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Importing Valie Export: Corporeal Topographies in Contemporary Austrian Body Art

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This article traces Valie Export's impact on Austrian video art and art performances around the turn of the twenty-first century. By examining selected women artists, reaching from Renate Kowanz-Kocer to Elke Krystufek, this study aims to map Austrian female body art that can be described in terms of a corporeal topography within an otherwise much wider range of contemporary Austrian art performances.¹ While the body art of Viennese Actionism has been widely studied, investigations of later art performances sometimes seem to neglect that the male body spaces exploited in the happenings of Günther Brus, Kurt Kren, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler² followed a body politics diametrically opposed to the critical gender spaces that Valie Export, Mara Mattuschka, and also many other Austrian women and younger body artists developed—at times even in opposition to the male-dominated Austrian post-World War II avant-garde.

Although my study here does not follow an art historical approach, I hope that an aesthetically- and gender-based analysis of the selected performance and video material can at least raise the question of whether there is a specific Austrian approach to—sometimes humorously—subverting body and gender politics. While the focus lies on the impact of Valie Export's early body performances, I will also refer to other German and Austrian (e.g., Karl Valentin, Bertolt Brecht, Hermes Phettberg, Marina Abramović) as well as North American influences (Cindy Sherman, pop art, and pop culture). In particular, I will ask how art performances influence the ways in which we perceive and comprehend the body, and how they can affect the various epistemological models that shape our understanding of cultural body images and, in this instance, create atypical Austrian corporeal topographies. For this purpose, I will apply a definition of performance and cultural space based on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre, Giorgio Agamben, and Erika Fischer-Lichte in order to expand Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performative category to an understanding of the human body as performative space.

Throughout the course of her career as a performance artist, Valie Export has helped to re-define the Austrian cultural space in exactly this sense, as a performative and thus changeable corporeal topography. Since 1980, when she first

presented at the Venice Biennale, her performances and installations have become representative of Austria's contemporary art scene, most likely due to the fact that she plays—although often in completely different ways—with the Austrian topography as *topos*, in that the Austrian urban topography becomes visible and audible as a scripted (from Greek: *graphein*) spatial event, as a personal corporeal topo-graphy. The best examples here are her filmic works *Invisible Adversaries* (Export and Weibel [1976]) and *Syntagma* (1984), which take place in Vienna and Salzburg. Closely connected to her exhibition *Körpersplitter* (1980), they show the artist's body not only as being connected to historical building structures (e.g., the Rupertinum in Salzburg) but also as part of a historical evolution of gendered spaces and gender stereotypes that have a religious, ritualistic, or political connotation (see Hallensleben).³ The analogies between political public spaces and personal topographies are made visible in some scenes by using cardboard figures that resemble the artist's body on the one hand, and by copying sculptured figures at public locations on the other. It is a visual technique that doubles the perspective, and it can also be found in Export's unfinished Pop-Film *Ein Sprachfest(essen)/Wor(l)d Cinema* (1968/1975, co-directed with Peter Weibel), here in the form of three-dimensional letters that double the visible body part, for instance, the head (see Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien 62). Export thus doubles the spatial perspectives, and by focusing on the textual inscriptions of the social body aims for opening the viewer's eyes to the perception of the public space as a political performance space.

In the Austrian context, Valie Export's concept of "Body Configurations" is also based on the avant-garde perception of the body as a performative image, understood as metamorphic platform and alterable public space. Originating in the context of her series "Expanded Cinema" (1967–68 [Saxenhuber 86–89]), her "Körperkonfigurationen" (*Körpersplitter* 37–76) are a number of stills, mostly post-altered self-portraits that show a woman's body in diverse urban and landscaped settings in which the artist's body is used as a textual-topographical metaphor to blend the organic with the constructed body of post-World War II Austrian society. In opposition to Viennese Actionism, they not only have a political but also a feminist intention, and thus reflect upon societal notions of beauty, gender, identity, and ethnicity.

If any aesthetic work on the body, whether in the arts or in the sciences, can be defined as an embodiment of life as art, then the body becomes an open image space, an adjustable, alterable, and often textually-read figuration that does not impose limits to performances of any kind. Since the (living) human body has lost its integrity, the artist's body of the twentieth century has become part of the artwork and thus part of public space. With the discovery of X-rays, the Futurists no longer believed in the "opacity of bodies," as it served to put the "spectator in the center of the picture" (Boccioni et al.), and when the first human made it safely back from orbit, the French avant-gardist Yves Klein staged his body

as a living sculpture for his photomontage *Man in Space! The Painter of Space Throws Himself into the Void!* (“Un homme dans l’espace! Le peintre de l’espace se jette dans le vide!”). Hence, can such a medial understanding of the body also be taken as a common image for a contemporary Austrian corporeal topography?

