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**Depictions of Inter-species Motherhood in Contemporary Art:
Posthuman Tendencies in the Art of Maja Smrekar and Ai Hasegawa**
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Depictions of Inter-species Motherhood in Contemporary Art

Posthuman Tendencies in the Art of Maja Smrekar and Ai Hasegawa

MA Thesis Arts and Culture

Art History Track

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is set to study depictions of motherhood in contemporary art that portrays inter-species relationships. Through the case studies of two specific artworks, Maja Smrekar's *Hybrid Family* and Ai Hasegawa's *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, this thesis investigates how they offer different solutions to the nature-culture divide. For the relevance to the academic fields of posthumanism, feminism, and environmental studies, the method of discourse analysis was used to unearth important terms, concepts, and theories which were applied to the case studies to answer the question: *What possibilities do Smrekar's and Hasegawa's works offer in an attempt to resolve the nature-culture binary and renaturalize cultural issues regarding motherhood and kinship?* The topics, discourse, and case studies are relevant today, as they highlight and question societal and cultural structures that uphold an unjust system that has actively been harming humans, animals, and the environment. A posthumanist and feminist approach is an attempt to view these issues from different angles and study whether the artworks of Hasegawa and Smrekar offer useful insights into tackling the nature-culture divide.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the summer of 2020, during one of the low-restriction phases of COVID-19 in Croatia, I volunteered at the TOUCH ME art festival organized by KONTEJNER-Buro of contemporary art praxis. TOUCH ME is a triannual festival initiated in 2002 and traditionally executed as: “a project set at the intersection of art, technology, and science, with a somewhat erotic subtext of the title reflecting the interactivity and responsive nature of most technology-based artworks.”¹ During the times in which touching was not encouraged, the festival, in its immediate and live form, was ambitious and successful. Its comprehensive program was composed of two exhibitions, an art film festival, workshops, artist talks, and performances. My role as a volunteer was miscellaneous, ranging from performance preparations like shoveling dirt, leading exhibition tours, reminding the visitors to keep their masks on, and spray-painting a 3D-printed artwork. At the festival, exhibited side by side were two artworks whose visual elements did not converse in an aesthetic manner, yet the themes they explored inspired the topic of this thesis: depictions of motherhood in interspecies relationships. The works in question are *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* by Ai Hasegawa and *K-9_topology: Cynomorpha* by Maja Smrekar. The 2020 Touch Me Festival was not the first exhibition in which the works were both present, as they also appeared in an exhibition titled *My Monster: The Human Animal Hybrid* at the RMIT Gallery in Melbourne, Australia.

I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin is a multimedia installation artwork in which all of the visual components illustrate Hasegawa’s conceptual proposition: that willing women should be able to offer their uterus as surrogates to carry out pregnancies of endangered animal species, and in this specific case, the Maui dolphin. *K-9_topology: Cynomorpha* is also presented as a multimedia installation that visually alludes to a dog stacker. Most of the displayed objects are presented as an obstacle course, which one would typically see at K-9 competitions. The installation is a condensed presentation of the artistic series of Smrekar’s works, all revolving around the relationship between man and animal, kinship and companionship, family, and otherness. In this thesis, I will focus on one of the works that make up this specific series, titled *Hybrid Family*. *Hybrid Family* is a project based on a three-month-long private endurance performance in which the artist secluded herself with her pet dog Byron and the *Family*’s new addition, puppy Ada. During that time span, the artist stimulated her glands in order to ‘trick’ them into producing milk, which she used to feed her puppy. The artist became what she titled

¹Kontejner, “Touch Me 2003-2008: Initiation.”

the 'mOther', as a play on words combining mother and other, and, in her own way, attempted to decolonize reproductive freedom and motherhood. The different approaches to phases of motherhood completely radicalized by the involvement of other animal species make these works fascinating case studies.

The artworks were my first contact with the concept of posthuman feminism, a branch of the humanities that has been growing and expanding since the 1980s. The main thinkers whose theories and approaches will be used to unpack the potential of these artworks are Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. In her book, *Posthuman Feminist*, Braidotti first focuses on Renaissance humanism and critiques its shortcomings. As a movement that came out of Central Europe and shaped our understanding of humanity, its art, and its philosophy, the ideal it depicted always revolved around the idea of the Vitruvian man. Braidotti writes: "Humanism upholds an implicit and partial definition of the human based on an assumption of superiority by a subject that is male, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, speaking a standard language."² She further argues that any being, human or non-human that does not fit into these very specific and limiting categories has historically been excluded socially and politically from equal opportunities. In posthumanism, the focus shifts from the human subject to the complexity of relations between humans, animals, and machines, and to the ways in which these relations shape the world we live in. Braidotti argues that posthumanism has the potential to bring about a more inclusive and ethical society by challenging the anthropocentric biases that have underpinned Western philosophy and culture. By acknowledging the agency and subjectivity of non-human entities, posthumanism can promote a more diverse and respectful coexistence between humans and other beings, and her views are widely accepted in posthumanist circles.

Haraway also appears crucial, as she is directly referenced as a source of some theory behind Maja Smrekar's work. In the letters exchanged between Jens and Smrekar during her reclusion, Haraway is invoked as a source of many ideas, mainly found in her books *The Companion Species Manifesto* and *Staying with the Trouble*. Haraway's concepts produced in her long and influential career which are going to be used in the discussion of artworks by Hasegawa and Smrekar, start with her essay 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', in which she ironically proposes a future in which cyborgism, human and technical advancement have produced a multitude of modes of existence. In the manifesto, technological advancement is both ironically embraced and realistically criticized as a possibility for the betterment of fringe and

² Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 10

multifaceted identities. Her gradual shift of focus towards animal studies did not forsake the sentiment relayed and expressed about the changes in human existence, yet her famous proclamation “Make Kin Not Babies!”³ seems to be embedded in both Haswgawa's and Smrekar's work, which will be developed in the coming pages.

Posthumanism and feminism in the case of these artworks cannot be studied without some understanding of feminist discussions about reproductive rights, ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology), IVF (In Vitro Fertilization), and the many contradictions and illogicalities brought forth by the policies and laws put in place to uphold patriarchal capitalist ideologies. The choice behind these artworks as case studies lies in the themes they illustrate, and with this thesis, I aim to answer the following question: *What possibilities do Smrekar's and Haswgawa's works offer in an attempt to resolve the nature-culture binary and renaturalize cultural issues regarding motherhood and kinship?* The focus on posthumanism and its portrayal in contemporary art has been a guiding line through my research in the past academic year. I find it an important branch of the humanities, and the theoretical framework of posthumanism seems very promising in tackling many societal issues we encounter in our lives today. From existential problems on the rise for all humanity that originate from our constant abuse of our planet and its other inhabitants to the reproductive rights and autonomy of human bodies traditionally viewed as the other. In the context of philosophy and social theory, "the other" refers to individuals or groups that are perceived as different or separate from oneself. It is commonly used to describe the process of categorizing people based on their differences, which can lead to the construction of social hierarchies and the marginalization of certain individuals or groups. The term itself came from Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*.

Structure and Method

The more recent adoption of posthumanist discourse by feminist thinkers and scientists has opened a whole new arena of humanistic theory, and that exact direction seems to be the most appropriate for a discussion on the works of art mentioned before. As this thesis requires a grasp of humanistic and philosophical theories of feminism and posthumanism, the first chapter will form a thorough literature review to merge these topics and help understand some of the concepts that will be discussed in the latter part of the thesis. It aims to investigate: *How do*

³ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 102.

feminist and posthuman theorists problematize and discuss terms such as posthumanism, transhumanism, and ecofeminism, and how do they inspire or draw inspiration from bio-art? Following the theoretical review, a section of the thesis will be dedicated to the history and the context of portrayals of motherhood, with a focus on non-traditional and somewhat queer examples. With jumps through time, historical and political changes, we can observe how it offers a glimpse into the future possibilities for art in dialogue with motherhood and kinship, as I answer the question: *How do specific examples from the history of mostly Western art diverge from the mainstream understanding of motherhood and pregnancies in the past?*

That gradual principle of approaching the case studies themselves will establish the vocabulary, context, and theoretical framework for analyzing the specificities of *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* and *Hybrid Family*. In chapter two, the aim is to dissect *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin*... The case study for Hasegawa's work will not only employ posthuman and feminist discourse but also focus on the ecological and ethical implications and nuances of her radical proposition. The debatable ethics surrounding her work will be discussed in detail, as there are valid critiques that should not be overlooked. The visual analysis method will be used to analyze the artistic method of relaying meaning through the objects exhibited at the 2020 TOUCH ME festival.

Hybrid Family, on the other hand, will be visually analyzed based on the photographic evidence of the private performance since it was only partially exhibited and submerged in the broader visual context of her artistic series. Ethics are once again an important aspect of this piece that requires further attention. The discussion about nursing and feminism is also important in the context of Smrekar's work, and it will offer additional insight into her feminist mission. The thesis will conclude with the possible answer(s) to the research question.

The methods that will be used in order to unpack the theory and the artworks themselves consist of discourse analysis, which is pertinent to the understanding of the theoretical approach. Discourse, as Michel Foucault discusses, is not merely a question of language use but also a system of power and knowledge that influences our perceptions of the outside world and of ourselves. Through a complicated web of behaviors, institutions, and through technology, discourse establishes and upholds norms, values, and identities.⁴ Foucault's approach to discourse analysis is closely linked to his broader theoretical framework, which emphasizes the relationship between power, knowledge, and subjectivity. He argued that discourse is a crucial element of power relations since it sets the terms of what can and cannot

⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 24-33

be said and who can and cannot speak. Therefore, discourse analysis should not only focus on what is said but also on what is left unsaid, as well as on the broader social and historical context in which discourse is produced and circulated. In this sense, I will study, compare, and establish communication between different theoretical approaches in order to set up a conversation of theories that will, in the end, enrich our understanding of not only Haswgawa and Smrekar's work but also give insight into the wider issue of the naturalization of women and their modes of existence.

In the specific case studies, as they pertain to the area of visual culture, they will be visually analyzed. Visual analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates a number of theoretical frameworks, including semiotics, visual anthropology, art history, and cultural studies. Researchers can decipher the symbolism, significance, and social or cultural ramifications of visual objects through visual analysis. Gillian Rose approaches visual interpretation in three ways: "Interpretations of visual images broadly concur that there are three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences."⁵

With this division, we can more easily approach and distinguish between different sites where artwork exists. When discussing *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* and *Hybrid Family*, the site of the image and the site of the exhibition will be studied more in-depth in their respective chapters.

Now that the structural, methodological, and contextual information has been provided, I hope that this irreverent topic and research paper will offer some interesting solutions in this sphere of academia. This research will investigate the aspects in which the works of Smrekar and Hasegawa offer insights into modern-day anxieties and possibilities. The subtle and maybe odd optimism of the works is a much-needed and rarely-seen sentiment in contemporary art, and all of it will be dissected and discussed in the following pages.

