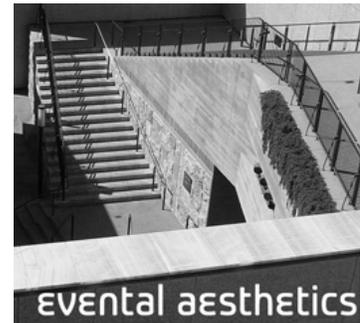


A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Kathryn McFadden, "Ambushed: The Unpresentable in VALIE EXPORT's Genital Panic," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 22-31.

ABSTRACT

What is unpresentable in art? This paper considers VALIE EXPORT's feminist exhibitionism in her 1968 performance artwork *Genital Panic*, which took place in a Munich cinema. EXPORT's transgressive display of her genitals, which finds art-historical precedents in medieval sheela na gigs and Courbet's *Origin of the World*, established a paradigm for a kind of feminist art collision that continues today, – for instance in Deborah de Robertis' 2014 unauthorized performance at the Musée d'Orsay. EXPORT's staged presentation and representation of blatant power and sexuality contradicts the lack postulated in Freud's castration complex. At the same time, it raises the question of the unpresentable, a notion taken up by Jean-François Lyotard's *The Inhuman*, which explores concepts of representation and the unpresentable. The latter he defines as an expression of an "Idea of reason," an absolute. I reflect on how this concept applies to EXPORT's marker for the use of the body in feminist art.

KEYWORDS

VALIE EXPORT, Jean-François Lyotard, feminist art, Sigmund Freud, Freudian lack, unpresentable

Ambushed: The Unpresentable in VALIE EXPORT's Genital Panic



Kathryn McFadden

In June 2014, a video circulated on the Internet in which contemporary performance artist Deborah de Robertis walked into the Musée d'Orsay and sat on the floor in front of Gustav Courbet's iconic *Origin of the World* (1866).¹ She lifted her gold dress and spread her knees up and apart to expose her genitalia to the surprised visitors in Room 20. Intending to show even more anatomy than Courbet's painting, she pulled her labia aside to allow for a stark view of her vaginal opening.² Many of the onlookers broke into a sustained applause. In the video, De Robertis holds this position until forcibly removed by museum security.

De Robertis' unauthorized performance brings to mind an earlier audacious act that took place in Germany almost fifty years ago. In 1968, Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT went into an art house cinema in Munich

dressed in a sweater and pants with the crotch cut away and carrying a machine gun.³ The unsuspecting patrons were there to see a pornographic film and were unaware of EXPORT's intention to stage an art performance. She walked among the seated audience in such a manner that enabled them to gaze directly at her exposed genitals while she pointed the gun at the backs of people's heads.

This performance ruptured the expectations of an audience in the midst of the voyeuristic act of watching an erotic film, an act that employs a phallogocentric cinematic gaze upon disembodied sexual organs. By offering the cinemagoers a 'real', fully embodied, and contextualized sexual organ, EXPORT not only exposed the fetishization at the heart of the viewers' fantasies but also subverted the structure of patriarchal subjectivity located in pornographic media.

However, EXPORT also told the audience that her actual genitalia were available and that they could do with it as they pleased. In an interview ten years later, she said:

I was afraid and had no idea what the people would do. As I moved from row to row, each row of people silently got up and left the theater. Out of film context, it was a totally different way for them to connect with the particular erotic symbol.⁴

EXPORT employed a guerrilla-style confrontation and transgressive tactic of exhibitionism. She gave permission for anyone to do anything to her pudendum, presumably including (at worst) bodily harm. While she admits to feeling vulnerable, her use of a gun placed the audience in an even more defenseless position since no one could have been certain that the gun was not real and that she would not deploy it. Yet from a critical standpoint, the gun, a loaded phallic symbol, challenges and risks undermining EXPORT's threat rather than augmenting it. Her reflection on what she did merely communicates her *intention* of using her feminist body as an implicit and explicit menace.

A year later in Vienna, EXPORT's friend and photographer Peter Hassman shot the iconic black and white photographs, entitled *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik (Action Pants: Genital Panic)*. In these photographs, a young EXPORT sits on a bench, striking a defiant glare, wearing a black leather jacket and jeans with a cut-away crotch, holding a rifle. Barefoot with her hair wildly

teased; her legs are spread, exposing pubic hair and labia that are centered in the middle of the photo's composition. These photographs were subsequently screen-printed onto flyers, which were posted in public spaces and in the street.