Here I shall concretely show how Valie Export’s photomontage series and concept of “Body Configurations” has had an immense influence on contemporary Austrian performance and video artists such as Miriam Bajtala, Carola Dertnig, and Ulrike Müller. Within Austrian performance art, Valie Export was not only the first artist who (de)constructed the body between gender and grammar but, with humorous irony, she also defamiliarized the audience with the concept that a woman is only her body image and therefore should represent body (*Körper*, *bios*) and life (*Leib*, *zoē*). Thus, in the context of the avant-garde paradigm of combining art and life, and in recurrence to Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism, Export’s body art can be understood as work on the body *as* image-space (*Leib* als *Bildraum*) with the goal of regaining control over the lost battle of Austrian body politics, not only in a political but also in an art historical context (see Hallensleben).

I will begin my series of instances of twenty-first-century Austrian corporeal topographies with Miriam Bajtala’s⁴ video installation *Im Leo/Im On/Aus dem Off* (2002–03; Figure 1). In three short clips of two-minute length, Bajtala presents the audience with a female figure, dressed in a red body suit, whose body movements are repetitive and digitally animated: “Miriam Bajtala is dealing with the interior and the exterior, the body and the surface, space and time. [...] In her video [...] she controls her figures like marionettes with invisible threads; their expression [sic] is manipulated by the computer. [...] An easy and funny adaptation” (“Miriam Bajtala, Judith Huemer, Loretta Lux”). Although we see the red figure replaced by a dummy and thrown to the ground, it always gets up again as a human body. The three video sequences play with the human body as



Figure 1: Miriam Bajtala, dir. *Im Leo*. Austria, 2003. © Miriam Bajtala/Sixpackfilm, 2006. Screenshot.

spatial signifier, with its visibility and invisibility, with its presence and absence. By putting closed and open spaces in analogy (a cornfield and a white empty room) it becomes an abstract stand-up figure which, through its red color based on the *tertium comparationis* blood, symbolizes the circle of life and builds allusions to topics such as fertility and sterility.

Bajtala's video does not include artificial laughter as an audible element, but the repetitiveness of the real sounding noises of a falling body in an otherwise quiet environment—we only hear the wind that goes through the cornfield in the exterior scenes and nothing but the sound of the falling female body in a white, artificial, closed-up, generic-looking room—nevertheless creates an identical effect. However, the central and third scene, which has become a separate work, depicts the same red female figure holding a mirror in her hand that directs the light back into the camera, thus erasing her image; whenever the light hits the lens and thus whitens out the image of the figure, a high-pitched tone is generated that hits a nerve (*Im Leo*). When we look at Bajtala's simultaneous two-minute video loop—which is most likely influenced by two of Valie Export's "Expanded Cinema" film installations (*Abstrakt Film Nr. 1* [1967–68] and *Adjungierte Dislokationen* [1973]) and her photo-graphics series "Body Configurations"—as a similar example of feminist art, it becomes noticeable how the young artist adds a slapstick momentum and comedy setting to Export's serious approach of showing the female body as a mirror of societal spaces. Whereas in her performance and later installation of *Abstract Film No. 1* (1997) Export created abstract patterns on the screen by using natural materials (water, light, mirrored glass) in order to "decode reality as it was manipulated in film" (Export, "Expanded Cinema"), Bajtala's video installation can be seen as a Lacanian interpretation and Derridean deconstruction of Export's "Expanded Cinema" itself in which "the body [functioned] as canvas on which the society arranges its daily slap stick" ("Expanded Cinema").

What is further noteworthy in comparison to Valie Export's *Adjungierte Dislokationen*, an eight-minute film installation that also combined three simultaneous film projections taken from two 8 mm cameras attached to Export's body, is the change in perspectives. Whereas Export's installation takes us back to the active movements of the artist's (camera) body in space and thus creates a multi-perspective perception of space, Bajtala's installation portrays the human body also as an integral but nevertheless passive part of the environment. When Export described her experimental film as "Spatialfilm" and "Film Aktion," she made clear that we not only have a body that is thrown into space but that we also *are* the body that can create space: "It is an expansion of the room that goes beyond urban architecture and extends into nature. [...] In this way, the surroundings also appear as a body, as an extension of the body, as an environmental body. Film combines opposite parts of the room, creating the spatial continuum of the body that cannot be immediately perceived" ("*Adjungierte Dislokationen*" [Description]).

Bajtala's more distant approach places an at times distortional body in opposition to the environmental space. It also shows both body and space as artificial constructs which are merged and at this point can even make the body as part of the environment disappear. Whereas Export worked against the notion of an obsolete body, Bajtala's video clips tell us that there is no longer a genealogy of corporeal topographies possible; instead we see a visual interpretation of the Heideggerian term "Geworfensein,"⁵ a postmodern version of existentialism as comical act. Export also plays with the Heideggerian category in her photomontage series *Identity Transfer* (e.g., *Identitätstransfer B* [1972–73]), where—possibly in reference to Hans Bellmer's anagrammatical doll studies—a woman's body is shown as a corpse. Whereas Bajtala's is an almost abstract reading in a symbolical sense, Export's interpretation again includes a gendered perspective: "It turns out that these frozen motions of the body represent a canon, a doctrine, [...] thus trying to reveal these expressions. [...] At present I am mainly treating female postures from a feminist point of view and dealing with materials from the female environment" ("Aus der Serie Körperfigurationen").

