

URSULA BIEMANN

**MISSION
REPORTS**

ARTISTIC PRACTICE
IN THE FIELD

VIDEO WORKS

1998-2008



TRANSIT TO ALGERIA AND LIBYA.





This substantial monograph, on and around Ursula Biemann's practice, provides an opportunity to engage with more than a decade of her video work and writing. Through a range of essays by cultural theorists, as well as texts by the artist herself and generous visual documentation, this book surveys the numerous artistic and visual research projects Biemann has conducted throughout the contested transnational territories of the world. She has consistently developed a unique aesthetic language with which to explore her concerns with the concept of borders and the contemporary forms of migration that they produce. Her video essays offer a critique of the visual technologies being advanced for the control of global mobility, confounding the prevailing representations to reveal a more complex human geography of collateral effects and unrecorded movements on the ground.

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Retrospective Exhibition Ursula Biemann

Bildmuseet, Umeå, 25 November 2007 – 20 January 2008

Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 7 March 2009 – 17 May 2009

Publication

Edited by Ursula Biemann and Jan-Erik Lundström

Published by

Bildmuseet, Umeå University

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in collaboration with

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www.arnolfini.org.uk

Distributed by

Cornerhouse Publications

70 Oxford Road, Manchester M1 5NH, UK

Tel +44 (0) 161 200 1503 Fax +44 (0) 161 200 1504

www.cornerhouse.org/books

Translations German and French to English: Rafaël Newman

Editing and proofreading of texts by Ursula Biemann: 100% Proof, Glasgow

Editing of essays by the authors: Ursula Biemann, Jan-Erik Lundström

Proofreading of authors' essays: Brian Manning Delaney

Photo Credits: Bildmuseet, Mikael Lundgren (106/107);

Centro Alántico, Arte Moderno, Nacho Gonzáles (108)

Graphic Design: Ilia Vasella and Markus Bucher, Zurich

Printer: Messedruck, Leipzig GmbH

Edition: 1000

© Umeå 2008, Bildmuseet, Arnolfini, authors and artist.

ISBN 978 0 907738 91 6

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Acknowledgments

Bildmuseet at Umeå University is proud to publish this comprehensive consideration of Ursula Biemann's work, and I would like to personally thank the artist for the privilege of working with her on the survey exhibition as well as this publication. I am grateful to co-publisher Tom Trevor at Arnolfini, Bristol, with its Port City project, which has provided significant support for this publication. I am also thankful to Elizabeth Delin Hansen at Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, both for the support to the publication and for hosting the retrospective of Ursula's work next Spring. Finally, it gives me great pleasure to announce that, in October of this year, Ursula Biemann will receive her Honorary doctorate within the Humanities Faculty at Umeå University.

Jan-Erik Lundström
Director, Bildmuseet, Umeå University

I am grateful to Jan-Erik Lundström for offering me the opportunity to compile this material, although I suspect he wasn't quite aware what he was getting himself into. This book has turned out much more substantial in content and generous in size and appearance than either of us first imagined. The strong content- and project-orientation of my work has meant that it has mostly been seen as single contributions to thematic exhibitions rather than in its entirety. And so I very much appreciate Jan-Erik's initiative to bring all the video works together in one exhibition and thus to highlight the connections and differences between them.

I would like to thank the authors who, over the years, have found my work useful for making arguments in their own fields of research and who were willing to re-edit their essays for this context. I greatly value Angela Dimitrakaki's careful and insightful peer critique of my texts, which has brought them a lot closer to their current forms. I would also like to thank the editors at 100% proof in Glasgow for their remarkable support of my writing. Hearty thanks also go to Raphaël Newman for the translations and to the designers, Ilia Vasella and Markus Bucher, for bringing diverse material into such a handsome shape.

I hope this book reflects the collaborative efforts that have gone into developing it as well as the video and curatorial projects that it comprises. On this occasion, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Thomas Schmutz, Armin Linke, Angela Sanders, Charles Heller, Simin Farkhondez, Banu Onrat and Peter Cusack for being great travel companions on my field trips, and to my colleagues Angela Melitopoulos, Lisa Parks, Anselm Franke, Brian Holmes, Beshara Doumani, Gülsün Karamustafa, Catherine Queloz and Jörg Huber for their valuable cooperation on my book and video projects.

Ursula Biemann

FORWORD

Ursula Biemann is an artist with a mission. Over the past decade she has been engaged with numerous collaborative art and visual research projects in contested transnational territories of the world, uncovering the underlying power mechanisms that produce the idea of borders and thus the conditions of mobility. Her ‘way in’ to such contested political and cultural situations is to focus upon the systemic impact upon real lives, often conflated with the visual language of surveillance and control, so as to upset prevailing representations and thus reveal a more complex, normally unseen, human geography of collateral effects and unrecorded movements on the ground.

I first met Ursula Biemann in 2005 at the premiere of her multi-channel video installation, *Black Sea Files*, at Kunst-Werke, Berlin; a project that resulted from three years of research on the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian basin at a time when global interests in crude oil had turned the region into a corridor of devastation and conflict. Characteristically, she was already also working on an intensive research project in the sub-Saharan, *Agadez Chronicle*, focusing on migration flows into ‘Fortress Europe’ from Niger, via Libya and Morocco. This was to form part of her curated exhibition, *The Maghreb Connection*, at the Townhouse, Cairo, in December 2006. Subsequently Arnolfini commissioned her to extend this research so as to include routes of migration through Mauretania and the Western Sahara, via the Canary Islands, and the project grew to become *Sahara Chronicle*, presented as part of the group exhibition, *Port City: on mobility & exchange*, in Bristol, 2007. Later that year, Bildmuseet, in Umeå, exhibited the first retrospective of Biemann’s work, looking back at ten years of socially-engaged video art practice (partly funded by the European Union in relation to *Port City*), which became the basis for this joint publication.

A decade earlier, in 1998, Ursula Biemann took a video camera on a field trip to the Mexican border for the first time. The research trip resulted in the making of *Performing the Border*, a video essay on the role of gender in the globalized economy. The project marked the beginning of a period of prolific video art production. This monograph provides an opportunity to look back at these projects and to examine Biemann’s practice in depth, through a range of essays by cultural theorists, as well as project texts by the artist herself. This comprehensive survey of her work includes the initial group of four one-channel videos (*Performing the Border*, *Writing Desire*, *Remote Sensing* and *Europlex*), followed by a number of multi-channel video projects (*Contained Mobility*, *Black Sea Files* and *Sahara Chronicle*), and a current work in progress (*X-Mission*).

From the beginning, Biemann sought to develop a unique aesthetic language with which to explore her concern with the idea of borders and contemporary forms of migration. A focus common to all of her video essays is a critique of the visual technologies developed for the acceleration or control of global mobility. Geographic information systems and communications technologies constitute a massive and powerful visual machinery employed to monitor the circulation of people and goods around the globe. Through precise territorial observations and in-depth reflections, Biemann maps a counter-geography consisting of trans-local networks and connective spaces of clandestine activities, movements and economies: from global migration into the world sex industry to border circuits of Moroccan smugglers around the Spanish enclaves, from the use of the internet for mail-order brides in Southeast Asia, to the perpetual movements of a Belorussian biologist through the dysfunctional European asylum apparatus, to the parallel flows of migrants and crude oil in the Caspian geography, and the clandestine transportation network for sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb. In the process, Biemann has explored different modes and methods of artistic field research as well as engaging in collaborations with many individuals including NGOs, anthropologists, cultural theorists, architects and artists.

I would like to thank Jan-Erik Lundström and our partner organization in the publication of this monograph, Bildmuseet, along with the funders who have enabled it to happen. We are extremely grateful to all of the contributors to this book, Angela Dimitrakaki, Wendy Hesford, Jean-Pierre Rehm, Brian Holmes, Jörg Huber, Uta Staiger and TJ Demos, for their thoughtful and insightful essays. Above all I would like to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to Ursula Biemann for her commitment and energy in the production of this publication. It has been a privilege to work with her.

Tom Trevor
Director, Arnolfini

INTRODUCTION

Jan-Erik Lundström

Over the past decade, throughout a series of exhibitions¹ I have curated and in many lectures, texts and seminars – on issues as wide-ranging as critical documentary practices, political geographies in contemporary art and notions of political and aesthetic practices – I have repeatedly returned to Ursula Biemann's work. And, indeed, several of her video essays had already found their places in these projects. These recurrences sparked the initiative to organize a more extended and focused encounter with Biemann's work: a survey exhibition of Biemann's video essays and this publication as parallel explorations of, and engagements with, her work. As this text suggests, it is a characteristic of Biemann's work to resource, empower or advance various other practices or issues – be they curatorial, theoretical, political, issue-based, or methodological.

This publication about, and with, the artistic practice of Ursula Biemann is both trans- and extra-disciplinary. Defying the conventions for a publication negotiating the work of a particular artist, it is neither an exhibition catalogue, nor an anthology, nor a standard artist monograph, nor or catalogue raisonné. Indeed, there is no single term with which to define this publication's character. Structurally, it is constituted of two parts. Firstly, a section of essays written by the artist herself, with a general introduction to her practice and its development, framing each of her major video essays – from *Performing the Border* (1999) to *X-Mission* (2008) – and including extensive visual material. Secondly, a section of seven essays by as many contributors, writing on, and from, the artistic oeuvre of Biemann. As such, the book's content and its organization echoes Biemann's artistic practice to yield a totality larger and more complex than the sum of its parts, an aggregate that is both intricate and multi-dimensional in its internal relationships and its external referents.

A conspicuous property of this book is the rewarding set of exchanges and interactions into which the reader is inserted and allowed to participate. In parallel to the essays written by the artist herself, the other authors provide a multiplicity of dialogues. Written from different perspectives, these texts reflect upon and analyze the artist's working practices, reminding us of a reciprocity which in many ways existed *before*

¹ See for example *Politics of Place*, Umeå, 2002; *Next Door*, Barents Triennial, Kirkenes, 2005; *After the Fact*, Berlin Photography Festival, 2005, *Heterotopias: Society Must Be Defended*, 1st Thessaloniki Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2007.

this book, since most of the essays were not commissioned specifically but had already evolved out of their own necessities and contexts. They also remind us of the collusion inherent in Biemann's work and how engaging with it urges us to reflect on, or feed back to, other research themes. A text on Biemann's work seems to inevitably become also a consideration of one's own discipline, its practice, research, discursive strategies and central themes. In other words, just as Biemann's video essays, and her own discussions of them, are theoretical-practical interventions into discourses and disciplines beyond art – into political science, philosophy, gender studies, globalization theory, cultural geography, visual culture, cultural studies, critical theory, art criticism – so are the texts produced by the other contributors.

Biemann's vector of influence is equally forceful in terms of redefining and reshaping contemporary art and aesthetic practices – practically, methodologically, conceptually, theoretically and in terms of content. Without *posing* as video art, Biemann's video essays insert themselves into the institutions and practices of contemporary moving-image production and distribution and dedicate themselves to opening up new possibilities in the interfaces between film and video, between the cinema and the museum, and between real world politics and aesthetics, further reshuffling the porous borders that demarcate the categories of "documentary" and "art." Together, these paths of dialogue and exchange may be seen as ongoing transformative spirals, perhaps exemplary of the "extradisciplinary investigations" sought by Brian Holmes (addressing this later in this volume) which not only reform and rework disciplines, but also invent extra-disciplinary spaces and processes of meaning.

As such, the network of relations within these pages mirrors the larger meta-structure of Biemann's work, which is not necessarily made explicit in the book's material, but which is made tangible through the links and connections being made throughout. Embracing a decade's production, this book illuminates, examines and recontextualizes eight major video essays. Yet this is not (and is not intended to be) an exhaustive mapping of Biemann's practice(s) as it extends over this period. Several of the video essays were conceived as, or became, part of larger research projects – some of which were initiated and organized by Biemann, many of which involved other artists, researchers, theoreticians – where her work constitutes a part of a larger ensemble, referenced through other publications, exhibitions and reports. *Transcultural Geographies* is an example of a research project involving curatorial and extended art practices.² Several of the contributors to this volume have also collaborated with Biemann in other contexts, such as *The Maghreb Connection*,³ which was co-curated/edited by Biemann and Holmes.

This extensive body of work has furthermore permitted a number of theoretical explorations, such as a line of investigations devoted to the video essay,⁴ as developed by Biemann and other practitioners of her generation, as an emergent genre and mode of investigation and production. In fact, the video essay – which demarcates Biemann as both a pioneering practitioner and an early theoretician – may be ventured as the extended subject matter of this book. Simultaneously an epistemological-ontological practice and an aesthetic-cognitive modality, the video essay is, in the words of

2 The exhibition/publication *B-Zone* being one of its outcomes. See *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anselm Franke, (Berlin/Barcelona: Kunst-Werke/Actar, 2005).

3 *The Maghreb Connection – Movements of Life Across North Africa*, eds. Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, (Barcelona: Actar, 2006).

4 See, for example, the publication *Stuff it: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann, (Zürich/Wien: Edition Voldemeer/Springer, 2003).

Biemann, “a rigorous and varied approach to documenting real conditions in transitional social-economic areas, and a complex relation to representation that exceeds the protocols of traditional documentary conventions;[...] a variety of representational strategies[...]that joins different regimes of signs into an heterogeneous assemblage.” The suggestion here, then, is to consider this book – intimately linked as it is to Biemann’s practice – as an implicit inventory of the problematics of the contemporary video essay, proposing at least four key issues: the complex relationship between form and content, knowledge production and incompleteness, agency and the essayist’s subject position, and the questions of representation linked to victimization and spectacle.

From the perspective of late modernist aesthetic history, the video essay may be viewed as the development of a genre, or of methodologies, building upon the essay film or the cinematic essay. It identifies the expansion of a documentary mode into an associative, non-linear, multi-layered filmic enterprise, often blending “fact” and “fiction”, heralded by a generation of experimental filmmakers who pushed the edges of established genres (Biemann quotes Chris Marker as an inspiration; other names could include filmmakers as diverse as Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, Alexander Kluge, Jean Rouch, Agnes Varda, Peter Watkins and Trinh T. Minh-ha). The film essay does not present a resolved theme but is rather a meditation on ideas in conflict, frictions which in turn influence the final form and qualities of the work. In the words of Noël Burch,⁵ the film essay is a dedicated praxis grounded in the insight that “a subject can engender form and that to choose a subject is to make an aesthetic choice.”

The video essay is born of a generation accustomed to digital technologies, nesting within the more temporally- and spatially-layered visual culture brought on by digital media and the internet. Along with Biemann herself, moving image-makers such as Chantal Akerman, John Akomfrah, Harun Farocki, Isaac Julien, Anwar Kanwar, Angela Melitopoulos, Hito Steyerl, Zelimir Zilnic, to name but a few, have contributed to the furthering of these practices. They have done this not by having specific elements in common, but through an inventive and broadly transformative practice, aimed at critical research and reflection through film.

Clearly, Biemann’s conception of the video essay is not as a singular, post-Kantian autonomous form, separable from contingency, meaning and content. On the contrary, central to the video essayist project is a particular and powerful drive towards developing forms which attend to, or enable, content, further changing as they chart multiple materials (subject matter is not chosen but *produced* in the video essay). As such, aesthetic and sensual-cognitive properties may not be assigned to the video essay in isolation from its identity as an interventionist tool for generating knowledge within, and about, contemporary society. In particular, this applies to the global condition of the present, occasioned by late capitalism in the age of migration and globalization, intertwined real and virtual geographies, transitory living, impermanence and new/old hegemonies.

Angela Dimitrakaki’s text recognizes in Biemann’s video essays an interdisciplinary practice which cuts “...across key problematics of contemporary visual art.” This locates the video essay in an intermediary position between documentary and video art, and acknowledges a uniquely politically-aware contemporary practice unifying art, theory and activism. As such, Dimitrakaki regards Biemann’s work to be a revised

5 Noël Burch, *The Theory of Film Practice*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

instance of, and a re-engagement with, the materialist-feminist video essay, a modality tuned to “the concrete embodiment of abstract economic [or socio-political] relations.” In its attention to the gendered and class-bound subjects who move through today’s post-colonial and post-Fordist geo-political terrain, Dimirakaki understands Biemann’s approach as effecting a crucial and decisive shift from “patriarchy” to “global capitalism.”

Dimitrakaki emphasizes that hybridity and the presence of a varied register of signs, does not imply the postmodern free-floating signifier or the “open-endedness of text,” neither does it deliver the aesthetic as separate from the social. Meaning is available; the video essay is an “instrument[...]for making sense,” for inflecting “quantitative data with qualitative meaning,” knowledge is generated, even with contradictions, complexities, ambivalences and irresolutions. A key strategy in this is what Dimitrakaki terms the *non-autobiographical I*, the fictive, yet grounded, voice of the essayist, guiding and performing meaning throughout. This non-authoritarian voice also underscores Biemann’s intention to observe both coercions and resistances, to replace victimization with agency and to rethink representation in terms of *who is speaking what and for whom*. These are topics which reappear in various versions in most of the book’s contributions, forming the bulk of discussion in, for example, the texts of both Wendy Hesford and Jean-Pierre Rehm.

Brian Holmes argues for Biemann’s practice at the forefront of a third generation of institutional critique. Briefly summarizing the first two generations of artistic practices aimed at the art institution, which questioned its parameters, preferences and preconditions, Holmes offers a skeptical consideration of the consequences of these practices. Casting his net over a wide range of contemporary practices, Holmes proposes an alternative that is rooted in collective and/or networked projects, carrying out investigations on “terrains far away from art,” neither getting trapped in nor neglecting disciplines (or *discipline*), to become an experimental and extradisciplinary practice, with Biemann’s work cited as a key example.

Jörg Huber, in his turn, situates Biemann’s video essays as significant to a contemporary theory of culture. Writing from a Foucauldian perspective – what and how we are able to see is an effect of power relations – Huber emphasizes that the “organization of vision and knowledge” is central to “the organization of ways of living,” noting that this often occurs as “specific practices of spatialization.” Quoting Biemann/Holmes, Huber claims that physical geographies and the material landscape are “not just the backdrop for a plot,” but “iconographic ind[ices] of the mind,...cultural product[s] in which ideas and ideologies manifest themselves; and, as such, they have their own “symbolic presence.”⁶ Huber joins also in the advocacy of geographies as generated by social, cultural, political and economic processes, and of an aesthetic practice organized “as an ensemble of specific ways of generating knowledge,” or a precise “poly-perspectivism,” aimed at unraveling such processes, thus underlining the centrality of sensory input in such production of significance. However, Huber reiterates that the power of the video essay lies in “specific cases,” the ability to articulate specificity, rather than generalities.

The issue of resolve is also discussed since, for Huber, the video essay, in the modalities provided by Biemann, enables both legibility and illegibility – the world is impenetrable and all knowledge production is provisional. As such, Biemann’s practice is upheld as a workable and tested practice, aligned with a contemporary theory of culture, including the possibility of a new paradigm of criticism no longer dependent on,

6 *The Maghreb Connection*, *ibid.*

or determined by, any institution (or discipline), but only occasioned by its subject matter – an aesthetic-artistic practice as a theory-practice.

Jean-Pierre Rehm gives his first priority to the video essay's precise and explicit establishment of subject matter. These are projects with "entirely explicit narratives," a subject ready to be exposed, unfolded, repeated, illuminated. Rehm finds the video essay in dialogue with a history of the documentary genre and its critique. For him, this is exemplified by File 4 in Biemann's *Black Sea Files*, where the forced evacuation of a Kurdish community in Ankara is filmed as well as discussed, described and articulated as meta-criticism. Biemann's voice-over is cited: "What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go into the trenches?" The sensationalist image, prepared by media and thus easily consumed, is called into question. For Rehm, Biemann's treatment of this also signals the levels of reflection and meaning.

Primarily focussing on *Sahara Chronicle*, T. J. Demos performs a detailed description and reading of this video essay, which generally challenges "the representational conditions of clandestine migration." Demos brings out the way in which *Sahara Chronicle* allows agency to its subjects and avoids issuing victim positions. In the words of Mehdi Aliou (quoted by Demos): "How to rethink migration as freedom?" In fact, the stateless condition of bare life uncovered and narrated in both *Sahara Chronicle* and *Contained Mobility* (and, under different conditions, in *Performing the* and in *X-Mission*), is to live in "radical uncertainty and political ambivalence." But it is also about the opening to fundamental transformation, a possibility made visible by Biemann's work. As such, *Sahara Chronicle* is an affective, imaginary and symbolic cartography of the desert floor of the Sahara which outlines a "geography of resistance" where the migrants position themselves, claims Biemann, "as rebels against the sovereignty that otherwise excludes them."

Demos also emphasizes a discursive and constructivist (and post-structuralist) understanding of the video essay, linking documentary functions to imaginative scenarios, thus involving not only the representation but also the constitution or production of realities, "inspiring belief in the world of its own constructions." Demos points to a *Sahara Chronicle* sequence involving a desert storm as "visualizing reality's resistance to representation." The video essay's core method is signalled here again in the creation of forms which produce their subject matter.

With a focus on the discourses and rhetorics human and citizens' rights, Wendy S. Hesford addresses campaigns on anti-trafficking and the abuse of women. She asks "In what ways are the models of identity particular to anti-trafficking campaigns part of the pathology of domination?[...] Is it so that narratives of victimization re-victimize and in fact support repressive cultural and political agendas?" Using *kairos* as a situational and contingency-based concept with which to analyze identity practices and self- and world-constitutive discourses, Hesford juxtaposes a number projects and campaigns, with Biemann's video essays addressing female contexts/labor (in particular *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire*). Skeptical to what she terms neoabolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns, where "the identification of women solely as victims[...] ignores the complications of transnationality" and furthers repression, Hesford finds in Biemann's work a layered approach, where identity is understood as "embodied rhetorical action." According to Hesford, Biemann "generates a critical ambivalence in her critique of the victim/agent binary while offering important "testimonies of women victimized by the sex industry." Indeed, Biemann's work clarifies the very representational challenges present when engaging in human rights discourse.

Uta Staiger's contribution observes the complex presence of the border in Biemann's work. Discussing *Contained Mobility*, she characterizes the border as the site "where the tensions between sovereignty and post-national pressures, citizen and alien, universal rights and exclusive membership, become poignantly visible, Staiger proceeds to investigate contemporary interdisciplinary cultural practices which problematize Europe's external borders, working in conjunction with current political theory towards a new "transnational body politic." Invoking the video essay as a "form of critical intelligence," she suggests that Biemann is able to negotiate the gaps between sovereignty and exclusion, between citizenship and human rights, thus offering perspectives on how culture takes a stance on the political changes facing Europe.

Like *Demos*, Staiger offers a critical discussion of Agamben and the stateless person at Europe's borders, as questioning "the trinity of state, nation and territory," locked in "a paradoxical double bind: both outside of the law and at the same time captured by it." Biemann's video essays are visual arguments to this end, mapping border regimes and the movements of transnational subjects. As Staiger suggests, *Contained Mobility* condenses this "into a single metaphorical container,[...]the spatial materialization of the state of exception." Biemann herself has suggested that this is work towards "the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation."

These brief accounts bring out some of the multi-perspectival character of this publication and observe some of its multifarious dialogues – between texts and between authors, between texts and artwork(s), and between all of these factors and the linked theories, themes and disciplines. This book comprises the most current account of the medium and methodology of the video essay, "theory-building through visual means" (Biemann), the practice of which enables and empowers these dialogues and interconnections. As we have seen, the video essayist combines a variety of roles – artist, theorist, curator, critic, mediator, field worker, project manager – and, as such, maintains both a rich spectrum of authorial positions and manifold methods of presentation and distribution, challenging both the viewer, the critic and the researcher to rethink and restructure her/his position, conclusions, premises. Paraphrasing Biemann one last time offers both a conclusion and a beginning: The video essayist approach is not only about documenting reality but about recoding, representing, organizing and producing complexities.

GOING TO THE BORDER: AN ESSAYIST PROJECT

Ursula Biemann

This publication of my videos and writings from the past ten years chronicles two parallel processes: first, the process of discerning a geographical and political area of interest for my art practice and, second, the process of tracing out a research field at the juncture of different forms of knowledge production where this practice could be situated. My simultaneous engagement with the geopolitical and social transformations being induced by globalization, and the form in which these could be addressed in the expanded aesthetic field, are conceptually related. These two ongoing processes are connected and hinge, in my work, on the concept of the border.

By the late 1980s, discourse on art was already considerably “contaminated” by other theoretical currents – such as ethnography, cultural and media studies, post-colonial criticism and feminist theories – which did not only represent new content but also provided instruments for reformulating the domain of symbolic production. It had become evident that an art-immanent discourse would no longer be the sole frame of reference for an aesthetic practice which would now have to position itself in relation to other terrains of knowledge production. This important discursive expansion coincided with the vigorous onset of globalization processes and a turn, in the arts, towards content-oriented work, enabling precisely this connection of diverse strands of critical interpretation. It was a moment for calling the theoretical basis of my work into question as I sensed the necessity of developing an aesthetic practice that could respond to this complex and rather unique condition.

The initial purpose of my writing, particularly in connection with my video projects, was to elaborate on their socio-political content. I regarded such theoretical elaborations as a way of expanding on those issues I had not been able to address directly in the video pieces. But, very soon, I developed a need for writing about my work on a ‘meta’ level. Reflecting on my motivations and aesthetic strategies became particularly useful for the reception of my videos in the art context, since the prevailing art critical trends were somewhat unresponsive to my emerging concerns as an artist. This kind of self-reflexive writing has been generally helpful in situating my work within the intellectual and interpretative context in which I think it is best understood. Conversely, the condition of continuously being driven to writing on both these levels has no doubt had a strong impact on my essayist video making.

Performing the border is my first video essay. While it dates from 1999, I had been thinking about the US-Mexico border since I graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1986. It was my first self-assigned research project as an independent artist. The border was to be explored as a zone of north-south labor division established during the peak of the corporate wave of going multinational, a division which also happens to run along the line of gender difference.

My trip to the border town of Ciudad Juárez in 1988 was the coming of age of an artist who would henceforth be ready to go to any unappealing place in the world if her research focus required it. This trip prepared the ground for an investigative art practice involving extensive fieldwork, cooperation with grassroots organizations, assembly of library- and archive-based information and theoretical reading. Art became a medium through which to get to know the world – not in the sense of discovering the unknown but rather with a view to organizing a wealth of existing knowledge into a complex aesthetic product from which new meaning could emerge.

Much of my effort in those early years went into condensing the complexity of my source material into conceptual art works involving photography, text and wall graphics.¹ Yet, this reductive working method proved, on many levels, to be unsuitable for tackling such complex reflections. Social transformation processes and their theoretical articulations should not be reduced to icons. It is only when I started to experiment with video, ten years later, that I found a medium which would foster an adequate form for speaking about globalization. The layering of images and text, the temporal movement through video time, the narrative quality of image sequences and the sonic dimensions of voices, music, environmental sounds, come together in a sensual compression, but not in a reductive sense.

Video is predestined to work simultaneously on multiple levels of expression, leading to a certain fluidity when moving from one type of enunciation to another. As a consumer medium, video easily connects with circuits of distribution beyond the art world. Working with video did not hinder or reduce the scope of my project; on the contrary, it made me constantly think about the role of image-making in forming discourses about the world beyond the narrow confines of art.

In many respects, the border project encapsulates my ongoing interest in conducting territorial research on the geopolitics of human displacement from a gendered perspective. On the US-Mexico border, I witnessed the emergence of a gigantic transnational space effectively produced by female migration and labor. The scenario made apparent what is ultimately meant by the regime of globalization: capital-intensive operations in the north, labor-intensive operations in the south. The magnitude of exploitation is impressive. In the following years, camera in hand, I visited other pertinent sites: free trade zones, entertainment cities catering to military camps, resorts for sex tourists, more border areas, refugee reception camps, transit migration hubs. All of these places are trans-local in practice, many of them extraterritorial *de jure*.

Much of my research goes into representing this new relational space, and the biopolitical body that constitutes it, by complying with, resisting or reinventing the emerging conditions.² Video facilitates my experiments in assembling diverse discursive

1 My art practice between 1988 and 1999 is subject of the artist book *Been there and back to nowhere – gender in transnational spaces*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Berlin: b_books, 2000).

2 I am referring to Giorgio Agamben's reformulation of Michel Foucault's biopolitics in terms of the relationship between sovereignty and the body in which life itself is the subject of new political battles (*Homo Sacer*, Stanford University Press, 1998).

and visual languages, to tell the story of places that are alienated from local cultures but connected across continents, be it through corporate structures or improvised migratory systems, places of desire and violence, conceived by a vision of difference but ultimately performed by gender, mobility, and labor – relentless hard labor.

Video also allows me to integrate theoretical reflection, not towards a line of argumentation, but in a loose assemblage, alongside knowledge produced in interviews with local experts and personal interpretations of the material space. The video essay, the essayist form, is what eventually emerged from this cocktail. My video essays are explicitly subjective in their approach – so, for example, in my first four video essays only women speak – they are highly theoretical and move back and forth between various discursive levels of lived experience, researched information, personal associations and theoretical speculations. On many occasions, just when you thought you were seeing a straightforward document, you realize that the narration is not congruent with the image.

