**VALIE EXPORT in Conversation with Thomas D. Trummer on January 16, 2023,   
in Bregenz**

Thomas D. Trummer: We’ve just come from the ground floor of the Kunsthaus Bregenz. How do you feel about the space?

VALIE EXPORT: I’ve always liked it a lot and found it interesting. It’s so big, with these lovely exterior surfaces—glass windows, a huge glass façade. We just did a trial hanging to test the installation, and I can imagine how impressive it will be to experience the organ pipes in the space.

TDT: We talked once before about the immersive experience that visitors will have as soon as they enter the ground floor, surrounded by sound. You used a particular term for the work: a “sound sculpture.”

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, for me it is a sound sculpture and not an installation—there’s a big difference. The work is sculptural. After all, an organ as a whole is a sculpture, not an installation. Wherever an organ is located, whether in a concert hall, a church, or some other place, it is a sculpture, a sculptural object. At the same time, the organ is also a subject. It itself “speaks”; it makes its own sound and is a musical sound subject—not just a passive object for viewers. In order to speak or make sounds, the organ is dependent on its blowers, in other words, on wind. It needs an air movement, and that also lends it a subject quality. We all need air, we all need wind, even nature itself does. Wind is hugely important for our planet. It moves the clouds, you might say; it brings us rain and snow and provides irrigation. Wind also blows across the surface of the Earth and constantly changes it.

TDT: Wind—breathing, our exchange of air—is also related to the body. Do you see nature as a body?

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, even nature is a body, a natural body. And wind—breathing—is a very important element. We humans also need breath to speak. I addressed that once in a work. We inhale, and the air that we then breathe out of our lungs flows in the direction of the larynx, setting the glottis into motion. That’s how sounds are formed and then given further shape in the palatal area. We could say that a small wind movement in interaction with the tongue is what creates a sound. Depending on how your tongue moves in the palatal space, how it interacts with the breath, we create different sounds.  
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TDT: Tell us a bit about the organ pipes that you’ve brought here to the Kunsthaus Bregenz, the story of their origin and how it relates to your own history.

VALIE EXPORT: The organ pipes come from the pilgrimage church located on the Pöstlingberg hill in Linz. I myself come from Linz; I was born there, and of course we went to the Pöstlingberg very often, hiking up it or taking the tramway, the Pöstlingbergbahn. The pilgrimage church at the top is a Baroque church, dedicated to St. Mary. That, of course, fits in well with my whole feminist idea. Not that I’m planning to worship St. Mary—I’ve left the Church. But it is a Church of Our Lady, and St. Mary has a particular function: she is a woman who appears in religion, that is to say, in the Roman Catholic Church, as a saint, at the same time that Mary Magdalene embodies evil. So the name Mary provides two images of woman, “zero one zero one” we could say—positive and negative. On the one hand, the woman is seen as divine. That also implies that she will always remain divine, that is, the woman is “complete.” There is no need to change her. Nor does the woman need to change herself. Seen in this way, the view of her is oriented against feminism, which wants to bring about a change. On the other hand, the woman is the “evil woman,” the whore, Mary Magdalene. In this combination, the woman is always simultaneously divine and a whore. That has long been a religious image—an image of women that is established in the Bible from the outset. And that’s the image I associate with Mary and the pilgrimage church.

TDT: And the pipes come from the organ that was built into the church on the Pöstlingberg.

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, exactly. We went to the church frequently, and I heard the organ playing very often. The organ was one of my favorite instruments. For me, organs are like voices, like a choir of singing voices. I remember that the Brothers of Mercy in Linz had an organ and a choir of singing nuns. The voices of the organ and the female voices—they were somehow the same for me. An organ is like a choir: it has volume, it’s composed of different individual tones. The organ “sings” like a choir, every pipe itself also singing individually. The individual is always part of the group. It’s similar in jazz: several instruments result in one voice. The performer also becomes an instrument. We can view that in reciprocal terms: instruments are like human voices—and the human being is an instrument, a “voice instrument.”

TDT: I find that very interesting, because it leads us back to the body. You always see the body, as well as the voice, as a medium—as a technical medium that engages in an exchange with both itself and others. There’s a certain connection between them, isn’t there?