Such an alienation effect, which shows the female body in opposition to often male-connoted public spaces, has meanwhile become a standard in contemporary feminist body art performances in Austria. Last but not least the red color, which Bajtala and Export both use as an alienation effect, can be interpreted as an act of painting over reality in order to present the female body as an outsider. It is an obvious allusion to blood, and thus reminds the viewer of the discriminating image of menstruation as wound, which has historically been used to degrade women to a second-class gender (Waldeck 155). While in Export's photo-graphics the color red marks public spaces as gender margins (*Einkreisung/Encirclement* [1976]; Figure 2), in Bajtala's animation it is applied to the female body as almost a racial indicator, thus representing the hostility of the human body in space. Furthermore, it could be—with Merleau-Ponty—interpreted in a *fleshy* sense, as "naked color" that "is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, [...] a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between thing and color, [...] a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things" (*The Visible* 132–33).

Bajtala's work might also have been influenced by the Austrian performance artist Renate Kowanz-Kocer, whose artwork is contemporary with Export's early feminist performance period. In Kowanz-Kocer's performance *Eine Bewegung erzeugt ein Geräusch* (1979) and her thirty-minute video loop *Schuhe* (1980), "sounds were created by the friction of the body against floors and walls. The body was the medium, or the large pencil. It was about sound and the aspect of movement" (Kowanz-Kocer and Scheyerer 210). *Schuhe* was also "a humorous project, [...] an exploration of the limits of what people usually associate with sound and music" (213). Kowanz-Kocer's work can be placed right between Export's and Bajtala's. On the one hand, it adds sound to Export's extracted film stills and silent



Figure 2: Valie Export. *Einkreisung/Encirclement*. Vienna, 1976. Photograph, b&w, vintage print, red water color, 41.8 x 61 cm, framed 56 x 79 cm. © VALIE EXPORT/Charim Gallery, Vienna, Austria. (See back cover.)

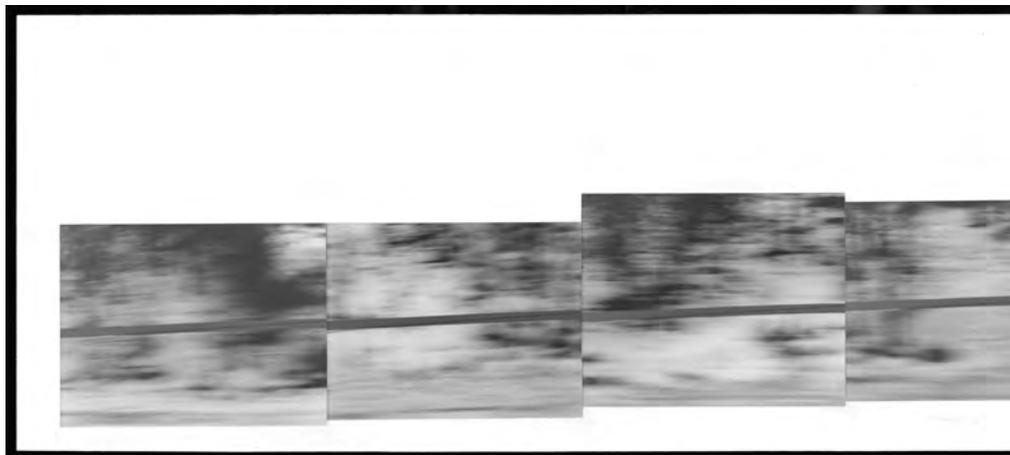


photomontages, thus giving women, who were shown as being silenced before, back the sound (but not the voice); on the other hand, it still sees the human body as an integral part of space, and not as alienated as in Bajtala's case.

Another alienation effect, probably closer to Brecht's tradition, can be observed in Carola Dertnig's short-film series *True Stories* (2000–03) in which she reconstructs narrated mishaps. In *Strangers* (2003), for instance, a woman loses her red tights, which then turn into an over-length ribbon that not only marks her movements in space while walking through a train station but also divides the public space with a private line that becomes a hindrance for other travelers (Figure 3). It is again a humorous allusion to the theme of menstruation; but as a half-directed slapstick comedy of four-minute length, it also goes back to one of the roots of Brecht's theater, and enacts Karl Valentin and Liesl Karlstadt's sketch "Die Fremden" (1940), which is narrated in a slightly altered version as a voice-over throughout the film. Thus the concept of marking space as territory



Figure 3: Carola Dertnig, dir. *Strangers*. *True Stories*. Short Film Series. Austria, 2003. Advertisement Photo. © Carola Dertnig/Sixpackfilm, 2006.



is simultaneously visualized in both humorous and serious ways. The ambivalent setting, however, is only visible to someone familiar with the chosen set and its history: it is Vienna's Westbahnhof from which deportations took place during National Socialism and also to which immigrants arrived from Hungary, Serbia, and Romania after World War II. Furthermore, Valentin and Karlstadt's main pun ironizes the racial politics by pinpointing the literal meaning of the German word for foreigner: *Fremde unter Fremden*. Thus the film theme is as historical as it is contemporary in portraying the irritation that can be caused by a stranger who—in the German language—is simultaneously seen as an alienated subject and as a foreigner (*ein Fremder*). While Rike Frank also classifies Dertnig's piece as an instance of “doing gender,” Bozidar Boskovic summarizes the message of this short film in reference to Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*: “Perhaps, as Julia Kristeva puts it, the stranger is really ourself.”

