

Graziele Lautenschlaeger

Linz

From very human to posthuman motherhoods: A reflection triggered by VALIE EXPORT's *Menschenfrauen*

Abstract: The biological, culturally constructed operationalities related to female bodies turn mothering into an ambivalent issue. Although VALIE EXPORT (*1940) has never been a main reference for mothering issues in art, there is more motherhood in her artworks than meets the eye. This paper analyses the maternal contingencies within her film *Menschenfrauen* (1979), in which the social and psychic states of four female characters are revealed through the extraordinary use of cinematographic strategies. The film addresses the overlapping burdens of female bodies engaged in human reproduction in a patriarchal society. To unfold the complexity of subjects intertwined in our object of study, a systemic analysis is conducted relating VALIE EXPORT's artistic statement with posthumanist thinking. Enriching the discussion with external examples, the paper invites readers to consider how contemporary art proposals contribute to reshaping the notion of motherhood.

Graziele Lautenschlaeger (Dr. phil) is a media artist and researcher, currently postdoctoral research fellow at the *Kunstuniversität Linz*, VALIE EXPORT Center. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from Humboldt University of Berlin, a MSc. in Architecture and Urbanism from the University of São Paulo and a BA in Media Design (Image and Sound) from the Federal University of São Carlos. Her ongoing research focuses on motherhood in contemporary media art, technofeminism and posthumanism.

1. Introduction

This paper is part of an ongoing artistic research project inspired by my own experience as a media artist becoming a mother. While pregnant, I was curious to know what artistic expressions resulted from the intersection between motherhood, technofeminism and posthumanism in contemporary art and I soon discovered that there were neither an abundance of examples nor had this intersection been sufficiently delineated in the academic field. Therefore, my initial curiosity turned into my current post-doctoral research project at the VALIE EXPORT Center and the University of Arts in Linz.

In a social organisation characterised by patriarchal structures and multilayered gender inequalities, motherhood is still seen as a counterproductive aspect for women's emancipation, within specific feminist perspectives as well. Reconciling motherhood with managing an artistic career is a challenge that has been especially hampered by the *modus operandi* of both art schools and the art market.¹

Intending to dig into this problem, I started the *Where are media artist mothers?* project, which also includes an online survey.² Due to the lack of attention to motherhood and related topics in the media art field, I am particularly interested in a specific profile of mothers: artists who are also technologists, creating their proposals in the intersections between scientific and technological knowledge, and whose artworks or performances reveal different types of media thinking, as well as critical approaches to technocultures, and/or technofeminist perspectives.

To what extent does the rare presence of mothering issues in media art mirror the gender gap in the tech industry? How machinic, hybrid and posthuman can the parenting of media artists be? How do discussions of maternity in the arts as an object of analysis reveal the blurred borders between biological and cultural aspects? Among these general questions, I am also interested in what types of initiatives are more open to media artist mothers in the production context, with the aim of populating media art with more constructive and empowering perspectives of posthuman motherhoods and therefore of enriching the art and technology environment with a wider range of imaginaries.

Some key pieces of the avant-garde Austrian media artist, performer, and filmmaker VALIE EXPORT directly or indirectly dealing with motherhood have proven to be a fruitful starting point to unravel the complexity of the relationships under study. In this paper, I attempt to show the relationships between the roles of mothers in *Menschenfrauen* with contemporary aspects of feminist thinking and their relations to posthumanism.

VALIE EXPORT plays a bridging role, inhabiting both worlds: the visual arts and media art and culture, going through the paradigmatic transformations of the technological environment. Although she has never been a main reference for mothering issues in art, there is more motherhood in her versatile body of artworks

¹ Judah 2022; Liss 2009.

² Available at shorturl.at/gnuxY, (01.09.2023).

than meets the eye, albeit through special challenging and provoking means. The pieces that attracted my attention when approaching the artist's works with the issue of mothering in mind were *Die Geburtenmadonna* (1976), *Geburtenbett* (1980), *Menschenfrauen* (1979), *Homo meter II* (1976) and more indirectly *Remote... remote* (1973) and *Restringierter code* (1973).

Among them, the film *Menschenfrauen* is especially challenging due to the complexity of the multiple aspects of motherhood addressed throughout the script, its characters' design and the various self-referential elements. Beginning with a contextualisation of the film, the paper then identifies several aspects of violence against "human females" and considers alternative ways to respond to oppressive systems. This path leads us to associate the characteristics of Feminist Actionism with the contemporary posthumanist thinking paradigm.