I am not in search of reality – a notion that has proven to be a fiction in and of itself – but I am interested in generating an artificial construct. Most of my video footage is used without its original sound – no Mexican music, no diesel traffic. The border zone is a synthetic area, and this has been made perceptible through the manipulation and layering of images and an electronic soundscape. Ultimately, these drastic means are used as critical tools with which to sever the image from its signified and to shift the mode from documentary transparency to critical reflection.

The video essay is the most suitable genre for an aesthetic project that involves a subjective position and the organization of an amazing diversity of knowledge. The subject need not to be presented as a coherent phenomenon explained via a linear narration. The authorial voice in the video essay has a different role – practicing a sort of dislocation by tying disparate places and concepts together in a trans-local fashion, as it were, not unlike transnationalism itself.³

It is hardly surprising that video essayist work consists mainly in the complex process of montage. In practical terms, this means that, for two weeks of research and recording in the field, I spend one year in the editing suite. This procedure explains why my research does not set out with a clearly defined thesis and a plan of action; it is most effective in an open process of knowledge production.

In the sequence of videos that followed *Performing the Border*, I developed different aesthetic strategies for mapping the condition of the emerging transnational subject. In their own way, each of these projects invests in specific forms of the domestication and mobilization of space and resources, and is informed by an awareness that mobility itself is one of the most powerful resources available today. Each of the video works represents a distinct structural configuration, calling for an equally distinct strategy of aesthetic analysis. The writing of the political matrix of a transnational corridor (*Black Sea Files*) clearly requires a different mode of visualization and intervention than the multidirectional network of the global trafficking of women (*Remote Sensing*), the economic circuits circumscribing a border checkpoint to the Spanish enclaves in Morocco (*Europlex*), the loose arrangement of traffic nodes in the Saharan migration system (*Sahara Chronicle*) or the interconnected enclaves of the Palestinian refugee camps dispersed throughout the Middle East (*X-Mission*).

3 For a more in depth discussion of the correlation between the essayist genre and transnationalism see Ursula Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video,” *Stuff It – The video essay in the digital age* (Zurich: Voldemeer/Springer, 2003), 83-91.

What these sites have in common is that they are thoroughly and profoundly gendered. By now, we are certainly aware that the majority of free trade zones, set up in countries from Jamaica to China, are mainly staffed by women, who are preferred, especially in technological manufacturing, over their male counterparts. Yet, in discussions of global labor, gender often seems to drop out of the equation. Unfortunately, if we dismiss gender as a determining factor, this gives us an incomplete, but also quite a distorted, picture. Gender is not a special interest area one can turn to once the overall logic of global capitalism is understood; rather, gender is a major constitutive force in forming the new global condition. That is why, in my video essays, I try not to reduce the female body to representations of Woman and her living conditions. Wherever possible, I record these mobile bodies in the process of doing other things: performing borders, activating networks, tracing geographies, constructing transnational principles.

Since the overwhelming majority of gender-related art and video production has placed the body and identity center stage, I should clarify here that my primary focus has always been on gendered systems of world migration and the movement of large numbers of women across the globe. My work investigates global structural concerns, not those of subjectivity formation. Although we see the existence of a significant body of academic literature on women and space, geography, migration, and globalization, this theoretical shift from identity to geography has not been counterbalanced by a significant shift in the domain of aesthetic production. This is a field of investigation in which a great deal of visual experimentation has yet to occur. The transformations to be examined reach beyond the concerns of the economy of female sexuality and productivity within a changed world order. They encompass a certain discursive shift in the way female dislocation and migration can be conceptualized and talked about today. The diasporic identity as a subject with a history – a concept developed in valuable intellectual and artistic work during the last decade – is not an appropriate description of this new subject. A theoretical platform that articulates gender, subject, mobility and space and a visual language which can represent a hyper-mobile, capitalized, gendered body – not only with a history but also with a geography – must be invented. Bodies with a travel schedule. Geographic bodies.



URSULA BIEMANN
VIDEO WORKS
1998-2008
CONCEPTUALIZING
ARTISTIC
FIELDWORK

MAKING THE TRANSNATIONAL INTELLIGIBLE: PERFORMING THE BORDER



The scene is set in a desert city on the border between the US and Mexico. Ciudad Juárez is located in the export-processing zone, hosting maquiladora assembly operations which run along the entire frontier. It is a transnational zone that has turned rural Mexican life into a high-tech slum for millions where workers live in improvised desert settlements without any infrastructure whatsoever. There are hundreds of US plants in this town, where young Mexican women solder the chips for our digital age. Global labor in the south is feminized, migratory and ghettoized, and thus streamlined for maximized productivity. Only bodies which allow themselves to be exchanged, commodified and recycled will be granted a visa for the transnational production site. At the border, everyone is processed into a transnational subject.

Having served as a laboratory for deregulation for decades now, the matrix of globalization is absolutely blatant in Juárez. The border town unashamedly exposes the conditions under which the technologies which facilitate a mobile, digital and obsessively visual society are produced. *Performing the Border* localizes this footloose, digital culture to a particular place and embodies it through the figure of the Mexican female cyborg, positively integrated in the technological assembly process, who returns to her shack without running water or electricity at night.

Sexual and industrial labor markets are closely related within this economic order, turning the border not only into a gendered but also a highly sexualized terrain. Low wages force many women to seek supplementary income from prostitution on weekends. Transnational companies reap lavish benefits by getting labor for small change and making women dependent on commodifying their bodies. By the same token, they determine women's lives both within and outside factory hours. Prostitution is not just part and parcel of the tax-free consumer binge that takes place at the border; it is a structural part of global capitalism whereby the female worker is literally addressed in her sexuality.

At the same time, the eroticized, gendered ethnic figure of the Mexican assembly worker becomes the articulator of the border, this fragile line marking the fringe of the national body, at which all the anxieties around national identity are concentrated. And that is where *Performing the Border* radically departs from the more traditional documentary format. This video essay makes a concerted effort to grasp the complex symbolic dimension of the border as difference – difference based on gender and ethnicity, but also on economic and cultural hierarchies between north and south. In the case of the assembly operator, the sex worker, the passer and the serial killer, the video examines the different modes through which both border and identity are produced, decomposed, and reconfigured.

Leading us right into the heart of the subject, the video opens with an accented female voice narrating the journey of a helicopter pilot as he monitors noc-

turnal topographies in the deep through infrared binoculars: "The border is always represented as a wound, that needs to be healed, that needs to be cleaned, that needs to be protected..." The border is always represented in the media as a war zone, as a place of delinquency, corruption, violence and illegality. But this is not how I wished to approach the matter. I was far more interested in visually describing the social practices and regulatory discourses through which the border is produced, and in studying the role of image-making in this process.¹

Crucially, the video examines how the discursive and material dimensions of the border's formation converge to constitute subjectivities as well as entire border geographies. Again, the voice in the off gives us a first hint: "You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have a discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border. It's a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border. It's just an imaginary line, a river or just a wall..."

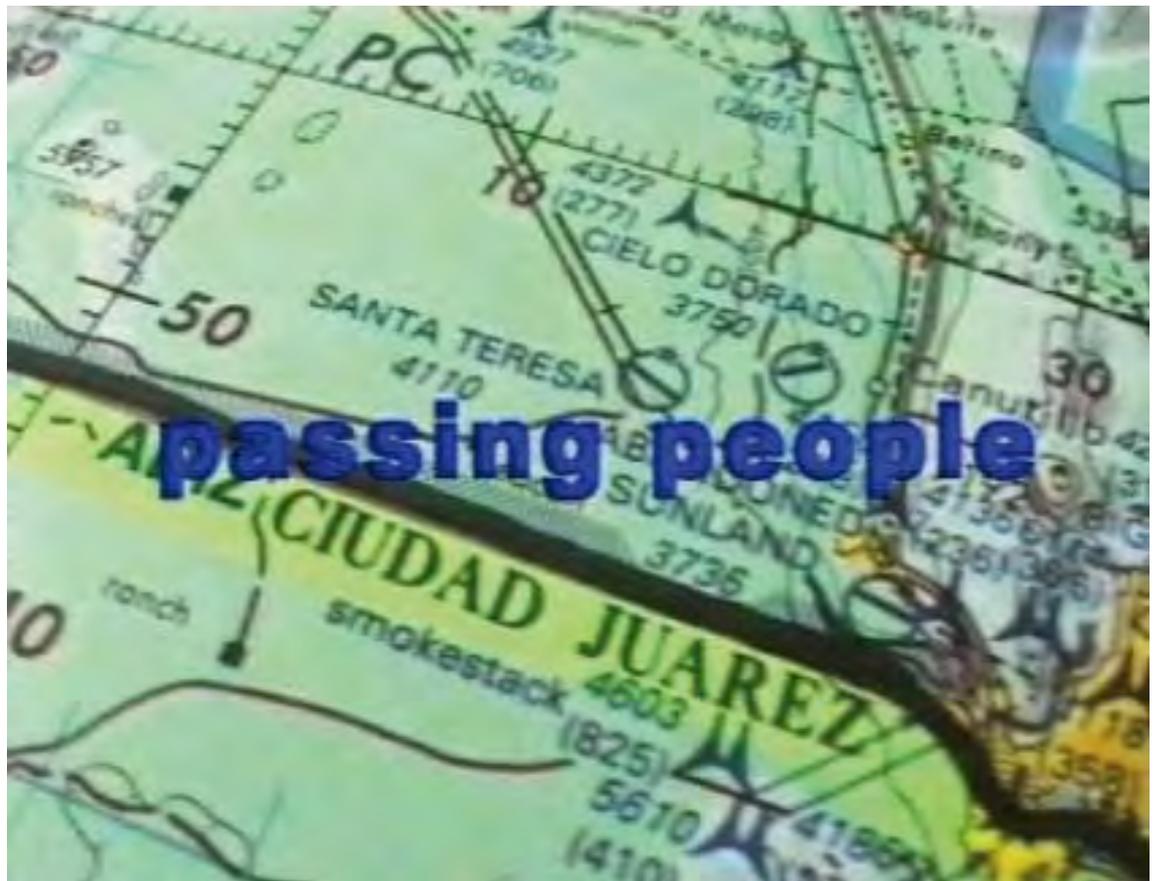
The voice belongs to Berta Jottar, a Mexican border artist and scholar of performance studies based in New York. Thanks to her perceptive contribution, the performative aspect of the borderlands came to play a central role in the video². The possibility of applying the concept of performativity to categories other than gender and identity opened up many new avenues. Where we had thought of borders as being stable political boundaries, performativity introduced the idea that their coherence and intelligibility are, in fact, culturally constructed through a reiterative practice.

This shifted the focus of the work from a fixation on the divisive forces of power onto a consideration of the multiple and diverse social practices of space. In this sense, the border needs to be constantly reenacted and reproduced to signify difference, much in the way that gender needs to be performed as difference. Recognizing this mechanism, and my personal part in it, was an embodied experience of the enormous potential inherent in symbolic production. Based on the understanding that the border is performed as much through the multiple and variable crossings as it is through the discursive and imaginative work done on it, I began to see the importance of image-making in the performative act through which material reality comes into being. I hope that *Performing the Border* communicates these theoretical and artistic insights, which reach beyond the documentary claim of representing social reality.

1 For an in-depth discussion of labor and gender politics on the border, see my research text "Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies and Technology" in *Been There and Back to Nowhere – Gender in transnational spaces*, ed. Ursula Biemann, (Berlin: b_books, 2000).

2 Berta Jottar refers to Judith Butler's analysis of gender and sexuality as culturally constructed and performative categories which need to be constantly reiterated through daily behavior (*Gender Trouble*, New York/London: Routledge, 1990).







In any case, visual representation is difficult in this arena. To begin with, transnational spaces profit from a special status in the juridical, and often moral, framework of the country. They are widely inaccessible; entry is restricted and under official, corporate or private control. The industrial parks are gated, borders are monitored, assembly plants are off-limits, clubs and bars are full of pimps and vigilant guards; this would involve image-making on prohibited terrain. Yet, refraining from making a film about assembly plants simply because they won't allow you on the factory floor with a camera cannot be the solution. Despite the strict image regime of corporations, we have to find ways of representing the situation – by finding information on the web, interviewing workers, copying and commenting on news material, grasping images in passing and constructing a complex whole.

Accepting that the continuous performance of difference materializes and reinforces borders like this one, how can we make these abstract relations visible? Where do they reveal themselves? The video examines the materializations of border-concepts in the post-urban architectural installations of the industrial zone, in the desert housing made of packaging materials recycled from the factories, in the burgeoning entertainment industry, and most obviously in the border fence and border patrol itself. Alongside these manifestations, the video also addresses more immaterial forms such as the regulation of work, reproduction and gender through the presence of the corporations, and the sexualization of the female worker in the public sphere. The transnational zone is, therefore, a place where the performativity of gender and border coincide. Moving back and forth between the discursive and material dimensions of the border, the video operates in a performative space and turns itself into practice.

While this video is an attempt to bring in supplementary, missing information, it does not claim to enter the real, or to be more truthful than corporate representations. It opens up another artificial space that is equally disconnected from the real on both the visual and the aural level. Slow motion, tinting, distortions and intense layering turn the images into discursive elements, rather than a straightforward depiction of (supposed) facts. But, perhaps more importantly, the original sound is deleted to a large extent, and replaced by an electronic sound carpet. The material space is thus technologized, dislocated, dematerialized and prepared for a different interpretation.

The reading I propose is not committed to documenting a slice of Mexican life. The voiceover argues and speculates, turning theoretical or poetic; the voice is always the same, but the text is patched together from many different sources. There is not, therefore, a consistent "I" from which the narrative voice speaks. There is no particular subject behind the narration, even though it is highly subjective. It speaks from a specific position, which could be de-

scribed as that of a white, feminist cultural producer who is in the process of moving from a Marxist position – focused mainly on labor relations – to a post-colonial, post-Fordist, post-humanist place, trying to figure out how to transpose old labor representations into a contemporary aesthetic and how to integrate a theoretical discourse that includes gender theories, technology critique, and performativity. With the benefit of ten years of hindsight, this might come across as a dated perspective since Marxism has long embraced gender and post-colonial criticism, but this was a first attempt at breaking down the ideological boundaries that defined the field of cultural production around these issues. Working through these tricky problems eventually helped me to define my own cultural position.

Amid this global expansion, definitions of what constitutes us as human subjects are claimed more urgently than ever. Yet, the drastic material manifestations at the US-Mexico border can easily blind us to the border's deeper metaphorical meaning and the fundamental differentiations in our self-understanding as subjects. Here, the divisions between the productive and the reproductive, between the machine and the organic body, between the natural and the collective body, between the sexual and the economic and between concepts of masculinity and femininity reveal themselves as artificial and unstable.

The border condition is a massive intervention in traditional identitary definitions. Most obvious, perhaps, is that women have moved from a largely reproductive role in traditional Mexican society to become the main productive labor force in the national maquila industry. Time, productivity and the body of the female worker are all strictly controlled by white male managers. Forced birth control and pregnancy tests are the order of the day and, needless to say, pregnancy means immediate dismissal. The reproductive function of these bodies becomes strictly controlled from the moment they are deemed to be productive. Another major identitary erosion lies in the fact that the female workers have been turned into cyborgs, merging the organic body with the machine environment. The workers' bodies are linked to the workbench through prostheses that protect them from excessive electromagnetic charges during the assembly process. It is not unusual on weekends to see women with a curled pink cable strapped to their wrist for fear of forgetting the device on Monday morning. In the women's self-perception, their physical integration with the technological is becoming a permanent fixture.

There is yet another, widely publicized and deeply disturbing, case that speaks of the collapse of identity on the border. I am referring to the serial killer who confuses his physical boundary with the national border. In addition to, and perhaps because of, the extraordinary circumstances produced by the largest industrial assembly complex in the country, Ciudad Juárez has become the site of the most horrific series of crimes committed in times of peace. Since 1995,







over 400 women have been murdered in Juárez according to a similar pattern: poor, slender women with long dark hair, mainly workers (rarely students) have been raped, tortured, stabbed or strangled and tossed into the desert. Some of them had only recently moved to the city and had neither a job nor an address, which meant that nobody came to claim their bodies; at the time of my visit, in summer 1998, fifty women were lying in the morgue, unidentified.

There is a violent clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology in the border zone, and it is my thesis that the serial killings are a particularly graphic expression of this clash. The last part of *Performing the Border* examines the possibility of reading the profile of the serial killer(s) in relation to the social, economic and political profile of the site. Rather than conducting an investigation that would contribute to resolving the case or shedding light on the racketeering behind it, I decided to make bold theoretical speculations about the crimes with the intention of advancing the metaphorical meaning and disturbing psycho-social dimension of the border. When it comes to the serial killings, it is theoretical speculation that becomes the primary mode of my artistic analysis. This is vague and risky terrain, that a journalist chronicler or documentary filmmaker would rather avoid, but I saw it as the only productive way of dealing with these crimes.

In a cultural analysis of serial killers, Mark Seltzer draws a number of intriguing parallels between this form of compulsive sexual violence and the mass technologies and modes of production characteristic of the machine culture in early modernity.³ Interestingly, he not only points out certain correlations between the serial modality of the crimes and the repetitive assembly process, but also relates the killer's boundary and identity problems to specific types of technologies. Notably, these are the technologies of identification, registration and simulation, which all happen to be very present in the Juárez production program.

What Seltzer suggests is that the pathological boundary problem goes much deeper. The killer is unable to recognize himself as being distinct from others and this lack of self-distinction is immediately translated into violence based on sexual difference – the one fundamental difference he does recognize. Within this logic, the gendered “other” is indistinguishable, exchangeable and reduced to a number in a body count. This morbid fact is conclusively confirmed in the case of Juárez, where exchangeability appears to be a determining factor in the murders, particularly in those cases where a woman was found dressed in the clothes that belonged to another missing woman. I never visited the local morgue, but the mental image of the fifty unidentified women came

to signify the deeper, and more disturbing, pathological condition caused by such decomposition and loss of identity.

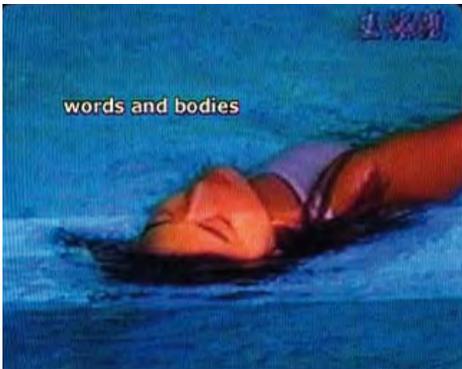
In conclusion, I should like to point to a final type of subjectivity that has emerged in this context, distinct from those of the serial killer, the auxiliary sex worker and the post-Fordist female robot cranking out chips around the clock. It is the character who best embodies the intelligent potential of a border existence: the subversive figure who benefits from the fissures and leaks in the surveillance technologies along the border fence and who knows the trails through the desert valleys. At night, Concha, the female passer, helps pregnant women across the border. She knows how to avoid snakebites and dehydration and charges little to safely bring women to a Texan hospital, to give birth on US soil and obtain American citizenship for their babies. Concha's clandestine trajectory is not a one-time crossing with the aim of becoming someone else on the other side. Rather, she is a subject perpetually in transit, moving through the transnational zone while finding ever-new strategies to get around the prevailing power structures.

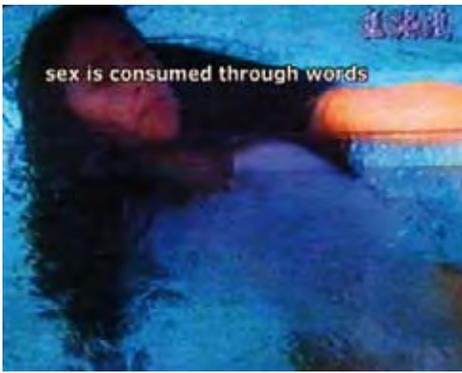
Many pregnant Mexican women in the border area wait until they begin labor and then cross into the US on a crossing card or with the help of a passer like Concha. In more recent years, a veritable industry has developed around these trans-border breeding practices, which involve travel agents specializing in “birth tours” and US clinics advertising their services in Mexico for delivering babies and obtaining birth certificates and passports for a set fee. Some women, however, don't make it to the hospital in time and give birth to a border baby in the middle of the desert.

Even though these nomadic subjectivities are modest in number and agency, it is important to articulate them. Such narratives of transgression stand in radical contradiction to the docile, knowable and manageable kinds of bodies usually appearing in images which advertise the corporate side of globalization. For this reason alone, it is worth highlighting the existence of the passer who emphatically reinserts a self-defined, strategic mode of reproduction by finding a way for women to give birth across the border. These semi-legal road narratives deserve our attention, for they represent the expression of vital, alternative desires emerging in a place where the competitive global market has imposed its imperatives.

3 Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers. Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York/London: Routledge, 1998). Even though Seltzer does not mention the unresolved *maquiladora* murders, the relevance of his analysis to the Juárez case is undeniable.

TURNING BODIES INTO CODES: WRITING DESIRE





While all of my videos elaborate the relations of gender, technology and transnational capitalism, *Writing Desire* (2000) is perhaps the most rigorous at placing the contradictions produced by the union of new technologies and global capitalism implacably side by side.¹ Whereas *Performing the Border* examines the outsourced production site of the hi-tech industry at the US-Mexico border as a gendered space, *Writing Desire* looks at cyberspace as a marketplace, a place for consumption and a site where female bodies and desires are written anew. Through a complex web of discourses, the video traces the different subjectivities produced through virtual communication in both the industrial world and in post-socialist and southeast Asian countries. “Desire,” pluralized into “desires,” is tied to, and expressive of, the economic power, cultural profile and geographic location of the digital writer. The internet has quickly capitalized on these differences and created an eroticized relational space, which is determined in both sexual and economic terms.

Writing Desire was made in the early years of the world wide web, when email was still a relatively new communication medium. The research and assembly of the video was in itself a learning process, aimed at a better understanding of the dynamics that were to constitute virtual space. The video is a fairly wild assemblage of short scenes which draw their content from sociological studies and new media analyses. This includes a video interview with an NGO expert on trafficking in Manila, data and visual material found on the internet (particularly Russian dating and mating services), an interview conducted with philosopher Rosi Braidotti on women’s writing and the disembodiment of sexuality, electronic correspondence with a digital artist in Mexico City and knowledge gained through personal experiments with digital media and through the experiences of befriended cultural producers who were willing to share these intimate data.

Beyond the simple but dramatic fact that the electronic medium has an immediate impact on one’s positionality *vis à vis* a global community, these early experiences revealed that, in compressed virtual space, the notion of the self undergoes further transformations that affect questions of boundaries, gender, and sexuality. Electronic communication has become a tool with which to build romantic relations on a textual basis with a speed and immediacy unknown to us before now. The isolation of the private writing space inspires fantasies that travel the wires freely in their coded, textualized and disembodied manner. The fantasies are “free” because they do not have to be implemented, and they reach a heightened intensity because they are released from any embodied experience. This state of suspended realities simulates a permanent condition of being in love and

1 Yvonne Volkart, “Gender matters to capital,” *make: the magazine of women’s art*, February 2001, 5-6.

creates the sense of always approaching but never reaching. A seductive female voice speaks these exact words in *Writing Desire* as we are drawn into mesmerizing video images taken on night flights over Asian metropolitan areas, looking down on a spiderweb of light streams produced by the steady flow of street traffic. The images immerse the viewer in nocturnal impressions of thresholds and liminalities, locations of transit like airports and highways, images in which we are constantly moving forward.

Writing Desire is my first attempt at exploring the possibilities of designing a compressed and multilayered type of space of the www in video format. Highly fragmented, the piece breaks the conventional linearity of video by simulating the interactive character of online activities in many forms. Graphics and writing, as well as selection processes on the screen, suggest a viewing situation more associated with the computer monitor than with televisual or cinematic viewing. At a fast pace, the video provides individual clips which deprive the viewer of the causal explanations expected in a documentary or linear manner. Meaning has to be extracted and combined by each individual viewer; knowledge is produced in a way that has been learned from computers and the internet. "I thought of making a video so I could speak with you" says a silent text on the screen, addressing the relationship between the online computer and video which represent and constitute us differently.

The use of seductive writing is experienced by many in the western world as playful and fun. The aim of correspondence is to maintain the virtuality of the relationship, as announced clearly in the words on the video screen "I don't want to enter your reality because it will cost what we have now", emphasizing that the purpose of the activity lies in the self-reflexive process of writing itself which would only be jeopardized by a physical follow-up. In contrast, many women in weaker economies use the internet as an opportunity to address a western man as a symbol of redemption, of getting out of poverty. For these women, the correspondence is a means to an end, the end being migration to the west. In their writing, discourses of romantic desire intertwine with a desire for survival.

Unsurprisingly, the internet capitalizes on this vulnerable set of motivations. The booming bridal market is evidence of how emotional and sexual relations are being commercialized within a larger power scheme based on economic imbalances. There is a wealth of websites advertising women available for correspondence, friendship or marriage. Some of the domain names refer to an imaginary space: *freespace.virgin*, *love.garden*, *tropic.paradise*; others make reference to the women on offer: *china.doll*, *tiger.lillies*, *latina.heartbeat*, *geisha.song*, while others qualify the type of relationship they offer: *classic.love*, *good.wife*, *first.love.matrimonial*. The sites include comprehensive picture databanks with demographic and anatomical information about the

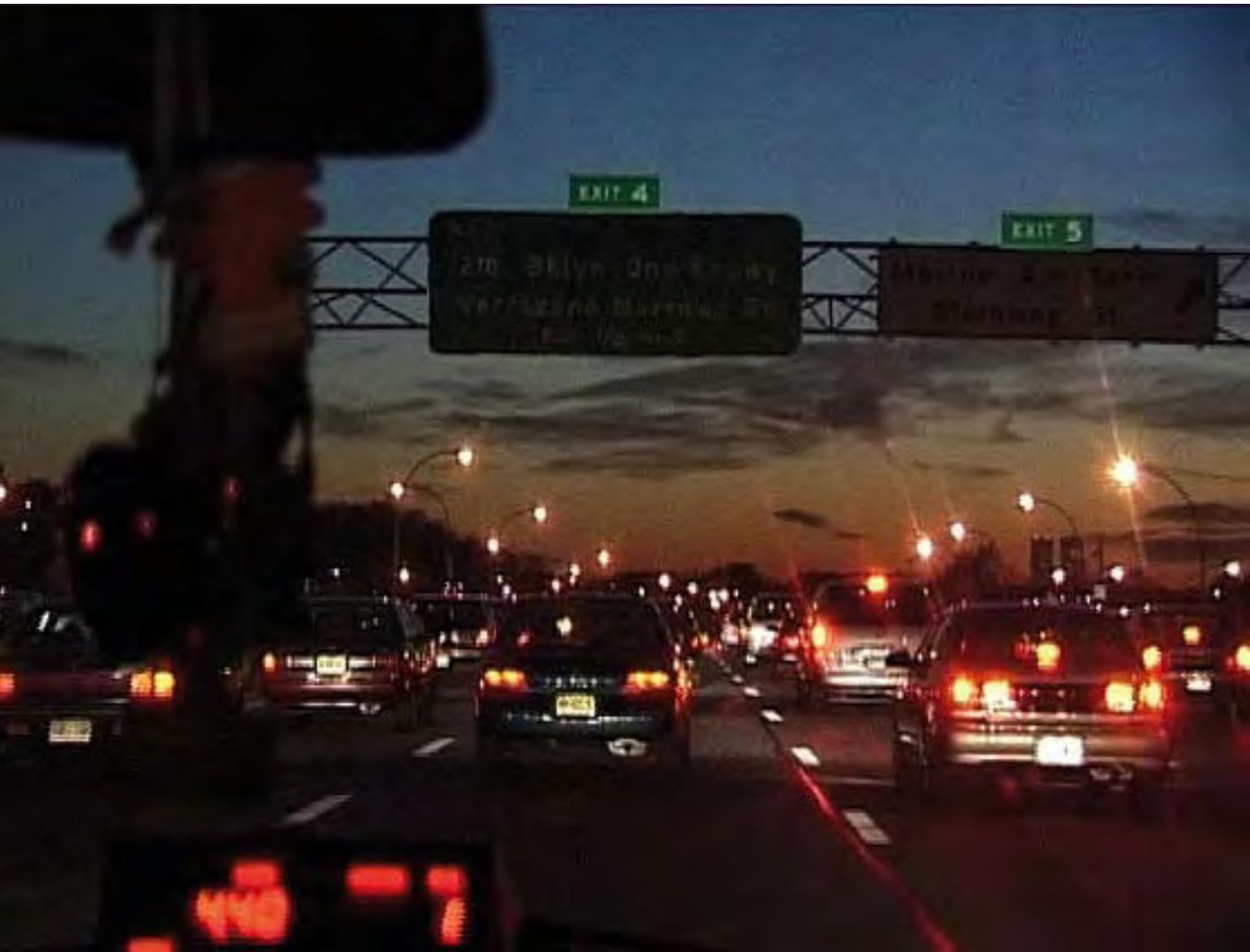
women. Some websites even feature short self-presentation videos in which women can voice their qualities and desires. Over the moving image of a blonde woman in an evening dress, *Writing Desire* summarizes the description of the Russian female, as advertised on one of these sites:

she is beautiful and feminine
she is loving and traditional
she is humble and devoted
she likes to listen to mellow music
the smile is her rhetorical gesture
she believes in a lasting marriage
and a happy home
she is the copy of the First World's past

These markets for virtual brides easily extend into physical transnational space by offering travel packages to the places of recruitment, with the male desire to consume, possess and colonize strangely intermingled on these web pages. One of the package deals offers regular round-trips from a US city to Siberian Novosibirsk for \$199 and extends to prospective grooms the privilege of being the judge in a beauty contest organized for their benefit. The mail-order-bride – a positively thriving market segment in the decade following globalization – draws on an historical narration of the racialized female body as an object of desire waiting to be conquered.