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, of course. From the outset, the body was at the center of my artistic, theoretical, and also scientific exploration. I started from the question: what do I have? What does my identity consist of? And that’s how I ended up with the body. I have a body, and it contains everything that makes up my identity. That includes my thoughts, my feelings, my organs that keep me alive. There’s a work I did in 1973, *Adjunct Dislocations*, which consists of a body—my body—that carries two cameras, one in front and one behind. What takes place on the back of the body, which we normally don’t see, along with everything on the front side too, all the movements that I made, were filmed and then projected onto the screen. The work contains the questions: what does the body mean? What does identity mean? What does bodily identity mean? Personal identity: what is that anyway? After all, we have different phases in life. At the beginning of the 1970s, I was in a depressive phase—and that was the standpoint from which I asked myself these questions. I concluded that I simply didn’t want to have an identity anymore, because without one, I’d be free from always having to think about my identity.

TDT: Like a sort of a reset, back to zero?

VALIE EXPORT: Right.

TDT: The absence of self.

VALIE EXPORT: But there is no such thing, unfortunately. Because at the exact moment in which I no longer want to have an identity, my identity consists of no longer wanting to have an identity.  
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TDT: At the Kunsthaus Bregenz, visitors will hear a musical piece in which the voice likewise plays a major role. Will you tell us about that?

VALIE EXPORT: Yes. The piece is from Charles Mingus: *Oh Lord, Don’t Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb on Me*” It was recorded in 1961 during the peak phase of the Cold War, when, for the first time since Hiroshima, the atomic bomb was once again being seriously discussed. The song, and particularly Mingus’s voice, made a massive impression on me. He has a certain diction in his singing, almost speaking but with an incredible amount of melody in his manner of speaking. He uses all the facets that the voice has to offer. The way he uses tonality and rhythm, the rhythm of the voice, creates a very specific vocal image, an “acoustic image.” He starts slowly, speeds up, slows down again, creating this really special, drawn-out tonality.

TDT: The piece is very expressive but at the same time quite simple—Mingus speaks or sings just one single sentence: “Oh Lord, don’t let them drop that atomic bomb on me.”

VALIE EXPORT: Right, he repeats the same sentence over and over. The lyrics are quite brief, but those few words work well, being interpreted differently each time. And his voice sounds really seductive. I discovered the song quite early on, and now I’m extremely happy to be able to present it here in connection with the organ pipes. After all, like I said earlier, the organ pipes also have their own voices.   
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TDT: In the large foyer of the Kunsthaus Bregenz, echo also plays an important role. We’ve had several acoustic works in the museum—Susan Phillips and Anri Sala have dealt with sound here for example. Those works have given me the impression that we don’t just feel the music very strongly in the space, but always also feel the space in the music. That’s something I expect with your work, too: that we come into the room and are surrounded by the music, become immersed in the sound sculpture, find ourselves in the midst of the acoustic work. There isn’t an opportunity for us to distance ourselves—like there usually is when we go to a museum and look at a work that hangs in a frame, passing it by to get to the next one. When we enter the Kunsthaus Bregenz, we take in the music and vibration not only with our ears but, in fact, with our entire body.

VALIE EXPORT: Right, the music is full of resonances, it’s full of small atoms, which themselves consist of further, smaller particles that the body registers as the atmosphere of the space, so to speak. The Earth also has an atmosphere; we use the same term for it, the principle of atoms continues into space.  
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TDT: Would you differentiate between noise and sound? If a glass plate breaks, we would speak of a noise, wouldn’t we? And a sound would be something that is formed with acoustic means, such as music. Is a noise a sound phenomenon that we can attribute to things—as opposed to sounds, which are attributed to subjects, to people?

VALIE EXPORT: Noises are also made by subjects. But sure, we could attribute them to things, to objects. There are noises in nature as well. Here, we come back to wind, which also plays a major role in my sculpture *Die* *Doppelgängerin*, from 2010. You can hear the wind as it “cuts” across the blades of two pairs of scissors—the noises that are generated are very important for the work. And similar to speech produced by the air we breathe, wind is also a formed air movement.

TDT: Might we refer to human wind and meteorological wind?