⁵ Rose, *Visual methodologies*, 16

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

This chapter is intended as an interlude in order to offer historical context for non-traditional depictions of motherhood. The artworks this chapter will discuss have all been selected for stepping away from tradition in some way and offering new insight into how motherhood and pregnancy have been perceived. The artworks in this chapter will mostly come from Judeo-Christian art histories, as their connection to the works of Smrekar and Hasegawa shows the progression of politics, laws, and human thought throughout history. It is important to note that the overview will have big gaps regarding historical and artistic periods, as these examples are rare and only happened every so often in history.

These examples aim to answer the following question: *What does the divergence from the mainstream understanding of motherhood and pregnancy in the past tell us about the unified image of it in the modern day?*

1.2 From Holy Family to Hybrid Family

The first visual references to motherhood or pregnancies come from the fertility idols found on many sites across the world. Fertility idols appeared in many early cultures, ranging from the Pre-Colombian civilizations to the Eurasian oolithic tribes. Even though, by today's conventions, some of these artifacts, including the famous Venus of Willendorf and depictions of the Egyptian goddess Tarewet, appear to be portrayed as pregnant, it is hard to say with certainty whether their functions and intent were to portray pregnant women. As it is written in *History of Art* by H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson: "Such carvings are often thought to be fertility figures, based on the spiritual beliefs of 'preliterate' societies of modern times. Although the idea is tempting, we cannot be sure that such beliefs existed in the Old Stone Age." ⁶ In ancient Egypt, we also encounter one of the most unique and fascinating artifacts displaying motherhood and fatherhood alike, the stone tablet relief depicting Akhenaten and Nefertiti with their children. Commonly known as *Akhenaten and His Family*, the artwork differs so much in style and motive from other examples of Egyptian art of the period. Its'

⁶ Janson, *The History of Art*, 35.

description states: "The informal, tender poses nonetheless defy all conventions of pharaonic dignity and bespeak a new view of humanity."⁷

Such a description really resonates with the aim of both Hasegawa's and Smrekar's art. Art that offers a new view of humanity is important in this instance as well, since posthumanism is an academic field that strives to do exactly that. The historical circumstances of *Akhenaten and His Family* are a result of politics, but the circumstances are complicated and do not contribute to the understanding of the main issues of the thesis. Nevertheless, if searching for non-traditional depictions of motherhood as a motive throughout the history of art, this example cannot be overlooked.

From the early days of Christianity, the development of the visual arts can be tracked through different motives, movements, and styles, and motherhood has existed as a motif in art history since the beginning of artistic expression. The iconic motive of the Madonna with Child appears quite early in Christian art. One of the first examples of it is the *Virgin and Child with Balaam the Prophet*, a fresco found in the Priscilla Catacomb in Rome and is dated back to the late 2nd century.⁸ It depicts the Virgin holding baby Jesus to her chest and could be interpreted as her breastfeeding him. The next time the motive of the Madonna with Child appeared more frequently and was perpetuated in the art of the Catholic Church was in the 10th and 11th centuries. Victor Lasareff, in his essay on the topic of studies of the iconography of the Virgin, explains how the motive of the *Virgin Lactans*, the breastfeeding Virgin, came from Egyptian iconology, most likely the images of the goddess Isis nursing Horus:

"From this Hellenistic source the Galactotrophousa type, here pure genre, might easily have passed into Christian art both in the West and the East. Another possible source from which this type could have been derived was Egyptian art; it was apparently this art which was destined to play the decisive part in its formation."⁹

From this point onward, the image of the Virgin with Child changed throughout the centuries, mainly reflecting the morals of the time that the Church wanted to uphold.

Offering quite a different scene of domestic "bliss", it is important to exemplify the Capitoline Wolf. An artwork of supposed Etruscan origins and a very interesting artifact whose dating is still a controversial subject. The bronze sculpture was believed to be dated to the 5th

⁷ Janson, *The History of Art*, 57.

⁸ Victor Lasareff, *Iconography of the Virgin*, 27.

⁹ Ibid., 28

century, as is mentioned in the History of Art by Janson, although recent studies and sources place its origins anywhere from the 10th or 11th centuries, all the way to the 15th century. The twins suckling her are a later addition from the 15th century. This sculpture refers to the story of the origins of Rome, in which the twins Romulus and Remus were nurtured by a she-wolf (Fig. 1). Depicting an ancient legend, this sculpture has been embedded in visual culture for a long time. Stories in which humans and animals have close relationships are not a rare occurrence in ancient mythologies, and thus the visual motives that follow inspire a lot of contemporary discourse. Maja Smrekar's Hybrid Family, in this sense, could be considered a direct inversion of this trope, which will be discussed in the case study itself.

Another example of art depicting an animal nursing a human child comes from early 19th-century France. The image was made by Henriette Lorimier, and it bears the descriptive title *Young Woman Having Her Child Nursed by a Goat*. Here we shall look at the content since its strong imagery romanticizes not only breastfeeding but also human and animal companionship. The engraving shows a young woman calmly watching a goat nurse a child, presumably hers. The goat itself appears calm as well, its gentle gaze towards the child highlighting her long, feminized lashes and her muzzle alluding to a gentle smile. The context of the image is related to the period of rationalism, during which breastfeeding was seen as a patriotic act and was perpetuated in French Art ¹⁰. It is also interpreted as showing how a young woman, unable to breastfeed her child, accepts her fate and engages in this inter-species relationship. It also supposedly appealed to the audience, since the young woman was stripped away from this romanticized process of nurturing and bonding.

As feminism emerged in the 20th century, the topic of depictions of women has been ever present in academic discussions, and much more attention has been given to investigating the history of womanhood and motherhood. At the beginning of 2020, at the Foundling Museum in London, an art exhibition titled *Portraying Pregnancy* took place. Karen Hearn, the curator behind the exhibition and the accompanying publication, has been a scholar of pregnancy portraits for more than 20 years. Both the publication and exhibition focus on British pregnant portraiture, which limits the scope of the information regarding a wider history of artistic expression portraying pregnant women or mothers, but helps grasp the conventions of different periods in the history of art. Based, mostly on the artworks she studied, Hearn discusses the portraiture of noble women from the 16th century onward. Aware of her limitations, her aim was to start a conversation that in the past had made the audiences

¹⁰ Reeve, "The Kindness of Human Milk: Jess Dobkin's Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar", 70.

uncomfortable. Her project reflected a wider movement of feminist rewriting of history. The women portrayed were usually ones in, although limited by gender, positions of power, and her aim was: "...to understand how frequently many of them were conducting active public roles while pregnant, with all the attendant bodily changes, discomforts and health challenges."

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Even though her focus remains on noble portraiture from the Renaissance to today, Hearn introduces an interesting type of artifact rarely displayed or mentioned. She writes about carved ivory pregnant anatomical figures, which she claims appeared in the late 16th and 17th centuries due to an increased interest in human anatomy. Even though they were used by wealthy obstetricians as supposed explanation models, the figurines showed young women's bodies in a sexualized manner, often depicted as if they were laying on their funeral beds. In this manner, they emulated the same emotions a Vanitas painting would, with an additional element of curiosity, as the breastplate and belly could be removed, revealing a floating fetus that was not particularly anatomically correct. This simple yet delicate object reveals the fascination of the period, one that could only be indulged in by wealthy men.¹²

During the 16th century in Britain, anatomical atlases of fetuses and disembodied wombs started to make an appearance, as in *The Byrth of Mankynde*, writes Hearn. Partly used by physicians and partly used in the vernacular, these steps towards visually separating women from pregnancies show how the progression towards dehumanization of pregnant people may have started. Not much visually different from flyers handed out in front of abortion clinics around the world, these types of images diminish the inseparability of fetuses from their bearers and potentially run the risk of medical and moral misinformation.¹³

Feminist art depicting motherhood is a complicated topic in itself, according to Andrea Liss, a contemporary art historian. Liss, in her introduction to *Feminist Art and the Maternal* problematizes the relationship between various stages of feminism and motherhood, as well as its depiction in art. When talking about the problems of maternity being displayed in art, she claims that most depictions seem blatantly patriarchal and mainly present pregnancy and motherhood as a 'natural' phenomenon, which additionally contributes to the naturalization of misogyny and the treatment of women as second-rate beings, especially women of color and queer parents. During the second wave of feminism, she claims that even feminists often viewed pregnant women and mothers as reinforcers of patriarchal capitalism, alienating them

¹¹ Hearn, *Portraying Pregnancy*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 71-71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

from the public sphere even further in the process. Liss discusses the false narrative of the feminist/mother binary and tries to reconcile it with a modern feminist approach. Her view of the reconciliation of these notions focuses on empowering the pregnant person: “Motherhood, especially feminist motherhood, confuses the normalized order of gender and power. Feminist motherhood deranges the supposed natural and historical progression of culture. Feminist motherhood complicates the dominant institutionalized idea of motherhood.”¹⁴

This statement is used to emphasize the disruptive potential a feminist motherhood may wield when faced with patriarchal capitalism and investigate future possibilities for a positive, non-oppressive procreative life.

1.3 Sub-conclusion

To conclude this brief overview, the examples of art regarding motherhood presented here come from different cultures, contexts, and times. Some of them represent traditional or common values and fall into the mainstream. Others subtly or explicitly challenge it and represent different narratives of motherhood, womanhood, and family life. We can track the progression of these visual representations of motherhood all the way to the modern day, but we can also look at exceptions to them. Most of these exceptions can be attributed to political change, which serves to show how such a ‘natural’ process is and has always been political as well. The often-repeated proclamation by feminist activist Carol Hanisch, “the personal is political”, applies well in this sphere of a personal yet universal experience, such as giving birth or taking care of offspring. As the slogan came out of the second wave feminist movement that shone light on the inequalities that transferred from the public sphere into the homes of women, its extension can be traced to many posthuman and feminist theories. As political changes or instability seem to be an important catalyst for stepping away from the norm and viewing these important biological processes in a different light, it is not surprising that both Hasegawa’s and Smrekar’s art also emerges from political and social issues.

¹⁴ Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, xvi.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Introduction

Just as the previous chapter contextualized the art historical progression and change of motives of motherhood, this section serves to discuss some of the important terms, theories, and concepts that can aid in understanding *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* and *Hybrid Family*.

As previously mentioned, the literature used will mainly come from the academic fields of posthumanism, feminism, and environmental studies. How do feminist and posthuman theorists problematize and discuss terms such as posthumanism, transhumanism, and ecofeminism, and how do they inspire or draw inspiration from bio-art? What are placenta politics, and how can they be applied? Should we view pregnant people as entities different from them before or after the pregnancy? All of this will be discussed in this chapter.