EXPORT's work was originally presented in the art cinema as performance, re-presented in a photograph, and then *re-re-presented* as a placard for mass viewing. Unlike De Robertis' video, EXPORT's ancillary photographs and posters are not documents of the actual event since they were created a year after the performance. Instead they act as both independent images and mediatory artworks, spotlighting and therefore criticizing the fetishistic gaze of disseminated images. Amelia Jones writes that in the 1960s the photographic/cinematic provocation of female genitalia had the expressive power to dislocate the organization of fetishism.⁵ Discussing *Genital Panic*, Jones explains, "EXPORT's project was to turn fetishism violently around, *to enact the female body as a site of agency and potential violence.*"⁶

By using a photograph of a staged representation of blatant power and sexuality, EXPORT calls into question the expectation of the fetishizing gaze and forces viewers to realize that newer standards of looking are possible. For example, EXPORT's performance demonstrates that the vagina is not a lack. Freud describes female pudenda as a deficit in his theory of the castration complex wherein young boys learn as a result of punishment to perceive female genitalia as castrated penises. Yet an authentic lack is a privation of something that was possessed at some point, something that has been removed from someone's grasp.⁷ EXPORT's work blatantly reveals the truth: that in the female body no such lack exists. As Jones puts it, "Exacerbating its threat to the male psyche, EXPORT's cunt refuses lack and refuses to congeal as a fetish."⁸

Collisions with the labial-vaginal as artistic subject matter or subtext are common. Western art history textbooks typically commence with images of female statuettes sporting emphatic vulvas from the Upper Paleolithic period. In contemporary art, artists snatch those images from a patriarchal agenda. Lyotard's philosophy of presentation, representation, and the unrepresentable may help to elucidate these artists' feminist tactics.⁹ He writes:

When the point is to try to present that there is something that is not presentable, you have to make presentation suffer. This means among other things that painters and public do not have at their disposal established symbols, figures or plastic forms which would allow them to signify and understand that the point of the work is Ideas of reason or imagination, as was the case in Romanesque Christian painting. In the techno-scientific industrial world, there can be no stable symbols of the good, the just, the true, the infinite, etc.¹⁰

Here Lyotard's concern is mid-twentieth-century avant-garde painting, a generally male-dominated art-historical era, yet his theory applies equally well to the innovative strategies of Second Wave feminist artists such as Marina Abramovic, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, and EXPORT. To overcome patriarchal notions of transcendence like the Freudian lack, these artists "embrac[e] immanence"¹¹ by doggedly negating the long-standing image of the *Venus pudica*,¹² – the nude female who modestly covers her pudenda – an image created and sustained by patriarchal epistemes.¹³

Artists like EXPORT thereby raise the question of what Judith Butler calls the "unrepresentable absence."¹⁴ In Lyotard's work:

The unrepresentable is what is the object of an Idea, and for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unrepresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc. The absolute in general, says Kant.¹⁵

By this definition, EXPORT's performance is not unrepresentable since her Idea was the opposite of an absolute – an unchanging, unconditional, universal concept.

Yet Lyotard offers a Kantian loophole: an artist can "present that there is *some* absolute."¹⁶ Artists do this by addressing the idea of the sublime, which does not concern the appreciation of beauty but the "pleasure of pain."¹⁷ Kant's sublime is a subjective aesthetic judgment in regards to nature; the experience of the sublime *moves* the onlooker (as in the awe of watching a violent storm over the sea) in such a way that the subject is markedly affected in their perception of formless and limitless power. As pure idea, the sublime *is* unrepresentable. However, by this reasoning the sight of EXPORT's body in her performance is not a site of the sublime either. Might she *suggest* the sublime

in the display of her genitals? In distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime, Kant defines beauty as a consciousness of pleasure, related to the imagination and understanding. The glimpse of a bare body, especially in work like EXPORT's, may provoke conflicted feelings of pleasure as well as fear in addition to erotic desire. Hence might we consider that the feelings aroused by the sight of a nude body – in art as well as life – fall somewhere in between the sense of the beautiful and the experience of the sublime?

Lyotard argues that the contemporary artist should: (1) not worry about satisfying viewers and (2) take on the "immanent sublime", the *allusion* to the unrepresentable, which carries no enlightening qualities.¹⁸ EXPORT's performance *was* intended to be an edifying experience, or at least a critical one, that communicated potent messages about reality and fantasy as objects of the gaze. Her straightforward exhibitionism paradoxically negates the kind of gratification that is generally found by viewers in an X-rated cinema. Instead, EXPORT's viewers experienced fear or confusion, even anger, when confronted with her actual cunt; it is significant that no one took her up on her offer to engage with it (although the presence of a gun cannot be overlooked) So although it would seem that EXPORT fulfills only the first of Lyotard's charges to contemporary art and eludes the second in the interests of critique, her barefaced exhibitionism incites the failure of engagement and may thereby indeed allude to the unrepresentable.

EXPORT presented viewers with an aesthetic moment in which everything was simply there. Lyotard argues that the present, the now, cannot be understood; there can be no epiphany about the present in the present because consciousness requires recollection.¹⁹ He states, "One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous."²⁰ An example he holds up Barnett Newman's non-objective color field paintings, but EXPORT's *Genital Panic* performance seems to draw close parallels. There is no allusion, no narrative. While Newman used the medium of painting to re-present the here and now, EXPORT and De Robertis deployed the body in a literal face-to-face relationship that invited viewers to *Look at me, Listen to me*, rather than *Look at this*. Lyotard asserts "the force of an obligation within a face-to-face relationship," the same responsibility that fuels the ethos of Emmanuel Levinas – bringing us face to face with the other for whom we are ethically responsible.²¹

In other words, Lyotard and EXPORT encourage collision. "Shock is, par excellence, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing,

suspended privation.”²² He urges an extreme dramatization of art, advising artists to find new models of vision and experiment with disquieting consequences.²³ Certainly EXPORT adopts this tactic – as does De Robertis. These artists are latter-day sheela na gigs²⁴ in which “the body is not only historical idea, but a set of *possibilities* to be continually realized.”²⁵ These prospects include employing the fearless and startling as allusions to the unrepresentable.

• Notes •

- 1 “Artist Enacts the Painting *Origin of the World* at Musée d’Orsay – And, Yes, That Means What You Think” Accessed June 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMM8GjoDNZ4>.
- 2 According to Benjamin Sutton in his article about de Robertis’ performance, titled *Mirror of Origin*, the artist states (in part), “I am not showing my vagina, but I am revealing what we do not see in the painting, the eye of the vagina, the black hole, this concealed eye, this chasm, which, beyond the flesh, refers to infinity, to the origin of the origin.”
- 3 While EXPORT is quoted in a 1979 interview with Ruth Askey as claiming to have a gun, Amelia Jones notes in a later interview she denied ever saying that. Whether or not there was a gun (or a simulated one) is a key question because its absence would certainly recast the effect of the performance on the witnesses – as well as EXPORT’s own intentions. A gun is a straightforward symbol of unmitigated violence. Its presence certainly would affect how the viewers would react to her demands, which would be perceived as a threat with the sight of the weapon. The absence of a gun changes the scenario rather drastically. Her “weapon” then becomes her verbal challenge along with her exposed crotch. She poses no real threat of bodily harm, only psychological violence upon male fantasies. Since the subsequent photographs reflect the use of a gun in her composition, I pursue the notion that a gun was implemented in the Munich cinema performance.
- 4 VALIE EXPORT, “VALIE EXPORT [interview with Ruth Askey]” in *Elles@centrepomidou*, ed. not noted. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 63.
- 5 Amelia Jones, “Genital Panic: The Threat of Feminist Bodies and Parafeminism” in *Elles@centrepomidou*, ed. not noted. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 292.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 294. Emphasis original.
- 7 For example, female circumcision (female genital mutilation) comes to mind.
- 8 Jones, “Genital Panic,” 292.
- 9 It is interesting to note that *The Inhuman* was written twenty years after *Genital Panic*.
- 10 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 125.
- 11 Jones, “Genital Panic,” 292.
- 12 *Venus pudica* (“modest Venus”) is a conventional representation of the nude female form with her hand demurely covering her pubic region. *Pudendus* (from the Latin) refers to mutual ideas of shame and external genitalia.
- 13 In her essay on *Genital Panic*, Jones discusses Simone de Beauvoir’s famous anti-essentialist quote, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Jones, “Genital Panic,” 291.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 38.
- 15 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 126.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 126. Emphasis added.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 126.

- 18 Ibid., 128.
- 19 Ibid., 59.
- 20 Ibid., 80.
- 21 Ibid., 81.
- 22 Ibid., 100. Emphasis original.
- 23 Ibid., 100.
- 24 Sheela na gigs are architectural medieval carvings of female figures melodramatically exposing their outsized vulvas. They are typically found on churches and castles and believed to serve an apotropaic function.
- 25 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” in *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 393. Butler is referring to an idea by Merleau-Ponty.

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