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, linguistic forms also exist in nature. We could speak of a phonetic expression, a phoneme. Listening to wind is very interesting. There is also the fact that it moves objects, and they in turn also make noise. They, too, have vibrations, their “object expression”: those of leaves differ from those of blades of grass, just as those of sand dunes differ from those of earth on the ground. A whole universe of sounds and sound languages exist. A telephone call ultimately consists of oscillations in a wire and of speech that is converted into oscillations. Those are major technical and scientific achievements that originated in military research. Many such achievements are thus closely tied to military and war history.

TDT: The history of war brings us back to the song by Mingus. The atomic bomb and nuclear war have regretfully become relevant again today.

VALIE EXPORT: That is pure coincidence, I have to say. In my mind, I’ve always associated this installation with that song by Mingus. And as a result of the invitation now, it naturally gains a great deal of currency. But it’s also *not* a coincidence. What is a coincidence in art anyway? The works already exist, they’re just put together differently. That’s what is so wonderful: that artists can refer back to so many things that are part of their—I’m going to put it in a big way here—artistic universe. I think it’s safe to use that term, because I feel that I’ve acquired or gained an incredible amount in my life, and this universe, my own artistic cosmos, contains all these things.

TDT: There was a great deal of fear about the atomic bomb during the Cold War. And after 1989, we all thought that the danger was alleviated and off the table. But we’re experiencing it again now.

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, today we’re very clearly feeling that anxiety again. And that’s of course why the song fits perfectly into the present time. It was written and describes the fear of those days, and now it virtually jumps into the current fear. But I would have always used the song, even if the situation today was different, because this fear exists anyway in outer space or in Earth’s space, in the political space of our planet—regardless of what country, what nation, or conflict we’re dealing with.

TDT: If we consider the organ pipes in sculptural terms, which is also what you do, they quite obviously look like weapons or munitions in their form. They’re also somewhat reminiscent of a warhead, aren’t they?

VALIE EXPORT: Right. Organ pipes are very aggressive-looking objects; individually they could be mistaken for rockets. They have “jet propulsion”—that’s the mouth of the pipe, or the opening through which sounds are emitted. After all, they speak of “organs” in military jargon, referring to rocket launchers that can carry small rockets over a certain distance, like the so-called “Stalin’s organ”—the nickname German troops gave to the Soviet Union’s Katyusha rocket launcher—which is a martial, brutal expression. The term conveys something very ambivalent. Here, the organ becomes a military instrument. The sound that these organs make probably recalls the whistling of organs in a church or concert hall. And you can easily imagine how organs could become a very powerful weapon.

TDT: The organ as a whole, that is, the sum of the individual pipes, comprises the instrument’s showpiece: a wall picture that develops its attraction via symmetry, through the overall picture. If you remove one of the pipes, it suddenly appears fragile and loses some of its magnificence. The individual organ pipes always remind me of Arte Povera and the art movement’s interest in the materials, in this case, the lead. In comparison to the splendor and beauty that the instrument as a whole exudes, the pipes alone seem relatively crude.

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, coarse and crude. When you put the organ pipes in casing and construct an instrument around them, they adapt to it, becoming more supple and gaining presence. Massed together they appear more powerful than they do alone. But we could also easily imagine the single pipe as a weapon clamped under someone’s armpit like a “tribal warrior” in battle—quite an archaic image.

TDT: Speaking of warriors, there is another question I’d like to ask you as a feminist artist: would you say that there is a connection between gender and war? After all, it is usually men who wage war.

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, waging war is a masculine trait. It’s about power, territorial conquests, and the ruthless use of war material. And by war material, I don’t mean technology but the human body, the body of human soldiers. That is a matter of masculinity. I would venture to say that conflicts would definitely be settled in a different way if women were in charge. And I am certain that the current diplomatic negotiations would look different if more women were involved. But it is chiefly the men who are doing the negotiating at the moment, and that is not a positive thing.

I am currently exploring military music and have compiled research on war songs and war lyrics—and I’m exploring the issue of how women are represented in them. We’re familiar with *Erika*, also known as *Auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein* (A little flower blooms on the heath)—the quintessential soldiers’ song. But I’m curious about what other soldiers’ songs and war texts there are in which women play a role. And are there any war songs at all written by women themselves? How do women engage with war? I’m currently interested in exploring these topics in my art in more depth.  
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TDT: If you were to sum up your career, would you say that you are successful as an artist, that is, for you yourself? You *are*, of course, successful, but from your perspective and in terms of your own standards?

VALIE EXPORT: Up to a certain point, yes, because I’ve been able to realize things, to depict things, to record things. But not everything, by far. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were many opportunities that I just didn’t have. Even the prospect of a studio didn’t exist. I have always worked quite a bit at a table, in a confined space, with drawings, with the sewing machine, writing texts. And it was always my wish to have a large studio, but that was unthinkable back then.

TDT: Coming back to the school textbook: how would you describe the “now”? Is there something that characterizes our present? Do you see differences between when you began your work in the 1960s and today—that is, on an artistic level? If you think back on the time then, paintings lost their frames, sculptures were removed from pedestals and became bodies. New media emerged, recording media…

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, you have to admit that it was an insane developmental leap. And we had the opportunity to connect to the active and interactive, the spatial and temporal of the 1920s, to Dadaism, Situationism, and so on. People found literature on that and expanded on it. But still, there was a kind of departure from what came earlier. People said: we’re no longer going to make anything that already exists! At the beginning, there was the great rejection of painting, where people said, we won’t paint anymore, no panel paintings! That changed later on, and panel painting was reinterpreted—Markus Prachensky and Josef Mikl come to mind. Art Informel painting, that was a really important time. Many other things from the prewar period were continued, like, of course, the earlier performances and Actionist precursors in Dadaism. After all, they did countless performances, very good ones, people just weren’t familiar with them at all.

TDT: Are you referring to Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters?

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, Kurt Schwitters, exactly. And then there was also the Japanese avant-garde artist group the Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai (Gutai Art Association), which appeared in my documentary film *Aktionskunst International.*

TDT: That was a film you made in 1989, in which the song by Charles Mingus can also be heard. In the sequence about the Situationists, you used the song as a soundtrack to accompany the images. Do you remember that?

VALIE EXPORT: Right, that was the first time that I included that song by Mingus.

TDT: Do you remember how you came across the song? Did you listen to it at home?

VALIE EXPORT: No, I couldn’t have heard it there since we didn’t own a record player. And it definitely wasn’t played on the radio. But as an adolescent I was in a jazz association in Linz, and it might have been played there. I was interested in jazz at the time, that’s why I was in that association—and the interest has stayed with me. The jazz club was associated with the Amerika Haus, which launched an insane plethora of things and opened many doors at the time: to film and literature.   
(…)

TDT: In Mingus’s song, God—the Christian God—is invoked. The song is actually part of the soul and gospel tradition. It’s really more of a prayer, a lament.

VALIE EXPORT: I’ve always seen the piece as an incantation: Mingus invokes God, but it doesn’t have to be a Christian God or have a religious significance in the classical sense. The song also reminds me of the invocation rites of indigenous, monolithic organized groups. I’ve seen films about them, shot by Indigenous people themselves. It’s a very different way of singing and has something “pagan” about it. I’ve always found rituals fascinating. They’ve influenced my artistic practice, my performances—or, rather, I started to see the performances as a ritual, though transferred onto our society, our social and political issues, feminism.

TDT: What fascinates me about Mingus’s song is that it is so existential. Yes, the atomic bomb is mentioned, but in reality, it’s simply about the extinction of everything human. It’s about my extinction and your extinction, this existential threat and the fear associated with it—a primal fear, because “being in the world” is always already linked to the fear of being wiped out of existence. And that feeling is incredibly strong, regardless of any religious belief or culture; you mentioned that earlier. In that respect, your artwork is quite astounding, and it corresponds to the current zeitgeist. We all suddenly have these fears because we’re experiencing things beyond our control and because we’re being confronted with threatening scenarios that are very serious. You could say we didn’t have things under control before either, but now we realize it.

VALIE EXPORT: Yes, that’s right. This fear already existed during the Cold War. But at the time we fostered utopias, and they enabled us to escape all the visions of destruction. We developed utopian places, utopian thoughts. At the moment, it’s difficult to develop utopias.  
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This conversation between VALIE EXPORT and Thomas D. Trummer took place in Bregenz on January 16, 2023.