2. Mothers in *Menschenfrauen*

Menschenfrauen was directed by VALIE EXPORT and based on the screenplay written by Peter Weibel in collaboration with the artist herself. The general and recurring plot of *Menschenfrauen* is the story of a man, the journalist Franz, and his relationships with four women. However, while watching the film, one realises that the female characters are more portrayed in more detail, with their psychological states revealed in a more exceptional manner through cinematographic strategies. The women are Elisabeth, Gertrud, Petra, and Anna. Elisabeth and Gertrud are already mothers, struggling to control their destinies. Petra and Anna will become mothers during the film.

At the *double bind - Kinder Kunst Karriere* (2003) exhibition, when EXPORT was interviewed by German curator Signe Theill, the artist confirmed the autobiographical aspects of motherhood addressed in the featured artworks³ and without emphasising it, referred to the feminist models discussed in the 1960s and 1970s.

In *Menschenfrauen*, the often ironic and denouncement-like aspects of her artworks are poignant and can neither be considered apart from the fact that EXPORT lost custody of her daughter, being accused of pornography, nor from how this issue is entrenched in the extremely complex and violent environment depicted in the diegesis. In the same aforementioned interview, the artist states:

Den Begriff Alleinerziehende Mutter gab es damals nicht. Einer Frau wurde nicht zugetraut, alleinerziehende Mutter zu sein und gleichzeitig zu arbeiten. Sorgen, erziehen kann nur der Vater (bzw. der Staat in Stellvertretung). Mit dem Kind habe

³ The artworks were *Menschenfrauen* and *Homometer II*. For further information on the exhibition programme, please visit the website [doublebind • Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin](#), (18.01.2024).

ich keinen Konflikt gehabt. Ja mit dem Staat. [...] es gab eine Regelung, das Kind wird dem Vater zugesprochen. Er ist erziehungsberechtigt und nicht ich.⁴

This condition especially applies to the character Gertrud, who experiences a similar situation in the film. EXPORT's mastery as an artist lies in the way she cleverly translates facts of her own experience and subjectivity into universal political statements.

To be able to unravel the complexity of the intertwinement between the artist as psychic system and her milieu of action as social system, to use Niklas Luhmann's terms, I will combine the lenses of posthuman, cybernetic, and systemic approaches, starting with the expressions of violence condemned in *Menschenfrauen*.

3. Violence within social systems

No case of violence should be considered as an isolated manifestation. Therefore, although they are presented separately in this paper, it is important to keep in mind the circular nature of violent dynamics, which involves a series of feedback loops between psychic and social systems.

A series of deconstructive steps must be taken between love and violence to reveal the failures of humanist ideals, here assisted by some specific human situations of *Menschenfrauen*. VALIE EXPORT exposes the historically and culturally constructed vicious circles of violence against women, encompassing the key issues one may face in becoming a mother. In general, vulnerability and autonomy are among the ethical parameters used to observe the absurdity of these manifestations of violence in both the humanist and the posthumanist senses.

3.1 That's homemade!

A monochromatic, blueish sequence that refers to a flashback. It starts with Elisabeth confronting her probably ex-husband (Mann W in the script⁵) and develops into a quarrel in which Elisabeth is violently slapped from behind while sitting. She asks him to stop in vain. She asks for help from her son who passively watches the violent action. Looking at his hurt mother, the son replies in a vengeful tone: "Du hast mich auch oft geschlagen."⁶

⁴ VALIE EXPORT apud Theill 2003: Fragment of the interview on DVD-ROM: "The term single mother did not exist at that time. Women were not thought capable of being a single mother and working at the same time. Only fathers (or the state as proxy) can provide for the children and educate them. I didn't have any trouble with the child. Yes, with the state. [...] there was a regulation that awarded custody of the child to the father. He was the legal guardian, not me." Translated by Mark Miscovich and the author.

⁵ VALIE EXPORT and Weibel, undated: 192.

⁶ "You also beat me often" translation provided in the subtitles in English. (*Menschenfrauen*: 00:51:11 – 00:51:13)



Fig. 1: Mann W slapping Elisabeth, performed by Susanne Widl. Screenshot from *Menschenfrauen*: 00:50:52. Source: Sixpackfilm © VALIE EXPORT.

