way in which it positions itself in space, and tries to grasp and occupy it. But there is more. If she offers us the possibility of an identification and an unlearning which liberates us from the standardized (and gendered) gesture and movement of *Adjungierte Dislokationen*, VALIE EXPORT also introduces confusion into these processes. In no time, the 8 mm images which file past do not, in any way, correspond with what the artist seems to be filming in the 16 mm film. This phase shift gives rise to another awareness: Not only has the viewer internalized standards of behaviour, but they also anticipate what seems to comply with the experience undergone by the artist in the projection on the left. This highlights our desire to predict what the experience should produce. By fooling this prediction, the artist shows us our active role in the construction of reality, the way in which we enclose ourselves in stereotypical kinds of conduct, which are repetitive and predictable. To describe this stage of the experience, she talks about an ‘environmental body’, a body

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24 This is the subject of my essay *Le corps-caméra*, in which I propose seeing a project-based identity somewhere between performance and photographic performance image: one intervening in the field of the visible in order to subvert it; Delpeux, *Le corps-caméra*.


which no longer undergoes, but rather produces its environment.\textsuperscript{27} She thus lends form to a thoroughly contemporary period, and to Jean Baudrillard’s hunch: Despite the ubiquitous danger of its normalization and profitability, the body can also show itself as ‘a living and contradictory agency’, and, in so doing, fulfil ‘its revolutionary virtuality’.\textsuperscript{28}

This artist’s body called VALIE EXPORT explores this virtuality, or so it seems to me, by means of investigations which multiply her faces and thereby render it—her body—elusive. Because they cannot be frozen in a single image, neither her gestures nor her patterns of behaviour ever have the required advertising coherence. If there is a capital which the artist wishes to assert to win her autonomy, it is as critical capital, the enemy of capital.

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\textsuperscript{28} ‘une instance vivante et contradictoire’; Baudrillard, \textit{La société de consommation}, p. 212.


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About the Author

Sophie Delpeux is a lecturer in Art History at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. Former Pensionnaire of the French Academy in Rome (Villa Medici), she focuses her researches on Performance Art. Her Ph.D was a study about the photographic documentation of these past events (Le corps-caméra. Le performer et son image, Paris, Textuel, 2010) and how it opens reality to fiction through artists’s bodies. The political, social but also therapeutical aspects of these art forms are at the center of her present academic works. She also writes about contemporary art.

Contact details: sdelpeux@univ-paris1.fr