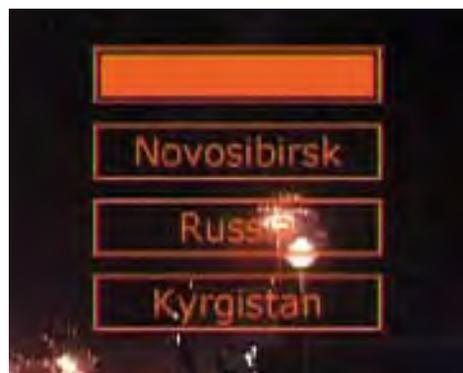
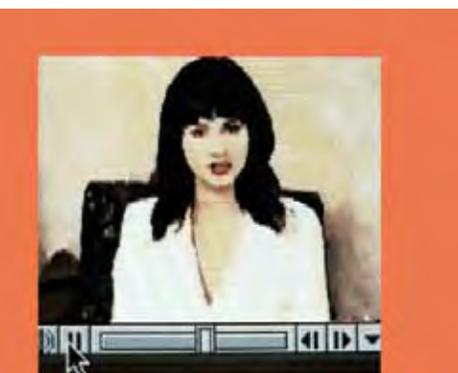
It is no coincidence that the female reservoirs of Thailand and the Philippine Islands are being tapped for women with the traditional qualities which are allegedly becoming more and more difficult to find in the industrialized world. We remember the thick marriage catalogs from the 1970s, channeling thousands of agreeable, smiling and soft-spoken women to a male community in the west. The routes for female migration along those lines into Europe, North America and Japan have never ceased; on the contrary, they have accelerated tremendously in recent years through use of the internet. Women no longer have to travel to the west in the hope of finding a husband within the three months of their tourist visa. Migration is made easier with the use of email, enabling them to build up a relationship that will hopefully lead to an engagement and consequent invitation to the west.

In the late 1990s, women from East Germany and the former Soviet Union made their appearance in cyberspace. *getmarriednow.com* – a very selective "business class" type of site which offers Russian models with university degrees – announced the forthcoming videos of 2000 women from Siberia, Russia, and Ukraine. In the subsequent digital representations of Russian and Filipino women, their bodies are reduced to a flat minimum of visual and textual information, with the web cast technologizing the bodies even further. The slave of the colonial era is transformed into a post-Fordist robot. But, then again, through the new possibilities of web casting, women are also able to voice their desires through video clips and, by doing so,





Hello
I'm Natascha



resist their total co-option. As subjects *with* desires they can no longer be reduced to mere objects of desire. In the short presentation videos, the female applicants can voice their personal qualities and wishes; however, the wish part is often pushed to the end and may be cut off by the agency to fit the prescribed length of the clips. In their standardized self-presentations – reduced to a pixellated, low resolution web image – the women begin to resemble animated cartoon characters; their desires become utterly interchangeable.

The human market on the net is thriving; resources are almost inexhaustible. Yet, behind some of the legitimate pen pal clubs are syndicated operations which market women in great numbers to a global community. By means of an international network of agents, passers and club owners, they recruit trusting young women from southeast Asia, advance the costs of their travel tickets and then force them to provide sexual services abroad until the debt is repaid. But, even in less coercive rapports, there is an economic imbalance that determines power relations between male and female correspondents, particularly when these are so firmly embedded in a long history of eroticized discourse. They replay the loops that tie together fantasies about the “other,” the conveniences and seductions of travel, the economics of global trade, and the brutal mobility fantasies that dominate gender politics in many parts of Asia and the world at large.

No matter how harsh the economic relations into which one inscribes oneself, there is always some degree of agency inherent in writing. *Writing Desire* is, first and foremost, an attempt to unite various positions of authorship without suggesting a binary contrast between those female subjects in advanced western societies – who practice a self-reflective, psychoanalytical, postmodern discourse of desire and sexuality motivated by fun – and those female subjects who struggle for survival and offer their emotional and sexual services to get out of the slums. Instead, the video investigates a wider range of writing positions, including the analytical voice of Braidotti who associates the disembodiment of sexuality due to virtual relations to the trend towards more ephemeral, adolescent body ideals in society, and the voice of the activist, Soki, from the International Migration Organisation in Metro Manila who specializes in monitoring regional trafficking operations in southeast Asia.

There is yet another position that is of crucial importance in this schema and that is the one represented in the video by virtual artist Maris Bustamante, based in Mexico City. Bustamante – who describes herself as a fifty year old feminist, mother, widow, university professor and radical of her own will – tells the story of how she sets out to find an American husband via the internet. The reason for searching the net is her thorough frustration with the meager partner options in the macho Mexican context. Her desire is to enter into a more emancipated relationship, and she

ends up meeting a lieutenant of the US Marine Corps on the net. In escaping the local machismo, Bustamante opts for a representative of the most macho enterprise on this planet... and marries him. One suspects that, had she met him at a cocktail party, he probably would not have stood a chance of speaking with her. What makes this incredible match possible is the fact that, in cyberspace, individuals are ripped out of their context, whereby the material signs of particular political, ideological and class-related values are suppressed. To achieve total mobility, the body has to be severed from local and social ties.

The increasing deterritorialization induced by electronic media and migration opens ample room for flexible self-designed identity. In *Writing Desire*, the subject and object of writing are not permanent, fixed positions – occasionally they swap. In an intimate late night scene, a woman dressed in lingerie sits at her laptop as a typographic dialog appears on the screen: “Say, have I turned into a permanent little icon on your screen? ... When you gave me a body image I was debating for a moment whether I should acknowledge it openly or download it into the subliminal text. – And? – Well, I decided to address it because it seems a way of finding a language for questions of desire and sublimation.” This time, the self-reflexive message is formulated by the author herself addressing the video viewer not as a consumer, but as her object of desire.

The intention of this video is to provide a better understanding of how virtual space constructs different subjectivities and how they relate to one another. If we compare the motivations, selection criteria and forms of enunciation in a low-income Filipino girl, a Mexican artist and a Swiss intellectual, it turns out that different desires author different scripts. But, seen in the larger scope of global capitalism, there may be a case that, for all their diversity, desires end up authoring pretty much the same script and, as argued by Angela Dimitrakaki in this book, that script is about the will to migrate to the true object of desire, which is not, of course, the man, or even the relationship, but the fetishized western economy.

REORGANIZING WOMEN ON A GLOBAL SCALE: REMOTE SENSING







ROUTE> PASSENGER 21923996/MS 03SEP00
DEPARTURE FROM MOSKWA
11.00AM MAIN STATION
TULA / ORJOL / KURSK / CHARKOW /
SAPROSHJE / SHDANOW
ARRIVAL IN SEWASTOPOL/KRIM
04SEP00 11.40PM
OVERNIGHT HOTEL ODESSA



Remote Sensing (2001) is a theoretical video essay on a particular kind of gender-specific mobility that has blossomed since the onset of the post-socialist era – the global sex trade. The research for this project took me to some of the hot spots of the global sex industry which have grown up around the Mekong region, along the border of the Czech Republic and around the former US Marine base in the Philippines. Coming back with video material from these diverse locations, I realized that representing a worldwide network with diverse sites and conditions would be more difficult than representing a single site.

Human trafficking – of which the global sex trade is a primary example – is a worldwide phenomenon occurring at many sites at the same time. Women are moving, or are being moved, in multiple directions according to specific patterns.

The aim of my exploration – which inevitably involves videographic activity – was twofold: firstly, a focus on the tangible sites at which trading took place and, secondly, a focus on movements, trails and routes as well as on the itinerant bodies themselves. In many places, where prostitution is outlawed and trafficking is a criminal operation, the women who are drawn into it are captive or clandestine. At these sites, aesthetic production posed considerable challenges as I needed to find ways to render this particular web of worldwide migration visible. At times, the navigation of female bodies had to be traced through the more or less visible, more or less illegal, more or less digital, terrain of the global sex trade. For these reasons, some of the places I visualize in the video are, in fact, imaginary ones.

Intermingling fictional and factual locations significantly challenges the “documentary” aspect of my work. But, beyond a simple critique of documentary realism, this implies that such global phenomena require new conceptual means to help us grasp their immense totality. My visual research encompasses a strong intuitive component, which enables me to give form to relations that I know account for a significant part of reality, which I can sense but not necessarily document. Solidifying these relations into images is a first step in making them tangible.

In this context, realism is understood as something that needs to be produced as opposed to considering something that is always already there. By and large, I have a complicated relationship to realism, if by realism we mean the relationship between the audiovisual text and the social world. Of course, video-making involves the relentless endeavor of establishing this very connection between the text and its referent; but, when it comes to the complex processes we choose to sum up under the notion of globalization, we face a new range of problems. Firstly, these processes take place at a high level of abstraction; the further they are removed from material realities and physical embodiments, the harder it becomes to visually represent them. Processes such as electronic communication, the flow of finance capital and increased deregulation escape direct representability,

which means that realism is increasingly incapable of making relevant statements about our reality. Images of slum women do no more than document the capillaries of a fantastically complex organism. Another reason is that consumer cameras and electronic communication media have democratized representation through the circulation of an unimaginable flood of self-authored images which makes one of the major realist projects – namely that of extending media representation to excluded or marginalized subjects – mostly redundant. The project can no longer be to simply give voice to the unheard.

One way to begin eliciting what the aesthetic project could be is to get an understanding of how images are currently used to facilitate the worldwide mobility of women and what these images effect in reality. While some women enter the sex industry through recruiting agents, many become mobilized by taking the initiative themselves, posting their picture on the web with a view to activating the interest of someone far away. By doing this, they demonstrate an active and highly directed use of digital space, by channeling their desire for mobility along profitable routes, while understanding its limitations.

Indeed, since network navigation transcends the political understanding of boundaries, traveling can take many forms. What starts for many women as a virtual involvement can quickly lead to the purchase of a long distance train, or plane, ticket or to the clandestine delivery of the outrageous sum for an illegal border crossing. This demonstrates a mind-boggling shift in scale from intimate romantic writing to global migration along serialized transnational paths. The great ease of moving between spatial dimensions makes it important to get to the bottom of the problems and possibilities of technology for contemporary gender and sexuality. On the one hand, the internet has enabled an enormous global trade in women through the bridal market; on the other hand, it has allowed for women's experimentation with new identities and desires.

Remote Sensing, the title of the video essay, refers to the visualizing technologies and other geographic information systems (GIS) that have been developed to scan, represent and interpret terrestrial topography in the most accurate fashion. Scanning, X-ray and remote sensing – to name but a few of the optical technologies that are used in geography to track and monitor migration movements – are constantly producing a new visuality that facilitates certain notions of globality and governability where the flow of people and resources, indeed the entire planet, appears ever more controllable. We could think of these technologies as being the leading mainstream method of “reading” the Earth and ascribing meaning to its geographies. The entire video essay is an effort to write counter-geographies into these remote digital and scientific planetary scripts.

Satellite images are so abstract that meaning has to be produced through interpretation. Gender is one of the categories that notoriously fall through the



scientific evaluation rosters, as these technologies conceal the gendered meaning of the data they produce. As gender is not likely to be a research target for space scientists, my video gently perverts the scientific fantasy of omniscient control by generating images of female bodies being sensed, recorded and rerouted. My intention was to infuse the technological images with human specificities, with subjective interpretations and personal ambiguities, to introduce illicit economies and other circuits of survival that people have developed in the cracks of the global economy. *Remote Sensing* enters all these interesting spaces, which hold great potential for subversion.

Remotely sensed images no longer present a map of a static moment in time, but rather convey a dynamic geography of moving and changing surfaces over which a steady flow of people, signals and data can be recorded. Satellite images represent a traversable space; they are not limited to simply recording the movement of people. Satellite images are also implicated in actively producing a perspective from which it has become thinkable to reorganize women on a global scale. It is from the orbital perspective offered by these images that we can fully appreciate the gigantic dimensions of today's transnational and highly sexualized mobility.¹

This is not to say that these bodies are only passively traced by GIS; on the contrary, they are involved in an active geographical process. In the course of the global dislocation of women and the sexualization of their labor, a new geography is being mapped out through recruitment from minority populations and slum communities, transportation along trafficking routes and itineraries adopted to cross borders, abroad and off-shore, to labor in the global sex industry, where they build overseas economies and alternative circuits of survival at the margins of a pan-capitalist reality.

Remote Sensing examines the economic and sexual nature of a global technological geography as trailed by women. In developing these ideas, it was helpful to draw on Saskia Sassen's study conceptualizing trafficking-related cross-border circuits as "counter-geographies of globalization." She understands them as being deeply implicated in some of the major dynamics constitutive of globalization: the formation of global markets, the intensifying of transnational and trans-local networks and the development of communication technologies that easily escape conventional surveillance practices.²

I want to zoom in on a particular place now to illuminate how these dynamics inscribe themselves

into a historically-determined visual regime. Since the Rest and Recreation Areas of US military bases from the Vietnam and Korea Wars were replaced by tourist infrastructures, Thailand and the Philippines have been epicenters of sex tourism. In the early 1980s, the Thai government launched a successful worldwide advertising campaign intended to attract a male clientele. Ads for tourist resorts depict Thai women in shiny silk dresses, adorned with flowers, softly smiling, conveying elegance, enchantment, seduction, eroticism – a 'natural resource' of Thailand. In addition to the implied ethnocentric discourse which articulates 'woman' in ethnic and sexual terms, these images also place her in the fantasy narrative of colonial conquest. A specific visual rapport is set up between a desirer and a desirable geography. In an overseas tourism that is sexually motivated, these relations are powerfully enforced through the male gaze of desire which can evaluate, compare, book and purchase. This gaze operates as a remote sensor of the male imaginary onto a sexualized and racialized geography – a situated, gendered gaze with buying power.

Behind the front images of sex tourism, there lies the unglamorous world of trafficking. Surrounded by poorer countries under socialist or dictatorial regimes, the Thai sex industry flourished and developed Fordist dimensions. The demand for prostitutes remained consistent, even after many of the more qualified women moved abroad. Since 1991, post-socialist countries like Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia have provided an influx of new sex workers so that the majority of women on the sex beaches in Pattaya and Pukhet or in the Bangkok red light district, Patpong, are no longer Thai. At the lower echelon of the Thai sex industry are girls from the poorest neighboring areas – often minors from the hill tribe states in Burma – smuggled across the border into closed brothels where they are lined up in aquarium-style glass containers for the working class customers.

I am not suggesting that we replace the seductive representations of femininity, which convey a natural joy in serving and satisfying, with grim images of incarceration and enslavement. Both representations of female sexuality – seduction and forced prostitution – are polar extremities operating within the parameters of a masculine symbolic. Instead I want to expand the discursive space of femininity and sexuality in a global context by mapping out the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, positions taken up by women in the sex trade.

Rather than using representations of captivity, immobility or deportation, my video sketches out an alternative territoriality, opting for images of women actively traversing geographies, sleeping in buses and dashing by on motorbikes. I also designed images of a virtual, digital space – images that could not be captured with my little Sony camera but which had to be invented: X-ray portraits of young women moving through deep blue landscapes, passing socialist housing projects in Bulgaria, crossing the Bosphorus

1 This video has benefited from an extensive correspondence with Lisa Parks while she was working on her publication *Cultures in Orbit, Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

2 "Countergeographies of Globalization: The Feminization of Survival" by Saskia Sassen. In: *Feminist post-development thought: rethinking modernity, postcolonialism and representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders. (London: Zed Books, 2002), 89-104.

or driving through slum neighborhoods in Mexico. The electronic travel schedules running down over the image trace travel routes across the globe, from Lagos to Munich, from Moscow to Tel Aviv, from San Salvador to California and from Chiang Mai to Paris. The detailed routings – the meticulous tracking of bus rides from town to town, the timing of border crossings, visa numbers, and ship schedules – all these obsessively collected data seem to come closer to documentary reality than anything else in the video. Such images speak about migration in the age of digital imaging. Whether the female passengers are touring for their personal pleasure, growth and enrichment, whether they have been routed along a standardized, serialized migratory path or whether they are being trafficked by a criminal organization into a life in clandestinity, the repetitive sequences of these digital journeys convey the intensity and multi-directionality of gendered traffic.

In *Remote Sensing*, the screen is often split into autonomous parts, deflecting the central perspective of a single frame into multiple perspectives and simultaneous topographies. Take Caroline – originally from a slum neighborhood in Manila and now working at the Bunny Club in Hong Kong – who confesses, in a slightly roundabout way, how exhausted she gets from “entertaining” her customers after she finishes long hours of dancing on stage. The video image is a montage of her close-up portrait on a satellite image which looks down on slowly-rotating Pacific islands, next to a video clip of the pulsing traffic in an Asian city at sunset and overlaid with Chinese characters for the word “Observatory.” The surface is congested with signs competing for attention. As Caroline speaks, textual data on Hong Kong’s sunset, moonrise, twilight and tidal changes scroll up, suggesting the entanglement of the hardships of a sex worker with factual scientific information. Here, the potential romanticism of the sunset or moonrise over Hong Kong Bay is overwritten by astrophysical data and the survival narrative of a slum girl. Messy life enters the clean computable digital image from all sides. By the same token, I am using these very images to enhance the representation of female migration and to bring it into this age of visual language.

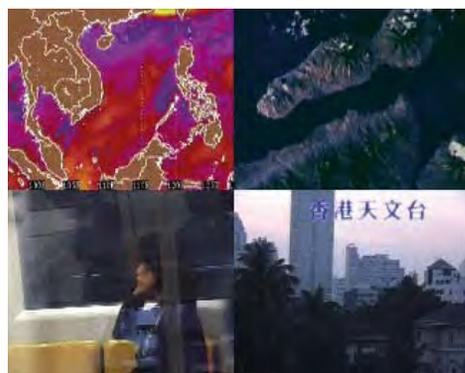
Contextualizing the mobility of women within a discourse of space technology and the most sophisticated optical industry naturally associates women with progress. Moving female bodies have increasingly become vehicles for economic growth in their home countries throughout southeast Asia and parts of Latin America, with national economies heavily dependant on the remittances of female domestic and sex workers abroad. This small detail is too often forgotten in discussions about migration for the purposes of marriage and sex work. The flow of capital in one direction is intrinsically linked to the motion of people in the other. What needs to come into focus in the imaging of migration, and particularly female migration, is the convergence between people and investments in globalizing technologies. Ultimately,

the association of migrant women with the high-tech images of mobility – as conceptualized by satellite images – signifies their trajectories more adequately than time-worn images of victimhood. The paradoxical predicament of these women shows that, although they are capitalized on, they still manage to produce innovative geographies of survival, ranging from negotiating their own terms with clientele to setting up international business networks and smuggling circuits and creating communities of solidarity.

There is also an intercultural dimension which we have to keep in mind when discussing global sex work. Sex tourism is founded on a complex emotional and sexual economy that is culturally determined and has a long history; it cannot be addressed simply in terms of exploitation. While the western concept of prostitution is that you strike a deal and go straight to business, in the southeast Asian setting of sex tourism, prostitution can be open-ended and comprise large fuzzy areas in between transactions. The woman tries to establish a rapport first, knowing that the customer might stay with her for weeks. Accompanying a client for days at a time without a clear job description softens the business side of the deal and abolishes the distinction between work and private life. Her motivation is money, but she may stage friendly concern which is often mistaken for love and affection. He becomes jealous and possessive while she is amused and surprised because, to her, it is business as usual. This tricky entanglement between the economies of female sexuality easily confuses the newcomer and throws his cognitive map into chaos.

Bandana, an NGO woman working in Bangkok, identifies a particularly interesting gray zone between the notion of “being forced” into prostitution – which is the narrow definition of trafficking – and “opting” for prostitution for lack of a better opportunity. From a human rights point of view and for political lobby work towards legislative changes, a distinction might have to be made between “free will” and being tricked into sex work against one’s will. For a cultural producer, however, it does not seem particularly useful to establish such an artificial distinction for moral reasons or for any other purpose. The cultural pressures, social obligations and economic necessities that drive women into sex work are ultimately no less imperative than the pull of organized trafficking. Far more interesting is the space of negotiation that opens up “in between,” for it is here that the complexity of life is located. What I have tried to show is how these gray zones materialize into particular space-times that are certainly presented as alternative to, but not outside, an economic logic. This is not the imaginary, romantic alternative of choosing an existence that is removed from, or external to, the perils of late capitalism, but rather the very ambivalent and conflict-ridden alternative of creating semi-legal circuits of survival in the cracks of a capitalist reality.





YUNNAN / BURMA /
AKHA HIGHLAND
LUANG NAMTHA
UPPER MEKONG REGION
304990100
02089009100
TRAFFICKING ROUTE
36499097800
1222128720
NO DEGREES
1222128720
3208995000000032 TK
RESTRICTED ACCESS
45668930948000120001
59940993
LUK MOO NETWORK
778456689309480





LOGGING THE BORDER: EUROPLEX



Capsized boats and clandestine immigrants washing up on European shores: these are the dramatic images by which the southern European border gets into the news again and again. The media seem to suggest that these images communicate the essence of the border in its most compressed and climactic form, and yet there is no defining image that can narrate the endless story of inclusion and exclusion. There is no single, violent icon to which the event of crossing can reasonably be reduced, only a plurality of passages, with diverse motivations, embodiments and articulations. Shifting the focus from simple acts of trespass onto the diffuse, and semi-legal, economic transactions that stimulate multiple movements within the borderlands aims to bring us closer to an understanding of the site.

Europlex (2003) is a video essay I made with visual anthropologist, Angela Sanders, on the Ibero-Moroccan border. Anthropological in its approach, this project primarily involves a precise process of observation. The border, as considered here, is far from being a linear formation; it encompasses the Strait of Gibraltar, with all its transverse shipping traffic, the two Spanish enclaves on the Moroccan side and the plastic-covered vegetable plantations of Andalusia, which are powered by an African labor force. *Europlex* is a geographic project in the sense that it engages in a process of visualizing spatial relations. When geography is understood as a spatialization of the dynamic social and economic relationships connecting local systems to the transnational, it becomes clear why border geographies are the site of extreme compression at all levels. *Europlex* examines the terrain through various forms of mobility generated by the differential economies of Europe and Africa.

The Strait of Gibraltar is a veritable bottleneck for the flows of people between two continents, which become particularly visible along the terrestrial border surrounding the Spanish enclaves. This area is given its cultural meaning predominantly by being traversed: by container ships en route from West Africa to the Mediterranean, by boats transporting migrants on their perilous nocturnal journeys, by helicopter patrols keeping watch, by radio waves and radar lines, by itinerant plantation workers who pick vegetables for the EU market, by commuting housemaids going to work for the señoras in Andalusia, by border-guard patrols along the mountain paths, by buses transporting Moroccan women to Tangier where they peel Dutch shrimps to be shipped back to Holland, by pirates who procure goods from China and by women smugglers who tie these goods up under their skirts and carry them into the medina. This is the mobility we are concerned with in this video – the everyday mobility lived out on a local level, to produce micro-geographies that are deeply intermeshed with one another while reflecting a global schema.

Through a series of video recordings, *Europlex* examines the circular movement of people around the checkpoint between the Spanish enclave of Ceuta

and the surrounding Moroccan territory. Powered and ruled by the European economy, southern Spain and northern Morocco form a space that is ultimately defined by the people who move across and between the territorial imperatives of the borders. Our main concern here lies neither with the global players nor with the deconstruction of power. Instead, we are more interested in the close observation of often invisible counter-geographies and dissident practices operating at the edge of the law. We call our videographic recordings “border logs,” where the term “log” refers both to ethnographic travel logs and to the logs of the captured video material used in the editing process. Angela and I stayed in the Moroccan town of Tetuán and repeatedly visited the border at six in the morning, when the gates opened to an expectant crowd of Moroccans.

Border Log I primarily reflects our meticulous observation of the extensive smuggling activities that circumscribe the border at Ceuta. As filming is strictly prohibited, images could only be recorded with a hidden camera, or from a distance, and were subject to constant interruptions. Many of the smugglers come from nearby Tetuán, others from villages of the Rif Mountains further away. The aim of their border crossing is not to get into the city of Ceuta but to pursue their semi-legal business in the expanded border complex which hosts wholesale warehouses and other tax-free markets. The smugglers buy as much as they can carry back to Tetuán, performing this border circuit up to eleven times a day. Smuggling – which takes place in daylight and within full view of the border officials – is part of the everyday culture. Female smugglers strap contraband shirts and other clothes to their bodies, layer upon layer, until they have doubled their volume. Since each item of clothing increases the profit margins of their passage, the logic of economics is inscribed in every layer added to these mobile female bodies.

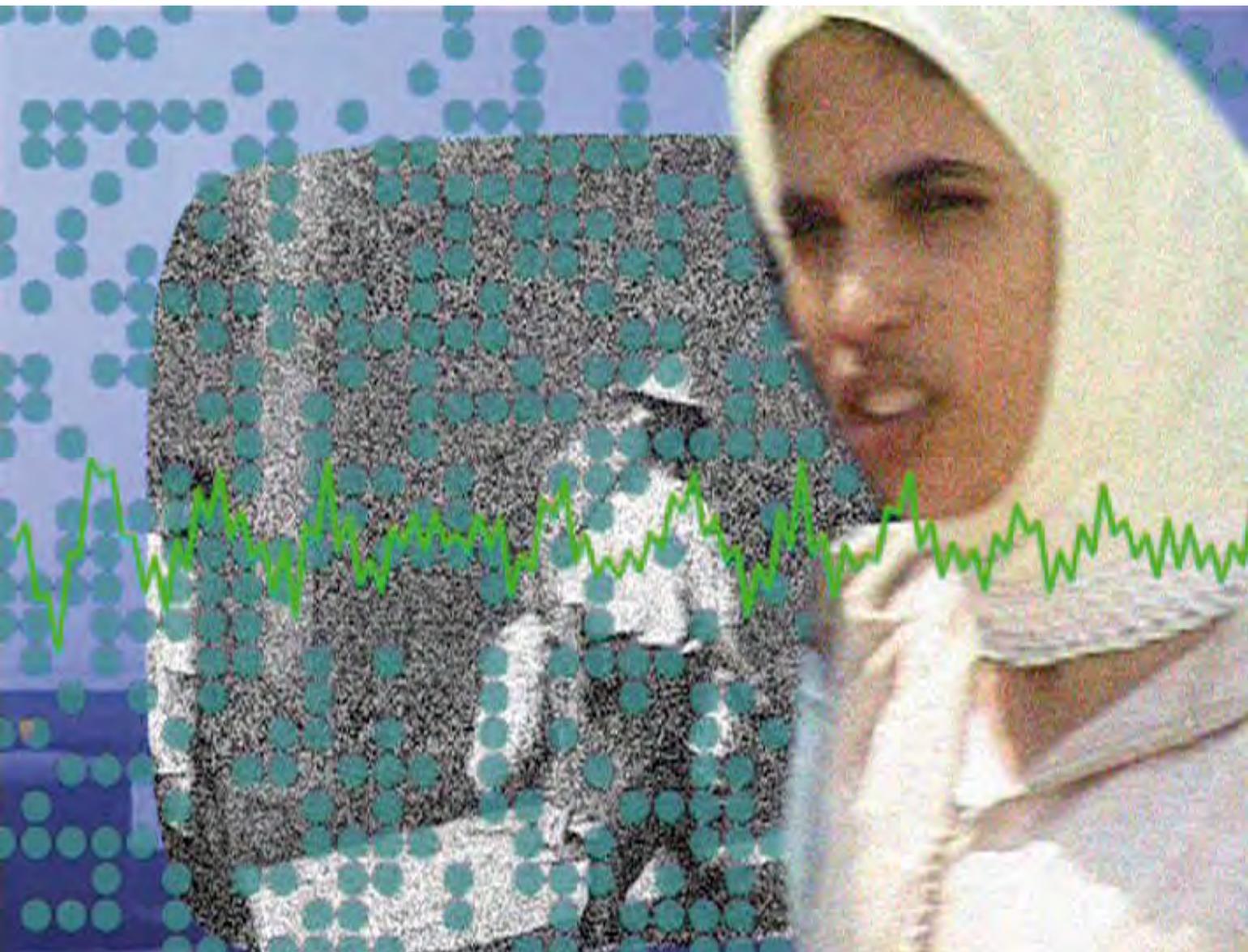
Border Log II follows the daily journey of the housemaids who live in the town of Tetuán in Morocco as they travel to work in the Spanish enclave. For many of them, the day begins as they shove through the crowded, gated passage at the border, hoping to be allowed into Spain, while state officials use every pretext to slow down, or completely block, the flow. Yet *Europlex* does not focus on the difficult conditions faced by these young Moroccan women when they enter the European labor market; rather, it looks at the curious fact that the workers commute between Moroccan and Spanish time zones. Since the adjacent territories have a two-hour time difference, the domestic workers turn into perpetual time travelers within the border economy. They have to leave their Moroccan homes at 5.30 in the morning, to be at work in Ceuta at 9, and return home in the middle of the afternoon when everyone else is still at work. Their life rhythm is out of sync, performed through alternating acceleration and retardation relative to the social context around them. In the video, the time-traveling housemaid is seen in front of a pop





In Biemann's videos, images and texts are reclaimed in a constellation that renders a provisional picture of the situation. By working at the interstices of image and text, her documentaries actualize what we should call a learning process. After all, we realize that, beneath the uniformity that unites us in communication, there is a chaotic diversity of personal connections, a myriad of subjective perceptions, and, for each of us, the connections continue to evolve, because no two of us learn our language alike. Hence the importance of a structure that connects a wide range of footage yet avoids erasing its original sense and value. In such a scenario, no final picture would be legitimate, and neither a summary nor a singular narrative would be possible.