A recurring scene in many different contexts all over the world, domestic violence is made explicit. It reflects the complexity of a vicious circle that also reveals the problematic relationship between mother and son. Resentful about his violent education, he reproduces the violence of his parents. This is not the only scene that addresses this conflict. EXPORT also composes scenes that contrast the words of the cute child with the words of the rebellious youngster, showing the effects and the engine of prevailing cultural constructs, the maintenance of patriarchal values. At this point, it is possible to identify one of the failures of the classic humanist project according to feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (*1954): that of structuring a notion of “man” based on a hierarchical arrangement of classes of beings. Those not considered in the “hyper-inflated, falsely universal ‘He’”⁷ are the “‘others’ defined as negative opposites of the dominant human norm”, who are perceived as “worth less than Man”⁸.

The title of the film, translated as “Human Females”, can be interpreted to be a critique of that classification system of humanness, addressing a category of humans (females) with its specificities, and through the problematisation of the human reproduction issue, EXPORT attacks the core of the unsolved paradoxes involving the biological and cultural aspects shaping motherhood in Western societies.

⁷ Irigaray 1985 [1977], 1993 [1984].

⁸ Braidotti 2022: 18–19.

The male-female dichotomy is perhaps the primary opposition in this reason-based valorisation system, which according to Braidotti, finds its foundations in “universal powers of scientific reason and faith in technological progress”.⁹ But not only, as we shall see, together with EXPORT, in the other example scenes below. This raises the question of whether violence can be reasonable at all.

3.2 Gott ist ein Mann!

Through a similar use of flashback as the abovementioned scene, we are presented with a long shot of the young Elisabeth at a Catholic church mass. In a close-up, we see her receiving the host, an artefact that symbolises the body of Christ. The sequence is iterated three times accompanied by the voice-over: “Gott ist ein Mann.”¹⁰ In the following shots, in another iteration of the priest’s voice offering the body of Christ, she is at home in front of an altar where there are also pictures of the family, mostly focusing on those of her father. The film again cuts to a close-up of her with her eyes closed and her mouth opened as if she were receiving an imaginary host, accompanied by the voice-over: “Vater ist ein Mann”¹¹. Her mother enters the room abruptly, saying “Was? Deinem toten Vater zeigst du die Zunge?”¹² and violently slaps her across the face.

In this short sequence of *Menschenfrauen*, VALIE EXPORT thematises the oppression of women by patriarchal morals and religion, criticising the values and legacy of the Catholic faith, a criticism she consistently expressed throughout her artistic production. Within the next approximately 20 seconds of the sequence, she manages to intertwine the multiple layers designating the power and dominance of the male imaginary towards Christians and their family-based organisation. Once again, EXPORT opts for a construction that emphasises the circularity and perpetuation of violent situations. God and Father are the authorities to be respected, swallowed, embodied. The lack of dialogue and misleading premises of the mother generate random violence suffered by Elisabeth as a child. It also draws a parallel to the education parameters presented in the previously discussed scene.

The repetition of elements – for example, the importance of male, wanton violence – simultaneously demonstrates and emphasises how violence has become ‘naturalised’ in Western culture, or in other words, banalised.

In addition, once the narrative is continuously moving along a given timeline, independently of the order of these scenes, every repetition adds a new aspect to the causes and effects of the violent relationships, which then leads to an expanded understanding if one approaches the film analysis through a systemic perspective and its circular dynamics.

⁹ Braidotti 2022: 18.

¹⁰ Original subtitles in English: “God is a man” (*Menschenfrauen*: 00:47:19 – 00:47:22; 00:47:31 – 00:47:34; 00:47:39 – 00:47:42).

¹¹ Original subtitles in English: “Father is a man” (*Menschenfrauen*: 00:47:46 – 00:47:50)

¹² Original subtitles in English: “What? You stick out your tongue to your dead father?” (*Menschenfrauen*: 00:47:53 – 00:47:57)

3.3 State, the father of the citizens!

EXPORT also depicts how violent dynamics can be embodied in the role of the state as “the father of the citizens”. Both Elisabeth and Gertrud are fighting in court for custody of their son and daughter, respectively. Gertrud, who decides to study after getting divorced, experiences more resistance from the state’s representatives in this regard, being questioned about her ability and possibility to study and take care of her daughter at the same time.

