

LIQUID ASSETS

Swiss 'avant-gazetteer' Ursula Biemann's installation about the Sahara sits alongside other recent work about the politics of water

By Sukhdev Sandhu

Circulation lies at the heart of Zurich-born Ursula Biemann's work. As well as moving herself between many fields and practices, operating as a curator, a social theorist, a film essayist, Biemann is both passionately and forensically interested in looking at the world through the lens of flow: the flow – at times obstructed, at other times supported by gunpower, technology and governmental heft – of oil, water, bodies. In *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-2009), an exploration of migration networks across Africa, she visits desert-truck terminals, uranium mines, iron-ore trains, octopus-processing plants. Elsewhere she drifts towards border ports, transit hubs, deportation prisons – transitional spaces and in-between geographies that are as politically pivotal as better-known metropolises. At all times, she is an avant-gazetteer, a poet of capitalist infrastructures, a mapmaker of all-too-overlooked contemporary worlds.

Last year's *Egyptian Chemistry*, which forms one strand of a three-part installation currently on display at Germany's Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, is a sustained investigation into the politics of water in a country that is increasingly short of it. A five-channel video piece, it looks at new schemes to transform desert into arable land, examines the impact of dam construction on the migration patterns of different kinds of fish (fat, lazy tilapia are apparently in the ascendant), follows scientists as they take water samples to be examined in laboratories. It's impossible to watch it without thinking of the Egyptian uprising of 2011, also known as the 'Revolution of the Thirsty' owing to the anger provoked by rising water rates and the World Bank-mandated privatisation of public water. Yet the traditional iconography of resistance is absent: there are no close-ups of placard-wielding protestors, no shots of silted riverbanks, no images of dry-faced housewives looking anguished.

This doesn't mean that Biemann has abandoned the political concerns that have always impelled her work; indeed, as if to underscore the ways in which political realities can rupture everything (even the normally rather hermetic world of artist-film production), one of the most unexpected episodes involves an interview with Cairo-based speculative-realism philosopher Graham Harman being interrupted by a bomb alert and the interviewee squirming in teargas-induced pain. However, it's clear that a filmmaker who once described her work as postcolonialist and who argued that the film essay was a form particularly well suited to the postcolonial project (because, for example, it linked questions of representation to those of victimisation and spectacle), is here searching for an augmented visual language.

Early shots depict the Toshka New Valley project as a compound of Ballardian hyper-realism, science-fiction lunar colony and eerie



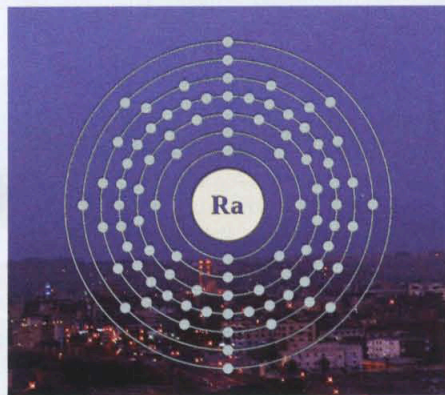
Global connections: 'Deep Weather', above, links Bangladesh and Alberta; below, 'Egyptian Chemistry'

example of what the title of Jennifer Baichwal's 2006 documentary about photographer Edward Burtynsky refers to as *Manufactured Landscapes*. Rather than activists or eco-campaigners, it's the voices of electrical engineers, atmospheric physicists and hydraulic researchers that are heard most loudly. Both in the elliptical text that appears on screen and in Biemann's ruminative voiceovers, metaphors of chemistry, science and the cosmos take precedence; the Nile itself is described as "a hybrid system that has always been at once organic, technological and social".

Egyptian Chemistry is a striking contribution

An Egyptian development project seems to combine Ballardian hyper-realism and science-fiction lunar colony

to the emerging body of moving-image work on the topic of hydro-poetics (others include Peter Bo Rappmund's *Psychohydrography*, The Otolith Group's *Hydra Decapita*, Allan Sekula and Noel Burch's *The Forgotten Space*), but equally important is how its quest for posthuman aesthetics aligns





the filmmaker with a broad range of visual artists who are beginning to investigate the implications of living in an 'anthropocene' era, a new historical phase marked by the impact of human activities on the earth's geology.

At the Kunstverein, Biemann is also showing *Deep Weather*, a new nine-minute film that connects the tar sands around Fort McMurray in Northern Alberta with the coastal areas of Bangladesh: the toxic clouds, acid winds and marine violence of the former will, over the next decades, contribute to the meteorological derangement that may well sink the latter – a link that Biemann, in an unusually dramatic move, narrates in a whisper as if she were a harrowed messenger from Greek tragedy, a bearer of bad tidings she hardly dares voice.

Each element of the installation not only works on its own terms but links with and broadens out the themes of the others. The show cements Biemann's standing as one of the most rigorous and rewardingly speculative documentarians of the present age. It also makes one wonder why she isn't better known. Could it be that the world of the film essay is, more than it would like to think, a men-only club? ☹

i 'Sahara Chronicle', 'Egyptian Chemistry' and 'Deep Water' are at the Neue Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin until 28 April