Carles Guerra





art backdrop, her gestures appearing unnaturally repetitive as she goes backwards and forwards through time and space. Her movements are interrupted by drop-outs as the filming is halted, creating a narrative that stops and restarts in a choppy fashion. Thus, this animated portrait of a Muslim woman, with its unchronological movements, assumes robotic features that further separate her from the conventional system of measuring time.

Border Log III enters the transnational zone near Tangier, where Moroccan women manufacture products for European subcontractors. The border crossed by these women on a daily basis is a lot less visible than the fortified one around Ceuta which is traversed by the smugglers and domestic workers. Nonetheless, upon entering the transnational zone, the worker experiences a distinct split from her cultural environment. In *Europlex*, this is expressed in a series of portraits of female workers, captured at the exit to a factory in the harbor of Tangier. At short intervals the image freezes, singling out a worker's portrait so that her face and gaze remain sharp, while the background gradually dissolves into graininess. Her manufacturing activity is posted in bright green letters on the screen: *aroma extractor*, *toy plastifier*, *gambas manipulator*. In this fragmented composition, her presence is decontextualized, her body entirely technologized.

Collectively, the border logs describe diverse practices which transform the border space into a trans-local reality, as manifested in the time difference that disconnects the Moroccan context from the reality of the Spanish enclave. What the border recordings aim at is not the consolidation of a national unity, as media reports on border defense inevitably attempt, but its opposite: the permeability and constant subversion of national space. To some extent, television reports on clandestine boat passengers do this too; yet, importantly, the shadowy and potentially subversive circumstances of such border passages are assimilated all too quickly into a disciplined national order in which the interventions of state officials play a leading part. Here, border passages are allowed to cultivate an alternative imaginary, based on cultural practices that harness and play with national boundaries.





SUSPENDED IN THE POST-HUMANIST LAPSE: CONTAINED MOBILITY





When entering the harbor, the voyager leaves the exceptional condition of the boundless sea – this traversable space of maritime immensity – to come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the trans-local state of not being of this place – nor of any other really – but of existing in a condition of permanent not-belonging, of juridical non-existence. He comes to signify the itinerant body, bound to string along a chain of territories, never reaching a final destination. Probing the protocols of access time and again, he moves through non-civil places, waits for status in off-social spaces, only to remain suspended in the post-humanist lapse. What used to be a state of temporary exemption – survival in the time-space of legal deferral – has turned into the prime mode of migratory subsistence. Connected but segregated, it forms the world system of contained mobility.
Prologue, Contained Mobility



Contained Mobility enters the digital world generated by the prevailing control of mobility and the unstable, trans-local forms of life that emerge between and around it. The video conveys this paradoxical, but fully interconnected, contemporary condition by splitting itself onto two synchronized screens. One screen displays digital navigation and container traffic information systems while the other registers the interior of a container inhabited by asylum seeker, Anatol. In conversation, Imre Szeman observes that, among my videos, *Contained Mobility* offers possibly the most direct, forceful and engaged examinations of the ways in which subjects are today enmeshed in a web of legal, geographic, political and economic systems which shape and determine *belonging* – one of the fundamental aspects of being human. The experience of globalization connects the question of what it means to be human with the technologies by which the human is divided, organized, distributed, arranged, prohibited, emplaced and displaced.¹

The story of the refugee, Anatol K. Zimmermann, narrates reality in the state-of-exception. A Belorussian, born in a labor detention camp in the Gulag, he has lived in limbo for an indefinite time, suspended in a post-national lapse. As a young adult, back in White Russia, he was discriminated against socially for being ethnic German, and persecuted by the authoritarian state for being a dissident. His is the experience of “low-intensity citizenship,” a citizenship not fully benefiting from human or citizen-rights. It is not surprising that such second-class citizens, who have historically been granted lesser rights, tend to be those most affected by neoliberalism’s trend for diminishing citizens’ rights. They are the ones we are most likely to encounter in an ever-growing juridical and spatial reality in Europe and worldwide. The crisis of human rights is inextricably linked to the crisis of the nation-state, which is based on the notion of its citizens and thus incapable of bearing meaningful relation to those who live outside it. Anatol’s existence takes place in a state-of-exception beyond the simple binary of re-nationalisation and repatriation.

For many migrants, it has become virtually impossible to enter the European space in a sanctioned way. The stringent measures devised for Schengen are being further reinforced in a post 9/11 period,² and only the very resourceful and inventive stand a chance of overcoming the imposed barriers. Even though many migrants would rather choose other venues, they recognize that asylum is the only option left

for entry. In theory, the European countries guaranteed the human right for asylum when signing the Geneva Convention, which constitutes one of the basic conventions of a humanist culture. De facto, however, nation states implement legal and practical measures that make it virtually impossible to access this right. One way of achieving this is by keeping migrants in extraterritorial transit zones, where national constitutions do not apply and cannot therefore be violated. Prolonged states of legal suspension are increasingly experienced by people who are not entitled to settle down anywhere. What used to be a state of exception has slowly consolidated into the primary mode of migratory subsistence. The provisional state – the reception camp, the asylum procedure – have turned into a permanent post-human and post-humanist condition. *Contained Mobility* attempts to grasp this transformative moment, to understand the qualities that characterize the emerging subject and to bring his condition to the fore.

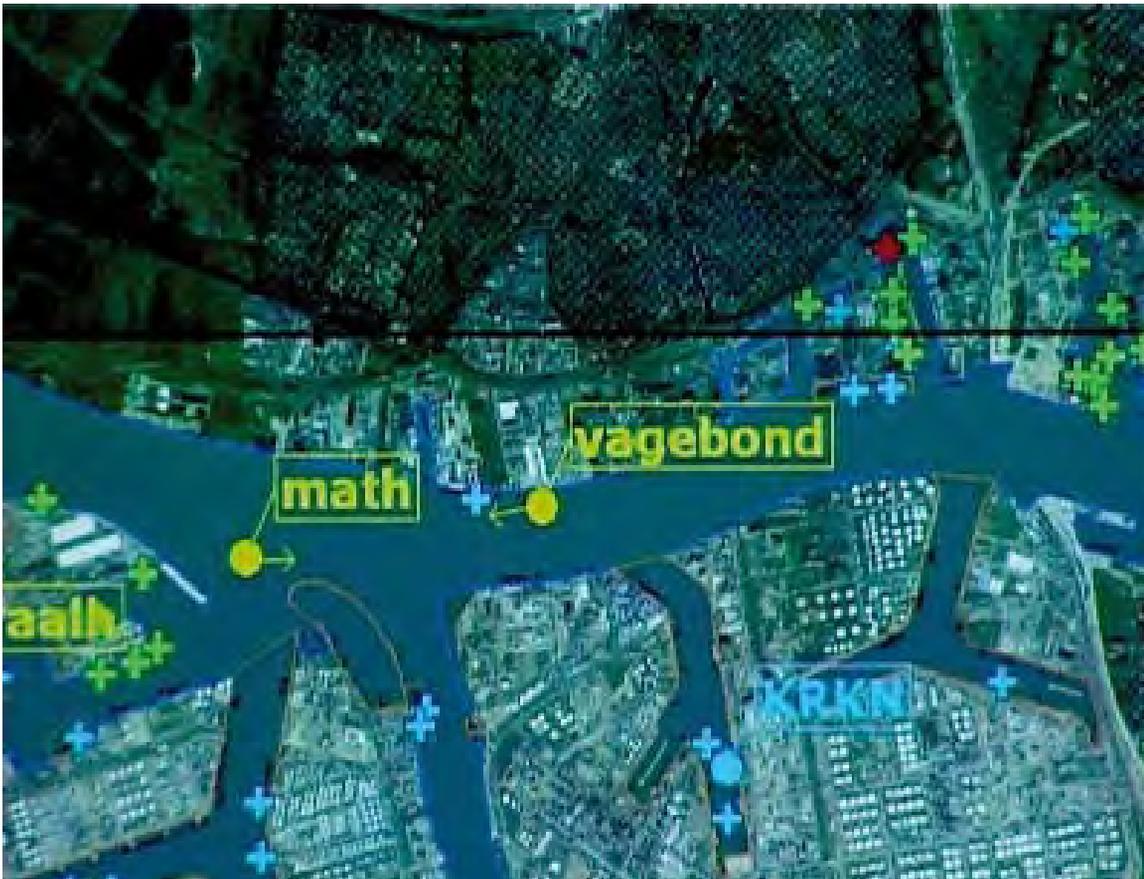
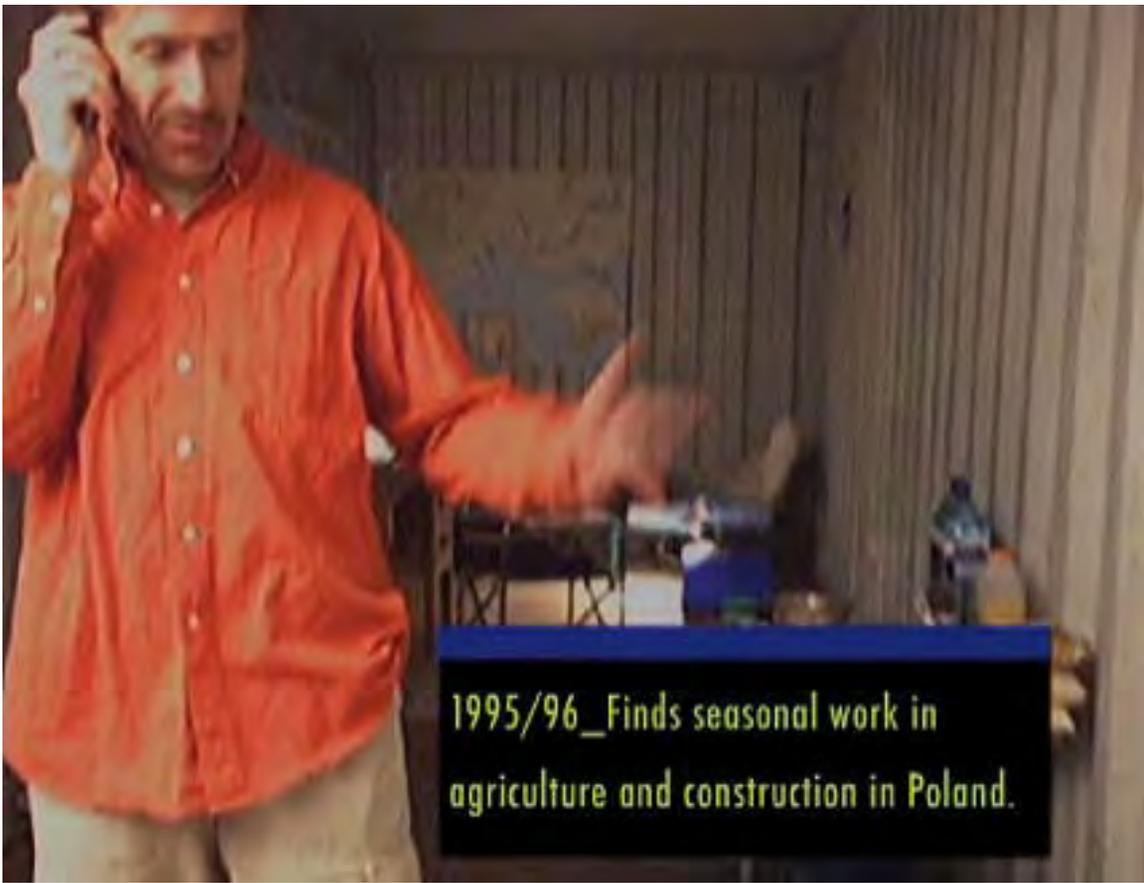
Since the mid 1990s, Anatol has been working in Poland and attempting to enter the European Union, first by swimming over the freezing river Neisse to Germany, later by crossing mountains and swamps in Ungaria, Slovenia and elsewhere. In the video, he appears as a highly educated, smartly-dressed human being who cunningly uses technology to find loopholes in the system of Schengenland. While webcam images show Anatol in a shipping container, the factual narrative of his odyssey of illegal border crossings, his capture, internment and escape scrolls up the screen. He comes to signify the itinerant body, never reaching a final destination. Trans-local existence appears here as an extra-judicial movement from place to place.

The gaze into the inside of the container, perceived through a surveillance camera, evokes a collapse of the borders between public and private life. But, when this camera lens captures a refugee, an irregular migrant, an exile, the border is effacing that between human being and citizen, the line between life and law. And it is the possible point of departure for the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation, where “everything new is born illegal” as the last line in the video reads.

While cultural identity has long been perceived as a fundamentally static concept, predicated on the nation state, this video pursues a model of pure mobility. *Contained Mobility* juxtaposes the two spatial realities of the global container transport system and human migration contained as pure movement. A global regulatory network is emerging that aims to control the flow of commerce and people on a global scale, focusing on the major nodes and logistical centers of harbors and airport. Increasingly sophisticated technologies intended to manage and control global flows are countered by equally inventive tactics of evasion by people questioning the prerogative of access to a political community. Oppressive spatial practices of control do not mean that resistance is

1 Ursula Biemann and Imre Szeman, “Forced Transit: A Dialogue on Black Sea Files and Contained Mobility” in *Political Typographies* (Barcelona: Fundacio Tapies/Actar, 2007), 35-45.

2 The reference here is to the 1985 Schengen Agreement, which introduced a European-wide common policy on the temporary entrance of persons to signatory nations. The countries in ‘Schengenland’ include all members of the European Union (with the exception of Ireland and the UK) plus Switzerland, Norway and Iceland.



forever confined to the authorized spaces of domination. They might “take place” elsewhere.

Contained Mobility gives some insight into the technological operations that constitute the network of control and the co-dependent possibility of autonomous migration. The synchronized videos depict the ongoing struggle between disciplinary mobility and the desire for self-determination, keeping in mind, however, that migratory resistance does not necessarily define itself in opposition to a specific power but imprints itself through all sorts of deviant tactics of survival and empowerment. In this scheme, the shipping container is used as a symbol for these contradictory terms as it denotes a quality of confinement and enclosure, while simultaneously implying a systematized world-wide mobility.

None of the images of *Contained Mobility* document reality. Every image is an artificial construct: a simulated seascape, a visual rendering of digital data, a webcam set up for a staged scene. The video is a conceptual statement about a particular state of being in this world. As the voice of the prologue reads: “To come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the trans-local state of not being of this place – nor of any other really – but of existing in a condition of permanent non-belonging, of juridical non-existence.” The condition of the refugee is expressed only in the negative.

Documentary representation today often serves the interests of the state – to identify, to recognize, to know, to control. Accordingly, photography, positioned within ever-new and expanding surveillance systems, operates as judicial and forensic evidence. Control, however, is not absolute since every system has its blind spots. These become manifest when Anatol disappears from the screen as a result of the angle at which the picture is taken. Thus, blind spots become a metaphor for the system’s loopholes, which Anatol uses with great ease. At another moment, Anatol takes up a Yoga position and, after a while, his figure dissolves in the air. The most obvious interpretation would be that he resorts to meditation in order to escape the confinement and precariousness of his situation. Perceiving things in a different, unreal way gives expression to a feeling of the stressful relationship and problematic sense of the self in relation to places. But there is also a deeper dimension to this image that I recognize in T.J. Demos’s question “How can one represent artistically a life severed from political representation?” In answer, he articulates – with reference to Yto Barrada’s photographs *A Life Full of Holes* – that the scene visualizes the becoming of the refugee as a process that pulls away presence into another world, creating a hole in the visual field that expresses the phenomenon of dislocation as a rupture from the grasp of the state.³ The rupture from political status troubles representation.

While none of the video images are indexical, referring to an immediate lived reality, the text is strictly documentary. Based on several hours of interview with Anatol in his forever-temporary location in Liverpool, I extracted his complicated itinerant biography with the greatest possible accuracy. This is, in fact, the simple procedure required for every asylum application filed. Yet Anatol assured me that, after being processed by a dozen European countries or more, I was the first person to produce a complete record. Usually meant for the obscure circuits of asylum management (which mostly mean asylum denial), this information, which authorities no longer feel obliged to produce, is now made public through an artistic practice that produces the missing record required for access to the human right of asylum. This made me wonder whether the unexpected utility of my act of representation had an impact on its status as an artwork, signifying a contemporary human condition, or whether *Contained Mobility* had inadvertently turned into a document reporting on one case to be resolved.

As dedicated as I am to symbolic production, I am nevertheless sensitive to the ethical question of when to put down the camera and assist the protagonist – in other words, whether direct intervention in social and political injustice is sometimes more justified than the aesthetic representation of it. In one instance, I did leave the mode of representation and engaged in a real-life encounter with Anatol: I offered to buy him a Polish passport. This was before Poland entered the EU, but it was only a matter of time and he would have been able to replace the forged passport with an EU one. As he was raised near the Polish border and spoke the language, this seemed to me the most suitable way for him to obtain the much-desired license to free circulation. Anatol declined. Salvation would have meant the death of his problem, which by now was obviously not only a burden but also the condition with which he has come to identify: to march in the cracks between nations as the post-migratory subject into which he has mutated.

Installation of *Contained Mobility* see page 108-109.

3 T.J. Demos, “A Life Full of Holes,” *Grey Room*, 24, Summer 2006, 72-87.



EMBEDDED FIELDWORK AND GLOBAL OIL CIRCULATION: BLACK SEA FILES





Where coverage is the keyword for hegemonic media – that totalizing view intended to visually capture the whole space associated with the represented event – positionality is the fundamental assumption of recent artistic documentary work. The radically incomplete, and radically inconclusive, structures deployed by artists conspire against iconic and discursive fixity. Their partial views are offered in confrontation with more totalizing perspectives, and transitional identities are treated with extreme caution. Paradoxically enough, transitional states of affair – situations in which people suffer or go through personal episodes – throw subjects into very vulnerable positions. While they are often used as permanent icons of disaster in the landscape of the mass media, in Ursula Biemann's videos, they do not surrender to a general scheme that confirms our prejudices. Instead, people become fragments of a local intelligence, as partial as their voices are.
Carles Guerra



While most of my previous video essays have been concerned with globalization processes in broad extraterritorial zones and along borders, with *Black Sea Files* I turned my attention to a specific transnational infrastructure: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Passing through the Southern Caucasus and Turkey, the recently-built pipeline pumps large quantities of new Caspian crude oil from Azerbaijan to the world market. In the mid 1990s, representation of the region changed from that of a politically unsettled and impoverished post-Soviet periphery, hosting a million displaced people, to a space where energy and capital flow at a rate that is remarkable even by global standards.

This giant project is the first manifestation of an ambitious European plan to not only cross the Caucasian corridor and access the Caspian oil reserves, but also to expand further into post-Cold War territories, particularly the landlocked Muslim states along the Southern rim of the former Soviet Republic. A veritable super-silk highway is the long-term vision behind this scheme, which will grow to encompass a fully-integrated transportation and communication corridor linking Europe with Central Asia. The overall focus of my two-year video exploration was the spatial and social transformations brought about by this gigantic infrastructure. During my fieldtrips in 2003 and 2004, the pipeline was still under construction, displaying the material efforts necessary to bury the conduit underground and make it forever invisible.

International media coverage of the Caucasus features images of political elites signing contracts, rubbing new oil between their fingertips or cutting ribbons at inaugurations. My work does not prioritize such corporate images, which consolidate power into a master narrative, because they offer little insight into complex regional relations and local textures. My intension was to disperse the predominantly US-centric perspective of current oil discourses and present an alternative.

The pipeline is a geo-strategic project of considerable political impact, not only for the powerful players in the region but also for a great number of locals: farmers, oil workers, migrants, and prostitutes, for whom the meaning of their living space will be transformed. These are the subjects who populate the video files, turning the pipeline corridor into a complex human geography. This is not the top-down view corporate planners favor when they decide on the course of the pipeline trajectory, but an engagement with the people who relate to this piece of infrastructure. The closing of big deals on a macro level entails a million small contracts and negotiations on the ground. If we want to reformulate the cultural construction of oil, it is on these subjects that we need to concentrate. Particular attention is therefore given to those instances at which the power line is incomplete, ambiguous or interrupted by local actors.

Some of the files deal with corporate politics of land use, documenting encounters with some of the

thousands of farmers who had to sell their land for the pipeline. In other files, I stray around the wasteland of abandoned oil extraction zones near Baku, or sit down for tea with Kurdish nomads who have set up their summer camp near the pipeline terminal on the Mediterranean coast. While the pipeline runs through the video like a central thread, it does not read like a linear narrative but visits secondary scenes, unfolds side events and roams around the lesser debris of history. The *Black Sea Files* are looking at Off-Broadway geopolitics.

I do not pretend to grasp the complexity of the region in its overall political and cultural dimension. Nonetheless, I attempt to shed light on a subjective, but interrelated, series of scenes and plots. Varying in scale, the files speak of grand ideas and sordid conspiracies, remote ordering systems and their prosaic local upshots; they detect plans within plans, seeking to understand their strategic purposes and operational failures, and the meaning they have in terms of human experience. It is the ensemble of the files that reveals their interconnectedness.

The video writes a fragmentary human geography through a rather heterogeneous collection of videographies made during three trips to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, with extensive text research, media clips and reflections being made in the aftermath. All this material needed to be organized, and I opted for files because they are an open structure, indicating progress, which tend to contain unique combinations of documents whose logic often lies entirely with the author. The project foregrounds the ordering system, and the ordering process itself, through the use of files as a metaphor for categorizing information.

In the case of transnational politics, data can come from geographically dispersed sources, linked only through a political relationship that is not always obvious for the uninitiated. The relations reveal themselves during the investigative process and through the figure of the researcher. While generally my practice can be understood as a cognitive method akin to those used by geologists, journalists and anthropologists, this was a very subjective way of organizing knowledge, which, in my view, is more closely related to secret intelligence than, say, anthropology, because of its inherently transnational procedure and the pursuit of hidden and restricted knowledge. With *Black Sea Files* I make a decisive attempt to insert myself into the range of investigative practices performed in these different spheres of knowledge.

Before I go on to discuss the content of some of these files in more detail, let me comment briefly on the form of presentation of this piece. *Black Sea Files* consists of ten synchronized double video files. In some of the files, the image on the left stands in contrast to the one on the right, as in File 0, where the empty plaza in front of the government palace in Baku is juxtaposed with the massive public demonstration which brought down the Georgian regime in the main square of Tbilisi. In many files, however, both videos







complement each other, saturating the short scenes with the particularities of local people while creating a dynamic view by mixing medium-range shots and close-ups. In the case of the Azeri farmers, Kasakh tailors and Kurdish farm hands, the doubling-up of synchronized images works in choreographic terms. In a region where verbal communication is at a minimum, gestures and abstract sounds become the main means of interpreting a situation.

At Kunst-Werke Berlin, where *Black Sea Files* was premiered in December 2005, the piece was installed on synchronized pairs of video monitors, lined up on a long black plinth which ran diagonally across the entire space. The file names and contents were posted on a dark purple wall, where the file structure and content was replicated typographically in the exhibition space. A separate video of Azeri oil workers was projected onto one of the walls, contributing to the sonic atmosphere of the installation, and, pasted onto another wall, was a large oil cartography, co-designed with an architecture bureau in Zurich. My decision to turn my video work into a large complex installation was a strategic one. I recognized that, although my video essays had been shown in a great variety of venues, they had not been taken too seriously by the art world. I felt that I could gain greater recognition in this context if my presentation was more sophisticated or simply took up more space. It seemed to me that the content of this video would justify a similarly geopolitical strategy of gaining more ground in the art world (see p. 106-107).

In the imaging of migration, one of the aesthetic strategies I have insisted on in the last few years is that migration should not be conceived of as a singular phenomenon but as one among many strands of interaction between regional and national spaces. *Black Sea Files* investigates the correlation between the flows of people and those of fossil resources, investments, information and images. Given the importance of energy in our society today, it is surprising how few cultural analyses are available on the subject, in comparison with research topics such as technology, virtuality or velocity. This lack of theoretical discourse makes it all the more difficult to discuss the circulation of oil in the context of a cultural-theoretical consideration of identity and migration, which meant I had to do a great deal of ground work.

The first task was to draw spatial connections and to find coincidences between the flow of persons and resources. One particularly striking site for this confluence is Istanbul. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the importance of the Turkish Straits has greatly increased, as large parts of the vast oil reserves of the Caspian region must be transported on tankers across the Black Sea to reach external markets. The Bosphorus, connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, is among the world's busiest and most dangerous waterways, cutting through the mega city of twelve million people. The strait's capacity for large oil tankers is practically saturated, hence the necessity to build the BTC pipeline.

This bottleneck of global oil circulation is also the site of the highest concentration of human migration in the region. Turkey is considered to be one of the main transit countries in the modern world for irregular migration. Tens of thousands of migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Moldova, and Russia arrive in Turkey every year, two thirds of them passing through Istanbul. The liberalization of post-socialist countries had a particularly noticeable impact on female mobility and marketability, and the Black Sea basin is known as a major trading place for women. Female migrants, trafficked from the former Soviet republics to Turkey, frequently use the route through Azerbaijan, which has become another regular transit country for illegal migration. In Azerbaijan, the massive oil-field revenues do not easily filter down to ordinary citizens; young women have to look for opportunities abroad, and they use the same westbound route as the oil.

As important as the connections between oil money and sexualized female labor migration are, they are often difficult to establish conceptually because these issues are discussed in very different cognitive fields. In the visual world of video space, and particularly in the practice of the video essay, there is a chance of bringing them together. Certain events in the *Black Sea Files*, like the scene I am about to describe, involving Russian and Azeri prostitutes, may indeed seem unrelated or coincidental. During fieldwork, however, the essayist is not always in the "signifying mode," hot on the tracks of her research topic. The situation sometimes requires a spontaneous decision to pursue a narrative thread that was unplanned.

When I arrived in Trabzon towards the end of my research trip through the Caucasus, I was already aware of the booming sex industry in the region, but it was not my explicit intention to tie it into my video project. I had taken a bus across the Turkish border from the Georgian port of Batumi and planned to have a couple of relaxing days in this lively old trading city. After taking a bath at the ancient hamam and watching a Lara Croft movie at the only cinema, I took a stroll down to the port. Behind the covered Russian market, where cheap plastic articles, textiles, and electronics are for sale, the filthy street was lined with brothels, hotels and bars, crowded with women from Russia, the Ukraine, and the Caucasus Republics. Even though this was supposed to be my time off, I made contact with people working in this milieu the very same day. In a local hotel room, I subsequently filmed an encounter with three young prostitutes – two from Moscow and one from Baku, Azerbaijan, who had recently arrived in Trabzon – in the presence of their pimps, an agent who introduced me to these shady characters, and a translator, all of whom remained behind the camera.

The disproportionate male presence in the room made a candid conversation impossible; in terms of factual information, the encounter would prove to be entirely useless. In addition, simultaneous trans-



lation was so minimal and fragmentary that my only option was to provoke a situation in which the prostitutes and pimps would start acting out their relations in front of the camera rather than narrating them to me. When a more thorough translation of the taped conversation took place several months later, during the editing process, it revealed that the prostitutes had been misinformed about my project – they were not told that I was working on a video about resources and migration, but assumed instead that I was making a “home movie.” This made it seem that they were forced to speak with me – a strictly unacceptable condition according to documentary ethics. Yet, the fact that we were both misinformed, and that entering their power terms was the only way of revealing the coercive character of the situation, made it a very valuable document for me.