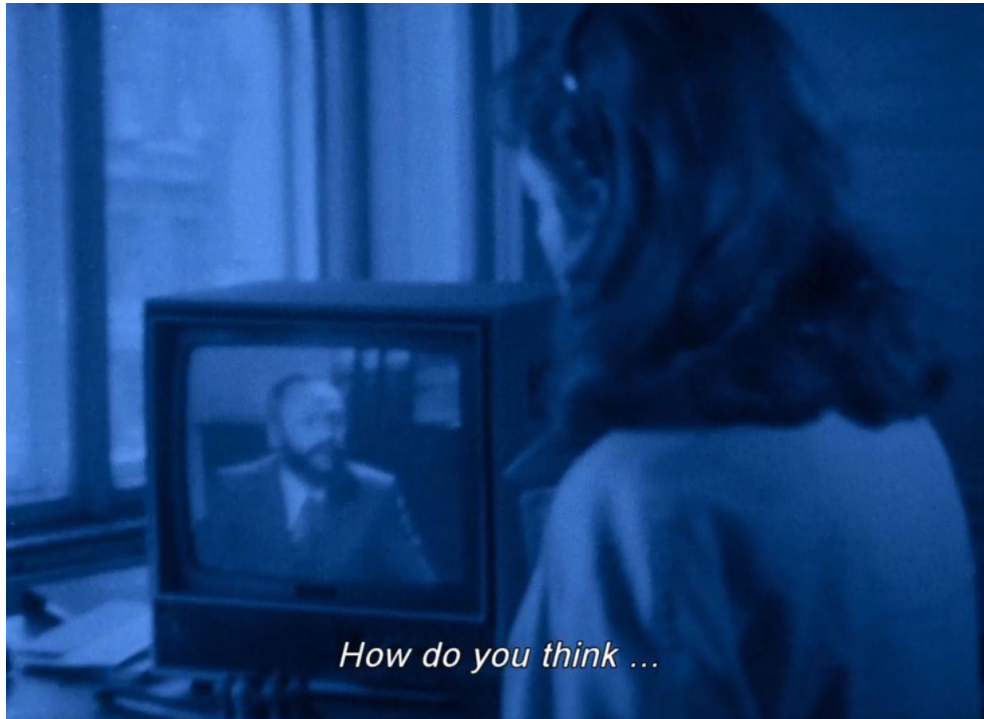


Fig. 2: Gertrud listens to the argumentation of the civil servant on a TV monitor. Screenshot from *Menschenfrauen*: 00:21:12. Source: Sixpackfilm © VALIE EXPORT.

Interestingly, the director creates a picture of a dehumanised state through the machine-mediated and repeated voice of the civil servant on the TV monitor. The mediatisation of the state representative is a first step towards abstracting huMAnness from violent dynamics, as a first step in rendering it ‘invisible’.

As a teacher and politically engaged person, Gertrud insists on presenting alternative ways of living, being perhaps the most autobiographical link to the director. In her role as the rules-breaking character, she is also creative in using an innovative kind of ‘type-moving image-writer’ through which the audience can gain an insight into the deeper psychological and symbolic layers of the burdens she is writing about in the diegesis and culminating in her death: Gertrud simultaneously embodies the symbolic death of a former Frau Lehner (the family name of EXPORT)

and the innumerable cases of women's annulation, with suicide representing the radical alternative to emancipation.

3.4 Invisible violences

All the aforementioned types of violence frequently assume invisible forms, either as 'naturalised' phenomena or as strategies to affirm that what is not seen simply does not exist – as the maximum of rational blindness. Engines of the capitalist means of production also operate in other circumstances, for instance, in making the energy costs involved in domestic and care work, the core of labour force production, invisible, as the Italian scholar and feminist activist Silvia Federici analytically explains.¹³

With regard to the invisibility of violent cycles involving women in *Menschenfrauen*, it is worth drawing attention to the way that EXPORT uses the narrative elements to portray Gertrud's struggles, culminating in her suicide. As an expression of the hopeless situation in which she finds herself, a woman within a patriarchal society, she meticulously executes a plan to put an end to her existence: she climbs up the mast of a high-voltage line and touches an electric cable.

The metaphor of electricity as invisible violence recurs in other works of VALIE EXPORT, such as *Hyperbulie* (1973) and *Die Praxis der Liebe* (1983),¹⁴ and can be linked to the influences of a kind of media thinking and the principles of the actionist movement behind the artist's repertoire. Electricity in an art context has special significance in its very materiality-operationality and its potential for endless meaning generation and attribution, precisely due to the zero-dimensionality of electronic and digital media.¹⁵ In this context, it is merely interesting to observe how EXPORT uses electricity as a means to extend the abstraction of violence across several layers: from the micro scale of a functioning TV monitor representing the state in a public office to the macro scale of a high-voltage power line.

