VALIE EXPORT/PETER WEIBEL

Multimedial feminist art

THOMAS DREHER

EXPANDED CINEMA

In 1968, the year of its founding, the *Undependent Film Center* in Munich organized the *First European Meeting of Independent Filmmakers*. Birgit Hein writes: *The necessary publicity for the well visited cinema events was provided by the spectacular presentations of Valie Export's Tapp- und Tastfilm* (Grope and Touch Film) *and Peter Weibel's action 'Exit'.*[1]

In *Exit*, Weibel projected a film onto a tin foil screen, until he interrupted the presentation by physically threatening the audience from the cinema's stage, the site of the presentation: Rocket bodies instead of motion pictures.[2] With the expulsion from the cinema in *Exit*, Weibel turned voyeurism against its own premises: Aggression and curiosity — coupled in a phallocratic sexuality which places itself at the disposal of the feminine — became opposing qualities in the expulsion from the cinema.
In *Tapp- und Tastkino*, Export placed a box over her head to cover her exposed breasts; the open front of the box was covered by a curtain. The action taking place on stage became invisible and tangible, as opposed to the visible, intangible glimmer of the cinema. Export invited passers-by to grope through the curtain for 12 seconds. As soon as a passer-by accepted the offer, the artist turned her head to the side to keep track of the time. After the time was up, Export looked at the person touching her and indicated that the action had come to an end. Export subjugated passers-by to a discipline of time, which subordinated the subjective sense of touch to an objective framework. Export circumvented the taboo of visual sexual attraction in public places. By publicly presenting female body parts naked, but not visually so, she corrected the sexual projection fields, which are established visually, but not tactily, by mass reproductions: spectacular 'object-images' ('images-objets')[3], which arouse curiosity, were not present. By means of the tactile, Export circumvented restrictive codes and then re-introduced them by means of the discipline of time: restrictive codes are, on a tactile level, considerably more threatening for the body and one's sense of his or her own body than visual coding, but also less subtle.

FEATURE FILMS

Beginning in 1976, Export and Weibel transform dénouement models of the feature film genre by means of montage techniques, dream sequences, and pictorial media in the pictorial medium, to make statements from a
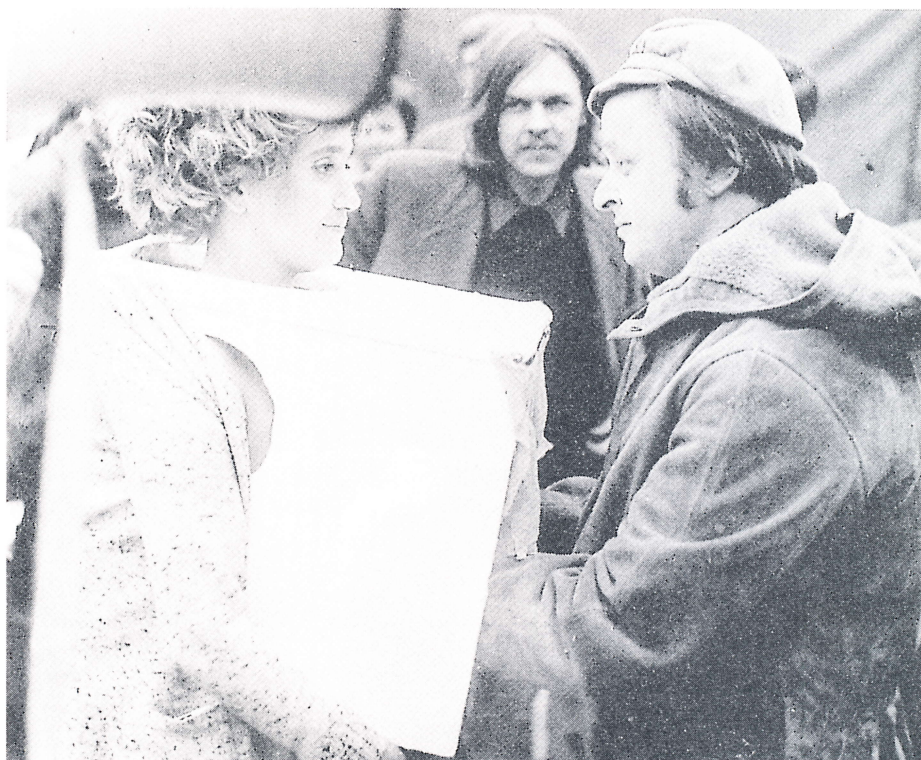
Valie EXPORT   *Tapp- und Tastkino*, 1968
aus: *Valie Export. Eine intermediale Künstlerin*,
Wien 1988

feminist standpoint, which, until then, had been either rare or impossible in this genre.