While waiting to begin the interview, I filmed the nervous way in which the three women moved around the room – getting up, sitting down again, reclining, hiding behind each other, constantly reshuffling their positions on the queen-size bed in an effort to place themselves in the best, or possibly the least, favorable posture in front of the camera. For the longest time, they rearranged their bodies in ever new positions, gradually becoming conscious of the humorous manner in which they were simultaneously hindering my task as a camerawoman and undermining the pimps’ authority. It is this awkward choreography that tells us more convincingly than any verbal statement about the women’s discomfort with their labor and with exposing themselves in this intimate, transitory space determined by capitalist relations. With their pointless moving around the room, they were able to appropriate the space in an anti-productive, playful, and resistant way.

It is this unspectacular and unassuming form of resistance – discovered through a process of minute observation – which I have often chosen as my object of representation. This is not because it has any real power to change economic relations, but because – in representation – the momentary, but highly symbolic, agency of women hardly ever comes into view. In the end, hard facts always tend towards a discourse of exploitation, rarely revealing strategies of mobility, slyness, and inventiveness, which are ultimately required in these geographies of survival.

There is another section I want to comment on briefly – File Four, in which I raise a number of questions concerning the status of images, the gathering of visual data, the capture of events and my own role as an embedded artist. On a spring morning in 2005, I filmed the Turkish police evicting a thousand Kurds from the vast recycling area on the periphery of Ankara that was the existential basis for an entire community. The massive attack of armed forces came out of the blue: in no time at all, the area was turned into a war zone filled with smoke, screams and tear-gas. Recyclers desperately tried to salvage mattresses and huge bags of other precious recycling materi-

als. Others set stacks of paper, cardboard and PET bottles on fire rather than leaving them for the enemy. Several bulldozers razed their shacks to the ground and tankers rolled over the debris, spraying water in all directions, to try to keep the crowd in check.

These were difficult filming conditions and the dramatic video material was no less difficult to insert in a piece that was otherwise a quietly-paced encounter with places and people. The scene is not in the immediate proximity of BTC construction sites, but it is not entirely unrelated to the pipeline project since the trajectory had to circumvent Kurdish areas for fear of sabotage and the eviction in Ankara could be interpreted as a signal from the authorities to keep a rebellious community on track. For my part, I was most concerned with the risk of turning the scene of desperation into a media spectacle. This prompted me to introduce a strong reflexive element by showing web cam images of myself sitting at a desk viewing film footage and speaking into the microphone. My voiceover questions the role of the embedded artist and the value of images produced under dangerous conditions. I am not normally in favour of the kind of self-indulgent artistic practice that making a personal appearance in my video would suggest but, in this instance, there was a need to counterbalance the drama of the scene.

The glimpse into my work environment, where the video material is viewed, manipulated and given meaning, is one way of breaking up the immediate thrill that dramatic images can produce. It is an expression of my vacillation between the urgency of documenting conspicuous injustice, inherent in the violent act of eviction, and the reluctance to represent human crisis as a spectacle. Ultimately, spectacle is produced through editing and commentary as much as in framing decisions. So, File Four is a record of people’s displacement, their urban struggle and their loss of land; but, at the same time, it is a reflection on the practice of, and conditions for, image-making in the drama of a moment at which a thousand citizens lose their existence before our eyes.

The images of the battle on the recycling fields of Ankara have another vital function in the video; they stand for the countless violations accompanying the construction and maintenance of the oil facilities which neither I, nor anyone else, was able to document. It is as if the violence of the Ankara footage performs an emotional transfer onto those peaceful images of the pipeline, lying innocuously in the grass, waiting to be buried, which alone do not adequately represent the pipeline project.

A massive foreign incision in a fragile region in historical transition is bound to trigger psychic dynamics, provoke social reconfigurations, reshuffle economic privileges, reconnect old ethnic ties and create new affiliations across the board. It is the tireless representation of these micro-political adjustments that can begin to bring the meaning of these fundamental geopolitical transformations to light.





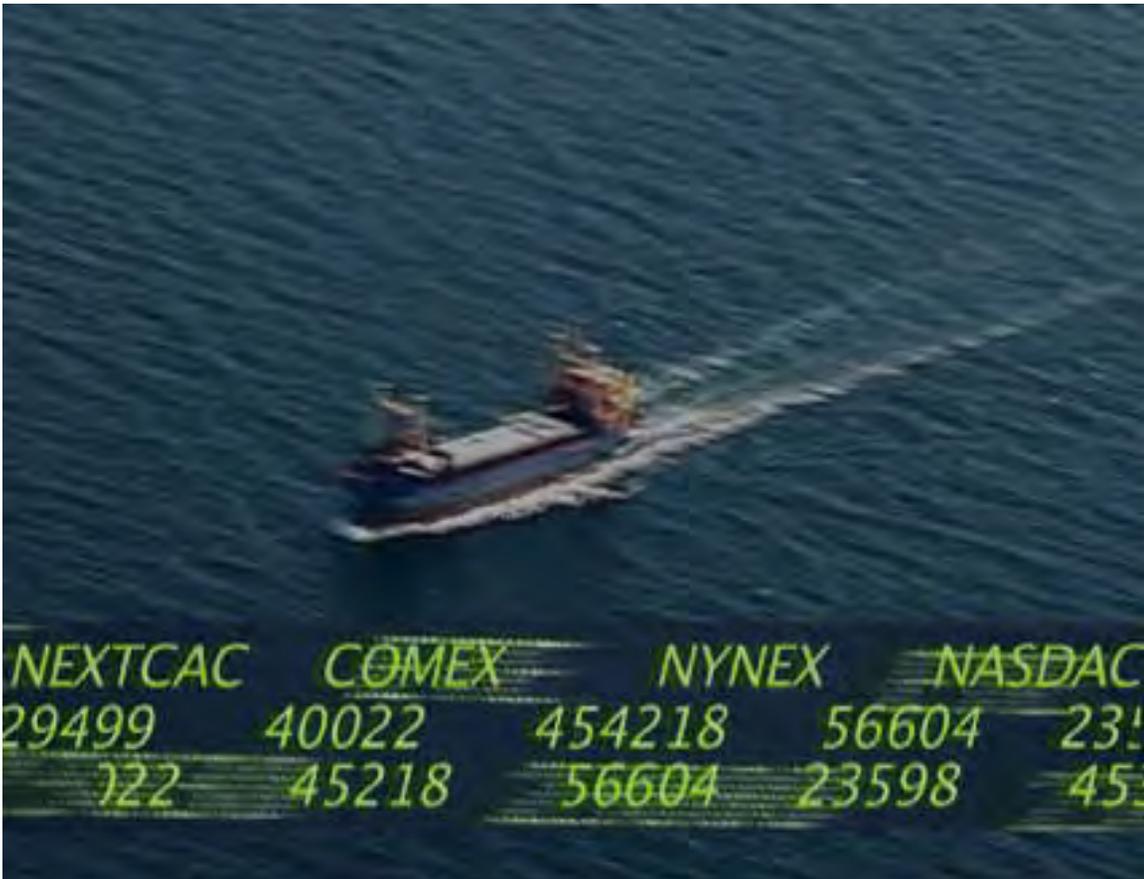
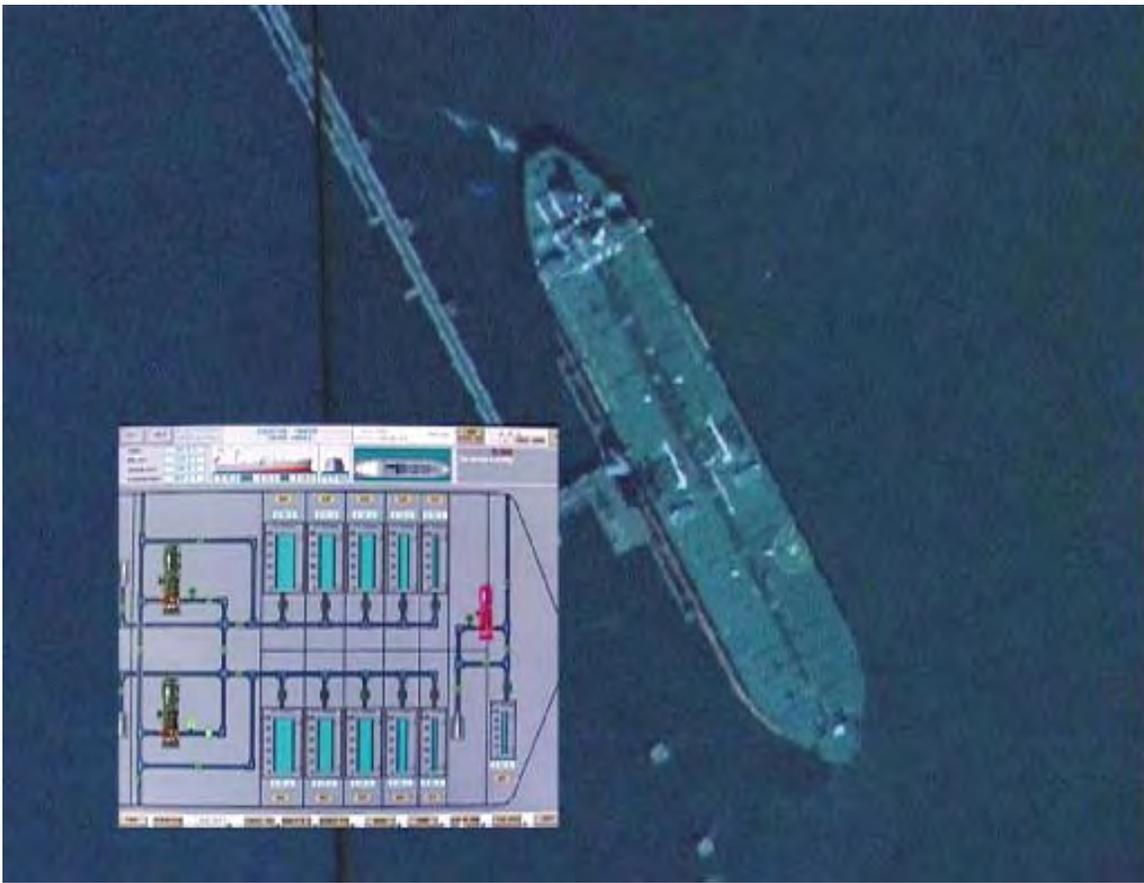






What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go to the trenches? How did it get to the point where she stands at the front next to the journalists at the very moment of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask. What kind of artistic practice does such video footage document? That of an embedded artist immersed in the surge of human confrontation and confusion? How to resist making the ultimate image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol? Is an image made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives? Is better knowledge that which is produced at great risk? It sounds odd, but it's risky to simply record a pipeline. Oil companies run a severe image regime. During construction image-making is prohibited, later it will be invisible anyway. What is the meaning of this tube in the hidden corporate imaginary of this space? What function does it have in their own secret ordering system of the Caucasus?

Voice-over file 4



DISPERSING THE VIEWPOINT: SAHARA CHRONICLE





Until recently, Africa enjoyed a politics of freedom of movement, whereby any African could move to any other African country, settle down and find work. This simple and beautiful concept has also been adopted by the European Union, which has invested considerable effort in implementing this principle within its own boundaries. During the course of the 1990s, one country after another joined the Schengen agreement, which aims at abolishing the internal borders within continental Europe to create a single external border enforced by immigration checks.

Of course, the most strain is put on the countries at the outer rim, particularly the Mediterranean countries with their porous coastal borders and considerable body of migrants. Here, the selection and control mechanisms implemented under EU rules are met with some ambivalence, because they jeopardize long-standing migration-based relationships with the south, with the sole benefit of strengthening identification with the interests determined in remote Brussels.

Predictably, the reinforced border regime had an immediate effect on migration flows from north Africa and, increasingly, from the 'deeper' south of sub-Saharan Africa, but it also did something more than that. New cooperation agreements delegated EU migration management of trans-Saharan movements to the Maghreb states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya), out-sourcing border control to countries where the free flow of people had been practiced for decades. Visa obligations for travelers entering the Maghreb from the South now rendered illegal the crossing into territory most people considered their legitimate zone of mobility.

The freedom to move within Europe is, therefore, achieved at the cost of free movement within Africa. According to Zygmunt Bauman, an unmistakable feature of the powerful is the elimination of obstacles to one's own free movement while limiting as much as possible the mobility of others, particularly that undertaken on the others' own initiative; even less so unauthorized movements. Mobility would not be such a formidable power resource were it not complemented by the territorial fixity of the powerless.¹ It is useful to keep in mind that, in the current reformulation of African-European relations, what is at stake is nothing less than the privileges and deprivations of the prime resource – mobility.

The western media has a very peculiar way of representing clandestine migration to Europe. It directs its spotlight on the failure of the stranded migrants, the "Naufragés," and celebrates police efforts which successfully apprehend transgressors; victorious passages go undocumented. The media seems to succumb to every temptation of condensing reality into a symbol, thrusting the whole issue into discursive

disrepair. In a perpetual loop, television clips capture the state of being intercepted, caught in a process of never reaching the destination, a freeze-frame of the Raft of the Medusa drifting off the shores of Senegal. In cinematographic language, this fixed spatial determination is simply called 'a shot,' suggesting that the real is no longer represented but targeted. In the staccato of television news, this particular shot becomes the symbol that encapsulates the meaning of the entire drama. It is evident that complex social relations are not negotiated in this frantic manner. Apart from the time compression, which creates an immense discrepancy between representation and social reality, there is something seriously inadequate about this robotic viewpoint when it is directed at the shifting and precarious movements of life.

But the mundane truth behind the trauma-like recurrence might be that these images are not the outcome of intense aesthetic reflection but the convenient product of current media politics under the strain of growing competition. Since their mission is to cover events rather than explain conditions, news channels do not see why they should send out expensive camera teams to remote desert towns in the Western Sahara or Niger, unless some drastic event makes these places internationally newsworthy. So we are likely to be presented with the lazy and less costly version of the story that only covers the most visible end points of a long journey. But there are not only practical explanations for this. The invisible operations – which effectively remain unknown to us thanks to these news strategies – contain another, perhaps quite unsettling, dimension of clandestine migration.

Invisibility is indeed an invaluable resource in the undercover transportation racket. Outlawed migration has gone into hiding and become a shadow system. Making images of these proceedings inevitably brings to light a system that works best when invisible; so much so that the imaging of clandestinity also signifies its symbolic ending. There is a paradox in the social consciousness, in that the desire to know about clandestine activities coincides with the anxiety to see these transgressions resolved; hence the fascination with images of captured illegal migrants. They embody the kind of boundlessness that needs to be concealed. It has created a disorder in global civil society by pushing an immense liminal zone into a neatly mapped post-colonial order, halfway between no longer defined worlds. Imaging the unspeakable statelessness brings this uncomfortable fact to light. When so many people are beyond, between or on a waiting list for citizenship, there is a need to conceive of a different mode of dwelling in this world. Trans-local existence brings to light this unfinished side of citizenship.

When so many people are beyond, between or on a waiting list for citizenship, there is a need to conceive of a different mode of dwelling in this world. Trans-local existence brings to light this unfinished side of citizenship.

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization – the Human Consequences* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), entitled "Space Wars: a Career Report," 27-54.

Sahara Chronicle is a collection of videos on the modalities and orientations of migration across the Sahara; it chronicles the sub-Saharan exodus towards Europe as a social practice embedded in local and historical conditions. The project introduces the migration system as an arrangement of pivotal sites, each of which have a particular function in the striving for migratory autonomy, as well as in the attempts made by diverse authorities to contain and manage these movements. Video documents include the transit migration hub of Agadez and Arlit in Niger; Tuareg border guides in the Libyan desert; military patrols along the Algero-Moroccan frontier in Oujda; the Mauritanian port of Nouadhibou on the border to the Polisario Front; the deportation prison in Laayoune, Western Sahara.

With its loose interconnectedness and its widespread geography, *Sahara Chronicle* mirrors the migration network itself. It does not intend to construct a homogenous, overarching, contemporary narrative of a phenomenon that has long roots in colonial Africa and is extremely diverse and fragile in its present social organization and human experience. No authorial voice, or any other narrative device, is used to tie the carefully-chosen scenes together; the full structure of the network comes together solely in the mind of the viewer who mentally draws connecting lines between the nodes at which migratory intensity is bundled.

This text is not primarily intended to interpret these videos; rather, it is a place for making some further reflections about the politics of visual practice with regard to migration, with a particular emphasis on illegal migration. It is also a place for offering some of the connections and insights acquired in the field about the nature of this sophisticated migration network, the intersection of resources and migration routes and the entanglement of migration and sustainability in the Sahara.

As part of the massive economic and political diaspora of our world of transnational capitalism, migrant workers uniquely embody the condition of cultural displacement and social discrimination. But, the task of a political aesthetics today is not to capture an image that best symbolizes our times; rather than positing the ultimate image, the task is to intervene effectively in current flows of representation, their narratives and framing devices. In some instances, the accepted story needs to be undone and we should not get anxious about reassembling it into another story too soon. The preferred mode of signification in *Sahara Chronicle*, therefore, is fragmentation and disassembly.

The project contains an undefined number of videos, which are never shown all at once, since there is always something unknown, hidden and incomplete about clandestine migration. My preferred way of showing them is in the form of an installation, where by some videos are projected and others can be viewed on monitors, creating a multi-perspective audiovisual environment that can be inhabited by

viewers, in much the same way that migration space is inhabited by the actors depicted.

Sahara Chronicle includes a number of records of the more or less successful efforts at keeping the fluctuating migration currents through Morocco, Mauritania and Libya in check, by means ranging from off-road patrols in border terrain to aerial surveys by propeller planes and high-tech surveillance drones. Engaging with this politics of containment sucked me right into the gigantic visualizing apparatus and made me a part of it.

One of the records follows the border brigades in the Algero-Moroccan frontierland, where they half-heartedly poke around popular hiding places for clandestinos near the train tracks. Nobody was found that day, but the colonel in charge of the area was pleased to demonstrate the efforts made by the royal brigades in impeding migration flows to Europe. As their budget is barely enough to cover one surveillance flight per week in the vast desert areas around border cities like Oujda or Laayoune, I didn't want to initiate an extra flight for aerial filming that would risk the detection of a group of clandestine migrants hiding in the dunes. The police were willing to give me the photographs they had taken on previous tours; these pictures have a different status from the frames I would have shot from the same plane, functioning as evidence for use within the confidential circuits of police investigation. They capture the moment between recognition and possible disciplinary action. A simultaneous role as witness and record endows these images with a juridical effect, providing evidence of infringement and the occasion for judgment and deportation. Integrating these photographs in my artwork further contributes to the process of exposing the furtive act to the public and positioning the viewer as voyeur-witness. However, the scrolling text in the video thwarts the fantasy of a potent vision, which has the power to evict, by introducing a thriving solidarity between the transiting migrants and the local populations. Moroccan carpenters have started to prefabricate boat kits, which can be quickly assembled by migrants in their desert hideouts. Distanced judgment is baffled here by a sense of local complicity.

Another video is dedicated to some of the most high-tech surveillance technologies currently being deployed on military missions, from the war in Iraq to the Saharan desert front. Libya has received the newest models of unmanned airplanes from Germany, in return for their active demonstration of hindering migration flux to Europe. These drones glide over the desert borders, transmitting televisual data back to a remote receiver in real time. Other observation machines are equipped with night vision and thermal cameras, extending surveillance into realms invisible to the human eye.

Colonel Muammar Kadhafi's military department was not as cooperative as the Moroccan brigades in handing its visual intelligence to me, but we can



S THE PILOT SIGNALS THE GENDARMERIE ON THE GROUND



TENTS AND MARK THE AREA AROUND THEM WITH STONES



FACTORIES OF DISPLACEMENT

Several globally-operating artists have used ethnographic techniques for observing everyday life in various locations in order to explore the current complexities of transnationalism. These artists make 'art' from the daily gathering of information, the creation of connections, and the plotting of movement. Aided by the proliferation of technologies of travel, communication and surveillance, they have begun to reorganize their work space across geographic and disciplinary borders. They have, at times, also invented new ways of collaborating with social activists and migrant groups. Their work problematizes the distinctions between reality and art, between real and virtual space and between flows of migrants, capital and information. At the center of this work, we find unsettling intersections between physical movements, virtual mediations and transnational belongings.

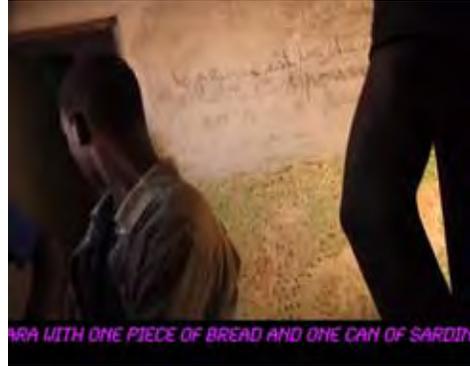
Ginette Verstraete



ADVERSARIES ARE KNOWN TO BE CONSTANTLY ON THE MOVE



IN THE FRONTIER-LAND THERE IS NO OUTSIDE



MARA WITH ONE PIECE OF BREAD AND ONE CAN OF SARDINES



R.T.

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THE LANDSCAPE IS AN ICONOGRAPHIC INDEX OF THE MINING



safely assume that the images produced by these drones are no longer film-based photography like the ones used in Moroccan aerial reconnaissance. They are more likely to be computer generated, able to create visual imagery from recorded data, thus transposing things located outside the spectrum of visibility into a readable image. These technologies have created new ways in which an image can be linked to an actual object; the indexical linkage required in previous concepts of documentary realism has been traded for new methods of attaining and validating empirical knowledge.² Aerial photography is inscribed in a different discourse than the images composed by optical devices onboard desert drones, since they stand for radically different interpretations of reality; the drone images are simulacra used as representation.

Lack of source material meant that I had to artificially construct it from high-resolution satellite images of the Libyan desert. The soundtrack is composed of many layers of recordings from Saharan and Middle Eastern radio and TV stations, mixed with electronic sounds, music fragments and winds. This artificial videography addresses the important fact that migratory space cannot simply be documented by conventional video-making on the ground. We need to enter the more ethereal strata of signal territories created by the streaming of images and the diffusion of sounds and information – territories with a relentless and excessive meaning production.

The abstraction of these images is offset in yet another video, with sequences of the hard reality experienced by those who have no visa to the borderless world of signs. The over-crowded deportation center in a former colonial prison in Laayoune, Western Sahara, offers a sight that propels you back two hundred years into a somber past. Close your eyes and you can hear the chains jangle. The main light source is a barred skylight, a hole in the roof through which a harsh stream of sunlight pierces the sweaty gloom, making every mosquito and every grain of dust dance in front of your eyes. Slowly getting used to the scene, you see starvation, weakness, disease and sun-scorched eyes; none of this matters when the goal is in sight, but it is excruciating to bear when hope has slid away. The only traces of the migrants' trajectories are the fragile architectures they had built in the remote desert dunes during the days and weeks of holding out while water stocks were running low. The aerial photographs show that, around some of these shelters, an area is marked by stones like the outline of a garden or a place for prayer, as if the deadly expanse was a place too vast to comprehend.

The core of *Sahara Chronicle*, however, is set in one

of the truck terminals for desert crossing in Agadez.³ The town, at the heart of Niger, is the southern gate to the Saharan basin for the main routes coming from west Africa; it is a major trans-Saharan trading center, and capital of the Tuareg.

The video documents the great departure of the "Exodés," those many young men and few young women from west Africa on a quest for a better life in the Maghreb, or, in a more distant, blurry vision, in Europe. In contrast to the images of failed arrival, these scenes show the moment of potentiality at which anything seems possible. The excitement about the risky outcome of their adventure is very tangible among the passengers. What unites them is the common goal of accessing the labor markets in the north.

In joining this greater venture, they contribute to an elaborate system of information exchange, routing and social organization that spans the immense Saharan region and, in doing so, create a translocal space that will exist for as long as these social practices last. As a human network it is distinct from those facilitated by permanent material infrastructures, such as rails or fiberglass; it is a vibrant process of spatialization performed by the psychic dynamics of desire and anxiety – a web made of obstinacy and vulnerability.

What we witness is a large-scale geographic reconfiguration, activated by growing practices of migration which are highly flexible – proficient at rerouting, reorganizing and going covert in record time. It is in this guerilla fashion that the geography is made productive, by those players defined by global capitalist logic as immobilized: the poor and the deprived. The focus is on the unrepresented, rebellious and obstinate local practices of space, which resist and circumvent any attempts to discipline them.

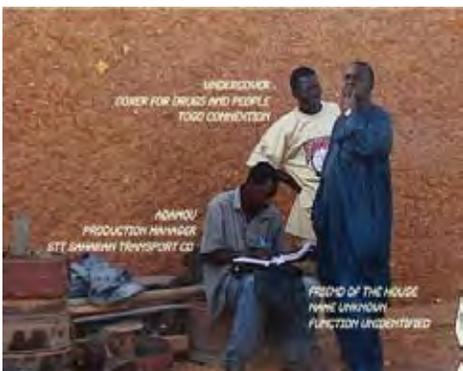
If we want to understand what makes this emerging migration system work, one of the things we need to look at is the historic condition of the region. For it is the conceptual difference between nomadic and colonial politics of space that lies at the heart of the Sahara being turned once again into a contested zone mobility. The immense Saharan territory of the Tuareg tribes was split in five by the Empires at the Berlin Conference in 1884. Since then, their space of mobility and livelihood has made up substantial areas of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and Chad. Denied a proper state, the Tuareg constitute a minority within these national cultures and are granted fewer civil rights than native citizens. Nonetheless, as a distinct linguistic and cultural entity, they maintain their identification as a people across the boundaries. Tuareg territorial structure is, by definition, transnational; it provides the framework for social and economic, if not political, organization. The role of these nomads is central to the transnational process

2 Mark J.P. Wolf discusses this shift of the indexical linkage in his essay "Subjunctive Documentary: Computer Imaging and Simulation," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 274-291.

3 For a detailed discussion of this, see Ursula Biemann, "Agadez Chronicle – Post-colonial politics of space and mobility in the Sahara," *The Maghreb Connection*, (Barcelona: Actar 2006). 43-67.



IN CAMEROON, TOGO, BENEM, GHANA.







of repurposing their old caravan routes as highways for illicit migration. Their unique topographical expertise and tribal ties are in high demand as a steady flow of sub-Saharan migrants pass through Agadez and Arlit.

The Tuareg rebellion in Niger in the mid 1990s, which made another attempt at consolidating their tribes into a nation state, was directly linked to uranium mining in Arlit and the exclusion of the Tuareg from the wealth found on their territory. The revenue from uranium extraction was shared among the French owners and the Nigerien elite in the remote capital who recruited miners from other ethnic groups from the south. The rebellion ended with a peace treaty which promised better social integration.

I interviewed former Tuareg rebel leader, Adawa, who is current head of the clandestine transportation operations in Arlit on the Algerian migration route. For lack of better opportunities, the returning rebels saw a possibility of making business with the transit migrants. Transportation services were needed; besides, Arlit, like Agadez, is a desert gate that can be controlled and taxed, but the desert border is a vast terrain and roving border patrols are few and far between. Some passengers were documented, many not. Deploying rebel tactics, they swarm out in jeeps at night and bypass the border checkpoints with their full charge of migrants before melting into the dark dunes.

The regional authority of Agadez saw the need to intervene in these opportunistic developments and formally mandated Adawa to manage the semi-legal transport of migrants in an organized fashion. The local authorities may have welcomed the fact that this locks him into a criminalized position which compromises any further rebellious plans. Semi-legal, yet authorized, the business keeps the rebel pacified while generating extra income and power for the officials: a well-planned, if precarious, balance. This solves two problems at once: putting an experienced man in charge of logistics and keeping him occupied and accountable. Should Adawa ever prove to be uncooperative, the authorities can put him away without much ado. He understands that he has been taken hostage and that his status as a semi-citizen of Niger is directly linked to his guidance of more and more people into a terrain of bare survival in which citizenship is suspended.

As in the case of the Tuareg, there are other sites in the Sahara at which migrant concentration coincides with enormous deposits of natural resources. In Africa, the routes for transporting raw materials and migrants frequently overlap, as is the case for the iron ore train in Mauritania which links the iron mountain of Zouerate with the maritime terminal in Nouadhibou on the Atlantic coast. The train tracks mark the border of the mined territories of the Polisario Front in the north of the country, and growing numbers of migrants take this dangerous route through the mined desert strip.