4. Towards alternatives: diversity and embracing uncertainty

On another narrative axis, one that contrasts with the omnipresent gender-based violence made explicit in the examples above, love, as pulse of life and creation, persists. The other characters, Anna and Petra, who are both pregnant by the same man, the journalist Franz, become partners and decide to join forces in a shared life without him. This is revealed in a sequence where both characters are in a restaurant exchanging affections while being severely criticised by the other guests, representing the public opinion and the conservative values of that time. The union between them is the meeting of human mothers with the chance to breathe within

¹³ Federici 2017.

¹⁴ Bachler 1984.

¹⁵ Lautenschlaeger 2018.

alternatives. Human mothers are searching for ways to overcome competition and engage in cooperation.

Depicting the lesbian relationship as an alternative challenges the nature-culture dichotomy usually associated with biologically given abilities and assigned gender roles, socially expected by representatives of the traditional heterosexual and monogamous family institution. As contrary to social expectations (the usual image of the woman in art), it anticipates possibilities that have only recently become more visible and less repressed in Western societies in part due to the popularity of the work of Gender Studies scholars such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Paul Preciado, Sophie Lewis, and many others.

EXPORT also smoothly incorporates the ideal of androgyny in *Menschenfrauen*, an aspect of the Feminist Actionism presented as an alternative for overcoming the dichotomous relationships between female and male as well as the persistent history of female self-alienation,¹⁶ an effort that corresponds with her feminist positioning throughout the range and variety of her work.

Besides the utopian lens of the film, the awareness of the perversity of the social system's mechanisms remains a central focus of EXPORT's writings, justifying the ongoing feminist endeavours, as the artist concludes in her text from the late 1980s:

Our culture, however, is still far from the androgynous spirit that listens to the echo of the belly, for men too would have to revise their ideals: as soon as the wife of a Jambim man feels she is pregnant, her husband no longer goes fishing. The sea, the endless amniotic fluid, is not to be disturbed by the strokes of the oar.¹⁷

The same powerful metaphor of the sea also appears in the final scenes of *Menschenfrauen* when Anna and Petra, the two pregnant women, face the vast ocean and together drink from its water. Besides addressing the necessity of diversity, EXPORT's filmic depiction also embraces uncertainty.

Curiously, comparing the final pages of the available screenplay (see Fig.3) with the final scenes of the film, we can notice a significant difference. In contrast to the written pages of the script, which read like a political manifesto, where the voices of reason refer to motherhood as a punishment, the film suggests an open end so huge and liquid as the sea faced by both pregnant bodies. Instead of portraying realistic scenes like Petra breastfeeding or Anna carrying her baby, the metaphor of a moving red flag is replaced by the characters drinking the water of the sea of uncertainties. Life as becoming. Existing as resisting.

¹⁶ Dziewior and Sauerländer 2023: 165.

¹⁷ VALIE EXPORT, "He who is not painted is stupid", undated, apud Dziewior and Sauerländer 2023: 85.