Besides a close reading of Dertnig's story as a feminist performance, a visual analysis of single shots also unveils direct references to Valie Export's performance video *Body Politics* (1974) as well as to her photomontages *Zug* (1971) and *Studie über bewegte Weg Bilder* (1970–72; see Saxenhuber 256–57, 264–65; Figure 4). After having placed the up and down movements of two escalators in analogy to the different communicative stages of a female-male relationship in *Body Politics*, the appearance and disappearance of a woman's body on a public staircase in her experimental film *Syntagma* (1984) further explores the connectedness of gender and space as performative categories. What influences Dertnig in particular is the image of the escalators on the one hand (in Export's version at the underground station of Vienna's Stephansplatz) and, on the other hand, the idea of disrupting the perspective as it becomes visible in Export's conceptual photomontages of the 1970s. Dertnig took the idea of the red line, used in Export's latter work to connect photos taken from a moving vehicle, as an embodiment of motion. It symbolizes

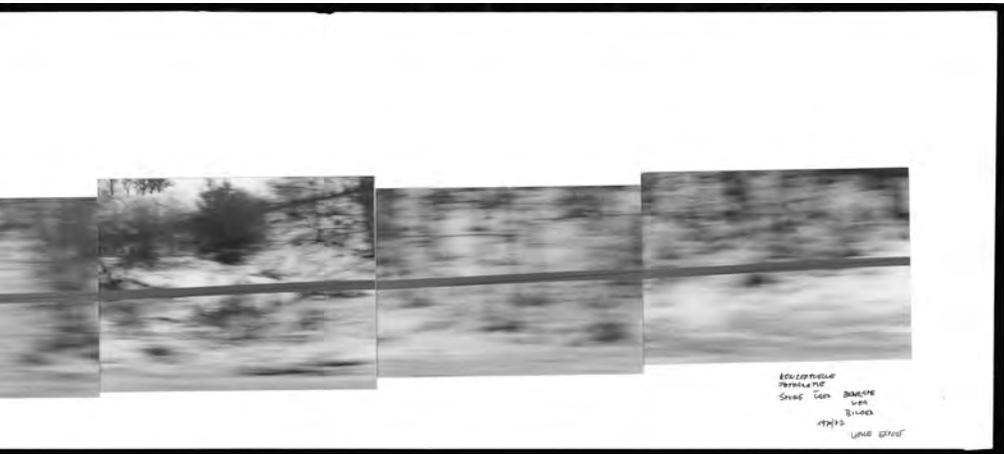


Figure 4: Valie Export. *Studie über bewegte Weg Bilder/Study on Moving Path Images*, 1970–72. Conceptual Photography, b&w, 7 parts in a row. 20.5 x 95.6 cm. © VALIE EXPORT/Charim Gallery, Vienna, Austria.

the bodily movement as a series of moments, as well as the path as a continuous and disruptive line of (e)motions, as—in Export’s words—a “position in the room [space]. The view is split, thus resulting in a shift of perspective, a rupture in perspective” (“Mediale Anagramme” 109).

The difference between Export’s and Dertnig’s versions of body politics lies in the degree of conceptualism. Whereas Export’s works are all conceptual and recall the structural films of the 1960s and 70s (Mueller 86), Dertnig’s approach is strictly narrative, almost epic in the Brechtian definition of acting, and relies heavily on the sketch as text and narration. Her conceptual strategy and its roots in Export’s works on body politics are hidden in single frames, almost invisible for the viewer; while Export’s visual conceptualism is still there—in the image of the escalators/stairs as a moving symbol of power, the red line as a symbol of movement and motion (*Bewegung* as motion and moving image of a path, including the movement “away” or “gone”; *Weg, weg*), the image of the train as a symbol of transport and as transductive element (*Zug* as train, pull, draw; *ziehen, zeichnen, überführen, übermitteln, übersetzen*)—Dertnig’s medial conceptualism works only on a textual level. While Export’s conceptual work looks at the perceptual discontinuity of moving objects at different levels, Dertnig’s narrative film relies on the continuation of the one, albeit multi-perspectival, concept of Otherness. In short, Export’s conceptual photography and the utilization of this technique for her experimental films was a political act, while Dertnig only refers to it as a historical concept. Her film is only a postmodern act of migration politics and, therefore, cannot go as far as Export’s demonstration of body politics which altered public spaces with the aim of manipulating gender politics. In other words, Dertnig only *shows* in an intertextual and postmodern way what Brecht and Export intended and *did* as a political act, and this is a tendency that could be applied to the works of other younger Austrian performance artists in general.

A second aspect that is part of Valie Export’s concept “Body Configurations” proves to be influential for other artists as well: showing how we associate and dissociate with nature and architecture and how architecture can influence the perception (and possibly even the shape) of the human body (see Hallensleben). Ulrike Müller, an Austrian video artist who participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York in 2002–03, retells Export’s “Body Configurations” as a spatial music clip. In *Mock Rock* (2004), a two-minute experimental video, Müller makes no distinction between nature and art when viewing a “rock [in the middle of an industrial zone in Queens, New York] and a female body as social condition,” and—as mentioned by the singer Essie Jain in a conversation with the artist (Burger-Utzer and Schwärzler, bonus track 3)—again plays with the medial notion of the “absence/presence dichotomy” of the female body in space. Here we have an example of a serious approach to “feminist art: [... inspired by the] wish to be outside society ([through the] notion of loneliness)” (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Ulrike Müller, dir. *Mock Rock*. Austria, 2004.
© Sixpackfilm, 2006. Screenshot.

Following the lines of an a capella song in soft country tunes, “I am a rock, I am an island,” the raw Super-8 image depicts the cityspace as a practised place (de Certeau), showing the female body in analogy to nature (the rock), but at the same time as misplaced within the urban space, as alienated from the city. Since

[b]oth city and countryside fail to provide any information about the object’s nature, [...] [r]ock, scene and song enter into a lyrical liaison which ascribes a certain feminine eccentricity to the comic aspect of the constructed situation. While the film conveys surprise at this nondescript piece of nature in the first verse, the second shows a woman’s body as it encounters the stone. The body disappears as suddenly as it appeared. The song’s lyrics blend into the mood of the place like an ethereal layer of meaning, gradually developing a symbol for a “desire for solitude and independence and their impossibility,” while at the same time the “social experience of loneliness is mirrored in the cultural conditionality of nature.” (Ries, quoting Müller)

The dichotomy of the absent/present body is put in analogy to the dichotomy of private/public spaces. The industrial cityspace as a deserted place is symbolized by the rock as a representation of nature and femininity. Thus the rock is not only an allegory of loneliness but also—in a very literal sense—the material on *and* of which the city is built. It represents the past as well as the present and, therefore, creates a notion of timelessness. However, it is also part of a traffic intersection and, therefore, points back to the ambivalent social aspect of the female body as a stereotypical cultural signifier of communication. Thus it also has the power of blocking it. It constructs and at the same time deconstructs the directive mode of a traffic intersection; it points the way, although it poses a barrier because of its huge dimension.

In this sense, Müller continues Export's photomontages which were parted in "Körperfigurationen in der Natur" (*Körpersplitter* 38–47) and "Körperkonfigurationen in der Architektur" (*Körpersplitter* 50–76). *Mock Rock* attempts to overcome the body/mind split that is still inherent in Export's series, possibly in reference to Spinoza's distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, thus visualizing that we not only *have* a body that can create space but also that we *are* the body that *is* space (see Lefebvre 170). Furthermore, when the metaphorical tradition of cities being described as female spaces (see Weigel 149–52, 73–76) is applied, Müller's spatial story answers the question of how to differentiate between artificial and natural body spaces, concrete and representational body spaces, private and public body spaces, and female- and male-gendered body spaces by adding a topographical component to Butler's understanding of gender as a social category. *Doing* gender here means not just *writing* spaces and thus referring back to the literal meaning of topo-*graphy* but also *performing* spaces; the image of the woman's body is cut into the image of the rock from different perspectives, at times resembling the formation of the rock, at times using it as a frame. Thus the woman's body becomes part of the image even when it is not visible and its absence/presence also underlines the topographical features of the rock itself, which through its presences reminds the viewer of the absence of nature.

In addition, Müller's approach allows for reconnecting Butler's concept of gender as performative category with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as flesh and space as a bodily category.⁶ For Butler, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh of the world has to do with the central question of the physicality, materiality, and locatedness of the human body, "how it is that bodies materialize, that is, how they come to assume the *morphe* [gestalt], the shape by which their material discreteness is marked. The materiality of the body is not to be taken for granted" (69). She then applies Lacan's concept of language as a tool for differentiating "idealized kinship relations" as an essential basis for the development of morphology. Müller, however, does not follow Butler's linguistic turn; she instead gives a filmic adaptation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "Visibility" as the "Tangible in itself" (*The Visible* 139): "My body *is* a *Gestalt* and it is co-present in every *Gestalt*; it also, and eminently, is a heavy signification, it is flesh" (205).