One reason for this is that the success rate of boat passages to the Canary Islands has been dropping. When boats do not capsize, or run into other serious trouble, they are likely to get intercepted by the Spanish border patrol. This is not to say that migrants do not continue to try this route. During the week I spent in Nouadhibou, the local rescue team promised to call me any time of the day or night if a new boat full of migrants came ashore. While there were three arrivals, each containing about seventy stranded people, in the previous week and a large boat with two hundred people the following week, nothing happened during my stay. Clouds were hanging over the sea, making a nocturnal passage too perilous even for the adventurous. This is maybe just as well, as I would have been tempted to capture the sort of sensationalist frames of which I am critical.

The drive to reiterate images that have engrained themselves in our minds is strong; we see what we know. Instead, I filmed the Mauritanian Red-Crescent officials, notebooks in hand, carrying out their hygiene inspection of an empty detention center in a former school, where fifty detainees can be crammed into each of the bunk bed dormitories that used to be classrooms. The windows are bricked up, the walls inside covered with messages scribbled either by excited children or by desperate captives. The education crisis of the country, where the dropping wages of teachers reflects a general crumbling of the national economy, coincides with the migration boom. This inspection scene speaks of the impressive migration management machinery, put into motion along the Atlantic front of the Sahara since 2006, when the Strait of Gibraltar became virtually impassible and migrants began to search for exit routes further south.

Nouadhibou hosts about 50,000 transit migrants who maintain a low profile; at the slightest attempt to leave on a boat they become illegal and risk deportation. On my late night arrival at the sleepy airport, where local cab drivers pick up passengers on the airstrip, I got shoved around by a group of forceful Spanish special security officers who bulldozed their way through the travelers. Leaving the airport building and stepping out in the dark, I bumped into a large group of stout foreign men standing on the unlit airfield who turned out to be Russian fishermen waiting to be exchanged with a fresh crew after three weeks on the open sea. Within the first few minutes of my arrival, it became evident that large numbers of foreign people were pulsing through Nouadhibou, turning the dusty little place into an international platform for transit migration and the provision of resources for distant destinations.

Mauritania is a desert state where endless sand dunes extend all the way to the shoreline. Apart from iron ore and potential fossil fuel, the country's only other resource is fish, particularly octopus. The waters off the Mauritanian coast are among the richest fishing grounds in the world, renowned for their fine cephalopods. Commercial and national fleet



from China, Japan, Russia and Ukraine come to fish there. Sid'Ahmed, president of the national fishing association, regards the loss of local revenues due to massive fishing by licensed industrial trawlers in the exclusive economic zone as a future migration cause for Mauritians.

The European Union creates pressure to maintain a high fishing quota regardless of the diminishing numbers of fragile species. Using the menace of unleashing a troupe of white-coated veterinarians to scrutinize conformity to its hygiene norms and the threat of closing down port facilities, the EU secures licenses which bypass Mauritanian laws specifying that the fish be processed in local plants, generating jobs and surplus value for the Mauritians. When this unique resource has been exhausted and the local fishery destroyed, people will have no choice but to turn to migration for survival. Migration boats are already full of Senegalese fishermen whose existential base has been exhausted in this way. When the EU looks for solutions to stem migration flows from the south, one of the things to consider is its aggressive strategies for resource procurement in Africa. However, what we are more likely to encounter are not self-critical revisions of post-colonial relations, but signs of an intensive EU collaboration with the Saharan states in matters of control and surveillance technologies.

Art can provide an in-depth view of the complex circumstances of the human condition, and thus has the potential to offer what we could call "sustainable representation." This is opposed to the quick shot in response to crisis as perpetuated by the media – or rather the steady but noticeable transformations, presented to us as crises, which call for emergency action. The increasing failure of sustainability of livelihood in the region is, of course, the reason for migrating in the first place. Sustainability and migration are two closely linked concepts in the Sahel, where inhabitants have lost a third of their viable land to desertification over the last few decades. By sustainable representation I do not mean undertaking background reportage on the economic push factors for migration. The term should reflect both the object of inquiry and its methodological process.

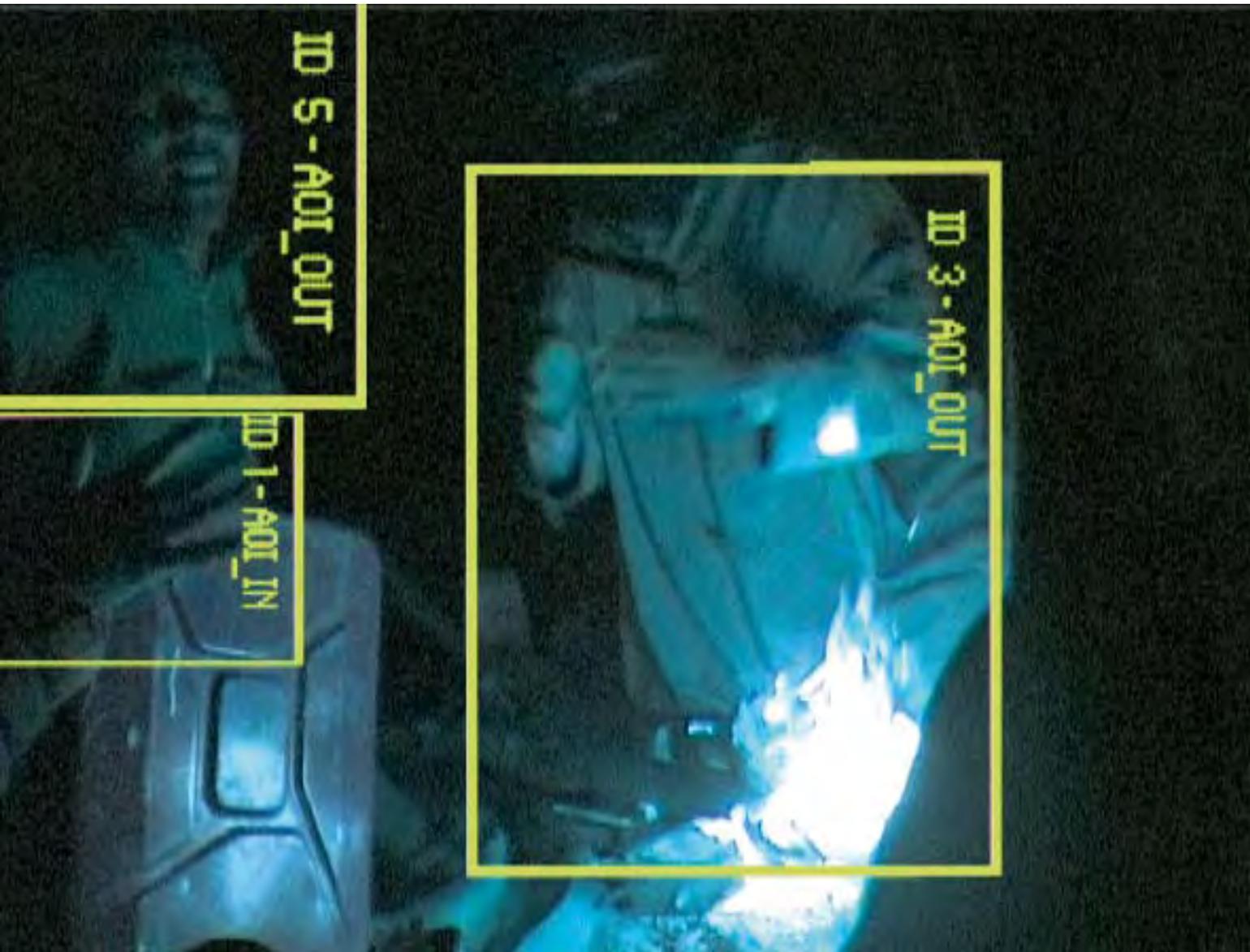
What could sustainability mean when applied to the visual field? What is the aesthetic ecology of Saharan mobility? What immediately comes to mind are representations with a longer lifespan, more durable images that would neither vanish into the romanticized mythology of desert life nor get hooked on the dramatized figure of the immobilized refugee. These reductive narratives refuse to acknowledge that the deteriorations being manifested in the region today have, in fact, evolved over a long period.

Watching the preparations for the great desert crossing at the Agadez truck terminal, it became evident that, only through the patient and unexcited recording of this quiet daily routine that has sprung up around life-changing journeys, will the deliberate

gesture of migratory self-determination fully emerge. Sustainability does not equal slowness and durability; it tells the story of how everything we do around the world is interconnected here and now, i.e. how the western lifestyle, known to have an effect on climate change, also has an impact on herdsmen in the Sahel. In this sense, it is less of a critical tool than an attitude reflecting contemporary awareness of how we live our lives.

Images are not excluded from this process. As social relations, representations that constitute meaning in one place are locked into the signification of another. A way of thinking about sustainability, then, is to generate images that do not exhaust the possibilities of others by fixing them in a place when their potential for a fuller life is likely to be realized in a distant country. This is why I regard it as imperative to show them as the mobile, inventive and highly organized actors they are.

Installation of Sahara Chronicle see page 110-111.



ARTICULATING THE EXCEPTION: X-MISSION



X-Mission explores the logic of the refugee camp as one of the oldest extraterritorial zones. The camp is part of a larger family of extraterritorial spaces, known to be “in,” but not “of,” the contexts in which they are located, and may therefore be viewed as an exemplary site for the study of the endless incisions into the body of a nation. Refugee camps are created in moments of crisis as juridical zones of exception, whereby populations are placed under international human rights laws and relinquish their political and civil rights. The camp is an extreme form of extraterritoriality, where populations are suspended from the legal order that governed their lives, to be defined and regulated according to the humanitarian conventions of the United Nations and the volatile domain of international politics.

Taking the Palestinian refugee camps as a case in point, *X-Mission* engages with the different discourses that give meaning to this exceptional space – the legal, symbolic, urbanist, mythological and historical narratives. The refugee camp emerges as what Eyal Weizman calls “a site where the politics of a troubled geography is folded into a reduced, bounded space elsewhere,”¹ producing an intense microcosm with complex relations to homeland and to related communities abroad. Given the importance of the interconnectivity among these separated pockets of Palestinian populations, the video attempts to place the Palestinian refugee in the context of a global diaspora and considers deterritorialized models of belonging which have emerged through the networked matrix of this widely dispersed community. However prominent the Palestinian exile is in terms of scope, political complexity and deep historical significance, I am aware that this is also a glaringly overrepresented situation, to which it has become exceedingly difficult to make any meaningful contribution. I should clarify that, whatever contribution is aimed at here, this is not directed towards backing up, or challenging, existing positions in the conflict.

My initial impulse for a possible approach was to find a way to speak of the Palestinians without falling into the inevitability of positing them in relation to Israel or to the conflict. The intention here would not be to deviate from the problems or to depoliticize the subject matter, but to avoid the trap of tired binary arguments, allowing me to rethink the case in relation to the other texts I have developed around the global networks of contemporary migrant communities in previous video essays (*Remote Sensing*, *Sahara Chronicle*). As someone with no personal ties to the ideological geography of the Middle East, I am most interested in studying this refugee case through the lens of knowledge gained in the analysis of globalization, transnationalism and other forms of political extraterritoriality – such as the al Qaeda

network and the US anti-terrorist paradigm – which have had a decisive impact on the Palestinian condition today. This may be the reason for starting the video with images of Afghan refugees from 1989 – the moment the focus shifted from Cold War adversary to so-called militant Islam – and with images made in Afghanistan by the UN Refugee Agency in 2001.

This is the crucial time frame for this video, particularly since the events of 9/11 have been used to impose a state of exception and, through political rhetoric, to legitimize measures that encroach upon the rights of any potentially suspicious person who fits the profile of a Muslim non-citizen man, regardless of his origin². Under these conditions, the production of citizenship unfolds through practices of racialized, gendered surveillance and suspicion, endless interrogations and a self-appointed authority to send someone into exile; here, the boundaries of who merits the status of civilian become narrow. More implicitly, *X-Mission* is about the precarious statelessness that is growing up around us. The state of exception that is thought of as a temporary intervention in times of emergency tends to be consolidating and self-perpetuating. It seems to me that, today, the Palestinian camps should be examined in the light of all these new developments.

Although I made three fieldtrips to Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Jordan and the West Bank, documentary images of camp life have been deployed sparingly in this video. The narrative relies strongly on a series of interviews made with professional experts, interspersed with multiple-layer video montage deriving from both downloaded and self-recorded sources. The speakers are explicitly labeled The Lawyer, The Architect, The Journalist, The Anthropologist, The Historian, The Refugee, etc., unmistakably speaking from a particularly informed position. Together they comprise an intricate web of discursive interrelations.

When it comes to the refugee question, it is essential to understand the legal superstructure. Palestinians are of particular interest here, because their case is not only the oldest and largest refugee case in international law, but it also helped to constitute the international refugee regime after the Second World War. This case exemplifies how international law itself failed to maintain a framework of protection, first depriving the Palestinians of their political rights as citizens – by turning them, perhaps too quickly, into a voiceless mass of refugees – and subsequently by dispossessing them of the right to international protection guaranteed to all refugees. The Palestinian refugees are the exception within the exception.

1 Eyal Weizman in conversation with Médecins sans frontières founding member Roni Brauman, Columbia University, New York, 2008.

2 Human Rights Watch report on 9/11 detentions, quoted in Leela Fernandes “The Boundaries of Terror, Feminism, Human Rights, and the Politics of Global Crisis” in *Just Advocacy?* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), eds. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, 2005, 66.



THE POST 9/11 PARADIGM HAD A STRONG IMPACT ON OLD AND NEW REFUGEES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD.





Because it was the United Nations that created the “problem” of the Palestinian refugees in the first place, it set up a regime of heightened protection for them, explains Susan Akram (*The Lawyer*).³ From the beginning, in 1948, the Palestinians were to have two agencies devoted exclusively to them: the UNCCP, entrusted with a complete international protection and resolution mandate, and UNRWA, whose job was to provide food, clothing and shelter.⁴ Because the Palestinians were seen to be taken care of, the charter of the UNHCR – the UN High Commissioner for Refugees founded in 1950 – had a special clause excluding the Palestinians from its mandate. When it became clear that the UNCCP was unable to resolve the Palestinian conflict, its funding was substantially truncated, which incapacitated it in its role as protector. Within four years, the Palestinians were left without this international protection or that provided by the UNHCR to all other refugee groups around the world. This means that they have no agency for interventions on an international level and no access to the International Court of Justice. The protection gap has never been closed, not least because the absence of any legal framework has been very convenient to the power politics behind negotiations. Under the guise of fiscal prudence, a major refugee case was maneuvered outside international law, where it has remained parked for decades.

This exceptional condition has made the Palestinian refugees especially vulnerable to arbitrary re-impositions of the state of exception, as a recent incident in Nahr el Bared, a camp in Northern Lebanon, demonstrates. Nahr el Bared is one of the twelve existing Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to have been founded in 1948 and subsequent years; several others have been destroyed. Allocated by the UN, the plot of land near the Syrian border first hosted tented settlements which were replaced by cinder block houses as and when the refugees could afford to build them. The urban fabric grew organically without a master plan, expressing a form of life altogether indifferent to strategic urban planning. Fifty years later, the population has multiplied but the surface of the camp has not been allowed to increase, resulting in one of the most densely populated places on earth. In juridical terms, this is UN territory, but it is Lebanese for matters of security and Palestinian in terms of identity.

For Sari Hanafi (*The Sociologist*), Nahr el Bared is the epitome of how the Lebanese authorities conceive of such extraterritorial space: “The camp is located outside the city of Tripoli but they allow no infrastructure to connect the camp to the city; they

marginalize it, govern it by emergency law and then abandon it. This is the very condition under which the refugee camps in Lebanon are turned into a place where other extraterritorial elements, like al Qaeda, can come and establish their microcosm.”⁵ In the summer of 2007, the Lebanese Army breached international convention and entered Nahr el Bared to eradicate a small number of foreign Islamists who had settled in the isolated camp. The operation grew out of all proportion and, instead of securing the refugees’ habitat, the army razed the whole camp to the ground and declared it a zone of exception. The 40,000 refugees lost all their belongings and had to flee to another overpopulated camp in the region. This is how easily, when an international protection mandate is lacking, the UN juridical status is suspended by the self-authorized imposition of another regime.

But, rather than focusing on the stratified and often ambivalent apparatus of sovereignty that rules this space, I suggest we pay attention to the flexible process through which the refugees have begun to reinscribe themselves into the political fabric. While the battle over Nahr el Bared was still underway, a community-based reconstruction committee was established to research the state of the camp before its destruction and to draw up an accurate plan that would serve as a basis for negotiations.⁶ In a collective process supported by volunteer architects, the camp dwellers defined the shapes and limits of their plot in order to recreate them. The reconstruction of the camp poses the interesting question of how the refugees themselves would plan their housing and urban organization if they had a say. Despite the many general complaints about the lack of space and sunlight in the camps, it turned out that, for the dwellers, the architectural form of the old camp made a lot of sense. For example, when people from the Palestinian village of Safuri arrived at the camp in 1948, they settled next to each other and named the neighborhood after their village. They wished to preserve this arrangement because it relates to their origins, to their right of return and to their sense of community. Usually, families own the roof of their building, which allows them to add another floor for the next generation. Another feature they want to retain is that the camp is, to a great extent, a pedestrian zone made of an intricate system of bending alleys. In Islamic society, and particularly in the crowded camps, the alleys are used as semi-public, semi-private spaces where women and children can enjoy a sense of enclosure and privacy.

The Lebanese state and army, however, have altogether different plans for the reconstruction of Nahr

3 The circumstances of the founding years of these institutions are extracted from a video interview I conducted with Susan Akram, Professor for International and Human Rights Laws at the Boston University Law School in February 2008.

4 UNCCP, the UN Conciliation Commission on Palestine, was established in 1948 and UNRWA, the UN Relief and Work Agency in 1949.

5 Interview conducted with Sari Hanafi, sociologist at the American University in Beirut, himself a Palestinian refugee in Beirut in December 2007

6 Interview conducted with Ismael Sheikh Hassan, architect and urbanist involved in the Nahr el Bared reconstruction committee, December 2007 in Beirut and July 2008 in Tripoli.





el Bared. In the organic system of narrow alleys, they see an obstacle to entering the camp with their vehicles, perceiving it as a military zone, when in fact it is an urban zone. “Armies shouldn’t do planning,” Ismael Sheikh Hassan (The Architect) argues, “because they want to solve political issues through urban design.” The result is a good security plan, perhaps, but a city where nobody wants to live. The international donor community for the reconstruction supports the plans of the refugee collective and opposes the imposition of Lebanese state power on UN land – so this represents a rare occasion in which an extraterritorial community has found a way to elude state power and to implement its political decisions. The master plan for the first 120 houses is being drafted, with construction due to start in January 2009.⁷

The common struggle to define the refugee space suggests that the camp, in this instance, is not the site of what Agamben calls “bare life,” existing outside of all political and cultural distinctions; on the contrary, it is a highly juridical space of dispossession and repossession. These endeavors have created an informal political domain that evades sovereign decisions, to reveal a place where the Palestinian refugees – who are literally placed on the outer reaches of international law – can unfold self-authorized, constructive means through which to re-inscribe themselves into the wider political fabric which is composed, by now, of a complex mix of post-national considerations.

Post-national ideas have gained momentum through the relentless proliferation of transnational and extraterritorial spaces in which people live or work with few guarantees of their security or dignity. For a growing number of people, life is now about finding a way to survive in the cracks of our system of nation states. The refugee comes forth as living proof of just how fallible and incomplete the world organization of nation states truly is. This is why I turn to supranational concepts – which are able to tackle massive statelessness – and to forms of post-national resistance and agency.

Half of the Palestinian community lives outside of their home territory, either in camps in the Middle East or as migrants scattered across the world. “How the Palestinians negotiate the space now and build a nation outside the territory should not be perceived only as negative, as a trap, as being outside of something” suggests Beshara Doumani (The Historian).⁸ “Their transnational experience is also the most important resource they have in order to build a future for themselves in which – whether or not they get a state – they can live a dignified life and have rights like any other human being. How they do that can be seen as a laboratory for other groups of people,

whether they are refugees or migrant laborers or people who simply find themselves outside certain spaces that they have long known.”

Somewhat out of phase with their transnational condition, the Palestinian’s political language continues to focus on self-determination through territorial sovereignty. However, many Palestinians have started to wonder whether the national project should be the ultimate goal or whether it should only be regarded as a vehicle for attaining rights and the ability to survive in the world and, if the latter, whether this vehicle is capable of doing so at a time when the nation state itself is in decline and proves to be a place in which people do not necessarily attain civil rights.

In the meantime, like any other major diasporic society, the Palestinian community has devised all sorts of ways to build a transnational network that allows them to negotiate the juridical zones that they are not allowed to enter, or in which they are forced to stay, by breaking them, overcoming them and finding ways around them. Across Borders, a web project hosted by Birzeit University in the West Bank, links eleven refugee camps in the region. Given that the terrestrial connection between Palestinian cities is often disrupted and that refugees in Lebanon are not allowed to visit the West Bank, it is all the more important for camp dwellers to be informed about the circumstances in the other camps. Besides personal and collective stories, the website diffuses daily news relative to Palestinian camp life in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. It is often the only way for people to know how their relatives are doing and if problems have occurred in and around the camp. The site also receives many visitors and commentators from abroad and Shaadi, who maintains the site in Deheishe camp near Bethlehem, is something of a virtual cosmopolitan whose worldliness is acquired, in large part, via technology.

On a different note, this video essay reflects on the artist’s mission as a particular sort of fieldwork. Most obviously, perhaps, *X-Mission* can be understood as a witness report from the field, inserting artistic research into a wide range of scholarly and humanitarian field works. Humanitarian officers are never simply on a field trip, they are on a mission, which implies that their visit is for purposes beyond the simple collection of information. They go with the aim of making a direct intervention, relieving suffering, helping people recover from disaster, providing medical and educational assistance or witnessing injustice; a mission can, therefore, be understood as the kind of fieldwork that embraces a moral component. Adi Ophir argues that “contemporary technologies of disaster are “in the moral” in the same way that scientists are said to be “in the truth,” which does not necessarily mean to act morally (in the same way that a scientist may err and still be “in the truth”); it means that a certain atten-

7 This first unit was commissioned by the EU but their funding was insufficient. Saudi Arabia contributed the difference.

8 Beshara Doumani, University of California Berkeley, interviewed in Tripoli, July 2008.



tion to moral considerations becomes inevitable.”⁹ Seen from this perspective, the camp as a response to crisis is always already a place for morality, not because it is placed above and beyond its political, economic, or religious meanings, but because of the existence of a complex apparatus of rescue and relief.

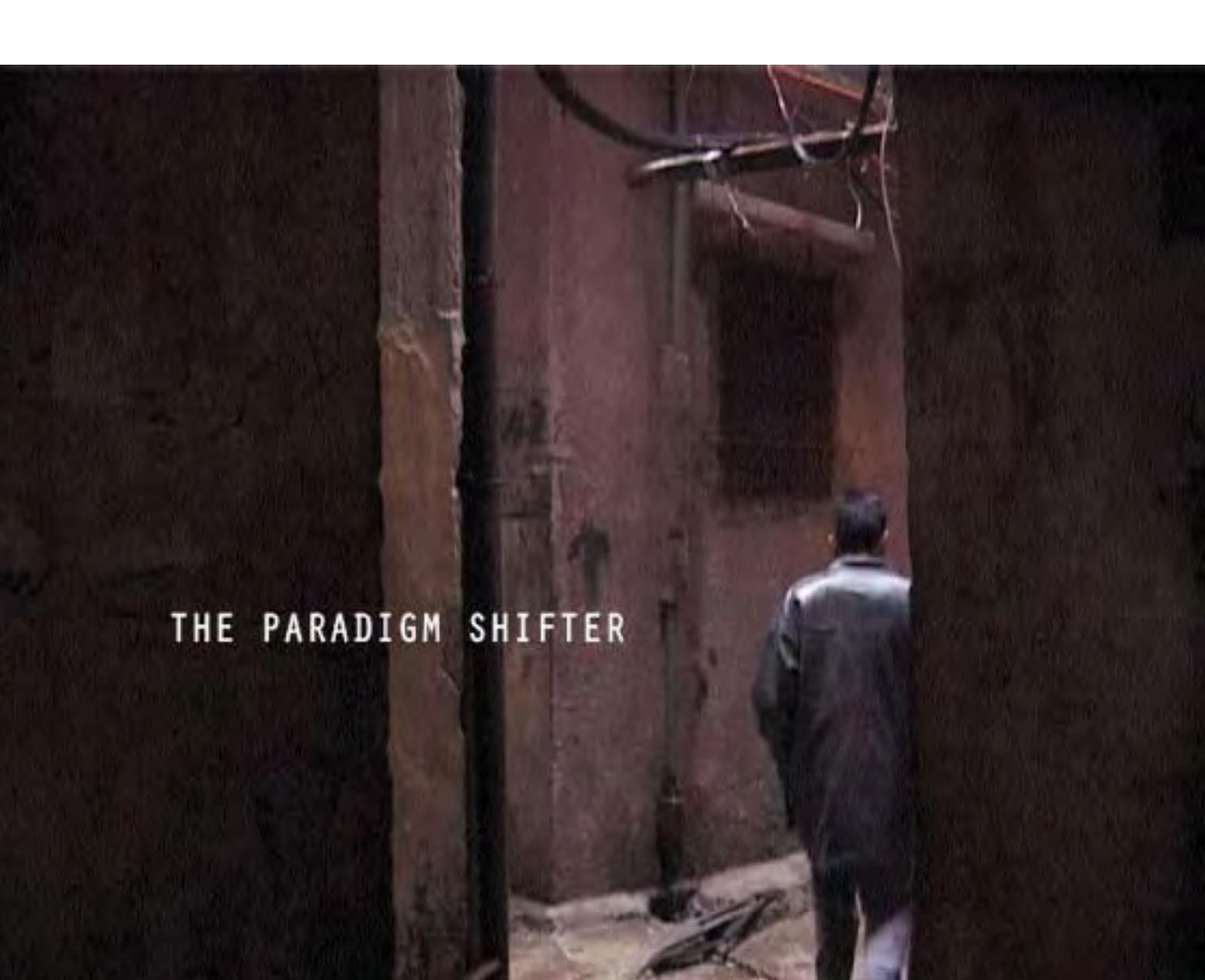
My video essays investigate the condition and organization of survival in the world, but they are not meant to contribute to an abstract relief program of sorts; they don’t mean to rescue anyone. The area that constitutes “the moral” in society is a complex humanitarian apparatus run by the state, the market and civil society at large, which consists of a fairly structured assemblage of power and knowledge, including spatial arrangements, means of communication, means of data collecting and processing, organizational procedures and discursive practices. It is into all these practices my videos intervene. In terms of representational politics, the struggle for autonomy is the focus of my approach to this most fragile form of life, which borders on “bare life,” where human agency is taken for the fundamental rhetorical practice.

Aside from intervening in rhetorical conventions of human rights discourse, *X-Mission* reports on a distinct tendency in the art world to converge aesthetic pleasure and moral mobilization. Since the early ’90s, the art market has channeled an astounding quantity of participatory projects with “communities in crisis” towards privileged global art consumers. We might indeed ask why the global art world should be considered the appropriate stage for the concerns of a disenfranchized community when it remains unclear whether increased representational visibility is necessarily linked with political agency. Drawing on Ophir’s ideas, a possible explanation is that art projects with a strong social commitment provide a special opportunity for the “moralization” of the market-driven art world and its civil audience. On the other hand, when it comes to large international exhibitions that are perceived by city and state governments as image-enhancing, such art projects present an opportunity for the politicization of a morally-motivated civil society. How *X-Mission*, or any of my videos for that matter, operate within these parameters is difficult to monitor. Their intention is to make an aesthetic contribution to current discourses that form and inform complex geopolitical developments while reflecting on how art participates in making them intelligible.



9 Adi Ophir, “The Sovereign, the Humanitarian, and the Terrorist” in *Nongovernmental Politics*, (New York: Zone Books), ed. Michel Feher, 165.