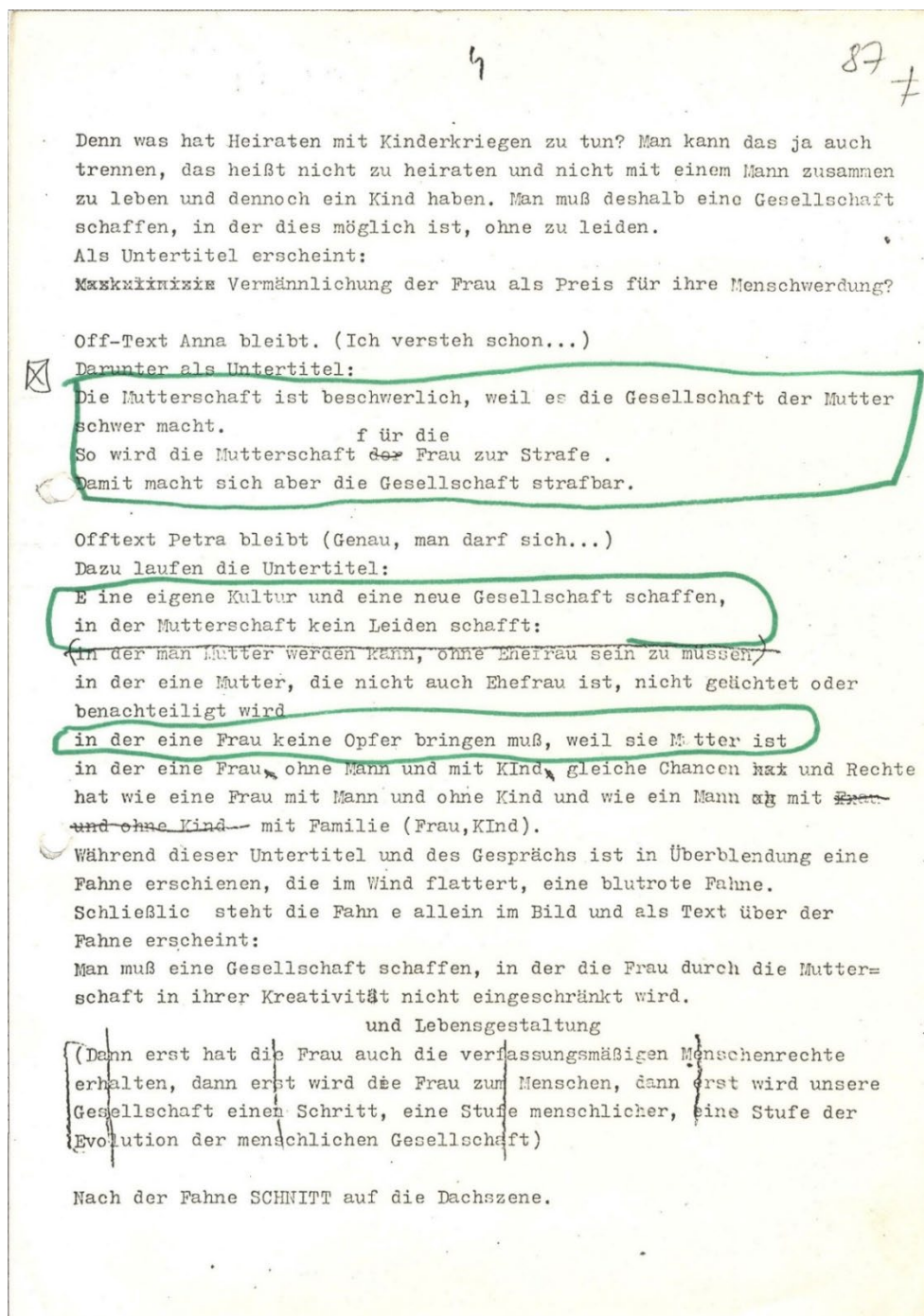


Fig. 3: Last page from the screenplay of *Menschenfrauen*, in a copy used by the director herself. Source: VALIE EXPORT Center Linz _ Research Center for Media and Performance Art / Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz.¹⁸

¹⁸ VALIE EXPORT; Weibel, Peter (undated): *Menschenfrauen*. Screenplay, typescript with various notes, 29.7 x 21 cm. VEC, bundle 40.

The diegetic open future can also be associated with hope and promises of change, at least to the limits of physical definitions concerning sex and gender, as well as those regarding technological developments related to them and therefore, to human reproduction as a whole.

5. From very human to posthuman

In order to unravel the complexity of themes intertwined in the analytical scope of our research, I am working with an expanded understanding of motherhood. Mainly, it encompasses the operations usually associated with a body named 'mother', its relationships to other bodies as well as the appropriation of the concept in non-human contexts. In the human case, these operations can be associated with a series of topics involving the reproductive cycle, from concerns about fertility and fecundation to the transformative aspects of pregnancy and gestation to birth-giving and the methods and ethics of caring for one's offspring.

The same sort of exercise in abstraction has been applied to the film analysis, observing the characters as psychic systems, inserted in their corresponding social systems, as well as the screenplay writer and director as observers and the author of this paper as observer of the observers – this is the core of our cybernetic, systemic, posthuman approach.

Amidst these abstractions, how can posthumanist thinking assist us in rescuing the very human? Critical posthumanist ideas go beyond a simple notion of posthuman as an extension of the human, instead moving beyond the dialectics of control/lack of control, superhuman/inhuman.

Although some current scientific research paradigms are still based on the dichotomy between human and non-human animals, for instance, in the search for genetic traces and the "molecular tinkering that transmuted our animal ancestors into humans"¹⁹, the ongoing efforts to develop a posthuman paradigm of thinking that envisions "a radical onto-existential re-signification of the notion of the human"²⁰ takes the significant otherness and inseparability of nature and culture into consideration. According to the U.S. scholar Cary Wolfe, posthumanism

far from surpassing or rejecting the human – actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes of affective states that of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of the other living beings and their own autopoietic of 'bringing forth a world'.²¹

¹⁹ Haussler 2008.