In a scene from the film *Unsichtbare Gegner* (Invisible Adversary), which Export and Weibel realized together in 1976/77, *Anna* and *Peter* communicate with one another both directly and, simultaneously, by means of monitors.[4] In 1984, in *Die Praxis der Liebe* (The Practice of Love), Export films a monitor-quarrel between Judith and Dr. Josef Frischkoff. Only Judith is present.[5] Both scenes are determined by crises within a relationship. In both cases, the monitor-image of the masculine part becomes independent of the actor; and in each case, the male image explicates the foundering of the relationship.

In both of these feature films, reproductive media, such as photography and video, which are presented in the film as part of the action, place viewers of the film in the role of the observer, who observe the (observed and observing) observers in the film as they observe. The observed and observing female observers in the film become female protagonists for viewers of both sexes: Just as, in the film, the actress attempts to orient herself between the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, the viewer attempts to orient his or herself between his or her own projections, the film world and the real circumstances of the presentation, and the projection in the cinema.

MULTIMEDIA-PERFORMANCE

Stimmen aus dem Innenraum (Voices from the Interior) was produced as a commission for the *Ars Electronica* and presented in 1988 at the Brucknerhaus in Linz. The 'medial structure' was realized by Export and Weibel. During the performance, Susanne Widl dressed up as Unica Zürn, Mae West, Mary Shelley, Augusta Ada Byron (Countess of Lovelace) and Linda Lovelace. Widl worked with props and gestures, which were characteristic for the women being presented. Excerpts from documents of the five

women were read by Widl onto an audio-cassette before the performance and played over loudspeakers together with compositions by Patricia Jünger. The texts demonstrated how much the feminist opposition is still a consequence and therefore, although more negative, a mirror of patriarchal structures.

Computer graphics in slides and videos split up digitalized images from Widl's impersonations of famous women in various ways: From the limited number of shots of Widl's performance, Muki Pakesch (video) and H.W. Pangratz (slides) generated images, which ranged from reconstructions of the social role of the women presented to allusions, to completely free combinations of images. The videos were presented behind the actress in serial sequences on a portable multi-monitor-wall, which covered almost the entire back wall. Four electronically coupled projectors presented slides next to and over each other on the back wall of the room.