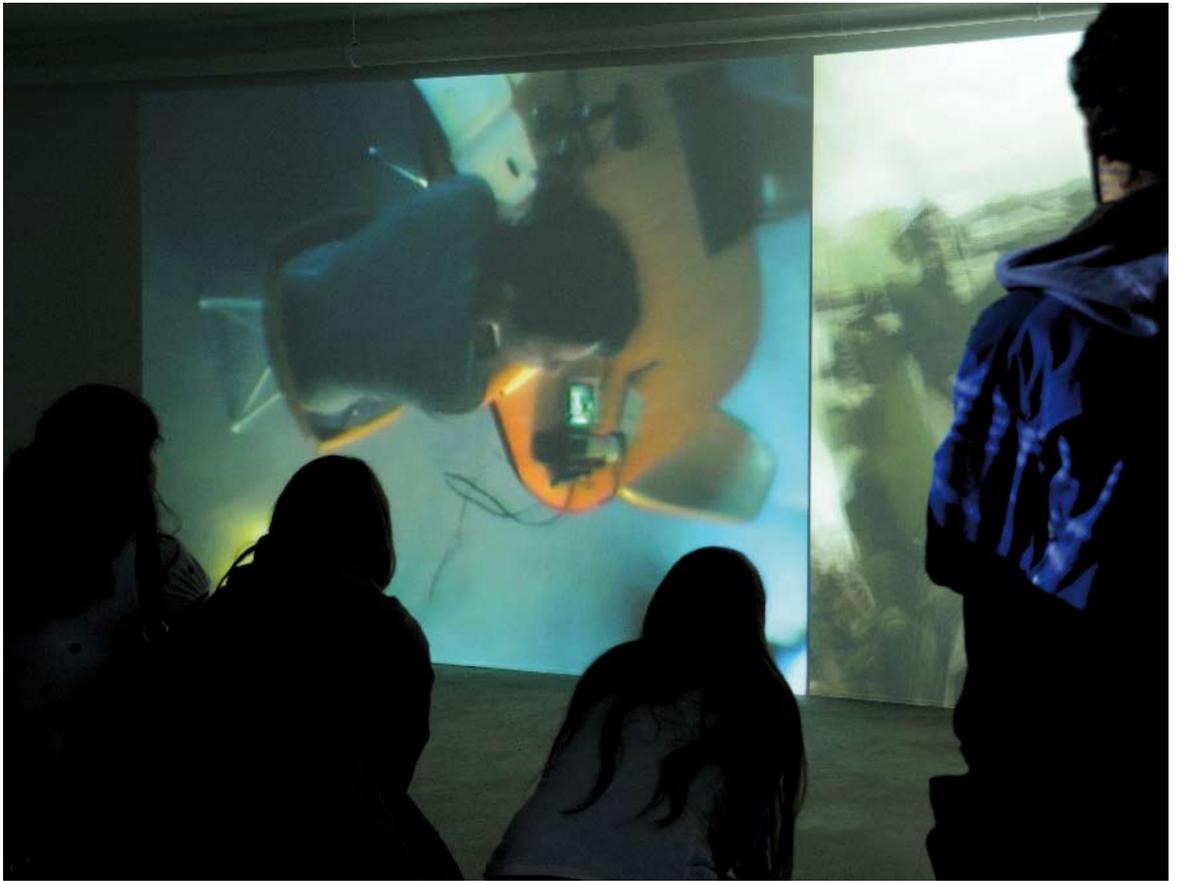


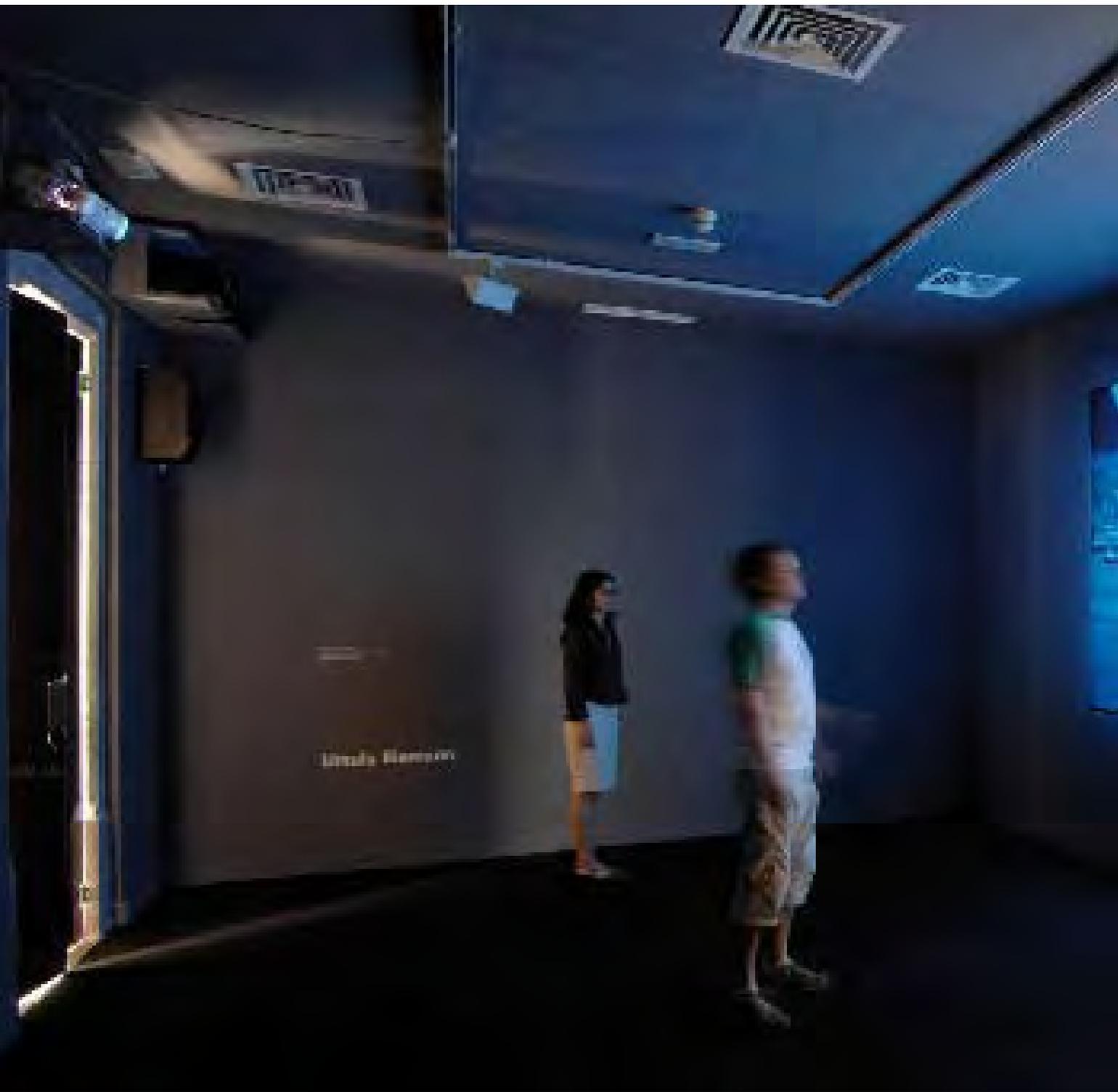
THE PARADIGM SHIFTER





Above and below left: *Black Sea Files* at Peacock Gallery, Aberdeen, Scotland
 Below right: *Black Sea Files* at Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden
 Right page above: *Black Sea Files* at VOID, Derry, Northern Ireland
 Right page below: *Black Sea Files* at Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden





Contained Mobility at the Atlantic Center for Contemporary Art, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Spain





Above: *Sahara Chronicle* at VOID, Derry, Northern Ireland
Below: *Sahara Chronicle* at Arnolfini, Bristol, England
Right page above: *Sahara Chronicle* at Arnolfini, Bristol, England
Right page below: *Sahara Chronicle* at TEK Festival, Rome, Italy



AGADEZ CHRONICLE

Alla Conferenza di Berlino (1884), l'immenso territorio deserto del Tuarag fu diviso in cinque e frazionato in Algeria, Libia, Mali, Niger e Chad. Agadez, nel cuore del Niger, è la porta di ingresso a sud del Sahara e la capitale del Tuarag. Negli anni Novanta la città diventò un focolaio della ribellione del Tuarag, accesa dall'esclusione della redistribuzione della ricchezza legata al giacimento di uranio scoperti nel loro territorio al culmine della Guerra Fredda.

La cultura Tuarag ha elaborato un sistema di trasmissione delle informazioni, di itinerari e conoscenza topografica per gestire la risorsa più preziosa del territorio: la mobilità. Negli ultimi anni, Agadez è diventata il centro di smistamento continentale per i migranti dell'Africa occidentale per i migranti dell'Europa. Rivitalizzando i legami tribali attraverso i confini, i Tuarag hanno rapidamente organizzato il trasporto dei migranti in un network efficiente.

فسم مؤتمربرازين(1884) هته الأرض الصحراوية الخماسعة التي يسكنها الطوارق إلى خمسة أقسام من الجزائر وليبيا ومالي والتيجي وتشاد. تقع أجاديز في قلب التيجي، وهي الواحة الجنوبية للصحراء الأفريقية الكبرى كما أنها عاصمة الطوارق. وفي تسعينيات القرن العشرين، صارت أجاديز أيضا عاصمة لتصويتات التمرد التي قام بها الطوارق والتي انطلقت إثرهمانهم من نصيبهم في ثروة اليورانيوم التي اكتشفت في أرضهم في ذروة الحرب الباردة.

وقد أنشأت ثقافة الطوارق نظاما للمعلومات. وأدلة الطريق والتعرف على تضاريس الأرض. بهدف التحكم في القدرة على الحركة، وتعد هذه القدرة أثمن الموارد في هذه المنطقة الجغرافية. حيث إن أجاديز صارت في السنوات الأخيرة محورا للهجرة على مستوى القارات. فيهمربها مهاجرو غرب أفريقيا في طريقهم إلى المغرب وأوروبا. وقد أعاد الطوارق إحياء الروابط القبلية بينهم عبر الحدود، وسرعان ما نظموا شبكة مواصلات تعمل بكفاءة في نقل المهاجرين.

ESSAYS

THE VIDEO ESSAY AND REAL-WORLD POLITICS

MATERIALIST FEMINISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE VIDEO ESSAYS OF URSULA BIEMANN

Angela Dimitrakaki

Despite all the difficulties involved in charting the terrain of visual art today, four tendencies stand out: first, the confluence of “art” and “documentation”; second, the advent of a new “cinematic regime” that, accelerated by the digital “revolution”, prioritizes the moving image as such rather than distinct media; third, related to the above, the tenet of the post-medium condition, which clearly exceeds the scope of the cinematic and refers us to art in general; finally, the overall entrenchment of art by various institutions of a corporate mentality. Critics have noted, for instance, yet another institutionally endorsed “back to basics” attitude promoting “reactionary registers such as the New Gentleness and New Formalism” through various “returns to painting, sculpture and objecthood”.¹ These tendencies describe a rather polarized condition for contemporary art. What remains unclear is the fate of the moving image, since references to a new cinematic regime and the technologies that underpin it do not incite us to think about the political interventions enabled in its context, or even about what moving-image art can offer that “popular” visual culture cannot.

My intention here then is to discuss Ursula Biemann’s video essays as exemplary of a practice that, I will argue, cuts across key problematics of contemporary visual art as described above. Biemann’s video essays make manifest what is at stake in the debate about the relation between art and documentation. They are a hybrid practice, although their relationship to the post-medium condition is more complex; they see the moving image in the digital age as a historically prioritized mediator of a global condition and try to do with it what popular visual culture does not; and they impli-

¹ See Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Anthony Davies, “Basic Instinct: Trauma and Retrenchment 2000-4,” in *Mute: Culture and Politics after the Net*, volume 29 (February 2005), 1-14 (specifically 8-9).

citly reveal what art's current return to "basics" obscures from view. Yet what makes Biemann's work contemporary in a strong sense is its attempt to move beyond the mainstays of a postmodern idiom. More importantly, in their complex re-politicization of the feminine subject, enabled by the shift of focus from "patriarchy" to "capitalism", the specific video essays examined in this chapter constitute a convincing negation of the premises of post-feminism, if the term describes – as it often did in the 1990s – the advent of a sufficiently transformed social field where a feminist politics is redundant. In addition, this body of work articulates an unapologetic re-assertion of materialist feminism.

The video essays' primary concern is to engage critically with the circuits where women find "their place" in the global capitalist economy, with a major role reserved for the geographies realized by the labor relations (and their "satellite" identities) required by capital in late modernity and the ways these re-fashion both female subjectivity and the consumption of women in spaces ranging from the factory floor and the Internet to the brothel and the desert. "Consumption" is invoked to suggest Biemann's departure from an earlier moment of materialist feminism that investigated primarily the *production* of gendered subjects, which dictated for many the turn to psychoanalysis. Undeniably, part of this rich and diverse body of theory addressed the consumption of the feminine as well, but this consumption mainly referred to the feminine as image. In this regard, Biemann's practice marks a crucial turn while also providing a platform for revisiting the "aesthetics and politics" debates of the 1960s and 1970s. Implicitly, the video essays address the processes by which history effects the re-signification of concepts. History for Biemann demands the examination of – and reflection upon – a horizontal archive (structured by space rather than time) and a synthesis of synchronicities of diverse orders (say, the tourist gaze in physical space and cyberspace), connected and always somehow in motion.

But what does it mean to make a connection between Biemann's video essays and a re-engagement with materialist feminism? First, Biemann's practice unambiguously prioritizes the economic as the axis of social subjectivity. Furthermore, this return to materialism incorporates the availability of digital technology to reflect on how capital organizes itself as reality and vice versa, how reality is organized as capital. The video essays pay equal attention to production (travelling and investigating with a video camera, filming *in situ* and collecting "footage" from disparate sources) and post-production (the manipulation of the image, giving us frames within frames, split-screens, the destabilization of the "documentary effect" of a hand-held camera, the wide range of combinations of image and text, or voice-over and image). The above points are, however, not meant to suggest that a materialist strategy is somehow embedded in the formal elements of the work. Rather, what I wish to put forward is the notion that the materialist strategy of Biemann's work is not reducible to its thematic focus but extends to its methods as well, as it sets out to map the multiple instances where an expanded feminine – both materially instantiated and ideologically coded – enters the circuits of global capital. My efforts will concentrate on exploring the historicity of Biemann's practice, on how it came to being and on the discourses that have shaped it. And I am also to understand how this practice, when linked to a materialist-feminist project, intervenes in contemporary discourses and practices that traverse cultural production but are not limited to it. I begin with the latter.

THE MATERIALIST-FEMINIST VIDEO ESSAY I: RELATIONS IN SPACE

Biemann's video essays involve the re-appropriation of video from the ideological construct of "video art" – a construct that, as Martha Rosler has argued, authorized the entry of video in the museum – and its re-signification as a tool of social research capable of challenging art as an *institution* condemned perpetually to re-assert its own boundaries.² The "back to basics" tendency discussed earlier is precisely an expression of this recently re-claimed autonomy of art. Biemann's writings, as much as her video work, go some way towards countering claims to a new autonomy of art, in acknowledgement of the fact that the new order of capital leaves little room for such territorial considerations. It is in this sense that the video essay has emerged today as a more historically relevant (rather than new) hybrid form. One aspect of the work's engagement with digital media is that images purloined and reworked from digital sources enter, through the video-essay format, social spaces that may be excluded from the World Wide Web's universal but exclusive community. It is integral to Biemann's practice that her video essays are shown in art galleries, at video and film festivals and activists' meetings, reaching widely diverse constituencies.

Primarily interested in representing the concrete embodiment of abstract economic relations, Biemann understands the video essay as a "practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political" and "a distinct aesthetic strategy".³ Two things need to be noted. First, the mention of an *aesthetic strategy* does not designate and deliver "the artistic" as separate from the social. Rather, the video essay witnesses the rise of the aesthetic as a currently privileged dimension both of the social world and of the process by which this social world becomes *intelligible*. Like Fredric Jameson, Biemann's work begins from the premise that the ubiquity of the image is a *symptom* of the overt aestheticization of every aspect of life in late capitalism.⁴ Secondly, the prioritization of the moving image, and especially video, is far from accidental. Formalist analyses of the moving image stress the "spatial density" of video where "the characteristics of temporal representation of spatial distance in the interval [of the film image] are restructured into forms of the image that *spatially* represent temporal distance through different layers of images merged with each other into the same image unit".⁵ Seen in this light, Biemann's choice of video acquires almost a symbolic significance, since it registers, and works with, simultaneity, compression,



Writing Desire, Remote Sensing, Europlex

- 2 Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture and Bay Area: BAVC, 1990).
- 3 Ursula Biemann, ed., *Stuff It! The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 8.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 109-12.
- 5 My emphasis. Yvonne Spielmann, "Expanding Film into Digital Media", *Screen*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 138.

inter-layering and opacity, all key attributes of the geographies of global capital. It is however worth recalling Raymond Bellour's observation that video, a technology of the image, is best understood as a practice of writing.⁶ Despite Biemann's mention of Chris Marker's film essays of the early 1980s as the ancestry of her practice, her turn to video, especially in its coupling with the essay, is an implicit prioritization of both *textual* and *spatializing* critical cultural practices. This, of course, challenges the facile categorization of any hybrid practice (here, the video essay) under the umbrella term "post-medium". Instead, the video essays propose a strategic intermediality, since "within one and the same artefact, simultaneous and oscillating, both verbal and iconic signs are present...".⁷ And yet the textuality animating the materialist-feminist video essay hardly abides by the postmodern law of the "unfixity" of meaning and the "open-endedness" of the text. This becomes clear even by a brief analysis of Biemann's three major projects to date dealing with women in late capitalism.

Performing the Border, Writing Desire, Remote Sensing

Performing the Border (1999, 43 min.) takes as its subject Mexican working-class women. Divided into four chapters ("The Plant", "The Settlement", "Sex Work", "The Killings"), this video essay is concerned with the *maquiladoras* of the Mexico – USA border where many U.S. corporations have their assembly plants. A key issue is the role of a contemporary working-class femininity in shaping the border.⁸ This video essay offers a complex tour of border culture, from the slum neighborhoods to the male strippers of the night clubs of Juarez frequented by young female workers and to the efforts to revive traditional union politics.⁹



Performing the Border

Performing the Border's greatest moment is possibly its concluding section. "The Killings" narrates a situated form of criminality: the abductions, rapes, and murders (the notorious "femicides") of women in the desert by the border, lending the latter a creepier form of bio-political identity. The victims are the female workers who have to cross the desert in the early hours to go to the *maquiladoras*. By forging an explicit link between the border-operating serial killer and capitalism, the video essay revisits Donna Haraway's much-hyped figure of the female cyborg from her widely cited essay of 1985, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the

6 Raymond Bellour, "Video Writing" in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture 1991), 421.

7 Aage A. Hansen-Löve quoted in Spielmann, 136.

8 See Imre Szeman, "Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 24.1/2 (January-June 2002), 94-95.

9 See Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums: Urban Revolution and the Informal Proletariat," *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004), 17.

Late Twentieth Century”.¹⁰ Fifteen years later, *Performing the Border* suggests that the female cyborg, actualized by the technologies of advanced capitalism, remains a split identity that is most certainly classed – rather conspicuously so in the case of Third World women.¹¹ The bodies of the female workers turn into cyborgs on the factory floor, when they enter “culture”, which for these women is the *direct consumption* of their energies by capital (the video shows these women connected with cables to their benches).¹² But outside the work space, where this identity collapses, when the link with technology breaks down, the bodies of women return to their pre-cyborg state: they relapse into vulnerable, gendered human biologies and social identities. The exchangeability of the working-class women in the maquiladoras is symbolically replicated in the desert where in many cases the clothes of one female corpse are found to be worn by another.

Writing Desire (2000, 25 min.) takes as its focus the economy of desire of the Internet – an “economy” in the literal and metaphorical sense, where the boundaries between economics and sexuality further blend. The video essay turns its gaze at women who use the Internet to pursue virtual, and then real, encounters with potential husbands from affluent geographies – women who “freely” enter into new forms of arranged marriages with Western men. *Writing Desire* articulates an intricate narrative that incorporates the economic and the ideological: women excluded from the West (the true object of desire) seem to believe that if they treat their *femininity as a form of capital* and invest wisely, they will be rewarded with profit. And since “in economies with highly developed financial markets, capital itself becomes a commodity”, the Internet facilitates – indeed, makes possible and encourages – the entry of these women into such economies, suggesting that the form of entry is that of the capital-commodity.¹³ This advanced form of reification casts the Internet in a double role: its materiality as technology, contributing to the expansion of the global market, and its ideological form through which *appearances that are not necessarily false* (femininity as capital-commodity) *conceal nevertheless real relations* (the reification of women in an advanced market place).¹⁴ That this materialist reading is tentatively proposed through the analytical structure of *Writing Desire*, rather than authoritatively asserted in the video essayist’s own narrative, makes this video essay an exemplary form of intervention in the often elusive social spaces of advanced technology.

Remote Sensing (2001, 53 min.) follows the movement of women around the globe, addressing specifically the “displacement of large numbers of women” either looking

10 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181. Originally in *Socialist Review*.

11 “It is not the jet-setting, palm-using business elite nor the skate-boarder computer nerd who retires at age 30, it is the Mexican female cyborg who is linked to her workbench by an electric discharge cable and returns to her shack without electricity at night.” Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video” in Biemann, 2003, 86.

12 “Experience shows that the average eyesight is sharp enough for about eight years, then she will have to be replaced by a fresh young worker. This means that her organic vision is consumed in the making of the visualization technologies our society relies on. These female bodies need to be continuously recycled.” Biemann in Szeman, 99.

13 Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell 1991 [1985]), 87.

14 “The simplicity of commodity fetishism makes it a starting point for analyzing non-economic relations. It establishes a dichotomy between appearance and concealed reality (without the former being necessarily false) which can be taken up in the analysis of ideology”. Bottomore, 87.

for work or entering labor relations against their will.¹⁵ The video essay observes a contradiction between the encouragement of (women's) movement in cyberspace and the function of the border as the least deregulated space of human activity, through which women are nevertheless ushered into the sex industry. *Remote Sensing* integrates and reworks images and data from NASA satellites, among other sources, in order to rethink the ability of contemporary technology to track movement. It uses this technology to *explain* movement as a profoundly gendered and classed activity.

Significantly, there is no glamorization of non-Western peasant societies exemplifying the doctrine of “uneven development” that profoundly complicates the trajectories of capitalist migration: in the first half of the video we hear about how certain Chinese farmers abduct Vietnamese women for breeding purposes and as unpaid “family” labor on farms. Back in Europe, a journey across the Czech/German border where women stand semi-naked in the cold becomes more profoundly melancholic when the voice-over narration informs us that the Eastern European prostitutes “feel that where they are and what they are is only *temporary*”. “Where” and “what”: *place* and *the self* become conflated, immersed, disoriented and exchangeable in the abyss of the fleeting. The question is whether this “fleeting” differs in a strong sense from that of an earlier modernity articulated through the urban mapping of the male flâneur and the “face in the crowd”. If it does, as *Remote Sensing* suggests, then this is because contemporary technology far exceeds the specificity of the urban, zooming-out to survey the interconnectivity of multiple spaces. Indeed, the production of global space as a form of technological achievement is propagated by capital *as a social relation*, or a “pan-capitalist reality”, as the female voice states over a slowly rotating, frame-by-frame image of the half-dark, half-illuminated globe. *Remote Sensing* repudiates the postmodern fixation on the “micro” as an end in itself and reasserts the *currently necessary* universality of the materialist-feminist project as a response to the dominant “grand narrative” of global (capitalist) space.



Remote Sensing

In general then, the video essay becomes an instrument for thinking in relational terms and for making sense of “crude” data. This is precisely why the video essay is currently gaining momentum as an adequate format for extending and renewing the project of materialist feminism in the arts and beyond: the wider scope of Biemann’s project appears to be the re-articulation of a *comparative methodology* that, working against the dominant tendencies of postmodern relativism, returns us to the critical observation of space as productive of that which postmodernists despised most: a “totality”. This totality provides the video essays’ outside (capitalism) and the video essays’ task is to reveal its presence while simultaneously acknowledging it as *constitutive of their own existence*. Capitalism (the “outside”) offers both the technologies that make the video essays possible and is also these technologies’ recursive subtext.

15 See www.geobodies.org/video/sensing/sensing_descript.html, accessed 5 May 2005.

The hybrid form of the video essay appears to admit to a certain failure – the failure of contemporary art to contest what Jameson has called “the perceptual system of late capitalism” that has made the safeguarding of a “properly aesthetic sphere... obsolete”.¹⁶ In its disavowal of this failure and its implications, the art establishment today is actually bent on defending such a properly aesthetic sphere and this is why the contemporary art museum embraces those practices that, while often annulling the mobility of the moving image in the installation environments where the former has to operate as sculpture, simultaneously assert the primacy of fiction over non-fiction, with a distinct emphasis on spirituality, transcendental subjects and the construction of a surrealist rather than realist space.¹⁷ Biemann’s materialist-feminist video essays find themselves at the antipode of these tendencies both in the connections they pursue between gendered subjects and economic forces, and in the kind of authorial subject they propose as the narrative’s nodal point. What follows then is a summary of the features of this project that best illustrate its historically specific modalities of intervention.

The Instrumentality of the Author

On a first level, the intention of the video essays is to inflect quantitative data with qualitative meaning and place themselves in a common space for activism, art and theory. But to achieve this without resorting to a prescriptive didacticism in the guise of “objectivity” of which political discourses have often been accused was the real challenge – or, more accurately, the challenge of a realist method (a point to which I shall return). To counter this, the video essays’ narrative instantiates a subjective “I”, the video essayist. But the role of this figure is far from transparent. For some, it will undoubtedly imply the revival of an older form of pre-Althusserian Marxist humanism, although it would be more correct to say that this particular revival of the authorial subject constitutes an effort to re-articulate the relationship between “structure” and “agency”. Both terms have a double point of reference: “structure” refers us to the mode of production and the particular configurations of image and text, while “agency” refers us to the work of the narrator and that of the viewer. The video essays are the platform where the relationship among these four points of reference is negotiated.

To grasp the connection between these four referents we must consider the video essay’s strategic use of the moving image as “detached display” where the viewing subject’s perspective never coincides with the perspective of the monitor.¹⁸ The moving image is thus seen as fundamentally expressive of alienation, and the subjective “I”, to which Biemann ascribes such importance, is an effort to alleviate this effect and propose this detached architecture of the image as the outcome of human action on technology. In addition, the video essayist’s speech (as voice-over and text) typically does not pose questions: instead, it operates through the statement, which can be either continuous or discontinuous with the image. It is through this unpredictable relationship between statement and image that theory oscillates between a poetic re-inscription and its normative, exegetic capacity. And paradoxically, the constant effort of this speech to rise beyond ideology cannot be characterized as either suc-

16 Jameson, 110-12.

17 See James Meyer, “‘The Strong and the Weak’: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy” *Grey Room* 17 (Fall 2004), 92.

18 See Noel Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63.

cessful or failing. Hence Biemann stresses that her main interest is in the “artificial construct”¹⁹ that the video essayist, the subjective “I”, necessarily produces despite her/his emphasis on an objective, extra-discursive reality. In other words, we are faced here with the instrumental revival of the authorial subject that makes explicit the video essayist’s own struggle with ideology.

Significantly, the video essays depart from the autobiographical “I”, a key strategy of second-wave feminism in the arts which rests on the *political* articulation of a transformed female subject (a strategy expressed in the slogan “the personal is political”). The video essays thus resist psychoanalysis in an effort to shift attention from the individual to the collective, by replacing feminist counter-cinema’s emphasis on fiction with counter-geography’s emphasis on non-fiction.²⁰ This resistance to psychoanalysis is indicative of the major “turn” that the historically precipitated rise of the feminist video essay constitutes today. The non-autobiographical “I” permits the video essayist both to be in the artificial construct of representation (where the shift from the unconscious as a marker of the individual gives way to ideology as the unconscious’s equivalent in the arena of political struggle) and to register the attempt to articulate a speech at the margins of this artificial construct, exemplifying a radical desire to cut through ideology. The non-fictional, subjective “I” is constantly undermined by the “objective” but dispersed reality it strives to represent. In the course then of rendering visible the process of its making – from the moment of proposing the connections and assembling the information to the moment of screening the edited, manipulated, stratified results – *the video essay mimics the position of the alienated spectator, a subject who is nevertheless keen to resist her alienation*. This is the instance of *gratification* that the video essay constructs for its audiences.

The Turn to the Multitude of Femininity

The video essays write into the increasingly audiovisual language of representation the *movement of the multitude of femininity*. In the context of the most contemporary of contemporary political theory, which is attempting to rethink Marxism through the real and hyperreal geographies of capital, the “multitude” refers us to a peculiar form of collectivity that emerges in a provisional form out of networked activity where singularities engage in a variety of encounters. The current ascendancy of a political theory of the multitude and the shift of focus witnessed in the practice of the video essay appeared at the same historical juncture, at the end of the 20th century, as responses to the new conditions of capital. The resurrection of the “multitude” is – not so curiously – witnessed in parallel with the resurrection of the author, and both trends testify to the demand for agency. Biemann’s video essays share three basic premises with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s analysis in their celebrated, but equally controversial, *Empire* and *Multitude*, published in 2000 and 2004 respectively.

First, the view that there is no longer a place external to capital, no remaining space to be conquered: in general terms, this is the historical condition prompting as much as enabling the function of the video essay as a comparative methodology addressing the interpenetration of capitalist spaces; in particular terms, this is, for

19 Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video” in *Stuff it* 2003, 85.

20 Biemann draws on Saskia Sassen’s definition of the latter term to undermine the positivism currently embedded in the discourse of networks: whereas women’s counter-cinema was a practice of subversion directed against the normative. See Biemann in Szeman 2002, 101.

example, why *Writing Desire* turns to cyberspace as a prime example of new space literally invented by the technologies of capital and used to expand the market.