²⁰ Ferrando 2016.

²¹ Wolfe 2010: xxv.

In addition, Wolfe mentions self-referentiality as a relevant approach to posthumanism. Based on Niklas Luhmann's theory of art in relation to the paradoxical dynamics of the second-order cybernetic observations, he suggests that we have the tools needed to move beyond the critical impasses that would attach the label of victimisation or sentimentalism to the artistic statements that cannot escape from the paradox entailed in the coincidence between artist, artwork and their corresponding contexts.

5.1 Self-referentiality

Including VALIE EXPORT's biographical references, the film challenges us to reflect on the boundaries between the artist's persona, the human artist and the artist mother. While this intertwinement can probably be found in any analysis of the relations between an artist and their work, it has been an issue structuring her work from the beginning of her career, as we can see from VALIE EXPORT's artistic statement:

Von Anfang an war an die Proklamierung des selbstgewählten Namens die Frage nach der eigenen Identität gekoppelt und wurde schon in der typographischen Präsenz des Logos der Konflikt visualisiert, den VALIE EXPORT zu einem zentralen Thema ihrer Kunst gemacht hat: den Konflikt zwischen Bild und Selbst, Bild und Sein.²²

This self-reference is not only an important part of her early career, for instance, *Selbstportrait mit Kamera* (1966-67), but she plays with its paradoxes and continuously engages in feedbacking and upcycling fragments of her previous artworks into new ones, as seen in films like *Unsichtbare Gegner* (1976) and *Syntagma* (1983). In *Menschenfrauen*, the artist also uses research she conducted into the different ways women commit suicide in the development of the character Gertrud.

Even if VALIE EXPORT did not highlight her motherhood in her public life and career, it is obvious in *Menschenfrauen* that she struggled with the interpenetration and conflicts between her psychic system and the social systems around her. The paradoxes of differentiation could be translated to filmmaking itself, as a means of creating realities:

if the observation of reality has also become the investigation of the investigator's construction of reality, then the process of scientific or theoretical observation must include an element of self-observation.²³

In addition, it is a welcome increase in the complexity of the created/framed reality if one considers not only the mind but the body of the observer.²⁴ In this sense, one

²² Ebert et al. 2003: 10. "From the very beginning, the proclamation of the self-chosen name was linked to the question of one's own identity, and the conflict that VALIE EXPORT has made a central theme of her art was already visualised in the typographic precision of the logo: the conflict between image and self, image and being". Translated by the author.

²³ Wolfe 2010: 303.

²⁴ Quote by A.N. Whitehead apud Viveiros de Castro 2020: 301. Source in Portuguese: "A relatividade do espaço e do tempo tem sido imaginada como se dependesse da escolha de

can assume that one of the main contributions of artists to the epistemological changes triggered by the inclusion of the observer while observing systems is the material basis of their actions.

Harking back to *Menschenfrauen*, the burdens of the characters on the level of the observed system overlap with those of the filmmaker as observer, representing the class of female artists experiencing both the patriarchal structures and the feminist revolution. In this sense, VALIE EXPORT's authorial mark is expressed by her engagement and protagonism of the body and the use of resources made possible by a media thought as a driving force, attuned to the technological developments of her time.

5.2 Feminist Actionism and Posthumanism

At the same time that VALIE EXPORT stated that it was especially important for her to use her own body as a means of controlling herself, her ideas, the female body, the position of women in society in an artistic and aesthetic context, her positioning in delineating a Feminist Actionism reinforces the need to address the significant otherness, beyond the ideal man of the humanist project.

Claiming to have coined the term "*feministischer Aktionismus*",²⁵ she defines the movement according to the following perspective:

Just as the 'material thinking shall free human products from their thing-character' one might suggest, Feminist Actionism shall free men's products, that is women, from their thing-character. Just as action aims at achieving the unity of actor and material, perception and action, subject and object, Feminist Actionism seeks to transform the object of male natural history, the material 'woman' subjugated and enslaved by the male creator, into an independent actor and creator, subject of her own history. For without the ability to express oneself and without a field of action, there can be no human dignity.²⁶

Starting from the premise that material equals body, the artists of Viennese Actionism considered the human body as inseparable from the materials they were working with, focusing on the materials themselves and exploring how they could become an active part of their propositions. This approach involved the material acting in and against itself, suggesting a deep engagement with its very physicality. As a result, the material approach led to a reconsideration of the role of meaning – with the materials serving as a stage for multiple meanings which may radically differ from one culture to another. This idea has been magnificently explored by VALIE EXPORT in the street action film, *Homo meter II* (1976), where the artist attaches a bread at the height of her stomach and invites passers-by to serve themselves with a knife.

um observador. É perfeitamente legítimo incluir o observador, se ele facilita as explicações. Mas é do corpo do observador que precisamos, não de sua mente".

