

TONSPUR 85
VALIE EXPORT
Der Wolf in uns (The Wolf Within Us), 2020

"...a field of tracks, wolves' tracks in the snow, dotted lines, imaginary lines comprised of dots. These tracks, which lie in the landscape like a grid, are path markings drawn across the countryside, left behind by a wolf or a pack of wolves on their wanderings. These tracks are signs marking paths, processes, times, geography and behaviour in group dynamics. They disappear to re-emerge in similar constellations."*

The wolf and the moonlanding, a mythical constellation, two at first glance disconnected and yet common motifs. The proverbial cliché of the wolf howling at the moon as a myth-enshrouded connection between the animalistic and the eerie is a far cry from the technological wonder of the moonlanding — and the demystification of the myth of the unassailable moon. Just as since time immemorial the moon has appeared as a metaphor for the unconscious, for the feminine and for the unknown, for controlling the tide, as a body in the night sky that is far enough away to remain unreachable, so this planet glowing in the night sky was domesticated in the 20th century. Differently domesticated to the dog, which it is differently estimated to have developed from its wild origins as a wolf 150,000 years ago, or perhaps merely 15,000 years ago, with human intervention, developing away from enmity and being a threat to being a companion. In the allegorical narrowing down in VALIE EXPORT's series of seven images and eight sound tracks, the wolf's gaze is fixed on the human incursion into foreign terrain.

The wolf as a metaphor for the dangerous and the idea of the latent savage slumbering within a human imbued with rationality who, by full moon, transforms at night into a werewolf through a magnetic attraction to the unconstrained force of nature, releasing something from the unconscious projections and hunches, according to which man is really still an animal and the animalistic in him can only be handled with disciplinary measures in the form of the instruments of civilisation. In 1978, in the impressive installation *I (BEAT (IT))*, this hard grip forces the protagonist, VALIE EXPORT herself, into the steel paws of social fetters while she is snarled at by German shepherds, representing the organisational power of the state and patriarchal society. The German Shepherd, renamed 'Alsatian' after the first world war, is a herding dog in a good sense, who tends the flock and is not to blame for the fact that he was trained and styled like a wolf by the Nazis to become a tooth-bearing guard dog.

The uneasy division of Western thinking into the binary of mind and body, nature and culture is a consistent feature of VALIE EXPORT's work. For instance, in a series of actions and films arranged into a series of photographs preceded by a diagram: *Zyklus der Zivilisation. Zur Mythologie zivilisatorischer Prozesse* (Cycle of civilisation. On the mythology of civilisatory processes). The title alone implies that these "processes" are a means of constructing a grand narrative, one that understands progress to be achievable not least of all through the domestication and codification of the body. So, EXPORT notes in a lecture: "We ourselves are signs, our body is part of our sign system. This emergence of the codes, the formation of the codes and

the meaning of chains of signifiers are important preoccupations in my artistic work and through my artworks. Signs have places, spaces that they repeatedly break through, pierce, they behave like a pack that is always on the move, signs are nomads — but they are also identity. Signs change their meanings, explain new signs and meanings, they isolate and connect, they stand with each other in changing forms of communication, change communication through signs of rituals, rules, of orders and disorder. In their interactions, however, signs can also be relative — in relation to each other — passive and active."*

The wolf calls to the moon, it seems, just like his relatives our companions the dogs do, they communicate on bright nights suited for hunting. Between the wild wolf and the companion dog, who was sent into space in the 1950s, sacrificed to the human species' urge to explore, and the first man on the moon lies a meaningful "chains of signifiers" that says something about the hubris and mythology of "processes of civilization". So Donna Haraway speaks of a Sputnik Shock generation whose belief in progress and the polar opposites and relations of subordination between animal and human, nature and culture, organic and technological, was opposed by feminist academics like herself, and contrasted with the concept of cyborgs and later of the companion species.

Perhaps Alexandre Kojève's early prophecy of the end of history and the end of man, who reverts to being an animal, will come true. In the soundtracks, which only reveal the howling of the wolves, their communication with one another, there is in any case no trace of a human sound. A potency is there, a reference in the grooves, the two opponents could still become companions after all: magical visual relationships appear complementary, more precisely in positive and negative fields of attraction and repulsion, which only come into unison when the "stars" conjugate, yes, merge. But apart from that, it is about the knowledge of one another, which is "situated", which takes into account realities conditioned by techno-science and biosociality and is characterized by the recognition of the fundamental *Significant Otherness*** of the respective other — animal and human as "companion species".

Sabine Folie, June 2020

* In her lecture 'VALIE EXPORT spricht über ihre Arbeiten' (VE speaks about her works) at Vienna University of Technology on 20.5.2000 Export showed, inter alia, an image with wolf tracks taken from the book *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1987, p.26. Quotations, here in translation.

** Donna Haraway, *The Companion Manifesto. Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, 2003.