INTERMEDIAL ALLEGORICAL PROCEDURES

The performance *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum* reconstructs the avant-garde method of montage with theatrical and electronic media — media, which are older and younger than montage itself. Montage as a recombination of decontextualized set pieces leads to *Allegorical Procedures*[6], to allusions to world conditions in a state of upheaval. The allegorical in montage processes ranges from history in a state of decay[7] to a *Vitally progressive history of humankind*[8]: *ruining*[9] not only allows that which has become static to tumble down, it also produces the dynamic necessary for change — without constituting a new conception of the world through *the contradictory relationship of heterogeneous parts*[10]. In *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum*, Export and Weibel choose such code-fragments of the feminine, which reveal themselves as ruins of collapsed patriarchal conceptions of
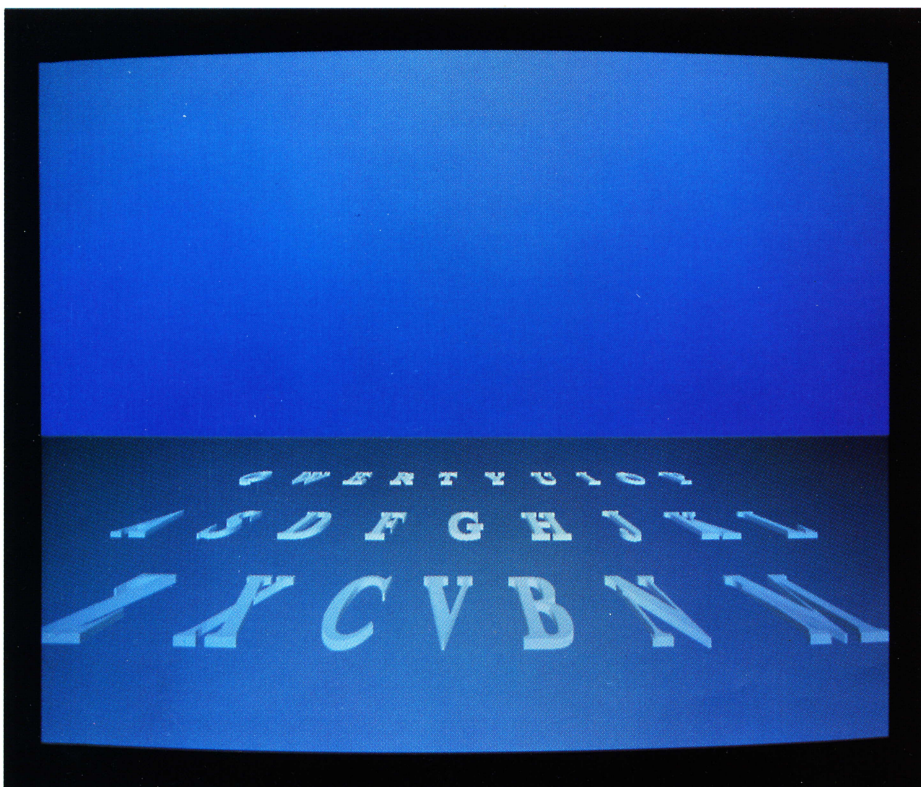
Peter WEIBEL *On Justifying the Hypothetical Nature of Art and the Non-Identicality within the Object World*. Image of the *World of Language*, 1992   Courtesy Galerie Tanja Grunert, Köln

the world. Computer graphics energize the intercourse with the signs of decay: static contrasts between patriarchal society and futile feminine counter-movements become feminist processes of transformation, a dialectic of transformer and transformed.

In *Stimmen*, an intermedial montage is constituted by the mutual reference between three levels:

a.) A living body (actress).

b.) Masquerade of the actress (a.) for a simulation of roles in real space. The roles refer to reference points in past reality: The past is re-enacted as the semblance of a formerly living being with the help of accessories.

c.) Electronic image simulation, in which signs are infinitely reproducible and transformable and sign operations are reversible. The image simulation combines fragments from b.) with each other as well as with additional elements. C.) receives a function through b.) that refers back to historical handicaps. Through the infinite, unlimited possibilities of transformation, which c.) presents in facets, the historical framework of b.) is revealed as being limited and restricted by pre-codings.

ANAGRAMS

In a text on the performance *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum*, Weibel places image simulation in connection with the anagrams of Unica Zürn[11]: from the fountain-heads of one of the chosen women who struggle against their pre-conditioned roles — the only one to have put an abrupt end to her own life — Export and Weibel take possibilities for an alternative interpretation of signs. Syllables, sounds and letters can be substituted in anagrams without regard for their semantics: *In anagrams, onomatopoeic expressions and numerous other linguistic tricks, the word, the syllable and the sound strut, emancipated from every semantic association, as a thing, which may be allegorically exploited.*[12]

According to Weibel, with reference to the dolls of Hans Bellmer, who was married to Zürn, the use of signs without semantic restrictions is translatable into an *anagrammaticism of the body*[13]. The double role of Bellmer's dolls — of being sign-like and real simultaneously, and thus presenting as dead bodies an amalgamation of sign-forms and sign-bearers — which allows them to become ideal bearers of wishful phantasies, is, however, not repeated in the performance. Bellmer's doll mechanics is divided in two levels: in the masquerade (b.) and the image simulation of body set pieces (c.), and both levels are created with and refer to a real body, to a female protagonist (a.). By playing through a plurality of exemplary female roles (b.), she runs up against the border of the transgression of established role-norms, while the image simulation (c.) has crossed these borders. The 'phallic significant' is, according to Jacques Lacan, the source of divisions on this side of and beyond a border[14], whereby both sides are mirrors of each other. Export and Weibel understand divisions in gender-specific oppositional pairs, in analogy to Lacan, as 'binary ambivalences' — ambivalent because the binary opposition of masculine-feminine refers to a masculine power which produces dichotomization.[15] The fates of the women (b.), reconstructed by Widl with theatrical means, stand today

Valie EXPORT *Die Praxis der Liebe*, 1984
aus: *Valie Export. Eine intermediale Künstlerin*, Wien 1988

for a feminist negation of the phallocratic power that had previously negated them.

In the unrestricted electronic generation of signs (c.), self-referential transformations become possible beyond 'binary ambivalences'. The difference between the electronic generation of signs (c.) and the theatrical simulation of roles (b.) cannot be described as the division of a phallocratic structure into binary features, but rather as the yet to be and already arrived at solution of 'binary ambivalences'. Computer simulation thematicizes this separation with its spectrum from reconstructions of social history to free combinations.

POTLATCH

The concept 'sign-function' stands for a limited number of possible ways of coordinating signs with meaning (poetic, emotive, referential, imperative, phatic and meta-linguistic), while the concept 'code' stands for an accumulation of signs, which are coordinated with meanings. The signs receive their meaning and their classification as elements of a code through use.

The anagrammaticism in *Stimmen* contradicts functional linguistic interpretations. In accordance with Jean Baudrillard's linguistic criticism, the typology of sign-functions itself may be understood as an additional group of signs, as one among infinitely numerous codes, instead of as a fundamental linguistic principle. Baudrillard does not accept the way in which Roman Jakobson and Jürgen Habermas attempt to re-semanticize the sign-function of poetic de-semantization[16] by integrating it as a special case into a group with semanticizing sign-functions.[17] This would domesticate the power of self-referential sign-forms, which bursts open semantization processes: *Le poétique est irréductible au mode de signification, qui n'est que le mode*

Valie EXPORT - Peter WEIBEL   *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum*, 1988   Susanne Widl (links) mit Bildnissen von, und (rechts) als, Unica Zürn, Ada Lovelace, Linda Lovelace, Mae West, Mary Shelley   Photo Courtesy Brucknerhaus, Linz

de production des valeurs de langage. C'est pourquoi il est irréductible à la linguistique, qui est la science de ce mode de production... Le poétique, c'est la restitution de l'échange symbolique au coeur même des mots.[18]
Toute forme de la valeur (objet, marchandise ou signe) doit être niée pour inaugurer l'échange symbolique.[19]
In the 'symbolic exchange' without 'value production', Baudrillard sees a way out of the attribution of meaning. The Lettrists and the Situationists - borrowing from the *Potlatch* of the North American Indians - have also developed a model of value-free exchange: the consumption of the material and work values by the bearer of the sign in symbolic gifts is presented as the contraposition of capitalistic value production (utility and exchange value).[20] The appropriation ('détournement') of elements from a value-producing society as propagated by the Lettrists and the Situationists has been extended by Export and Weibel in *Voices* to include the appropriation of signs for a self-referential, value-free transformation in computer-generated images. In the exchange of immaterially conveyed signs, there is no waste of material and work values, since the production of sign-bearers is omitted. But the presence of subjects that communicate with one another is, however, also no longer a prerequisite for 'symbolic exchange'.

15 V. EXPORT and P. WEIBEL, *Die Zweiheit der Natur*, in: *Computerkulturtage Linz*, ORF-Videonale 86, ORF-Landesstudio, Linz 1986, pp.47ff. (exhibition catalogue)
16 Poetic signs refer to their sign-form, instead of to their meaning.
17 R. JAKOBSON, *Linguistics and Poetics*, in: T.A. SEBEOK, *Style in Language*, Cambridge, Mass./London 1960, pp.350-377; J. HABERMAS, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: zwölf Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1985, pp.235,238
18 BAUDRILLARD, see note 14, pp. 289, 298 in response to: F. SAUSSURE, *Cahiers d'anagrammes*, published in: J. STAROBINSKI, *Les mots sous les mots*, Paris 1971
19 J. BAUDRILLARD, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris 1972, p.147
20 The word 'potlatch'« can be traced back to the Chinook word 'potshatl', which means 'to give away'. The Indians of the American North-West Coast appease the gods through 'potlatch' and secure their social position through gifts. (H. LÄNG, *Kulturgeschichte der Indianer Nordamerikas*, Göttingen 1991, pp.321-324; cf. G. DEBORD, *Le rôle de 'Potlatch'*, in: *Potlatch*, Neue Serie, No. 1 (No. 30)/1959, a periodical of the Lettrist International). In 1967, Raoul Vaneigem wrote, in the sense of Marcel Mauss' ideal of a non-reciprocal, or rather asymmetrical extravagance (M. MAUSS, *Essai sur le don*, quoted in: G. BATAILLE, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris 1971, Vol. 1, p.310): *What wonderful 'Potlatch' without counter-consideration the surplus society will give birth to, whether it wants to or not, when the effusiveness of the younger generation finally discovers pure giving*. (R. VANEIGEM, *Handbuch der Lebenskunst für die jungen Generationen*, Paris 1977, p.75; cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of the exchange of wine 'in restaurants in Southern France in expressions of social gifts' (C. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Strukturale Anthropologie*, Vol. 1, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp.364ff.). In 1961, Vaneigem suggested to the Situationists, that paintings from Jean Dubuffet, Asger Jorn, Willem De Kooning, Pablo Picasso, and others should be made available to be destroyed 'in a sensational Potlatch' (R. ORTH, *Phantom Avantgarde...*, Hamburg 1990, p.256). Exchange without value production and anagrammaticism become for Baudrillard (pp.295ff.) mutually illuminating aspects.

1 B. HEIN, *Film im Underground: Von seinen Anfängen bis zum Unabhängigen Kino*, Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Wien 1971, p.143
2 HEIN, see note 1, p.157
3 G. DEBORD, *La société du spectacle*, Paris 1967, p.14, 115
4 For more on the plot, see: A. PRANNER, *Valie Export: Eine multimediale Künstlerin*, Wien 1988, pp.111-121
5 For more on the plot, see: G.J. LISCHKA (ed.), *Alles und noch viel mehr*, Bern 1985, p.882
6 H.D.B. BUCHLOH, *Allegorical Procedures*, in: *Artforum*, Sept. 1982, pp.43-56
7 W. BENJAMIN, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, pp.155ff.
8 Benjamin (see note 7, p.144) quotes Görres from F. CREUZER, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, Part 1, Leipzig/Darmstadt 1819, p.147ff.
9 B. BROCK, *Ästhetik gegen erzwungene Unmittelbarkeit...*, Cologne 1986, pp.176-187; V. EXPORT, *Das Reale und sein Double: der Körper*, Bern 1987, p.35
10 P. BÜRGER, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a.M. 1974, p.110
11 U. ZÜRN *Gesamtausgabe, Volume I: Anagramme*, Berlin 1988; P. WEIBEL, *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum*, in: *Ars Electronica: Kunst der Szene*, Brucknerhaus Linz 1988, pp.136-148 (exhibition catalogue); also: Export, pp.12ff.
12 BENJAMIN, see note 7, p.183
13 WEIBEL, see note 11, p.137
14 EXPORT, see note 9, p.19; J. LACAN, *Ecrits II*, Paris 1971, pp.67-72, 103-115; cf. J. BAUDRILLARD, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris 1976, pp.155-160

Valie EXPORT (Waltraut Höllinger, 1940, Linz, Austria) lives and works in Vienna and Milwaukee/Wisconsin. Since 1989 Professor for Film and Video at the University of Wisconsin.

Peter WEIBEL (°1945, Odessa) is Director of the Institute for New Media at the Städelschule in Frankfurt a.M. since 1991. He will be the Commissioner of the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennial of Venice 1993.

Thomas DREHER (°1957) is an art critic and lives in Munich.