2.2 Critical Terms and Theory

The first two terms that require unpacking are bio-art and ecofeminism, since their bilateral relationship will prove helpful for understanding the specificities of Smrekar's and Hasegawa's work. Bio-art is any art that, in its themes, materials, or mediums, uses living organisms, bacteria, tissue, or biological processes. Smrekar and Hasegawa both have very different approaches and mediums for their artworks. While Smrekar uses her own body and the bodies of her pets in her work, Hasegawa only speculates on the possibilities of bio-engineering without using any living materials in the process. Her art is more speculative and revolves around using data from scientific experiments to push her ideas further. Bioart comes with its own critiques, ethics, and standards, which will be discussed more in detail in the following case studies.

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that works toward not just the equality of genders but also expands its focus on the environment. The term itself was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. Its main claims are that patriarchal and capitalist society is not only behind the disempowerment and disenfranchising of women and other queer or trans identities but also the system that structurally uses and unethically consumes animals, plants, and the environment. Since then, artists have been producing works on similar topics, and often enough, especially in the 21st century, bio-art and the ideals of ecofeminism have come together, as in *Hybrid Family* or *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...* Cynthia Verspaget writes about

this merger: “Ecofeminism parallels with BioArt as it actualises ‘new models of cooperation’ between things and their environments and offers the potential of new metaphors in biological discourse.”¹⁵ Her definition of bioart can most definitely be used to describe Smrekar’s and Hasegawa’s art, and in the following case studies, the ecological implications of both of them will be investigated.

As posthumanism was introduced in the introduction, it is important to further distinguish it from transhumanism. Even though both use some of the same terminology, their ideologies diverge greatly. Confusingly enough, Bradotti sometimes refers to transhumanism as a branch of posthumanism: “While the transhumanist movement is one of the most dominant trends within mainstream posthumanism, I will argue why this school of thought is problematic and controversial from a feminist posthuman perspective.”¹⁶ What makes transhumanism problematic in this instance is that it sees itself as an extension of classical humanism and, at its core, has no intent on rethinking what other categories would deserve the treatment reserved for the Vitruvian man. One of the main ideologues of transhumanism, Joel Garreau, explains: “Transhumanists are keen on the enhancement of human intellectual, physical and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span.”¹⁷ What often stays ambiguous is the question of what forms of life it seeks to actually progress and which species would be offered the opportunity for such betterment. Even though its politics often relies on patriarchal humanism, the ideas of using the potential of science and technology often inspire posthumanists and artists and could possibly serve as a means of posthumanism as well. In this instance, Hasegawa’s work can be considered to rely on transhumanist notions. Even though there is no personal gain from being adapted into a dolphin surrogate in the sense of the typical transhumanist human ‘hybridization’, Hasegawa proposes the adaptation of a human uterus with the help of medicine in order to achieve her goal of birthing a Mauii dolphin.

One of the most influential texts that combine the ‘tools’ of transhumanism with posthuman ideologies is the aforementioned ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ by Donna Haraway. In the essay, Haraway constructs a transhuman being as a vessel for implementing the idea of challenging the current relationships between humans and other non-human animals, machines, and the Earth itself. Her world offers an opportunity to repair and reverse the consequences of capitalist exploitation of life on earth: “A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily

¹⁵ Runway, ‘Creative Lab Monsters: Looking at Bioart through the Lens of Ecofeminism’.

¹⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 61.

¹⁷ Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution*, 231.

realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.’’¹⁸

Kinship in this instance remains a strong motive in Haraway's theory, a concept that is key to understanding not only *Hybrid Family* and *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, but a wide range of artworks and theories that discuss inter-species relationships. Instead of kinship passing on by biological descent, she insists on the importance of a wide spectrum of such relationships, which would undermine the traditional patriarchal family unit and thus the whole system that upholds the destructive and alienating capitalist mission. In *Staying with the Trouble*, as mentioned in the introduction, she argues:

“The Chthulucene needs at least one slogan (of course, more than one); still shouting ‘Cyborgs for Earthly Survival,’ ‘Run Fast, Bite Hard,’ and ‘Shut Up and Train,’ I propose ‘Make Kin Not Babies!’ Making and recognizing kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part. Feminists of our time have been leaders in unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons.’’¹⁹

Braidotti has a similar conclusion regarding interspecies relationships, which she does not directly name kinship, but it serves to show the interconnectedness of these ideas, and their representation by more authors:

“...there is a qualitative difference between accepting the structural interdependence among species and actually treating the non-humans as cognitive partners and knowledge collaborators. The posthuman predicament is encouraging us to move precisely in this direction. Situated in the age of computational networks, transecology and post-biology on the one hand and climate change and planetary depletion on the other, posthuman subjects need to learn to think differently.’’²⁰

The last important concept from Haraway's academic literature regards the nature-culture gap. The term has existed for some time in social theory and philosophy. The gap

¹⁸ Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’, 90.

¹⁹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 102.

²⁰ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 115.

implies a fundamental distinction between what is regarded as "natural" and what is regarded as 'cultural' or 'social.' According to Haraway, it should be eliminated in favor of a focus on "cyborgs". In Haraway's view, the concept that humans are distinct from and superior to other kinds of life can be challenged by using cyborgs to reimagine the borders between nature and civilization. We can see how she expands the realm of the dichotomies she is set to reconcile with the following statement:

"Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways.'"²¹

Nature versus culture is not the only problematic binary that, in her opinion, damages our understanding of life. Another important perspective on the nature-culture divide is offered by Bruno Latour, with whom Haraway also engages in her theory and who argues that it is a product of modernity and the Enlightenment. According to Latour's argument in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, the nature-culture split is a product of the way that contemporary science and technology have created a worldview that isolates humans from the natural world. The biggest danger from nature versus culture comes from its false narrative of naturalizing concepts that have been shaped by human culture up to this point, i.e., patriarchy and white supremacy.²²

Feminist scholars argue that the concept of naturalization has been used to justify and maintain the status quo of gender and racial hierarchies. For example, the idea that women are naturally suited to caregiving roles and men are naturally suited to leadership positions has been used to justify gendered divisions of labor and to exclude women from positions of power. Similarly, the naturalization of racial categories has been used to justify racial hierarchies and inequalities. Braidotti, among other scholars, sees posthumanism as a way of combating these damaging and false narratives:

"Posthuman feminism is innovative because it extends the analysis of sexualized and racialized hierarchies to the naturalized differences of non-human entities. It calls for

²¹ Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 4.

²² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, ?

a recognition of species equality and a more collaborative sense of interdependence between humans and animals, plants, the earth and the planet as a whole.”²³

We can notice the problematization of the nature culture binary in many more authors, and in the following pages of the case studies, we will see how the problem is tackled by Hasegawa and Smrekar.

2.3 Discussions on Assisted Reproduction

Since both Haraway and Braidotti often touch on reproductive rights and biotechnologies, it is important to relay some arguments, questions, and concerns regarding a specific field of medicine that, even though controversial, has been a normalized and naturalized treatment for more than forty years. Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) and its early attempts can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, but the first successful human use of it was embedded in history with the birth of Lusie Brown on July 25, 1978. The American CDC (Center for Disease Control) states: “ART procedures involve surgically removing eggs from a woman’s ovaries, combining them with sperm in the laboratory, and returning them to the woman’s body or donating them to another woman.”²⁴ This procedure is problematized in much feminist literature, with a wide range of arguments, from seeing it as one of the final stages of female reproductive freedom to the panic of the loss of women’s agency over their bodies. Both are possible with the potential of ART, yet they mainly depend on politics and law. Even though ART and IVF are most commonly used in order to solidify the concept of the nuclear family as the building block of a capitalist and patriarchal society, it can be said that they offer enormous speculative potential in terms of new possibilities for inter-species kinship and reshaping of human relationships.

Sarah Franklin’s argument from *Biological Relatives* can be used here to highlight the subversive potential of ART: “To the extent that molecular biology is premised on the trope of rewriting biology, its genealogy simultaneously reconfigures the future of ‘biological’ kinship as a set of relationships not only to, and through, but of, technology.”²⁵ Franklin, in her book, investigates ART through different lenses and angles. She highlights that some of the main problems with ART are the laws and the capitalistic exploitation of surrogates. Surrogacy

²³ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 11.

²⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘What is Assisted Reproductive Technology?’

²⁵ Franklin, *Biological Relatives*, 13.

offers an opportunity for direct biological offspring for couples whose women cannot, for one reason or another, carry out the full pregnancy safely. It also highlights the inequality among women from different social backgrounds and classes.

Sophie Lewis, in *Full Surrogacy Now*, highlights this issue: “Surrogacy is a logistics of manufacture and distribution where the commodity is biogenetic progeny, backed by ‘science’ and legal contract. It’s a booming, ever-shifting frontier whose yearly turnover per annum is unknown but certainly not negligible: ‘a \$2bn industry’ was the standard estimate quoted in 2017.”²⁶ In this legalized manner, reproductive work is only considered work when the carrier of the pregnancy is not the one intended to raise the child, yet the way they are exposed to unsafe conditions depends on the laws of certain countries. Some places have laws backed up by moral codes rooted in religion; for instance, in the Netherlands, due to European Union laws, oocytes cannot be sold, but women who go through the painful and long process of egg cell extraction are reimbursed for their time, which rounds up to about 600 euros per extraction session.²⁷ In the USA, the same process is valued at over 1,000 USD.²⁸

The last issue with ART that requires attention here is its renaturalization of women’s biological destiny through the use of ‘liberating’ biotechnology. Franklin writes:

“Representations of IVF typically reproduce, and condense, familiar narratives—from the naturalness of reproduction and the universal desire for parenthood to the value of scientific progress and the benefits of medical assistance—and the success of IVF is in turn offered as proof, or evidence, of how these logics fit together.”²⁹

Unfortunately, the current end result of a subversive and promising medical praxis works hard to uphold patriarchal values, diminish reproductive labor, and create neo-conservative narratives of nuclear family units that even engulf queer and same-sex couples.

Concerning the ontological understanding of pregnant people, it is important to discuss the concept of what Chikako Takeshita named the ‘motherfoetus’. Takeshita proposed this term to distinguish the ontology of a pregnant body from its state before and after pregnancy. With her feminist approach, she criticizes how the supposed duality of the mother and the developing

²⁶ Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*

The literature was accessed through an e-reader program, and it does not display page numbers, so they will be left out when quoting Lewis.

²⁷ TFP Fertility, “Become an Egg Donor”

²⁸ Bright Expectations, “How Much Money Do Egg Donors Get Paid?”

²⁹ Franklin, *Biological Relatives*, 6.

fetus is presented in medical texts by positioning the fetus as an almost masculine, invasive organism set to deplete its host of nutrients and trick its natural body's defenses. She argues: "Scientific accounts of implantation reflects 'a masculinist bias' that 'divide[s] the world into sharply opposed, hostile categories, such that the options are to conquer, be conquered, or magnanimously tolerate the other'." ³⁰ The point of departure for her proposal is the argument that the human body is far from a unique and independent organism. She argues that it is more of a holobiont that thrives due to its symbiosis with single-cell organisms, bacteria, and microbes. She also states that the assumption that all the romanticization of pregnancy and motherhood only strengthens gender essentialism, which, in solidifying the false narrative of women's natural maternal instincts, marginalizes other non-traditional identities. She explains: "Alas the romanticization of microchimerism in the media as an eternal bond between the mother and child reinforces the gendered and essentialist discourse that presumes all women to identify with motherhood and all "mothers" to be women."³¹ Her final argument is the proposition of an entirely different ontological being, the motherfoetus, which encompasses the state of the mother's body while pregnant, in order to write over the centuries of dualist thinking in medical, social, and philosophical thought.

Her concept also ties into Braidotti's concept, which is proposed for wider use in discussions of politics, identity, and relationships. On a number of occasions, Braidotti sets up the concept of 'placenta politics' in her book *Posthuman*. According to Braidotti, the placenta is a crucial venue for political involvement because it questions conventional notions about the distinctions between humans and other animals, mothers and their children, and oneself and others. The mother and fetus share the organ, which is in charge of transferring nutrition, oxygen, and waste products between them: "The biological entity of the placenta as a third party that redefines the relationship between the maternal body and the other body, the foetus, in immunological terms."³² According to Braidotti, the placenta presents a possible point of resistance since it casts doubt on the notion that the mother and fetus are two distinct beings. Instead, the placenta fosters a symbiotic relationship in which both parties are essential to one another's lives. What these concepts add to our understanding of both Smrekar's and Hasegawa's works is that, through the use of medical or biological language and concepts, we can actually observe political nuances that affect the everyday lives of people or animals perceived as the other. These concepts can trickle down into very tangible consequences for

³⁰ Takeshita, "From Mother/Fetus to Holobiont(s)", 6.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

³² Braidotti, Hvalajova, *The Posthuman Glossary*, 315.

any number of other identities in the form of reduced medical autonomy, unjust border regimes, and hostility towards those judged on the basis of their biologically determined appearance.

CHAPTER 3: AI HASEGAWA'S *I WANNA DELIVER A DOLPHIN...*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter serves to study the artwork produced by the Japanese artist Ai Hasegawa, *I Wanna Birth a Dolphin...* This specific artwork is comprised of several elements, and because of its richness in context, theory, and political charge, it is important to discuss it in depth. Since the artwork touches on many concepts and terms discussed in the previous chapter, the goal is to use them to investigate how they specifically shape the unique politics brought forth by the artist. Ai Hasegawa is a Japanese artist, born in 1977 in Yokohama. She obtained her higher education in the UK at the Royal College of Art. Since then, she has worked as a researcher at MIT and the University of Tokyo. She has been actively producing and creating art for the past 20 years. Her works typically visually portray her artistic research in the realms of design fiction, bio-art, and speculative design. Thematically, she has explored intersections between art, design, science, technology, politics, and ecology. She has had a successful artistic career, during which she has exhibited all over the world, including some prestigious institutions such as the Milano Salone, Italy, the Science Gallery Dublin, the Taipei Digital Arts Center, and the MoMA in New York, to name a few.

I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin..., *I Wanna Deliver a Shark...*, and *(Im)possible Baby* are her most notable works, for which she was rewarded with many awards. The subject of this study will be *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, which is an artwork created between 2011 and 2013. Segments of this artistic project have been displayed all over the world and in different settings, but in this particular study, the focus will be on the way the artwork was presented at the 2020 Touch Me Festival. The artwork has a simple premise with a complex background and visual identity. Hasegawa, with her work, proposes that women who want to experience pregnancy and help reverse the effects of overfishing and global warming should carry out pregnancies of endangered animal species. In this specific instance, she proposes the Maui dolphin, the world's smallest dolphin, whose species' survival is particularly threatened by overfishing. The topics she explores in this piece are ecology, feminism, and reproductive freedom, which tie in well with the discourse presented in the previous chapter.

I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin... is a project often referred to as one of speculative design. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, who coined the term, state: "Speculative design projects can provide new forms of visual representation for biotechnology that open up other possibilities

for debate, linking the discussion to mass consumerism for instance.”³³ The definition applies well to this particular artwork for its play on facts and fiction and its use of the natural sciences in contemporary problem-solving. The project gradually descends from speculative fiction to the completely made-up utopian idea of interspecies kinship. It roots the idea of this hybrid pregnancy in science and biology, making it almost believable as a possibility. At first glance, all of these objects resemble an informational presentation that could be seen at a science show competition. The artist herself claims the idea for the project came from an actual experiment in developing an artificial uterus for non-human animals. When visitors first walked up to the section where Hasegawa’s work was shown, they were confronted by two boards with informational diagrams and a small 3D printed version of her work that is publicly displayed, with a digital monitor showing the actual location of her work in a public space. A projection of her video-art segment with accompanying sound, which showed the birth of the dolphin calf was stationed on the side of the area.

With this case study, the hope is to answer the question: *How do the bioethical implications of ‘I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...’ communicate with the feminist posthumanist discourse?* In order to answer the question, it is necessary to look at all of the separate visual segments that shape Hasegawa’s artwork. This chapter will be structured with three subchapters and a conclusion. The whole project is presented through three units, which include the sculpture, the informational billboards, and the video, which are discussed individually in the following segments. After the visual aspects have been discussed, the artwork will be further discussed through the lenses of ecology, feminism, and posthumanism in order to understand all the complex nuances and offer useful insight.

3.2 Sculpture

The white 3D-printed sculpture is an iteration of a much bigger sculpture that was previously displayed in a public space. It depicts a scientist and a woman sitting down. From her stomach, an umbilical cord connects her to the dolphin, which appears to be floating. The scientist’s figure is standing beside them and, with a raised hand, gestures to the DNA strand, which connects his test tube to the back of the woman’s body (Figure 2.). The medium and material in which this sculpture is made can be considered a comment on the aesthetics and sentiment of this artwork. As a relatively new technique for producing art, it alludes to its

³³ Dune and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 61.

contemporaneity. 3D printing can offer more precision than some more traditional sculpting methods, and the use of technology in the artwork's production connects well with the idea of technology as a solution to problems of scarcity. As Hasegawa offers to use medicine and technology to assist in the reproduction of extinct animals, the technology of 3D printing as a tool for mass production ties in well with the idea of quick and available production of objects.

The design of the scientist's figure almost resembles that of a Disney wizard, since from his test tube emerges a DNA helix that whimsically circles around the other figures in the artwork. The singular DNA strand transforms from human DNA to dolphin DNA. The seated woman is depicted in a scene of a made-up birth, and from her belly button emerges a dolphin, connecting the two by an umbilical cord. The choice of the depiction of 'birth' is puzzling since it is far from medically correct. It could be said that the artwork itself indirectly comments on facts and fiction, and how the two interact in different visual displays. The irony of basing an artistic project on scientific research, yet displaying it in a form of a fairy-tale figurine helps the viewer adjust to the fictitious scenario, while still being able to discuss and think about her proposition.

This sculpture could be problematic in its portrayal of the woman's agency in this whole project. If Hasegawa's proposition truly stems from not only ecological concern but a feminist one as well, it is an odd choice, in this instance, to portray the woman in such a passive way. If this sculpture represents the project as a whole, it seems as though the scientist (who is depicted as a man), is the main protagonist of this scene. Lara Stevens, a feminist scholar, problematizes Hasegawa's notion that women should be the ones to reverse the effects of overfishing and climate change with their gestational labor. She poses a question: "Why for example, is it women who have to change their behaviour and make their bodies available to science in order to compensate for unsustainable food production practices that have led to over-fishing certain populations of animals?"³⁴ The discussion is raised to question the feminist aspects of the work and look deeper into the implications that Hasegawa's proposal could have regarding reproductive freedom and autonomy. Stevens finds it in line with neo-liberal notions of scratching the surface of greater societal issues. One of the controversial aspects of the project is the implication that the birthed animals could be used as food after their birth, which in turn would lessen the effects of overfishing and overconsumption by making the carriers of the pregnancies more aware of the labor that comes with gestation. In this manner, Stevens concludes: "Hasegawa's work does not advocate that we reproduce or consume less- an idea

³⁴ Stevens, "Performing Reproduction in an Age of Overproduction", 217.

that developing nations and neoliberal nations, with their emphasis on expanding growth, are very adverse to. Instead, it advocates that we reproduce and consume differently.”³⁵ Her conclusion distances the artwork from its posthumanist notions greatly, and instead of a utopian posthumanist scenario, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, starts to resemble an almost vain neoliberal project. Perhaps Hasegawa’s work in this context could also be interpreted as representing the commonly used and misused internet catchphrase ‘there is no ethical consumption under capitalism’.

Stevens’s reading of Hasegawa’s work doesn’t necessarily represent the consensus on its ethics. Hasegawa does not propose forced surrogacy or dictate what needs to happen to these birthed animals. In a sense, the potential of her open-ended proposal could be equated, in a way, with the potential of ART. As I discuss in the theoretical review, the law is the only thing that draws the line between reproductive freedom and reproductive repression as a result of the use of ART, IVF, or surrogates. If, in some reality, Hasegawa’s proposal were not only possible but also legalized, it would depend on the laws to dictate for what purposes these surrogacies would be carried out. If Hasegawa’s proposal were accepted, it is unclear whether, in practice, it would bring about the same issues that are connected to surrogacy today. As argued before, surrogacy offers great potential for the betterment of humankind, but as it is done today in a capitalist society, it certainly highlights inequalities pertaining to differently valued human lives. As Lewis argues: “Under capitalism and imperialism, safer (or, at least, medically supported) gestation has typically been the privilege of the upper classes.”³⁶ It is not hard to believe that Hasegawa’s proposal would suffer a similar fate.

While in this case the ethics of *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* remain debatable, in another context this work seems to be a far more ethical bio-artwork than others that use live matter. It is interesting to note how *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...* was written about as a positive example by Nora Vaage in her article ‘What Ethics for Bioart’. In her article, the scholar writes about the ethics of works by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr. She mentions Hasegawa’s approach to bio-art, as she conveyed her controversial ideas using more traditional media, which doesn’t involve the discussions commonly tied to using live matter in contemporary art. She states: “Using an anatomical section sculpture of the human womb containing the dolphin foetus, pictures of a dolphin-human future, and a video of herself giving birth to a dolphin in a swimming pool, Hasegawa richly explored the potential of such a technological future using traditional

³⁵ Stevens, “Performing Reproduction in an Age of Overproduction”, 221

³⁶ Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*

media.”³⁷ When viewed through that lens, Hasegawa’s work seems more theoretically controversial, with little or no real-life ethical or legal complications. As one aspect of the project, the sculpture discussed above only highlights some aspects of *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...* The video and billboards separately thematize other problematic aspects of female reproductive freedom, ecology, and kinship, and it is interesting to compare and contrast the sentiments of these pieces, which will be developed further below.

3.3 Video

The video that is shown alongside the sculpture is the most visually compelling aspect of the project. It is two minutes and thirty seconds long, and it shows the birth of the dolphin in the water. The artist herself is shown blissfully splashing around in the water in a sheer white dress that covers her torso but reveals her belly underneath. Her splashing intensifies as her face shows signs of discomfort, and as she swims through the water, a dolphin tail emerges from inside her thighs. The close-up shots of the woman’s face make it seem as though her birth was more of a spiritual experience. The depiction of interspecies birth purposefully shows it as a somewhat calm, blissful, and, most importantly, not physically demanding experience. In an underwater scene, we see the dolphin fully leave her body, and a splash of red appears in the water. The dolphin immediately starts playfully and energetically swimming through the waters, while the woman lays still for a moment. In the next few moments, we watch the newborn splash around in joy and swim up to the artist for the first meal. The artist lovingly and patiently injects the dolphin’s milk into its mouth with a feeder. The last scene shows both mother and dolphin swimming alongside one another in an ideological display of kinship between man and animal (Figure 3).

This aspect of Hasegawa’s artwork differs from the sentiment of her sculpture. Visually, the focus of this video-art piece is on the woman and the dolphin calf. In this particular instance, Hasegawa’s focus on realism is more direct than in the sculpture. The artist herself portrays the birthing woman, and the dolphin animatronic is made very realistically by Masamichi Hayashi. Hayashi is a marine scientist and a self-taught roboticist, and he produces robotic marine animals using recycled materials. The robot’s range of movements looks convincingly natural, which contributes to the realism of this video. Realism is another aspect of Hasegawa’s work that comes under scrutiny from Lara Stevens. She claims it: “...not only

³⁷ Vaage, “What Ethics for Bioart?”, 14

sanitizes labour but makes it look pleasurable and puts a new spin on the parental imperative of ‘don’t play with your food’.”³⁸ People who go through childbirth all have different experiences, but it is hard to believe that any one of them would describe Hasegawa’s depiction of childbirth as realistic. Shulamith Firestone, the feminist scholar behind the notable *Dialectics of Sex* even considers childbirth barbaric: “Pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species. Moreover, childbirth hurts.”³⁹ Even though the video is made very realistically to portray this interspecies birth, it could be said that it is not meant to show gestational labor. Instead, it could be an artistic decision about a utopian possibility that is not necessarily rooted in the present but in a posthuman future that would allow such freedoms. This reading also breeds contradiction, since if a reality exists where the need for such lengths in battling overconsumption is possible, what would the reasoning for such a radical process be?

One of the possibilities appears in a radical search for almost biological kinship. As relayed before, thinkers such as Haraway and Braidotti call for interspecies kinship, which leaves out biological relatives in an attempt to dislocate the human from his position of dominion over all that is living on Earth. It is also meant to destabilize the capitalist and patriarchal structures of society and bring about a more equal system that respects all living beings. Hasegawa could, with this artwork, be trying to bring interspecies kinship closer to women in particular. Possibly, in the hope that by the biological process of birth, women would develop deeper feelings for beings of other species and, in turn, rethink human-animal relations with a personal imperative. In the birthing video, this combination of science-based fiction and art fiction makes a particularly interesting case. The spiritual experience of birth as an act of service to the ‘other’ and the gentle visual cues get rooted in science fiction, which is shown in the administering of the first milk right after the calf is born. It is a perfect example of this artistic contrast, which enriches and deepens its meaning and emotional response.

The last aspect of this video that requires attention is how Hasegawa’s proposition converses with the concept of the pregnant posthuman. The term “pregnant posthuman” appears in the *Posthuman Glossary*. It is introduced and written about by Rodante van der Waal, a posthuman feminist scholar, and it is in a way different from many other definitions in the glossary. It is written in the first person, which effectively removes objectivity from the start. Van der Waal writes:

³⁸ Stevens, “Performing Reproduction in an Age of Overproduction”, 219.

³⁹ Firestone, *The Dialectics of Sex*, 224.

“With each child I produce, I sacrifice and constitute myself. I am the synthesis of difference and repetition, because my repetition, my being pregnant again, is always a differentiation of a new life. I am with ... child ... matter ... fish... crisis.... failure ... unknown ... other ... not-yet. I capture the movement of new materialism right inside of me: the affectionate, intimate relation with matter, with objects that determine who I become, maybe even more than I am able to determine their becomings, I live inside their history as they live inside of me.”⁴⁰

With this quote, Van der Waal references multiple philosophers, concepts, and theories, in order to proliferate the uses of posthumanism. Van der Waal mentions new materialism, a field of Western philosophy that lives somewhere at the convergence of feminism, science studies, and cultural theory. Braidotti herself has credited New Materialism with being the basis of posthumanism, which this quote highlights: “The new-materialist approach stresses that bodies, even anthropomorphic ones, are never only human, although they are bound and specified as such. Bodies are posthuman in that they are heterogeneous genetic and bacterial assemblages modulated by social and technological infrastructures.”⁴¹

When positioning Hasegawa’s *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, in its core, it refracts all the values brought forth by van der Waal’s quote. Hasegawa’s quote also converses with Braidotti’s description of new materialism. Understanding human bodies as heterogenous holobionts, just like Takeshita highlighted, in a way shrinks the gap between humans and other animals, and allows for such queer kinships to take place. That dialogue enriches both theory and art in a way, creating a unique literal illustration of the term ‘pregnant posthuman’.

3.4 Diagrams

As the last visual objects that make up the artwork, the billboards are both graphically designed to inform the viewer of the ‘science’ that is backing up this proposal. The color scheme adds an informal tone to the otherwise scientific data. Its use of the pastel hues of blue and pink could be considered a play on the modern use of these colors as gender indicators in infants (Figure 4). One poster is a chart of the moral dilemmas regarding pregnancies and child-

⁴⁰ Van der Waal, “Pregnant Posthuman”, 370.

⁴¹ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 113.

bearing. It starts with the question, ‘Would you like to have a child?’ and ends with five possibilities. Two options are regular childbirth and not having a child at all, while the other three options ask the question, ‘Why don’t you deliver an animal?’. The stations that come in between the starting and endpoint ask personal questions that sometimes reflect ethical dilemmas such as overpopulation, personal responsibility, and the ethics of bringing new life to earth, such as ‘Do you think your child is going to have a happy life on this world?’ which is illustrated by a pictogram of a sad child in front of a polluted world. The critical choice of the questions in the diagram points to the moral dilemmas surrounding motherhood and opens up discussions, while also raising awareness about the issues of climate change, overconsumption, and pollution.

It is essential to discuss the idea that Hasegawa presents as one of the problems that her proposal might help resolve: overpopulation. Overpopulation became a fear in the last century, around the 1960s, and today we are able to discuss it in a more nuanced way. It appeared as a sort of global panic in the West, and many scholars that were and still are active in the field of academia have contributed to it in one way or another. The fear comes from the idea that, by the way, that the world population is growing, we are depleting the world of its resources, and the trajectory we are on continues to do so until greater consequences are felt by all. A notable example comes from Firestone, who finds hope in technology to ‘repair’ and restructure the growing population: “The two issues, population control and cybernation, produce the same nervous superficial response because in both cases the underlying problem is one for which there is no precedent: qualitative change in humanity’s basic relationships to both its production and its reproduction.”⁴² What was not considered at the time, was how resource exploitation is not equally contributed to by all countries and nations, and that there is a huge discrepancy between countries in the Global West and those in the Global South.

Donna Haraway also appears as one of the scholars whose theories were built on the assumption of overpopulation. Her call to replace biological descendants with kinship has been interpreted as a cry for posthumanist population restructuring. She dedicated an entire publication to the cause, in collaboration with Adelle Clarke, titled *Make Kin Not Population*. Their work is evaluated by anthropologists and sociologists Katherine Dow and Annelie Lamoreaux:

⁴² Firestone, *The Dialectics of Sex*, 227.

“Clarke and Haraway’s chapters both put expanding population numbers at the forefront of their environmental concern, pointing specifically to the threat of increased food demand. While recognizing declining birth rates ‘almost everywhere,’ their chapters privilege a reduction in “biogenetic” reproduction as a means to reduce human burden on a damaged planet.”⁴³

They further explain how Clarke and Haraway do not ignore the uneven exploitation of Earth’s resources, yet instead of focusing on restructuring the capitalist food chain supply or other means of combating the scarcity of certain resources, their focus remains on individual responsibility.

When we look into some examples from the past, for instance, China’s one-child policy, we can see how such strict population control techniques highlighted some already underlying societal issues and worsened them. Lewis highlights how often, in these narratives, developing countries with high birth rates are looked at as the problem without actually acknowledging that their lives consume fewer resources than those in the West. Sophie Lewis even goes as far as to refer to these claims as feminist eugenics:

“Eugenic feminism’s heart beats still in campaigns of the kind endorsed by Barbara Bush, targeting ‘overpopulation’ through uncontroversial social policy goods like ‘education for women’ (because, it is implied, it is the poor women’s kids who are the problem, and which could only be the result of a lack of education).”⁴⁴

With this in mind, Hasegawa’s proposal, which claims to not only resolve the problem of animal extinction but also the problem of overpopulation, requires further inquiry in order to fully grasp its political leanings.

The second diagram is presented as completely informational since it relays the medical and biological facts that would allow this interspecies pregnancy. It consists of the text, which covers most of the diagram but also shows a medical textbook-style illustration of a cross-body cut, which shows what a human pregnant with a dolphin would look like (Figure 5). In the aforementioned color scheme and art style, the visual itself seems idealized, which is made obvious by the faint smile noticeable on the dolphin fetus’ mouth. It also focuses on the concept

⁴³ Dow and Lamoreaux, “Situated Kinmaking and the Population ‘Problem,’” 476.

⁴⁴ Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*

of the Human-Dolphin placenta, which will be discussed further below. The first aspect that needs further discussion is what biological implications the Human-Dolphin placenta carries. In the text of the informational diagram, the artist highlights how the placenta in this scenario would be a dolphin one since that would avoid experimentation with human egg cells, which is ethically and legally complicated. During pregnancy, the placenta and the decidua have distinct yet extremely important roles, and it is important to distinguish between them to understand Hasegawa's proposal.

The placenta is a specialized organ that develops from the fetal and maternal tissues and serves as the main interface between the mother and the developing fetus. It is in charge of giving the fetus oxygen and nourishment, clearing waste from the fetal bloodstream, generating hormones that control the pregnancy, and shielding the fetus from pathogens and dangerous substances.⁴⁵ The decidua, on the other hand, is a specialized uterine lining that develops during pregnancy and has a number of functions related to sustaining the growing embryo and child. During pregnancy, the decidua also aids in immune system regulation, protecting the mother's immunological system from attacking and even discarding the fetus.⁴⁶ Hasegawa in the diagram focuses on the decidua, knowing it would need to be re-engineered in order for a successful interspecies pregnancy. She proposes to modify the placenta to distinguish mammals from non-mammals in order for it to be more accepting of inter-species pregnancy. Because of certain modifications done to the normal functions of these organs, the first milk proves itself more important than it usually is. The synthetic milk and its administration would make sure that the dolphin calf received all of its crucial nutrients and antibodies.

Such biological and medical changes could be a step forward toward a visual representation of the aforementioned 'placenta politics'. Braidotti's 'placenta politics' were not necessarily meant to be taken literally, but in the context of this artwork, they do offer some insight. As the placenta and the decidua play extremely important roles in carrying out a pregnancy, synthetically developed in this case, they add an extra layer to the cross-species symbiotic relations. The Human-Dolphin placenta as a meeting point for two species represents a made-up yet almost possible illustration of Braidotti's concept. The place of convergence for the biological needs of both humans and dolphins in this instance, which may be solved with such a radical biological, ethical, and technological proposal, remains a multifaceted work of art.

⁴⁵ Mayo Clinic, "Placenta: How it works, what's normal".

⁴⁶ Science Direct, "Decidua".

3.5 Sub-conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, complicates the relationship between feminism, posthumanism, and bioethics. The work of art seems to have been produced in such a way that it does not hide its controversies or contradictions. With its complex visual presentation of three separate pieces made of different media, it touches on some of the most urgent issues of today's world, such as ecological sustainability and reproductive rights. Even though its base in science and biology makes the artwork appear self-serious, the irony can be seen in the contradictions within the work. The visual style, especially of the sculpture and the diagrams, takes a step toward whimsy and makes the unrealistic proposal more apparent for what it is: a speculative artwork meant to spark conversation and rethink human and animal relationships. When looked at closely, it is apparent that Hasegawa's work does not find approval for its feminist claims. Even the ecological impact of implementing her idea is not ethically justified. Nonetheless, it serves as a layered illustration of the discussions around feminism, ecology, and bioethics.

CHAPTER 4: MAJA SMREKAR'S *HYBRID FAMILY*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is conceptualized as a case study of the artwork titled *Hybrid Family*, made by the artist Maja Smrekar. She is a contemporary artist born in Slovenia in 1978. Smrekar studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in the Sculpture Department, and she had also earned a Master's degree from the Department of Video. She has enjoyed quite a successful career, and her work has been exhibited at least twenty times at solo exhibitions and over fifty times at group exhibitions. Her work was exhibited all over the world, and she has had close partnerships, grants, and collaborations with many institutions, universities, and institutes, including the Kapelica Galeria Kersnikova Institute in Slovenia, the Department of Zoology at Humboldt University in Berlin, and STUDIOTOPIA - Art Meets Science in the Anthropocene international platform, to name a few. Her artworks have been rewarded with many prizes, some of which are the 1st prize at the Cynetart Festival 2012, Honorary Mention at the Ars Electronica Festival 2013 (Linz / Austria), and in 2021, she received the Oton Župančič Award, the highest recognition of the City of Ljubljana for working artists.⁴⁷

In her work, she frequently engages with the topics and fields of biotechnology, ecology, robotics, reproductive medicine, and molecular biology. She collects academic references and draws inspiration from fields of study such as ecofeminism, posthumanism, and inter-species relationships. She works with a whole range of materials and mediums, most notably hybrid or bio-art, site-specific installations, performance, or video art, and produces extensive texts revolving around her artistic practice. At the 2020 Kontejner's TOUCH ME festival, the work exhibited was titled K-9_Typology: Cynomorpha, a multi-media installation from 2017. The work combines a series of Smrekar's works developed between 2014 and 2017, all of which explore a posthumanist and utopian idea of human and animal relationships, with a focus on dogs as a companion species. The piece that was displayed visually alluded to a dog stacker. The display consisted of objects, pieces, photographs, scientific apparatus, and other media from her series that included the works: *Ecce Canis* (2014.), *I Hunt Nature and Culture Hunts Me* (2014.), *Hybrid Family* (2015-16), and *ARTE_mis* (2017). It was originally created for CyberArts 2017- Prix Art Electronica Exhibition at the Ars Electronica festival. As a separate art installation, it inspired the focus on one work specifically, which, with its

⁴⁷ Maja Smrekar, "Biography".

exploration of humanity, animality, kinship, and care, presents a controversial contemporary artwork. The focal point of this chapter will be *Hybrid Family*, an endurance performance that was recorded through personal letters and photographs.

This specific artwork is chosen for its clear mission statement of exploring the position of a mother in an interspecies kinship. The artist secluded herself with her pet dogs for the duration of 3 months, during which she used a breast pump to stimulate her glands in order to have them produce milk. She breastfed her newly acquired puppy Ada in an attempt at a hybrid family between human and animal, in the self-proclaimed role of the ‘m(O)ther’.⁴⁸

The aim of this chapter is to answer the question: How does the act of breastfeeding in the art of Maja Smrekar communicate with the posthumanist discourse to de- and re-naturalize interspecies relationships and postulate a new form of kinship? In order to answer the question, the chapter will investigate the power relations of the performance, its utopianism, and its ethics. It will also reflect on how exactly the reproductive freedom postulated by the artist contributes to the decolonization of queer and non-human identities in relation to the patriarchal norms that seek to exploit them. The artwork will be analyzed visually in the following chapter, as it is represented on Smrekar’s website. The letters exchanged by the artist and her co-curator Jens Hauser will also be subjected to close reading in order to theoretically reflect on the execution of the performance itself.

In the theoretical discussion and discourse analysis on the topics surrounding the performance, the main literature used will be that of Donna Haraway. The artist’s take on the nature-culture binary and the introduction of nurture in its immediate and most raw form as a political act will be discussed below, especially in regard to feminist posthumanism. As the artist herself references the posthumanist writer and her various writings on the topics of posthumanity, kinship, and companionship between the human and the other, she frames *Hybrid Family* as a possible answer to the question posed by Haraway: “What is decolonial feminist reproductive freedom in a dangerously troubled multispecies world?”⁴⁹

4.2 Private Performance and Staged Photographs

Hybrid Family, an endurance performance that lasted for three months, is documented through staged photographs that capture the vulnerability, queerness, and possibilities that come out of

⁴⁸ Maja Smrekar, “Hybrid Family”

⁴⁹ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 6

human and dog companionship. The photographic series is documented by Manuel Vason, an artist specializing in performance photography. He worked very closely with Smrekar to create the images used for the representation of her hybrid family. In the introduction to Vason's book *Double Exposure*, the photographer David Evans highlighted the importance of collaboration and cross-pollination for Vason's artistic process, which is important to keep in mind when viewing the photographs of *Hybrid Family*.

The two artists worked together for six days, during which Vason moved in with Smrekar, Ada, and Byron (Smrekar's dogs). Smrekar writes about their experience in blog post number 7. She allowed Vason to capture the most intimate moments, the vulnerability, care, and playfulness of her family. The staged photographs set out to represent the performance, enrich it semiotically with the objects Smrekar grew up with and narrate their physical and psychological transformations into the new form of kinship.⁵⁰ Here, the focus will be on that series of photographs, but not individually or compositionally. The four photographs that will be used in this discussion were chosen on the basis of their strong visual language and their most apparent dialogue with the theory of posthumanism. The power of the photographs lies in their symbolic, emotional, and conceptual content, which will be studied.

These photographs represent the performance itself, and since it was done in private with no audience, it is essential to delve deeper into the importance of performance and photography. Performance as an art form can be traced back to the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, such as Dadaism and Futurism, which rejected traditional creative conventions and attempted to conflate art and life. In the 1960s and 1970s, it became more well-known, especially with the rise of figures like Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramović, and Yoko Ono. Performance was for a long time considered a special art form for its ephemeral nature, being mostly performed for an audience, and its experimental approach to visual and conceptual exploration. Because of its fleeting and performative nature, documentation of such an art form has been discussed at length. One of the questions, especially pertaining to *Hybrid Family*, is about how the photographs taken by Vason represent the nature of the performance.

In an essay about the performativity of performance photography, Philip Auslander mentions two categories into which performance photography can be divided. He states how they can be conceived as either documentary or theatrical, with the former being more traditionally accepted as it plays more into the idea of performances as unique and ephemeral experiences. Theatrical photographs he describes as:

⁵⁰ Maja Smrekar, "Post N7 : Survival Art: Collaboration With Manuel Vason"

“...cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document (whether visual or audiovisual) thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs.”⁵¹

He further discusses the need for an audience in performances. He concludes:

“I submit that presence of that initial audience has no real importance to the performance as an entity whose continued life is through its documentation because our usual concern as consumers of such documentation is with recreating the artist's work, not the total interaction.”⁵²

With this in mind, our understanding of the photographic depictions of *Hybrid Family* can be looked at as the artwork itself. Through the collaborative nature of these photographs, we can trace the conceptual background of Smrekar's performance, but we can also view them as separate works of art, and the process of the photography as a performance in itself. Vason's vision and the staging of this performance for the photographic lens are, in fact, the final form in which the audience experiences *Hybrid Family*, and for this reason, they are the most important visual aspects of this artwork.

The controversial photograph that is often used as the main visual representation of the performance shows the artist, who is centered in the photograph. She is kneeling in the white, ascetically decorated room, with a white sheet covering her body from the waist down. Her upper body is laid bare. With one hand, she holds the breast pump to her breast, and with the other, she gently holds her puppy's head to her other breast. The subdued color palette of white and cream alludes to purity, cleanliness, bliss, and milk. Static and peaceful, yet almost liminal and unsettling, the photograph epitomizes the performance of the Hybrid Family (Fig 6). The staging of this photograph, the almost bare room, with only a few signifiers to the narrative of its reality draws the focus on Smrekar and Ada. Here it is important to highlight certain aspects of these photographs in order to discuss them in the following segment. In this photograph, the use of modern technology (the breast pump) is crucial, since without it, the performance might

⁵¹ Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation”, 2.

⁵² Ibid., 6-7.

not even be possible. The reliance on technology in the investigation of borders of humanity and animality, nature and culture, art and theory brings this artwork closer to the complicated relationship between posthumanism and technology.

As a visual connection, here we can notice the inversion of the Capitoline Wolf. Different in medium, context, and style, yet shows an act of nursing between humans and canines. Haraway, in her book *The Companion Species Manifesto*, theorizes that the relationship between humans and dogs has historically been co-evolutionary:

“But it is a mistake to see the alterations of dogs' bodies and minds as biological and the changes in human bodies and lives, for example in the emergence of herding or agricultural societies, as cultural, and so not about co-evolution.”⁵³

Her statement not only brings closer the human and the canine but also the formative power of nature over culture and vice versa, which Smrekar is set to explore with her artwork.

In another photograph of the series that can be seen as exploring the cultural aspect, Smrekar and Vason, together with Ada, recreate the familiar iconography of family portraits with a newborn. In the corner of a barren room, the artists create a unit of the nuclear family consisting of a man, a woman, and a pup (Figure 7). Both bare, artists come together in an intimate pose of togetherness, Vason's arms around Smrekar, who is holding Ada in a loving hug. The play on the visuals of the ideal heteronormative familial unit creates an uncanny aura caused by the juxtaposition of intimacy and care in the empty liminal space around it (Figure 6). This photograph could be seen as challenging the idea of a heteronormative familial unit and the structures it upholds within and without. Even though the only role substituted by an animal is that of a child, such an intimate depiction of this hybrid family encourages thought. The purposeful setting of this familial portrait could be seen as a form of resistance. Even though their environment is barren and uninviting, they do not seem bothered by it.

Lastly, while in the first two photographs, the animal seems to be inserted into traditionally human scenarios, the third one shows a different power dynamic. The artist lays bare on a crumpled white sheet. Her facial expression is blank as she stares up. Her chosen family, consisting of Byron and Ada, is shown in a moment of play-fighting. Byron's and Ada's bodies cover Smrekars with their fur, and Byron is captured with an open snout. As Polona Tratnik, an artist and scholar, describes Smrekar's transformation into the 'M(o)ther': “In this

⁵³ Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 31.

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state the subject surrenders to the instinctive drivenness “toward” it is the state of captivation.”

⁵⁴ The artist allows herself to be subjected to animality in her search for the posthumanist ideal of interspecies kinship (Figure 8).

Smrekar plays with this concept in many other artworks, most notably her performance titled *I Hunt Nature and Culture Hunts Me*, which she performed in 2014. In her artist text, Smrekar writes: “You and I are hunted by those who lack the capacity to transfer into the intimacy of companionship beyond the anthropological machine discourse of deviding species.” ⁵⁵ Her take on the nature/culture gap seems to be more focused on the primal and animal aspects of humanity and the psychological implications of its negation. In her world, the humans negating their animality are taken over by the artificialities of humanism, which are then used to justify human dominion over other life forms and the exploitation of the planet. To combat this, in the photograph, the aspect of nature is put to the forefront. Smrekar, a human, surrenders to the will of her dogs.

This subchapter offered some insight into *Hybrid Family* on the basis of the photographs depicting Smrekar’s performance. It is not only captured on photographs, but is also subjectively narrated through a series of letters exchanged between Smrekar and Jens Hauser. The letters are open to the public on Smrekar’s website, and through the letters, she vulnerably discusses her thoughts, theoretical reflections, and physical discomforts surrounding her three month seclusion. The letters and some aspects of them will be discussed further below to deepen the understanding of this artwork, and connect it to previously established posthumanist and feminist theories.

4.3 The Implications and Ethics of Interspecies Breastfeeding

Smrekar starts off the series with a personal overview of her family’s history, and their history of animal companionship. In the manner of a typical rural family in a socialist developing country, animals of certain species were used as kin and companions, while others were exploited for their meat and fur. She connects the fallout of Yugoslavia and Slovenia’s new independence with the economic hardship that resulted in the suicide of her father. The arrival of liberal capitalism greatly affected the relationships between her family members and their beloved animals. The area she grew up in later became the locus of political struggle and

⁵⁴Tratnik, “Maja Smrekar’s Biopolitical Manifesto from a Philosophical Perspective”, 77

⁵⁵ Maja Smrekar, “I Hunt Nature And Culture Hunts Me”.

immigration politics, as for years it marked the Schengen border and, in the wake of the European migration crises, became wired with barbed wire. The hostility shown to non-European immigrants could, in terms of bio-politics be registered as an immunological response. As opposed to the established 'placenta politics' Braidotti discussed, this kind of rejection of the Other noticeably influenced Smrekar's artistic research. She discusses the loss of her identity, land, and family in the gradual power shifts typical for Slovenia in the 1990s, as the country separated from Yugoslavia in 1991, joined the European Union in 2003, and was subsequently incorporated into the Schengen area in 2007, thus becoming a part of the EU border systems.

Her motivations are tied to posthuman discourse in her exploration of the boundaries of the nature-culture binary. As mentioned in the literature review, the nature-culture binary is an artificial theoretical problem of seemingly opposing concepts that, when investigated, appear to be a product of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Smrekar plays with this concept in many other artworks, most notably the aforementioned performance titled *I hunt nature and culture hunts me*, which she performed in 2014. The quote from the artist's text also shows the limits of posthumanism in Smrekar's work and gives reason to question some methods she uses in her art. When Braidotti writes about the nature-culture binary, her focus is on the harmful naturalization of culturally established positions that lead to a political imbalance:

"Feminists are painfully aware of the dangers involved in being assigned to nature. Nature is the cover for a hierarchical naturalization of inequalities, which circulates within the socio-cultural system of patriarchy as a pretext for discrimination. Appeals to nature and to a naturalized world order are a tactic that the patriarchal, capitalist, neo-colonial system uses to lend legitimacy to the social structures it has created."⁵⁶

Smrekar's call for the utopian and differently naturalized world proposed by her art does not, in this instance, reflect on this specific problem of the nature-culture gap. Instead, her renaturalization tries to over-ride the problem in the manner of 'becoming' animal. In the hope that it provokes and results in the rethinking of existence models between humans and non-human animals, it could also be said that it avoids more tangible problems.

One of the main critiques of Smrekar's work comes from the idea of animal use or exploitation in art. As written before on the ethics of bio-art, the lines are blurred on what is

⁵⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, 71.

ethical or acceptable, which complicates matters greatly. Vaage introduces the standpoint of the critiques of the moralists led by David Hume: “A moralist perceives the morality of art as having a direct impact on its aesthetic value. In other words: if an artwork is morally defective, it must be aesthetically flawed, too.”⁵⁷ Often, this stance is seen as limiting and constricting and has been debunked in debates about violent literature, media, and video games. The worry is that unethical art has corruptive potential and might cause immorality in its audience. But in contemporary practice, these kinds of critiques have been widely overlooked. In the case of Smrekar’s art, the number of awards and praise her work has received over the years often contradicts the public’s opinion of her work. While often underinformed and biased, based on religious or moral standards, the critiques often voice concerns about animal abuse and shock value, which, unfortunately, undermines a possible understanding of her art.

Apart from *Hybrid Family*, her *ARTE_mis* project has received plenty of negative backlashes. In collaboration with BioTechna- a laboratory for artistic research of living systems, the artist’s enucleated oocyte was fused with her dog’s somatic cell extracted from her saliva. The matter has been left to develop for a duration of three days, and just before it formed the blastocyte, it was frozen, and thus the development process ceased. Olga Majcen Linn and Sunčica Ostojić, Smrekar’s long lasting curators and collaborators, write about this project and its need for intense curating: “The core taboo of her work, the potential creation of the human-dog hybrid, reinforces the fear of possible obscure transformations of human species through new kinds of kinship with other non-human living beings.”⁵⁸ As the project itself is deep in meaning and visual representation, here it is only used to illustrate and voice some concerns regarding bio-art. The artist purposefully used solely the somatic cells of her dog, taken from her saliva, so the animal’s body was not used or hurt in any way. As it is impossible for an animal to give its consent to participating in projects such as *ARTE_mis* or *Hybrid Family*, many voiced concerns about exploitation.

Claims that Smrekar uses ‘the other’ for personal and reputational gain need further discussion. The problem partially resides in the performativity of the process. Even Jens Hauser in his response to her letter, greets her and her “Berlin trans-species performativity nest.”⁵⁹ He is not commenting on the photographs of the performance but on the private performance itself. It is important to keep in mind that *Hybrid Family* is never presented as a lifestyle, nor does

⁵⁷ Vaage, “What Ethics for Bioart?”⁶

⁵⁸ Majcen Linn and Ostojić, “Curatorial Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Science Dealing with Interspecies Connections,” 83-84.

⁵⁹ Maja Smrekar, “Post N2: Jens Hauser on History of Tears”.

Smrekar nurse every pet she has. *Hybrid Family* is an artistic project meant for exhibiting and, thus, viewing. Such a mission cannot escape the performativity inherent in the nature of the project, but that is not its only issue. Hauser also references Smrekar's own words about using dogs as a medium. The use of live animals as a medium has been deemed controversial in any given context in contemporary art and has been frowned upon by many audience members, animal rights organizations, and academics.

Deirdre M. Smith, a scholar of contemporary and Slavic art, discusses this concept in her essay about the exhibition *Heavenly Beings: Neither Human nor Animal*, which was held in 2018 in the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana, Slovenia. At its core, the exhibition explored the intersection of art, science, technology, and society and exhibited works by local artists that focused on the theme. Smith focused on three controversial artworks, one of which was Smrekar's *Hybrid Family*. In regards to the artwork, she ambivalently concludes: "The extent to which Ada or Byron could consent to participating in an artwork is worth considering, but to presume regardless that their participation was damaging degrades Ada and Byron's emotional and cognitive capabilities."⁶⁰ She further goes on to equate Ada's lack of consent in the performance to the lack of a child's consent on being born and chooses to view the relationship of all involved in *Hybrid Family* as one of 'significant otherness' as explained by Haraway. Haraway uses this term as she draws from the research of the ethnographer Marilyn Strathern, who studied the way the English reckoned kinships in Papua New Guinea and claimed how the opposition of nature and culture was not only unuseful but also wrong. Her approach to partial connections inspired Haraway's term: "Strathern thinks in terms of 'partial connections,' i.e., patterns within which the players are neither wholes nor parts. I call these the relations of significant otherness. I think of Strathern as an ethnographer of naturecultures..."⁶¹

Another opinion about the use of animals as a medium in art comes from Carey Wofe and her book *What is Posthumanism?*, where she endorses art focusing on the mistreatment and displacement of non-human animals by humans. She argues that it has the potential to disturb the pedestal on which human life has been placed. Her discussion on the use of animals in Sue Coe's and Eduardo Kac's work affirms the use of animals by humans in art. She claims humans as subjects have the power to shed light on the experience of the other: "And it is such a subject who then, on the basis of sovereignty, extends ethical or artistic consideration outward

⁶⁰ Smith, "Heavenly Beings' Art Facing the Animal in Ljubljana", 309.

⁶¹ Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 8.

or toward the nonhuman other.”⁶² Somewhat in disagreement, Amanda Boetzkes argues that the use of non-human animals in art, if only used as a tool or an empathy machine to help humans understand themselves differently, does not comply with the ethics of art. Smrekar’s work in this case would not pass the ethics test if viewed through Boetzkes’ theoretical lens. Even though the theoretical *Hybrid Family* pleads for a more nurturing, non-exploitative, and fair existence between species, it isn’t fully clear how Ada or Byron benefit from their roles. The dialogue in this instance is one-sided; Smrekar is the only one with the agency to implement change in herself and her animals.

Lastly, when unpacking Smrekar’s artwork, it is important to look at breastfeeding as a biological and sociological act, and its importance in *Hybrid Family* as a motive and a means of her exploration of borders between humans and animals. It is also important to understand its history and the politics behind using it as a motive in this particular artwork.

Breastfeeding as a natural and biological act has been culturalized, and discussed at length by feminist scholars. Francesca Ferrando problematizes how even the classification system of species shows its sexist biases:

“While the term “mammal”, which is related to female biology and stresses human specificities, is used to place the human species into the larger natural system; the term *Homo sapiens* emphasizes the human cognitive functions within a male frame, and is applied to mark the distinction between humans and other primates, revealing the inner sexism and speciesism of both notions.”⁶³

Jeanne Stolzer, a psychology and family studies scholar, offers a historical overview of breastfeeding and contextualizes it in different historical periods. She discusses how the use of wet-nurses, using animal milk as a substitute for human milk for infants, and using formula have all historically been connected to higher infant mortality rates. Nevertheless, these customs were perpetuated in societies in which nursing your own offspring seemed inappropriate or immodest, for instance, in England and America during the Victorian era. She also claims that the shift from women’s shared knowledge to trust in medical institutions, which were run by men, occurred during this time period.⁶⁴ We could consider that to be the beginning of the double scrutiny that women today experience when discussing breastfeeding.

⁶² Wolfe, “CODA Reflections on Art and Posthumanism”, 67.

⁶³ Ferrando, “The Body”, 151-152.

⁶⁴ Stolzer, “Breastfeeding: an Interdisciplinary Review”, 105.

The philosopher Rebecca Kukla discusses this bilateral attack on people who breastfeed, stating how, on the one hand, they are expected to breastfeed their infants for at least six months, and are scrutinized if they do not, but are systematically excluded from the society that holds them to such a high standard. She also claims that the breastfeeding propaganda does not encourage, but instead distances mothers from the public and private spaces: “New mothers may find themselves acutely uncomfortable and alienated both in the new spaces they negotiate (pediatricians’ offices, mommy-and-baby playgroups) and in the old spaces that used to be comfortable (childless friends’ houses, restaurants, their work space).”⁶⁵ When these arguments are taken into consideration, the act of nursing in any form can be understood as a subtle form of resistance in sexist and capitalist societies. Smrekar’s choice of nursing as a representation of the ultimate caregiving act, with the aspect of interspecies kinship, sheds more light on her claims of decolonizing reproductive freedom.

4.4 Sub-conclusion

Maja Smrekar’s *Hybrid Family* shows resonance with modern-day issues that pertain not only to women but to any group of beings othered by the current wider socio-political system. Even though breastfeeding is not performed in all of the photographs representing Smrekar’s work, it is the main catalyst of her artistic intent. Staged photographs that show the artist in different settings with her animals could be considered as additional context and illustration of the hypothetical hybrid family Smrekar set out to investigate. The real physical endurance that the artist submitted herself to could be seen as a sympathetic act of resistance not only to the societal norms that control reproduction, but also as an act of resistance to the other repressive divides between human and animal, human and environment, and nature and culture. Even though some of the ethical implications of her work are still debated for their ethics and implications, what she proposes also sheds light on inequalities and stale social structures such as the heteronormative nuclear unit, the unjust system of borders, and the systematic exploitation of natural resources as a result of a capitalist society.

⁶⁵ Kukla, “Ethics and Ideology in Breastfeeding Advocacy Campaigns“, 168.

CONCLUSION

The mission of this thesis was to discuss the artworks *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...* and *Hybrid Family* and investigate their relationship with posthumanist and feminist discourse. Mainly, the focus was to explore how they combat the nature-culture gap and how inter-species kinship offers insight into the modern-day issues of heteronormative structures and roles, involving those of a mother. Posthuman and feminist discourses were chosen for its immediate connection with these works, as some of the theory was used as direct inspiration for the artists, especially in the relationship between Maja Smrekar's work and the theories of Donna Haraway.

Firstly, by reviewing other examples from different historical and cultural contexts, I highlighted how non-traditional depictions of motherhood often stemmed from political or social changes. Examples of this can be seen in *Akhenaten and His Family*, *Young Woman Having Her Child Nursed by a Goat*, and even depictions of religious scenes such as any *Virgin with Child*. It is more obvious in feminist art, as feminism in itself is a political movement. In this manner, we could notice how sometimes the imagery of motherhood, considered 'natural', could be used to either strengthen or question different social relationships, hierarchies, and structures in human society. In its political potential to induce change or rethinking, we can notice how it can act as an artificial construct in service of any ideology.

Furthermore, while unpacking relevant theories, concepts, and terms, I discussed how the relationship between bio-art and ecofeminism can be seen as bilateral and how it specifically connects Ai Hasegawa's work. The connection between Braidotti's 'placenta politics' and Takeshita's 'motherfoetus' highlighted the inequalities in the medical language used to discuss 'neutral' biological processes, and deepened our understanding of the placental organ as a location of political resistance. As I had presented, the discourse around IVF and ART is today very important, as these procedures offer both utopian and dystopian possibilities, only determined by the laws they adhere to. These laws in particular seem to be influenced by the nature-culture gap, which is still used to this day to justify the unjust treatment of disempowered beings. The use of technology today as well seems to be more in line with transhumanist ideals than posthumanist. We scientifically have the possibility of improving lives. Unfortunately, the systems in place, which posthumanism criticizes, still prioritize which people individually receive these enhancements.

In the case study of Ai Hasegawa's artwork, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, the mission was to truly think through her notion of humans reversing ecological destruction through inter-

species birth. Her work was dissected into three separate visual segments, and they were individually used to fully grasp the work in the context of posthumanist and feminist discourse. Her sculpture offered insight into the contemporaneity of her work due to its modern mediums. As she proposes that women, due to their physical abilities to bear children, should be the ones responsible for the reversal of ecological destruction, she also overlooks their position in the society that caused said negative consequences. Her video segment also comes under scrutiny for its romanticization of birth. Because of the romantic visual aesthetics of this inter-species birth, I also consider it a romanticization of inter-species kinship. Its sentiment should not be overlooked, as it, at its core, works toward destabilizing the harmful societal structures held up by capitalism and heteronormativity. The diagrams brought forth a discussion on the topic of the population problem, and Hasegawa's work in this instance failed to address the multitude of inequalities often overlooked in fears of overpopulation. I also highlighted how they could be seen as visual representations of Braidotti's 'placenta politics'.

Maja Smrekar's *Hybrid Family* demanded a different approach dictated by its visual components and its themes. Staged photography as a medium for documenting her private endurance performance captured the essence of her artwork. Her collaboration with Manuel Vason highlighted the most important aspects of an attempt at a human-dog hybrid family. As her medium was questioned for the use of live animals, the ethics remain debateable. Her portrayal of the performance is also questioned for its narrow focus on the human-dog relationship in the midst of times of crisis for all living beings. She remains dedicated to questioning the line between culture and nature, and she illustrates it through the act of breastfeeding. As I discuss, breastfeeding successfully portrays the issues of nursing people's societal position on a smaller scale. The scrutiny and inequalities marginalized people endure in the current systems of power are often justified by their supposed 'natural' traits, while it is the cultural structure that actually upholds them. By substituting an infant with a pup, Smrekar radicalizes these inequalities, highlighting them and, through the process of art, renaturalizing them in her own utopian world.

To conclude, Smrekar and Hasegawa both offer different scenarios of human and animal kinship. They use the institution of motherhood as a complex societal position that is both idealized and scrutinized. Motherhood remains scrutinized for its natural and biological processes, which do not line up with the idealized, cultural image of a mother. This hypocrisy has real-life consequences for the lives of mothers, but it can also be extended to other groups of people, animals, or beings treated in the same manner. Hasegawa and Smreka challenge these notions through their visual representations of radical posthumanist ideals. Through the

cultural institution of art, their projects culturalize their denaturalized processes, and, in turn, postulate different modes of existence for humans and their companions on Earth. For further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether artworks with similar aims exist, and whether they also involve the use of women's bodies for the rethinking of human and animal relationships. Smrekar's use of her own body and Hasegawa's postulated use of women's bodies in general beg the question of whether such strong emotions, which motivate change towards the other can come without the corporeal or biological aspect.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Unknown author, *The Capitoline Wolf*, 10th century BCE, bronze, 75 x 114.



Figure 2. Ai Hasegawa, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin...*, 2013. 3-D printed plastic filament, dimensions unknown.



Figure 3. Ai Hasegawa, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin*, 2013. Video.

Dilemma chart (Why don't I get pregnant with...)

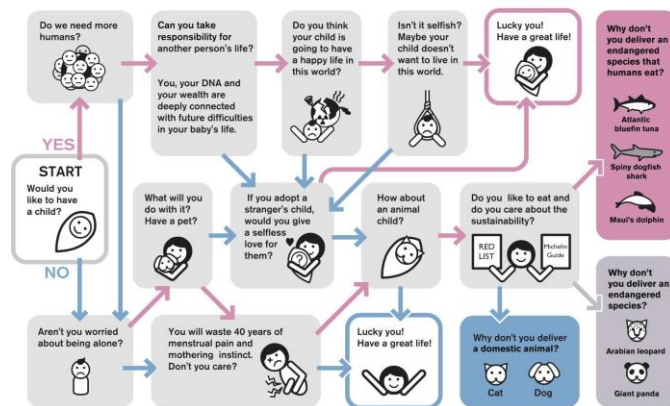


Figure 4. Ai Hasegawa, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin*, 2013. Digital print, dimensions unknown.

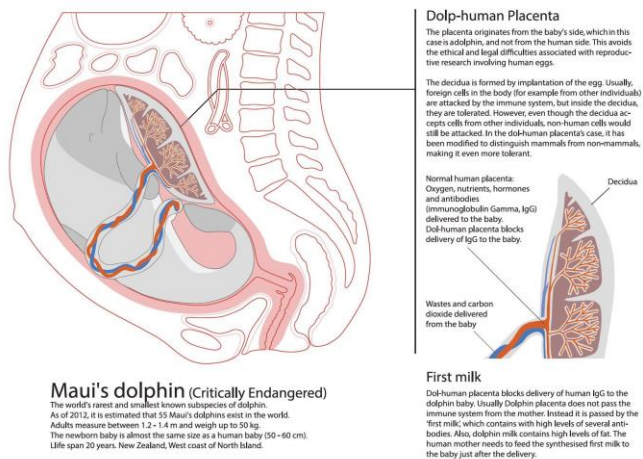


Figure 5. Ai Hasegawa, *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin*, 2013. Digital print, dimensions unknown.



Figure 6. Maja Smrekar, *Hybrid Family*, 2016. Digital photograph, dimensions unknown.



Figure 7. Maja Smrekar, *Hybrid Family*, 2016. Digital photograph, dimensions unknown.



Figure 8. Maja Smrekar, *Hybrid Family*, 2016. Digital photograph, dimensions unknown.

IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3d/Lupa_Capitolina_con_sfondo_bianco.jpg/375px-Lupa_Capitolina_con_sfondo_bianco.jpg

Figure 2. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 3. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 4. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 5. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 6. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 7. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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Figure 8. Downloaded 5 June, 2023.

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