²⁵ Interview with Signe Theill in the context of the *double bind – Kinder Kunst Karriere* exhibition, 2003.

²⁶ VALIE EXPORT 1989: 142–143.

The acknowledgment of the material agency in artworks by the actionist movement, including the feminist agenda, links up with concerns of New Materialism, which investigates interrelations between technological, biological, environmental and social processes and human action. It is part of the programme of decentralisation of the human to emphasise the significance of materials and their agency in interactions with other living entities and the environment – a perspective adopted by non-European cultures much earlier than Western thinking could formalise it in words. Examples of this worldview are found in Amerindian perspectivism, animism, and others.

Nevertheless, the discussion may be enriched if we briefly illustrate how artists currently materialise and articulate posthumanist issues regarding human reproduction and mothering. A very recent example is *Organ of Radical Care: Una Matriz Colaborativa* (2023) by the duo Charlotte Jarvis and Patricia Saragueta, who among other actions, are growing a ‘collaborative uterus’ from the menstrual blood of multiple women, trans- and non-binary people, perhaps even incorporating ‘male’ cells. A glass chalice has been designed for the endometrial cells coming from anonymised uterus donors, and one among the challenges is to keep them alive. They specifically created an evolving, collective body that incorporates intersectional voices, thus augmenting the diversity of the representativity of otherness.

A second groundbreaking example is *Hybrid family* (2016) by the Slovenian artist Maja Smrekar, who inquired into the existential and political instrumentalisation of a woman's body and breastfeeding. By means of a three-month performance with her dog and systematically pumping her breasts every three hours, the artist stimulated her own hypophysis to release prolactin. At the same time, she ate a diet rich in galactogens to promote lactation, which in turn stimulated an increase in oxytocin. By becoming a “(m)other”, the artist experienced and demonstrated the “natureculture” coined by Donna Haraway²⁷ and continues to explore decolonial reproductive freedom in a multispecies world. The performance simultaneously embraced ecofeminism, interspecies relations, and critiqued the technological and ideological structures of society.

While a detailed analysis of these examples would go beyond the scope of this article, they are, however, relevant for illustrating the further development of Feminist Actionism and Posthumanism, especially concerning the possibilities of biotechnological knowledge and techniques in reshaping motherhood-related operationalities. The discussion would certainly be further enhanced by inputs from the fields of feminist technoscience, ecofeminism and xenofeminism.

6. Final considerations

Feminist concerns regarding the female body, like those addressed repeatedly by VALIE EXPORT in her works, cannot ignore the female body's reproductive ability,

²⁷ Haraway 2008.

the corresponding care work, and the various taboos, controversies and paradoxes surrounding them – these are the aspects that I would call the very human within the construction of characters in *Menschenfrauen*.

In the context of feminist contemporary art, the film is a relevant contribution to the re-imagining of the concept of motherhood. On the one hand, it addresses motherhood through the multi-layered acts of violence suffered by the female characters – from the very materiality of the human body to the oppressive abstractions of patriarchal moral and religious values. On the other hand, it encompasses the plural voices of the ‘human females’, anticipating the formalisation of intersectional voices of feminism while simultaneously incorporating queer and collective approaches to off-spring care.

Although *Menschenfrauen* does not decentre the human from the primary focus of the filmic discourse, VALIE EXPORT’s self-referentiality and the principles of Feminist Actionism intertwine some of the seeds of the epistemological changes observed in feminist artworks and its bridges to posthumanist thinking.

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- Syntagma*. Austria 1984, VALIE EXPORT, 20min.
- Unsichtbare Gegner*. Austria 1977, VALIE EXPORT, 110min.

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- Fig. 3: Last page from the screenplay of *Menschenfrauen*, in a copy used by the director herself. Source: VALIE EXPORT Center Linz _ Research Center for Media and Performance Art / Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz.