

Pointing the Moral Index Finger: Ruth Beckermann on Mutzenbacher



By Darren Hughes

In “The Present Absence,” his introductory essay for the Austrian Film Museum’s English-language monograph dedicated to Ruth Beckermann, Nick Pinkerton pinpoints the central question that has animated much of Beckermann’s work as a filmmaker, writer, editor, photographer, and installation artist over the past five decades: “What then is to be done? How is a past no one wants to remember to be regained for posterity?” Born in postwar Vienna to Holocaust survivors, Beckermann has devoted her career to excavating, with a dogged curiosity, the social, political, and economic histories of 19th- and 20th-century Austria, always balancing a sincere generosity toward her human subjects with a precise critique of the systems in which they work, worship, strive, and struggle. *Mutzenbacher*, her twelfth feature and winner of the Best Film prize in the Encounters program at the 2022 Berlinale, is an unabashed provocation that dusts off a notorious, century-old pornographic text to interrogate masculinity and the strange, hand-wringing Puritanism of our modern age. As with all subjects that fall under her gaze, Beckermann observes sex, shame, desire, fear, fantasies, and transgression with a concentrated stare and a wry smile.

Beckermann’s filmography can be divided very roughly into four phases. After studying photography for a year at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, she returned to Vienna in 1976 and soon founded the Filmladen distribution company with Franz Grafl and Josef Aichholzer, with the intent of documenting the contemporary political climate in Austria. The early results of their collaboration—*Arena Squatted* (1977), *Suddenly, a Strike* (1978), and *The Steel Hammer Out There on the Grass* (1981)—are collectivist, activist films that present on-the-ground reporting of the labour movement in a time of crisis. Their follow-up, a study of labour in the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna, was intended to be made in a similar

vein, but the focus of the project shifted after they met Franz West (né Weinstraub), who arrived in Vienna as a teenager in 1924 and was later active in Social Democratic and then Communist party politics. In addition to extensive interviews with West, *Return to Vienna* (1983) incorporates found footage from the era to explore the once-vibrant Jewish community in Leopoldstadt (aka “Matzo Island”), the between-wars period of “Red Vienna,” and the rise of Austrofascism and National Socialism. The film ends—movingly, brilliantly—with an audio recording in which West recounts the destruction of his family in the Shoah accompanied by an uncharacteristic montage of nighttime images of Vienna, most of them shot through the window of a moving train.

Return to Vienna is a key transition film for Beckermann, as it coincides with a shift in her politics and her formal approach to cinema. After spending her twenties associating with, and demonstrating alongside of, Viennese Maoists, Trotskyists, and Young Socialists (she never formally joined any of them), she made a break with the Left in 1982, precipitated by the strain of anti-Semitism that polluted the Left’s reaction to the Lebanon War and also by her general lack of interest in modern forms of identity politics. She responded by turning her focus inward: “I thought it necessary to express who I am, and to confront others with it,” she told Alexander Horwath and Michael Omasta. *Paper Bridge* (1987) is the first in a loose trilogy of major films—followed by *Toward Jerusalem* (1991) and *East of War* (1996)—in which Beckermann explores the European Jewish experience, including the particular travails of her own family’s migrations to and from Austria, Bukovina, and Israel.

The stand-out formal device that emerges in these films is Beckermann’s remarkable talents as an interviewer: as in the best work of Chantal Akerman, Agnès Varda, and Wang Bing, Beckermann establishes quick confidence with her subjects and elicits from them remarkable stories, as if the person had been waiting his or her entire life for someone to ask. *East of War* was shot in the fall of 1995 at *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944*, an exhibition of photographs that confronted viewers with the atrocities committed by Austrian troops on the Eastern Front, and in doing so also challenged the convenient myth that Austria was simply Nazi Germany’s unwitting victim. A signature moment in Beckermann’s project is her exchange with a middle-aged woman at the exhibit who, surrounded by life-sized photos, refuses to accept the destabilizing truths in them: “I don’t believe it,” she cries. “I don’t believe my uncles were murderers.”

Beckermann speaks often of how her creative and intellectual imagination was shaped from a young age by literature rather than films: “I have this impression, to this day,” she told Horwath and Omasta, “that far too many images are being made.” It’s noteworthy, then, that with *A Fleeting Passage to the Orient* (1999) she enters a phase of experimentation with less structured, more directly cinematic forms. In *Orient* she retraces the journeys of Empress Elisabeth of Austria (1837–1889), collecting images of street vendors, desert landscapes, children walking along the seaside, a whirling dervish, the faces of Egyptian women, and whatever else happened to pique her curiosity—a “brief catalogue of beauty,” she calls it in voiceover—and then assembles the images with a highly personal, associative montage. The films of this period—including *homemad(e)* (2001), *Zorro’s Bar Mitzvah* (2006), *American Passages* (2011), and *Those Who Go Those Who Stay* (2013)—are more ambitious in some ways than her previous work, but also more difficult to fully embrace. *American Passages*, for example, documents Beckermann’s journey through the US, and while it would be difficult to argue that any of the images she collected are untrue, by

<https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/pointing-the-moral-index-finger-ruth-beckermann-on-mutzenbacher/>

making stops at Liberty University (a locus of fundamentalist Christianity), Oxford, Mississippi (a typically segregated city in the South), Maricopa County, Arizona (the stomping grounds of notorious Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was later the beneficiary of Trump's first presidential pardon), and Las Vegas, Nevada (a real-life simulacrum), Beckermann indulges her confirmation bias: she seems to have found the America she was looking for.

Beckermann followed *Those Who Go Those Who Stay*, the most discursive of her image essays, with *The Dreamed Ones* (2016), which marked a return to the subject of Jewish life in postwar Europe, but in a completely original form. Working for the first time with actors, Beckermann stages readings of selected letters between the German-language poets Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, whose relationship had then only recently become public knowledge. The actors, Anja Plaschg and Laurence Rupp, were roughly the same age at the time of filming that Bachmann and Celan were when they met in Vienna in 1948, and Beckermann's strategy of prompting them with the letters while shooting them in close-up challenges any simple notions of "performance." Very gradually, our experience of Plaschg and Rupp—their particular ways of speaking and registering emotion, their shifting glances—becomes indistinguishable from our evolving understanding of the poets and their tragic situation; the only other comparable biopic is Peter Watkins' similarly hybrid/Brechtian *Edvard Munch* (1974).

The Dreamed Ones introduced a new phase in Beckermann's career, and also brought her long-deserved international recognition. Her films had for decades screened in Berlin, Vienna, and at festivals in France, but *The Dreamed Ones* travelled to Toronto and New York and was picked up for American distribution, a first for her. *The Waldheim Waltz* (2018), a found-footage study of former UN Secretary-General and accused war criminal Kurt Waldheim, likewise found a broader audience, including a slot at the New York Film Festival.

Prompted by *Josefine Mutzenbacher, or The Story of a Viennese Whore*, an anonymous 1906 novel generally attributed to *Bambi* author Felix Salter, Beckermann's latest project began with an open casting call: "Looking for men between the ages of 16 and 99." The hundred or so men who answered the ad found themselves gathered around a buffet table in a former coffin factory before being led, alone or in small groups, to a second room, where they took a seat on a garish pink and gold couch and were greeted by Beckermann and her cameras. *Mutzenbacher*, the book, is a fictional memoir narrated with titillating candour by the aging Josephine, who meditates on her long life as a sex worker, beginning as a young child. Beckermann's initial provocation is to hand each man a selection of the text and ask him to read it aloud, which prompts various responses, from disgust and embarrassment to casual indifference and exhilaration. More importantly, the exercise pierces the conventions of polite conversation and gives the men permission to ignore the learned instinct to self-censor, at which point their conversations with Beckermann, and with each other, spin off in any number of revealing directions.

Beckermann and co-writer Claus Philipp committed to the film in the summer of 2020, during an early wave of the quarantine. "It was such a disembodied period," Beckermann has said. "In any case, the subject was in the air again." *Mutzenbacher* is not a COVID film as we've come to recognize such works, but its instantiation of intimacy—that the men speak so frankly is more important than what they say—is born of the moment.

<https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/pointing-the-moral-index-finger-ruth-beckermann-on-mutzenbacher/>

Cinema Scope: Near the end of *Mutzenbacher*, a man says the book is difficult to discuss because of the “moral index finger.” I don’t speak German—is that a common idiom?

Ruth Beckermann: Maybe it’s a bad translation? Because in German, you say *moralischer Zeigefinger*.

Scope: I’m sure the translation is fine, but we don’t have that exact idiom in English. It’s an especially useful expression for this film.

Beckermann: Yeah, of course, because it’s the double bind.

Scope: On the one hand, you’re inviting the participants to be very open, as if this were an intimate conversation, but it’s all taking place in front of cameras.

Beckermann: This was my idea, to put it on public trial. But I didn’t want to have any moral prejudices. I tried to be open to whatever they presented. Some of them really liked to read the texts, some of them didn’t like it. One even threw it away after he read it. I was interested in the confrontation between the text, which was probably written by a man, and a man of today—a random man. I didn’t do a casting, I just made a casting call. But I didn’t really choose: I didn’t look for a Black guy, I didn’t look for a homosexual. I mean, an Israeli came!

Scope: Did an Israeli come?

Beckermann: Yes, there’s an Israeli in the film. You didn’t recognize the accent probably. Near the beginning, when there’s a group of some men standing and one guy says, “My German is not that good”—he’s an Israeli. He just showed up, you know?

Scope: Given your career-long interest in the experiences of Jews in Vienna, I was surprised there’s no mention in the film of the author of *Mutzenbacher* being Jewish.

Beckermann: Is he? It was probably not who you think it was. There was a big article in *The New Yorker* a week or two ago about *Bambi* because there’s a new translation by Jack Zipes. The article also mentions *Mutzenbacher*, and they say it’s by Felix Salter. But in the meantime, the Vienna library got all the letters and the legacy of Felix Salter, and they didn’t find any hint that he wrote the book. It came out anonymously, and we don’t know who wrote it. But it’s probably...I suppose it was a man.

Scope: How did you choose which selections from the book to put on the cards for people to read?

Beckermann: The whole process before I decided on this concept was quite long—almost a year. I did research, met all kinds of people, prostitutes, journalists, historians, and so on. And we really worked with the book, trying to find good chapters, good pieces, good paragraphs, that show different situations and that are good to read. It was much too long, then you shorten it, you shorten it, you cut, cut, cut, and then finally arrive at one or two small pages.

Scope: I'm not at all familiar with the book, so I was hearing these stories and Josephine's voice for the first time. One passage you chose was her earliest memory, which is of a locksmith who was a roomer in their home. When her mother left them alone together, he would hold her on his lap and examine her. Looking back, she describes him as her first lover—I assume because he taught her about the voyeuristic pleasure men take from girls.

Beckermann: I like the construction of the book, as a female memoir. It starts with an elderly woman who thinks about her childhood and about her youth, and in between there is always this reflection of the elderly woman. So, yes, in her memory—or in the *author's* fantasy of what *her* memory would be—she considers him to be her first lover. It's bizarre.

Scope: That's an important distinction: that it's the *author's fantasy* of Josephine who is telling the story. It reminds me of the two men who get into a minor argument in the film: one of them admits he often feels a spark of lust when he sees a beautiful young girl, but then a kind of moral barrier springs up and he pushes the thought aside. The other man won't admit to experiencing even the *spark* of an inappropriate thought.

Beckermann: I think it's very rare that a man admits that. And it's important to admit it, because there should be a real difference between fantasy and fact. Fantasies are free. Why not? Have a fantasy. With whomever. But the problem is when you do it, yeah? I think that's very important, especially in our times when there's such a blur between facts and fantasies, on the internet especially.

Scope: That scene is so interesting, because the subtext of the film suddenly becomes text. You must have known, in the moment, that their conversation would make the final cut.

Beckermann: Definitely. I mean, you wait for those moments; you're happy with those moments. What was it Chris Marker said? Your heart palpitates. When you sit there and realize there's a real conversation happening, a real discussion, you're happy. But then in the editing room, you have a big problem because it's an interesting discussion that goes on for ten or 15 minutes and you have to select the moment out of that.

Scope: You're a very good interviewer.

Beckermann: I don't prepare. Or, let's say, I did a lot of research, and I worked a lot with the book and the text and so on, but then I didn't prepare. It's not good to prepare for the way I film. It might be different if I used another way to make a documentary, but the way I work, I concentrate on the person. I just concentrate. And it's tiring to meet someone and immediately find a way to communicate with them, so it needs a lot of concentration, which I only have when I film—or when I fall in love or whatever, when I meet someone *really* interesting. It's a very strong concentration—which makes something, *does* something, to the other person.

Scope: You say in the film, "Here, talking is part of the pleasure"—which could be referring to the erotic pleasure of the intimate conversations you're having with strangers and that we're witnessing as viewers, or could be referring to the sex talk in *Mutzenbacher*.

Beckermann: That's the fun thing in this book: they talk all the time while they do it, especially the women! And the funny thing is also that they talk about their husbands who

<https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/pointing-the-moral-index-finger-ruth-beckermann-on-mutzenbacher/>

are not able to, while they have sex with another man. So it's really a kind of burlesque, a kind of comedy.

Interviewing is something I never learned. But, you know, you have some talents. It's probably a talent of mine. People trust me. I don't know why. People must trust you, immediately. If not, it doesn't work.

Scope: *Mutzenbacher* reminds me of *East of War*, in that you're interviewing strangers in a tightly controlled context. You couldn't have known what each man would say when you questioned him, but the situation offers useful prompts and boundaries for your conversation.

Beckermann: Yeah, I'd say it's a similar concept. *Mutzenbacher* is in a way similar to *East of War*, and in other ways it's similar to *The Dreamed Ones*, because both are texts concerning men. But, of course, it's a completely different subject. *East of War* was easier because you had the exhibition as a trigger, with these very strong photographs nobody could resist. And it was much more emotional because the people there had *been* to war, they were emotionalized by the photographs. Here, I just gave them a text to read as a trigger.

I like to be surprised. I didn't know these men before. There was a waiting area with a buffet, and then I just asked my assistant to bring two or three in. So I didn't even know who would be with whom. The combination was random, which was exciting because it could work, it could not work. Of course, we shot much more than is in the film. Some were boring, or nothing happened between them. But in most of the cases, it was very interesting. It worked.

Scope: The readings were a trigger, but also what you just described was a trigger—the casting call from a well-known filmmaker, the waiting-room buffet, the lights and cameras, the couch. Everyone who came that day knew they would be expected to participate. I began imagining the men at home that morning, deciding what to wear for their casting.

Beckermann: But they didn't dress very well! Well...some. This was also fun. I mean, how do you dress to go to a casting call? There was one man who thought he would act in a sex movie! Some didn't know who I was. Probably one-third knew me, or they Googled me. As one of the men mentions, there was a group who knew who I was, and another who just knew *Mutzenbacher*.

Scope: I also thought of *East of War* because every person you interview in that film acknowledges that atrocities were committed by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. Some chalk it up to the horrors of war, some justify it as a response to the equally atrocious actions of the Russian army, others are still clearly traumatized by what they experienced, but no one in that film admits their own culpability; it's always *others* who are guilty. I wondered if the same would happen in *Mutzenbacher*, so I was fascinated by the older man who tells you a story about a friend's uncle who introduced him as a teenager to all kinds of transgressive sexual behaviour. "It's still the same today," he says.

Beckermann: Nobody said, "I had sex with a child." Nobody would say that today. But this guy was like stepping out of a movie made at the time of *Mutzenbacher*. He was such a Viennese type: a "man of the people." And he said that after the war, when he was younger,

<https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/pointing-the-moral-index-finger-ruth-beckermann-on-mutzenbacher/>

there was this friend, but she was 14...First of all, he was amusing, and I didn't really take him seriously, but I think he did what he said, yeah? At the time, it was more common. Nobody really talked about abuse of kids.

The book is very interesting as a sociological book, about the way people live together, with rumours. A man slept in the bed during the day and worked at night, within the context of a family, so there were always strangers around. But this was typical for the time when Vienna became a big city.

Scope: You've said before that your sense of Vienna was shaped from a young age by books from the Austro-Hungarian era, by authors like Arthur Schnitzler and Joseph Roth. Does that explain some of your sociological interest in *Mutzenbacher*?

Beckermann: Being Jewish and coming from a home where books were not read—and my parents were starting from zero after the war—books became very important to find myself and to find something in this Austrian-Viennese culture I could relate to. It was such a strange feeling to live there after the war, in this Nazi environment. So Kafka, Schnitzler, all these authors from the Austro-Hungarian empire who came to Vienna as strangers themselves and who wrote about society with the gaze of an outsider, I could relate to them.

I found *Mutzenbacher* not in that context, of course, because it was hidden somewhere. Although we were always searching for forbidden books, of course, about sex; we didn't consider the book as literature at the time, just as porn. But I think today it's literature because the language is very interesting, the construction of the book is good, and it describes the sociological background of the time. In Stefan Zweig's memoir, he writes about his youth in Vienna that there were whores everywhere in the city—30,000 whores. You couldn't walk around in the city centre without seeing them. Today, everything's somewhere out of sight. Even when I was young, you could see them in the streets; now, it's forbidden.

Scope: Your film ends with a man reading from the final chapter of the book: "All men do the same. They lie on top, we lie on bottom. They pound us and we get pounded. That is the whole difference." I know this is a strange association, but it reminded me of the final chapter of Kohelet in the Torah (or Ecclesiastes), where the author, after describing all of the ways he's pursued wisdom, boils everything down to an equally simple conclusion. I wonder if you consider *Mutzenbacher* a kind of wisdom literature?

Beckermann: What does *he* say?

Scope: "Here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments."

Beckermann: Oh. (*She rolls her eyes.*) In *Mutzenbacher* it comes down to that very simple sentence—"They pound us and we get pounded"—which of course is completely against identity politics. It's purely biological, straight, hetero, which is fun today with all this diversity talk.

Scope: It's fun for you?

Beckermann: Yeah, sure.

Scope: One of the men tells you that, as a young boy in boarding school, he would look around at night and wonder why no one else was masturbating. “Why was this only happening to me?” It’s revealing of how seldom we talk about our sexual experiences.

Beckermann: Right. It’s a taboo in a way, today. Sex is everywhere, and it’s a taboo at the same time. It’s very strange, because people talk a lot about abuse, about rape, about harassment, but not about the art of sex, the technique, or whatever. And if you read Foucault, that’s what he says: that in the East, in Asia, they have *ars erotica*, they have the *Kama Sutra*, and in the West we know about sex because people talk in a negative way, to the doctor or to the priest, always about the things you should not do or the dangers, like AIDS or the pandemic. Today, there are many taboos. At the time when *Mutzenbacher* was written you had Sigmund Freud, and people talked about sexuality probably more than today. [Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was published the year before *Mutzenbacher*.]

Scope: The film is, in part, about the language we use to describe or imagine sex. One man—Austrian film historian and curator Alexander Horwath—tells a great story about his first conscious memory of the word “fuck.” Boys and girls in the neighbourhood would pair up, go into a tent, and stay inside until they’d “fucked,” like a game of truth or dare. So he and a friend went in the tent and they both stared at the ground for ten minutes, and when he got home he told his mother he had “fucked.”

Beckermann: I like the way he tells that story. The tent is the black box. He says they went in the tent and nobody knew what the others had done. In the film and in the book, the forbidden is always there, and the forbidden makes it more exciting: “Beware, someone could come” or “Don’t tell it to anybody.” All this is what is in the black box. So the *hors-champ*, what happens out of frame, is part of the suspense. I’m not in the frame, so I’m also *hors-champ* in the film, which means in the fantasy of the spectator, they don’t know how this woman looks.

Scope: Is that why you waited until the end of the film to include a scene in which you are heard reading a passage from the book?

Beckermann: I think it’s only interesting in the end of the film, after you had so many men reading. And it changes the text when a woman reads it. It’s interesting to watch a man listening. Again, it’s a reversal of the situation—just like the couch, of course, is a reversal of the power situation that normally takes place when an actress is sitting on a casting couch.

Scope: Several interesting reversals occur in that scene. He only agrees to participate if he can read a woman’s part.

Beckermann: And how he reads it! At first he refuses, and then he’s really into it. This is a good end. Like the culmination, the orgasm!