For the artist, it is not merely the understanding of language as a representative system of the paternal law and thus the materialization of a gendered body by *naming* it after an imaginary formation that is central to Butler's idea of rewriting body politics, rather it is the morphological form [*Gestalt*] of a rock itself that can be seen in analogy to a woman's body. The title of the piece, nevertheless, makes clear that—by just changing one signifier—the rock becomes mock; it looks as if it were a fake and, if we take this into consideration, the movement of the woman's body through space creates an alienation effect, thus creating the experience of otherness or loneliness. By doubling the morphological Other (the body as rock), it demonstrates that a woman is indeed alienated from her own body; in other words, when the image of the body is created by the image of the space, one can easily forget that the human body *is* space, that it is the human body that *produces space* and that can *practise place* at the same time. In Müller, the invisible (the morphological imaginary of nature as woman) becomes visible as nature (rock) and woman (human body); as both appear (mis)placed in an industrial, male-allocated cityspace, their materialization is as real as it is fake. They are as present as they are absent. It is up to the viewer's discretion to decide what is fake and what is real, and whether the public space is a private space and vice versa.

To better understand this performative relationship between body and space, it helps to analyze one other concrete example of Austrian feminist performance art that presents the female body in a much more sexualized way: Elke Krystufek's performance *The Blue Moods of Spain* at the Portikus Gallery in Frankfurt a. M. (2000). It can be seen within the phenomenological context of being in the world as body *and* as thing, as all performances and installations of the young but renowned Austrian artist Elke Krystufek provocatively deal with the creation of *woman* and combine both the evolutionary and the exhibitionary:

Her work is, accordingly, deliberately faux expressionism, it is more about the social construction, the erasure of identity, and the impossibility of defining identity or gender than it is about the authenticity of self-expression. [...] Krystufek deliberately takes on the rhetoric of masculine expressionism in the mode of postmodern appropriation pioneered by Cindy Sherman. (Coulter-Smith)

Other explicitly named performance artists who have influenced her are Export, Marina Abramović, and Hermes Phettberg (Buchhart 244). What has frequently been noted is Krystufek's corporeal interrogation of public and private spaces with a provocative theatricalization of female intimacy and privacy (239). In reference to Export, she understands her body as a projection surface for public opinion; however, as Krystufek points out, through the overload of signifiers within today's medialized public space, it has become impossible to continue the feminism of the 60s and 70s (249). In addition, her "work with the body" stands in opposition to Viennese Actionism and she stresses the respect that she shows for the bodies of

others (245). Whereas in her performance *Satisfaction* (Kunsthalle Wien, 1994) she turned the private space of a bathroom into a public stage and thus caused a “sex scandal” (Nesweda 287),⁷ in *Blue Moods of Spain* she performed private washroom rituals within the exhibition space, thus “cleansing the body from impurities” (Herkenhoff 36). The body here can be substituted as a private and public space at once and, therefore, the curator’s decision to add Elfriede Jelinek’s “Der Tod und das Mädchen II [Dornröschen]” from her *Prinzessinnendramen* to the images of Krystufek’s performance (see König and Nollert 100–07)—the original idea was a collaboration between Jelinek and Krystufek that never took place—creates a political frame for the performance itself.

In “Der Tod und das Mädchen II,” Austria is personified as Sleeping Beauty who in the end is abused by a prince, a contemporary political reference to the Haider (FPÖ) government of that time:

[Prinz]: Wären Sie tot gewesen, hätte ich mich, wie jeder Schöpfer, der sowas nicht vorgesehen hatte, gefragt: Mußte das wirklich sein? Was hab ich falsch gemacht? Ist das die Prinzessin oder ist sie es nicht? Wären Sie tot geblieben, hätte ich mich angesichts Ihrer Leiche gefragt, was ist, kann ich Tote nicht wieder lebendig machen? ... *Er überraicht Dornröschen ein weißes Hasenkostüm aus Plüsch, mit stark hervorgehobener Vulva, und deutet ihr, es anzuziehen, was sie auch tut. Als sie auch ihr Kostüm anhat, beginnen beide sofort wie wild loszurammeln. Die Hecke stürzt über ihnen zusammen und begräbt sie unter sich. Aus ihr erheben sich verschiedene Tiere, hauptsächlich Hühner [österreichische Adler], die sich sehr tierisch benehmen ... Zwei der Hühner entfalten elegant ein Transparent, auf dem steht: “BESUCHEN SIE ÖSTERREICH! JETZT ERST RECHT!”* (Jelinek, *Der Tod* 37–38)

In Jelinek’s view, Austria, the “poultry empire,” is half dead and half alive, half past and half present, half public and half private space. While in Jelinek’s play Sleeping Beauty’s body becomes a projection surface for the nation, Krystufek utilizes her own body as a political medium. She speaks through her body in a symbolic way and uses ritualized gestures and bodily expressions as language tools.

What was striking about Krystufek’s performance was not only the speechlessness of the audience and the reported tension and quietness in the relatively small exhibition hall (see König and Nollert 10) but also the speechlessness of the artist herself. By performing star gestures of pop culture, she embodied the pop song “Nobody Has to Know” by Spain in a subversive manner, thus defamiliarizing the audience with very familiar Western cultural star rituals. By *being* and showing what “nobody has to know,” the enactment of secret, private feelings became a painful experience of seeing a *love song* being turned into fluid bodily excrement: Krystufek presented the contents of her intestines in a glass bowl as if holding a victor’s cup (see König and Nollert 106). Thus she subverted a commonly known gesture that stands for success and iconic strength in the media to a gesture of

pure bodily presence. By exposing her own body and its excrement, she was able to create an alienation effect which obviously was very irritating to the audience. The intertextual and intercultural references are manifold and reach from Schiele, Weininger, Wittgenstein, and Freud to Buddhist Yoga practices and American pop and media culture. They show how Krystufek's performance is based on the idea of communicating what normally is *not* communicated at all and thus it not only fits as an instance for the subversion of national Austrian body politics within a global frame (e.g., by underpinning Jelinek's allusion of Austria as Sleeping Beauty) but also can serve as an example for Giorgio Agamben's political theory of gestures as a means of pure mediality (by making the mediality and thus the vulnerability of the human body visible): "The gesture is [...] communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human being as pure mediality" ("Notes on Gesture" 111).⁸

Agamben's notion of gesture, based on the concept that any body politics begins and ends with the "naked life (the human being)" (*Means without End* 20), combines the idea of a *bare life* (*zoē*) as a dangerously politicized category with the idea of "life as form" or the political "*form-of-life*" (9) (*bios*), thus reflecting upon the biopower struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the loss of sovereignty during the Shoa (see *Homo Sacer*). So when Agamben's philosophical notion of the bodily gesture as political language is applied to Austrian body arts, then Jelinek's play and Krystufek's performance would come close to rewriting the political (personal and public) *life* (*bios*) apart from a sociological and religious context as an aesthetic *figuration* (*zoē*) from a feminist point of view. Their artistic approaches take the medial malleability of the human body into account and help to redefine it as something being *performed* rather than just being formed. They try to embody political language rather than just speak it, and Krystufek's decision to use English instead of German for her collages, installations, and performances is, therefore, a political act and "a conceptual work as a means to determine an identity and to overcome time," as the curators put it (König and Nollert 11). Both artists perform gestures, either linguistically or physically, and thus subvert the official Austrian body politics and, in this particular case, the right-wing Haider government that represented about a third of the population in Austria. It is seen as a sexually abusive act of a personal power trip fed by the National Socialist past. The allegorical image could not be clearer: Austria, as female body, is raped and painfully dishonored. Whereas Jelinek allegorized Austria as Sleeping Beauty, Krystufek turned the allegory into a living sculpture, into a performative act, through which a woman's body becomes a public space and vice versa. It is not just the representation of an image; instead her body *is* the public space that becomes alive.

When we look further at the reception of Valie Export's work in Jelinek's writings and Krystufek's artwork, as Evelyne Polt-Heinzl recently did in her analysis of Jelinek's corporeal topographies, Jelinek's technique of an *écriture*

fémiline follows the “hidden,” subconscious, underground texture of a history composed without seams (“*nahtlose Näh-Bilder*,” 459), and then Krystufek’s performance and exhibition at the Portikus Gallery in Frankfurt can be understood as the creation of a self-portrait as critical medial self-presentation in the era of “Reality[-TV]” and Walt Disney films (450). Here, according to Polt-Heinzl, the tendency of creating cultural icons as mythological, stable categories is coming to an end and the long tradition of the metamorphosis of cultural figures as icons is becoming a tautological play with the reference system itself. Or as Sleeping Beauty formulates: “I am an event because I am happening and not because I pull on some outfit” (104). In other words, I, as a woman, am Austria because I am *present*, and not because I am presenting Austria or representing it dressed in historical clothes. I, as Elke Krystufek, *am* the Austrian body and historical event, and not because I, as an artist, am representing female art from Austria.

The political consequences of such a corporeal topography as performative act—being Austria by embodying the culture, rather than only representing its history—become clearer when we look at recent definitions of performative spaces as Fischer-Lichte does in her *Ästhetik des Performativen* (187–209). Her criteria of a changeable atmospheric, transitory event character that is part of any performative space allows for a closer look at the recent performance art in Austria as well. First, any theatrical place (the stage as public institution) is a performative space, but it is also the sometimes unexpected event of a play that allows for creating and redefining the space (189–90). Furthermore, the variability of theatrical spaces has steadily increased since the European avant-garde theater of the early twentieth century and even led to new modes of perceiving motion and of moving the body in space, ultimately leading up to productions during which the actors and audience became interchangeable (191–99). Thus even public locations that normally do not represent theatrical places could become performative spaces, and it is possible—from an ethnographical point of view—to look at any location as a performative cultural space. Theater in this sense is not just part of a culture, but culture becomes comprehensible as a performative ritual. Performance art, then, is not just a subcategory of institutionalized art, rather it shows how any cultural event is part of a performative space that is constantly bodily enacted, perceptually redefined, and culturally in flux.

For Export, who continues with the feminist approach of seeing the female body “as canvas on which the society arranges its daily slap stick,” the medial connection of body, language, and political power is absolutely crucial (“Context variations” 13). By adapting elements of Export’s body and performance art, Bajtala’s, Dertnig’s, and Müller’s art videos present a more humorous, postmodern tone to reflect on typical Austrian body politics that meanwhile have become global affairs. Whereas Bajtala plays in an artificial way with the “Geworfensein” of the individual in the postmodern and posthumanist world, thus showing the female body exposed like a “thing” to outside and inside spaces, Dertnig depicts

the situation and thus discusses the definition of foreigners in Austrian society within the context of past racial and present migration politics. Both utilize the aesthetic concept of Export's "Body Configurations" as a tool, without claiming the same level of open and provocative political protest. Müller's adaptation goes in the same direction, but in a very subtle way, and can be accounted for as a somber feminist approach. All three play with the dichotomy of presence/absence and thus of the performative quality that the human body has in space. As much as social spaces cannot be created without bodies, the spatial understanding, especially of the female body, depends on the categorization of public places and topographical locations. Therefore, Müller's example shows best how the perception of the (female) body depends on the definition of the latter ones.

Whereas Kowanz-Kocer's *Eine Bewegung erzeugt ein Geräusch* explored the topics of body politics and body configurations in its own manner and is similarly coherent in its feminist aim when compared to Export's work, probably due to Kowanz-Kocer belonging to the same generation of women artists in Austria, Krystufek's example of body art shows that there was and still is room for expanding the performative gender space of the 60s and 70s. She can do so—and this is contrary to Export's development as a body artist—by going to extremes when exposing her own body because she no longer distinguishes between the private and public sphere, between the public image of women and acts of female intimacy and privacy. Her performance at the Portikus Gallery not only confronted the audience with the private act of going to the bathroom but also defamiliarized the public with stereotypical images of women and pop cultural iconic star gestures that go far beyond a provocative happening. At this point, the artist's body no longer represents its cultural and ethnic affiliation, for it has become a hybrid, highly medialized public territory on which the battle of gender, social status, and popularity replaces the former struggle with national and hereditary identity. The artist *uses* her body (or parts of it) as a tool and, at the same time, her body *is* the tool that allows *living*, acting, interacting, creating life and producing space, creating ideologies and rituals, and producing ideas, material realms, figural topics, and urban topographies following Lefebvre's definition of body spaces (170). It is exactly this ambivalence of *being* and *having* a body, which can be traced back to Helmuth Plessner's anthropological study on "the limits of human behavior" (34–35), that allows for understanding the human body as *performative space*.

The final question remains: what then could be so particular about the contemporary Austrian body space? As these examples of women artists show, it is certainly no longer Viennese Actionism with its patriarchic body politics directed against Catholicism and post-World War II Austrian politics that alone defines the performative space and thus the Austrian body space as a political space; it is probably also a contemporary sensitivity for and historically built awareness of the female body as a theatrical space, as a place for male desires as much as a location of public opinion. And if we take the allegory of Austria

as a woman into account, this symbolic space seems to be always in danger of turning a very private affair into a public body performance. Thus Krystufek's performance of bowel movements would be only one step away from Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* (1988); it is still surprising to see that a scandal only unfolds when the language becomes explicit, but not when it is performed by a woman artist as subversive bodily gesture.

NOTES

1. For this reason, video art and art performances that cannot particularly be considered female body art influenced by Valie Export—for example, video art by Maria Lassnig and Hubert Sielecki (*Maria Lassnig Kantate*) or Barbara Musil and Karo Szmít (*SW-NÖ 04*)—had to be omitted. This article is part of a larger study on body images in twentieth-century avant-garde literature and twenty-first century body art performances (supported by the UBC Hampton Research Fund) for which I plan to incorporate a wider range of female artists, including artists from earlier periods such as Mara Mattuschka and Heidemarie Seblatnig, as well as male artists such as Franz West and Erwin Wurm. I gratefully acknowledge Jeremy Redlich's editing support.

2. Hubert Klocker's description of Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* makes it clear how even the landscape that is chosen as a backdrop for Nitsch's performances has an autobiographical impetus (24), which here could be interpreted as patriarchic.

3. See my forthcoming article "Mapping the Body Space between Gender and Grammar: Valie Export's *Body Configurations*," which was first presented at the MALCA symposium at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, on April 14, 2007.

4. Bajtala, who was born in Bratislava in 1970 and studied at the University of Vienna and the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, lives in Vienna and is regarded as an Austrian artist.

5. According to Heidegger, it is the existentialist fear that "bringt das Dasein vor sein eigenstes Geworfensein und enthüllt die Unheimlichkeit des alltäglich vertrauten In-der-Welt-seins. [...] Das Dasein bringt zunächst den Wurf des Geworfenseins in die Welt nicht zum Stehen." (342, 348–49; § 68). I kindly thank Brigitte Prutti for her comment on Heidegger.

6. "Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 243).

7. By also playing with the interchangeability of bodies and things based on a similar *morphe*, *Satisfaction* is obviously influenced by Mara Mattuschka's animated short film *Der Untergang der Titania* (1985) and Export's provocative masturbation short film *Mann & Frau & Animal* (1973).

8. Since the English translation of Agamben's essay in his book *Means without End* was shortened, I quote from the complete English version.

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