Secondly, the view that contemporary, global capital (articulated as “empire”) is not just productive of classed subjects but of a *whole fabric of life*: the multitude of femininities that Biemann traces includes but also exceeds, the same as Hardt and Negri’s “multitude”, a working class proper, shifting attention instead to *the movement of the global poor* – arguably, an anticipated shift, given the feminization of poverty today.

Thirdly, the view that resistance to the practices of global capital is an important parameter in shaping the geographies of capital: the “documentary” aspect of the video essays often appears to serve the purpose of balancing the critical melancholy of the video essayist’s own reflections, by registering the efforts made by dispossessed subjects to name the problem, analyze its repercussions, and resist its effects. Yet for the time being, the video essays *work towards*, but have not yet achieved, a representational platform that would completely replace victimization with agency. Needless to say, that would be quite an achievement. Biemann’s work resists the temptation (to which Hardt and Negri succumb) to name a new revolutionary subject. To name a new revolutionary subject would in a sense be premature, for the very reason that the movement (firstly, in geographical and, secondly, in political terms) of women does not permit such leaps of imagination. Therefore Biemann’s video essays constitute, to an extent, a critique of Hardt and Negri’s unreflective optimism that amounts to a bizarre ending to their otherwise perceptive analysis. Similarly, the video essays depart from the unspoken rule in much feminist art theory to search obsessively for successful instances of “subversion” in women’s cultural practices. Biemann’s turn to social (as opposed to cultural) practices enables her to record and negotiate *processes of resistance* but also to accept and render visible the interplay between coercion and consent that produces the vast majority of feminine subjectivities today. The video essay thus signals the end of liberal (post)feminism and the emergence of the feminism of Empire, and that is why references to “patriarchy” have been replaced by references to “global capitalism”.

Biemann’s video essays perform this double role: on the one hand, they provide concrete evidence that if there is indeed an emergent collectivity it remains profoundly gendered. Secondly, the gendering (feminization) of the multitude poses some important questions about the hegemonic presence of “immaterial labor” that allegedly has a global scope – a key concept in Hardt and Negri’s analysis.²¹ “Immaterial labor” is the work done by the video essayist: the subjective “I”, the resurrected author, brings together information, transvaluates images, de-naturalizes values. She encases her data in theory and technology, and *cooperation* (another key term in *Empire*) is indeed “completely immanent” to this kind of activity. Yet the data are about the lives of other women as producers of precisely “non-immaterial labor”: the cable that connects female Mexican workers to their work benches and makes a cyborg out of them leads to the production of material goods in a way that requires the consumption of the body’s materiality. Thus the video essays dispel any notion that the “biopolitical production” of the multitude of femininity – operating on a planetary scale – is patterned

21 “Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production as immaterial labor – that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 290.

upon immaterial labor (even if the latter is a component of women's labor), drawing a sharp distinction between their "work" and the "work" of the researcher/videomaker.

However, the attempted deconstruction of the documentary mode through the rejection of a purportedly objective vision is never completed. For in embracing contradiction, the video essay exploits to a certain extent the illusionism of the moving image to leave open the possibility of traditional "realism" for those who need it. The video essays anticipate that different audiences will prioritize different registers and effects of the image-text: some will be attracted to the meditative aspects of the video essayist's speech, others to the recitation of hard numbers, factual information or the emotive response invited by the interviewed or observed subjects. Also, the video essays' desire to reach a wide range of audiences prompts a more *populist* re-inscription of theory, ranging from a mimesis of poetry to the tropes of advertising. The fragments of text hovering on the screen become intelligible not as a result of their "objective value" but in the ideologically overdetermined positions foregrounded by the video essayist in her attempt to counter a dominant ideology. The problem then is that the viewer, unless fully versed in deconstruction techniques, may very well be unaware of the processes by which "an artificial construct" is indeed constructed, and may forget that the video essay uses data to illustrate a situation on which it takes a "position". The eclectic use of documentary techniques will only facilitate this misreading. In other words, the video essay has not yet resolved the thorny issue of realism. But to understand this problematics we need to turn to the past.

THE MATERIALIST-FEMINIST VIDEO ESSAY II: RELATIONS IN TIME

The renewed interest in the video essay, of which Biemann's work is an example, is not merely an outcome of transnational capitalism but also a response to earlier feminist debates, encompassing everything from film to visual art, where realism was often cited as a point of contention. The critique of feminist art practices attempting to show what "real women are really like" is a theme that runs through many of the essays archived in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Framing Feminism*.²² The reference to the video essay as an image-text practice echoes Pollock's strategic emphasis on Mary Kelly's "scripto-visual" work in the 1970s and 1980s. What Kelly's practice shares with Biemann's video essays is the conscious effort to articulate a representational space where the image interweaves with its own analysis of "real (female) subjects" to enable the transgression of conventional modes of pleasure in images of women. But there are important differences between Kelly's and Biemann's work, among which the latter's departure from the politicized autobiographical "I" is of great importance. Whereas Kelly's work retained a strong interest in the author (Kelly) as an experiential subject, as for example seen in *Post-Partum Document* from the 1970s, where the artist approached her experience as a mother through the lens of a highly theorized discourse, Biemann uses theory in a more ludic fashion and her utterances in the form of statements are closer in spirit to Adrian Piper's and Barbara Kruger's photo-text montages where we find the statement-text superimposed on the image. The non-autobiographical authorial subject serves to contest what Victor

²² Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement*, (London: Pandora, 1985).

Burgin has called “the narcissistic fervor with which humanist ideology defends the “individual””,²³ manifested in the ease with which the erstwhile politicized feminist autobiographical subject deteriorated into a profoundly de-politicized confessional mode animating much post-feminist work and fully endorsing the celebrity-artist culture.

But the roots of the materialist-feminist video essay should also be sought in cinema, especially in the complex exchanges between Third- and First-World cinemas – the attending to large numbers of women, and especially to the routes through and by which Third- and Second-World women are allowed to enter First-World spaces, coupled with the explicit imperative to use the video-essay text politically to situate the video essay closer to a Third-Cinema modality. Michael Chanan has discussed the mixed ancestry of Third Cinema as such which, he has argued, “is not restricted to the third world, even in the original conception of the idea,” since the authors of the Third Cinema manifesto “immediately cited examples which come from the first world,” including “Chris Marker in France [...]”²⁴ Already in the late 1960s, then, Third Cinema brings together post-colonial critique and new-left topics in order to effect politically mobilized experiments with the languages of the moving image. Significantly, Biemann also cites as her inspiration Chris Marker and specifically Marker’s “film essays”, citing *Sans soleil* of 1982–83.²⁵ *Sans soleil* [*Sunless*] opens up to global space in a way that highlights both the referenced objective reality and its necessarily partial integration into the narrative (the voice-over of a woman reading out letters addressed to an unspecified subject and functioning at the same time as a provisional, poetic commentary on the image). On the other side of the Atlantic, in 1980–1981, Edin Velez used the term “video essay” to describe his “non-linear, poetic documentaries.”²⁶ Velez’s work was of a distinctly anti-colonial ethos and his video essays seemed to provide a solution to what was effectively *a problem of language*: how to re/represent the contradictions suffered in the context of the Mayan colonized society without pretending to be emotionally and intellectually unaffected by them. In the 1980s the moving-image essay becomes of increasing relevance through works such as John Akomfrah’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986), which addressed race and its discontents in Britain. In any case, in the 1980s, both in Europe and America, we witness a move away from the choice “art, documentary, or theory” and towards a hybrid form of engagement that constitutes an attempt to reform a realist method. It can hardly be a coincidence that the realist debate in feminist film criticism was then at its peak.

Already in the first half of the 1980s both E. Ann Kaplan in *Women & Film* and Annette Kuhn in *Women’s Pictures* raised the issue: was realism a politically viable strategy for the feminist filmmaker? Their accounts make obvious that although the feminist objective was to change the reality (life) of real women, realism was not necessarily the means most suited to that goal. Importantly, it was an issue relevant to fiction and documentary film alike, since both these representational practices could seek to reference “the experience of ordinary people”, which was what realism was about.²⁷

23 Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 211.

24 Michael Chanan, “The Changing Geography of Third Cinema,” *Screen*, Vol 38, No 4 (Winter 1997), 374.

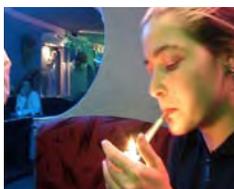
25 Ursula Biemann, “The Video Essay in the Digital Age” introduction, *Stuff It – the video essay in the digital age*, ed. Biemann 2003, 8.

26 Boyle, *Illuminating Video*, eds. Hall and Fife (New York: Aperture, 1991), 65.

27 Ann E. Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Routledge, 1988 [1983]), 126.

The emergence of feminist counter-cinema in the late 1970s is a direct effort to move beyond the mere modification of already tested realist techniques. European counter-cinema and its British branch, identified as “avant-garde theory cinema”, was the 1970s answer to the question of realism in the visual field. A prevalent feature of avant-garde theory cinema was the intention to do away with the distinction between theory and practice. Along with its involvement with semiology, structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis, Kaplan notes its deliberate “*mix[ing of] documentary and fiction*”.²⁸ Kuhn also turns to an examination of feminist counter-cinema, identifying the two main tendencies of “deconstruction” and “feminine writing”.²⁹ Beginning with Johnston’s admonition about the importance of articulating the “female subject in process...by textual practice”, Kuhn deploys the notion of “feminine cinematic writing”, a concept adapted from the French term *écriture féminine*. Here, “narrativity and narrative discourse” along with “fiction as against non-fiction” and “openness as against closure” are preferred sites for the inscription of the “other” voice of the feminine. As for those unrepentant realists, there was a demand for unobtrusive technology.³⁰ We are further informed that voice-over is absent from feminist documentary unless it is the voice of the female autobiographical subject and that such films largely function as oral history. Kaplan urges women to begin the job of *reconstruction* following the knowledge accumulated in the 1970s.

Starting with the mobility and unobtrusiveness of video, the fusion of theory and practice, and the emphasis on textuality, it already becomes obvious that Biemann’s video essays converge in many ways with feminist strategies aiming at the politicization of the moving image as much as they attempt to address the shortcomings of some dominant tendencies. Indeed, they attempt a form of “reconstruction”, as Kaplan suggested, that would not however resort to a naive realism, addressing instead the gap between “theoretically aware deconstruction” and “accessibility” (a code name for realism). Biemann’s work constitutes an extension of the project of the deliberate “mixing” of documentary with other forms of narration. In departing from the feminist documentary by breaking the rule of the voice-over, this work is also, in its self-reflexive focus on its own constructedness, antithetical to a project of oral history. The intensification of key features of global capital expansion, including the particular roles reserved for women in the visible (legitimate) and hidden (illegitimate) “networked” economies, dictated an engagement with the given modes in which information is collected, processed, and analyzed rather than with the disarticulation of dominant gender codes. In practice this has meant a preoccupation not with the mixing of documentary and fiction, but with the mixing of documentary (the empirical) and the *re-articulation of the authorial subject*. The resurrected authorial subject, the



Remote Sensing, Europlex

²⁸ My emphasis. Kaplan 1988, 138.

²⁹ Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1993 [1982]), 160.

³⁰ Kuhn, 147.

subjective, non-fictional “I” encountered in Biemann’s video essays, performs several roles at once: it negates postmodern “openness” by proposing a coherent locus of meaning; it acknowledges the always “situated” viewer whose position the “I” mimics; and it reinstates the relationship of the author to reality *as materially stable but discursively unstable*, challenging thus the strategic primacy of fiction. Significantly, whereas for second-wave feminism, “fiction” was an attractive option for the self-consciousness it displayed, the institutionalization and de-politicization of “fiction” in the visual arts by the end of the 1990s, and especially in the art embraced by the art museum, has made it less of an attractive option today. Biemann’s intentions explicitly cite the performative aspect that is the *modus operandi* of the video essay.

My videos tackle *topics which are typically associated with a documentary practice* – topics over which feminists have articulated clear positions in the past decades – only to break open speculative spaces by making unusual associations and juxtapositions which defy causal explanations or the simple affirmation of facts. The process *from the imaginary to representation* is not a smooth, linear one. How can you document this process? You cannot. All you can do is perform it.³¹

Her position is indeed very close to John Roberts’ reading of Henri Lefebvre’s “model of critical practice based on art and theory as *practical* forms of knowledge and activity.” Roberts explains: “Lefebvre wants to drive home the point that artistic and theoretical activity is actually *performed out of* the contradictions of everyday life.”³² But of course, Biemann’s video essays are not strictly speaking concerned with “the everyday”, which belongs perhaps to the discourse of an earlier phase of modernity. That “the everyday”, along with “the autobiographical”, was recuperated within second-wave feminism and extended thus its lifespan all the way to the “post-feminist” 1990s testifies to the essentially *modern* discourse of second-wave feminism – which provided its fundamental contradiction in the context of hegemonic postmodern demands, leading to the dissolution of Western women’s movements in general and the women’s art movement in particular. Yet materialist feminism in the twenty-first century makes a critical departure from the everyday to large-scale transformations where autobiographical devices fade away and where the return of the authorial subject becomes a *condition* for turning the gaze outwards. By tracing the movement of large numbers of women, *always exceeding the analytical capabilities of a subjective, narrative “I”*, it tests the realized power of a mode of production against the unrealized power of the subjects this very mode of production forms. The emphasis on this precarious, dialectical asymmetry is an acknowledgement of the fact, to quote David Harvey, “that elements, things, structures, and systems do not exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain and undermine them.”³³ For all these reasons, the materialist-feminist video essay makes manifest the possibilities of a politically aware practice, more radically irreverent than predictably ironic in its crossing through art, activism, and theory.

“Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-first Century” has been published in a longer version in the *Oxford Art Journal*, 30/2, 2007

31 My emphasis. Electronic interview with the author (December 2004).

32 Emphasis in the text. John Roberts, *Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 8-9.

33 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 49

GLOBAL SEX WORK AND VIDEO ADVOCACY: THE GEOPOLITICS OF RHETORICAL IDENTIFICATION

Wendy S. Hesford

Sad, foreboding music plays as the camera focuses on partially-hidden women, their faces blackened out, looking down or facing away from the camera as they tell stories about the global sex trade.¹ Narratives of confinement, betrayal, violation, and rescue characterize the documentary video *Open Your Eyes*, produced by the International Organization for Migration, as part of their counter-trafficking campaign. The opening image depicts this betrayal and violation through a close-up shot on an unnamed woman's face and bare shoulders. Her vulnerability is highlighted when, unexpectedly, a black-gloved hand smashes an invisible pane of glass between the woman and the viewer, fragmenting her face and startling the audience. The text below her reads, in English and Czech, "OPEN YOUR EYES."²

Human rights is an empowering and disciplining discourse; for instance, the exposure of human rights violations can threaten nation-states and governments with sanctions deployed for political purposes. In *Open Your Eyes*, however, the disciplining function of human rights discourse is transported to victims and potential victims, to whom the video is targeted. The women who provide testimony in *Open Your Eyes*

1 Human rights groups estimate that more than 700,000 people are trafficked annually worldwide, with a sizable portion of those trafficked from South Asia. Reliable statistics are not available due to covert channels of human trafficking (hr-education@hrea.org). The Global Human Rights Education fact sheet indicates that trafficking has grown expediently in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. They also report that the CIA estimates that between 45,000-50,000 women and children are trafficked into the U.S. under false pretenses. Additionally, UNICEF estimates that more than 200,000 children are enslaved by cross-border smuggling in West and Central Africa.

2 International Organization for Migration. *Open Your Eyes*, 2001.

are those who fled their situations and sought help from the embassy or city officials. Their stories are mobilized by the International Office of Migration to support a larger cautionary tale. *Open Your Eyes* frames women's victimization narratives by the imperatives of border control and the increased surveillance of migrating bodies, with little recognition of the causes for such movements, which include the opening of borders to trade and tourism, war and military enterprises on foreign territory, gender discrimination, poverty, improved communication and transport links, and the lucrative profits that can be made in the sex industry.

The identification of women as passive and naïve victims lured and tricked into sex work, and therefore in need of rescuing, is a prominent narrative in international human rights campaigns, including some feminist anti-trafficking campaigns, and in public media representations of the global sex trade. What cultural and political forces contribute to the acceptability and public readiness for such identifications and appropriations? For whom and in what contexts are such narratives and identifications persuasive? In what ways are the models of identity particular to anti-trafficking campaigns part of the pathology of domination?

One way of analyzing why an issue or identification is persuasive or has a sense of urgency at a particular historical moment and context is to examine its *kairos*. *Kairos* is a multi-dimensional term that refers to a situational understanding of space and/or time and the material circumstances – namely the cultural climate – of rhetorical situations.³ To foreground *kairos* in the creation and analysis of political and/or artistic texts is to represent a qualitative notion of time and space, adaptable, opportune, and contingent on material circumstances. *Kairos* is an important concept to rhetorical studies at this particular moment as scholars wrestle with articulating the temporal and spatial features of transnational publics. Transnational publics do not exist in static spatial or temporal locations but rather emerge as processes. Transnational publics may be protean, but as processes they are nonetheless governed by rhetorical principles, cultural norms, and social and economic materialities. To employ *kairos* as part of a transnational analytic is to engage *kairos* with the problem of identification as it operates within and across a range of publics and to examine the experiences and discourses with which particular acts of identification are entangled or associated.

Narratives of victimization are central to legal and cultural representations of human rights violations, such as the trafficking of women and girls. Victims' testimonies are employed in human rights campaigns to persuade audiences to remember; to establish historical consciousness; and to encourage target audiences and institutional venues to act. For instance, U.S. Trafficking Legislation requires individuals to prove they were victims of a severe form of trafficking in order to receive legal benefits

3 See Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 3rd Ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 37. Social theorists use the term "opportunity structures" in ways that parallel rhetoricians' use of the term *kairos*. Similar to the methodology of Kirk and Sikkink, my methodological emphasis on social, cultural, and political "frames" share concerns with constructionists in international relations theory and social movement theory.

and social services.⁴ To empower trafficked and enslaved persons to full access to justice and victim-centered services, organizations such as the Freedom Network, (a national coalition of anti-trafficking organizations and advocates in the US), must ensure that trafficked and enslaved persons are perceived, in part, as victims.

My goal in this essay is not to silence narratives of violation but rather to draw attention to the rhetorical dynamics of women's accounts of violation within the context of anti-trafficking campaigns, with particular attention to contrasting feminist mobilizations of certain identity-narratives and identification practices. The risks are simply too great for women, men, and children around the world for feminist academics and advocates to get caught up in an old debate over incommensurate theoretical views of agency and identity politics. Instead, we need to become more attuned to advocates' (including academics and artists) strategic and at times uncritical mobilization of victimization narratives in ways that may re-victimize women and support repressive cultural and political agendas. Additionally, we need to account for the geopolitical structures and technological developments – nationally and internationally – which affect the mobility and marketability of certain identifications associated with female bodies and sexuality and the transnational spectacle of suffering.

To place identification practices and identity claims within the drama of *kairos* is to understand human agency as a rhetorical-geopolitical practice and identification, or, for that matter, dis-identification, as a means of rhetorical invention and embodied action. As Patricia Williams suggests in another context, identity categories are rhetorical gestures. Such recognition, “complicates the supposed purity of gender, race, voice, boundary [and] allows us to acknowledge the utility of such categorization for certain purposes and the necessity of their breakdown on other occasions.”⁵ Hence, my call to shift our focus from the identity categories of victim and agent to consider material-rhetorical processes of identification and their mobilization within action-defined contexts. Such a shift opens up important new ground for thinking through the complexities and particularities of women's agency and processes of identification that define the terms of transnational feminist scholarship and advocacy. Just as new global connections call out for new studies to understand the “asymmetrical formations created by global capitalism's expansionary moves”,⁶ so too do they call out for new methodologies that enable a contextual rhetorical understanding of identity categories and identification practices as forms of commodity and symbolic exchange. The interrogation of cultural and political practices of rhetorical identification leads us to question the contexts created for and by such identifications. The rhetorical, namely *kairotic*, dimensions of identification remain under theorized in transnational feminist studies and human rights advocacy, and it is precisely in thinking through these concepts that rhetorical studies can most productively meet and shape these fields.

4 U.S. Trafficking Legislation, namely the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000*, aims to assist and to protect trafficked persons and to increase the penalties for traffickers. The Act defines severe forms of trafficking as sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion; or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purposes of subjecting to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.

5 Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10-11.

6 Caren Kaplan, “Hillary Rodham Clinton's Orient: Cosmopolitan Travel and Global Feminist Subjects” *Meridians*. 2.1. (2001), 236.

Feminist Anti-Trafficking Campaigns: Kairoitic Coalitions and Clashes

Recent feminist anti-trafficking campaigns' emphases on victimization narratives can be understood, in part, as a consequence of the primacy of *violence against women* as an organizing device in the international women's human rights movement. Violence against women became a prominent focus of the international women's movement in the early 1980s, which helped to counteract historical divisions between Western feminists, who emphasized women's discrimination, and feminists from the developing world, who underscored development and social justice and its effects on both men and women. The rhetorical appeal of the transnational identity of women as victims of oppression is persuasive, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink suggest, because the issue of "bodily harm resonate[s] with the ideological traditions of Western liberal countries like the U.S. and Western Europe [and] with basic ideas of human dignity common to most cultures ... Issues of bodily harm also lend themselves to dramatic portrayal and personal testimony that are such an important part of network tactics."⁷

Neo-abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns, such as that of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW),⁸ mobilize women's testimonies of victimization as a means of influencing anti-trafficking legislation to resist the movement to legalize prostitution as a form of work and to make the harm of prostitution visible. Within CATW's campaign materials, experiential narratives appeal to a moral understanding of human rights premised on the coherence of "women" as a universal category. Despite recognition of women's consent to sex work, CATW claims that prostitution "reduces all women to sex" and therefore that all prostitution is exploitative. CATW employs a broad definition of prostitution, which includes casual, brothel, escort agency, militarily prostitution, sex tourism, mail-order bride selling and trafficking in women.⁹

In CATW's campaign video *So Great a Violence: Prostitution, Trafficking, and The Global Sex Industry*¹⁰ the representation of sex workers as victims highlights the global and local contexts and forces (for example poverty and sexism) that drive women into sex work, and the material forces that constrain women's choices. But the video does not expand upon the contextual forces in its portrayal and identification of women as victims. An *ethos* of individual victimization emerges over a contextual understanding. According to the testimonies, these women have "little or no sexual autonomy." The video claims, for instance, those women "don't understand that the mail-order bride marketers are promoting women of their country as subordinate domestic and sexual servants." Women's testimonies attest to how they were duped and trapped into prostitution. As one woman, a former sex worker, put it, "I felt trapped, like I had no other choice." She continues, "We have no resources or money to create our own business ... [prostitution] is a survival strategy ... I just wanted to live a nor-

7 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 205.

8 *Coalition Against Trafficking in Women*. 2003. <http://www.catwinternational.org/>

9 CATW defines sexual exploitation as practices "by which persons achieve sexual gratification or financial gain or advancement through the abuse of a person's sexuality by abrogating that person's human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being" (quoted in Crago).

10 Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). *So Deep a Violence: Prostitution, Trafficking, and the Global Sex Industry*. Documentary. CATW, 2000.

mal life.” This woman’s narrative alludes to contextual constraints, including the lack of economic opportunity, but this larger abolitionist argument is one that places little or no responsibility on those contextual constraints.

The commonplace notion that sex workers or consumers of commercial sex are passive victims of patriarchy assumes a static notion of gender identity attached to victimization – an injury or wound – and ignores the myriad forces and range of identifications (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.) that shape human agency and subjectivity. This configuration also produces a static notion of context that does not account for how the economy structures and creates sexual desire and the demand for commercial sex work.¹¹ According to Jo Doezema, activist and researcher with the Network of Sex Work Projects and former sex worker, images of “trafficking victims” as naïve, innocent young women lured by traffickers bears little resemblance to the realities of the majority of women who migrate for work in the sex industry. Yet, as she also notes, “it is easier to gain support for victims of evil traffickers than for challenging structures that violate sex workers’ human rights ... The picture of the ‘duped innocent’ is a pervasive and tenacious cultural myth.”¹² Moreover, a segment of the anti-trafficking lobby depicts “victims of trafficking” as un-emancipated, poor, Third World Women “kidnapped or lured from [their] village[s] with promises of a lucrative, respectable job overseas.”¹³ Choice is an option, Doezema claims, that in some anti-trafficking campaigns is given only to Western prostitutes.¹⁴ The majority of migrant sex workers, she notes, are aware that they will work as prostitutes; what they are lied to about are the slavery-like conditions under which they must work.¹⁵ Stereotypes of prostitutes as social deviants or as helpless victims maintain their rhetorical appeal because they keep the focus on the “other,” and thereby deflect attention from the national and international policies, economic and socio-political forces, and cultural traditions that contribute to the material conditions that drive many women to work in the sex industry. The identification of women solely as victims serves a crime-control agenda that ignores the complications of *transnationality*.

The persuasiveness of neo-abolitionist campaigns in the current climate is achieved through their *kairotic*, namely timely and opportunistic, association with

11 Ara Wilson, “Remapping Trafficking: Conceptualizing Customer Demand” Prepared for the conference, The Dark Side of Globalization: Trafficking in People. The Ohio State University. May 15, 2004.

12 Jo Doezema, “Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy” in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 42-43. Given Doezema’s recognition of the power of rhetorical appeals and pervasive cultural myths, I find her claim that the “image of the ‘trafficking’ victim . . . [is] a figment of neo-Victorian imaginations” a bit puzzling. At the macro-level her claim at first appears reasonable, but what it ignores is the micro-politics of particular rhetorical situations. For example, in this piece, though she does allude to this dynamic elsewhere, she doesn’t address the limitations of geo-political realities and the context that enables the proliferation of such myths. Distinctions need to be made in terms of who or which groups invoke certain cultural myths and with what intent. In other words, claims of the agency of sex workers can just as easily become overly romanticized as cultural myths of victimization. Jo Doezema, “Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women” *Gender Issues* 18.1, January 1, 2000, 23-50.

13 Jo Doezema, “Trafficking in Myths?” in *Sex Work and Sex Workers*. Ed. Barry M. Dank and Roberto Refinetti. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 165-168.

14 Doezema references the 1995 Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women’s Human Rights as an example of a recent publication that reproduces trafficking stereotypes. *Ibid.*, 166.

15 Doezema, 1998, 24.

national narratives of crisis, vulnerability, and security. The anxiety and panic over the violation of moral and geographic boundaries that characterize neo-abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns might be considered, as Doezema suggests, a modern version of century-old cultural myths about “white slavery.”¹⁶ Dominated by repressive moralists, anti-white-slavery campaigns forged alliances with religious and social purity organizations and feminist organizations that sought to abolish prostitution.

Opportunistic alliances continue to exist today between neo-abolitionist feminists and rightwing groups. Although a range of forces paved the way for the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA)¹⁷ by the U.S. Congress in 2000, including the efforts of Senator Paul Wellstone, rightwing and feminist groups coalesced around the passage to advance their own political agendas. As Anna-Louise Crago notes, “a successful joint campaign was mounted to ensure that the TVPA would not only condemn forced labor and forced prostitution but condemn sex work as a whole – forced or not.”¹⁸ For instance, on January 15, 2003, USAID (the United States International Aid Agency) notified organizations around the world that no funds would go to anti-trafficking projects that advocate “prostitution as an employment choice or advocate or support the legalization of prostitution.”¹⁹ The U.S. government is not alone in its anti-prostitution abolitionist agenda but is joined by Christian right-wing groups and non-governmental feminist groups. As Laura Lederer, appointee to the U.S. State Department’s Anti-trafficking Office, put it, faith-based groups have brought “a fresh perspective and a biblical mandate to the women’s movement. Women’s groups don’t understand that the partnership on this issue has strengthened them, because they would not be getting attention internationally otherwise.”²⁰ Likewise, Donna Hughes, an affiliate with CATW, in her response to the new USAID policy, states that “The challenge now is to implement these landmark [anti-prostitution] policies in order to free women and children from enslavement.”²¹

Such couplings, however, can have serious consequences. Josephine Ho from ZiTeng, a sex workers’ rights group in Hong Kong, notes, for example, how domestic policies designed for their national appeal impose themselves on other nations: “first-world feminists and women’s NGOs ... have now joined with UN workers and other international organizations in characterizing Asian sex work as nothing but the traf-

16 Anti-white slavery campaigns in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century attempted to regulate female sexuality under the pretext of protecting women. Then, as now, such claims reflect uncertainties over national identity and fears over women’s increased desire for autonomy. Ibid, 23-4.

17 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. 2000. <usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0801/ijge/gj09>

18 CATW’s web-site www.catwinternational.org refers to Article 3 of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, which supplements the UN Conventions Against Transnational Organized Crime, in defense of their position that even consensual prostitution is exploitation. The supplement states that “The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to be intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.” CATW calls for the decriminalization of women in prostitution and criminalization of the men who buy women and children and anyone who promotes sexual exploitation. However, the organization does not position itself as advocate for the decriminalization of prostitution as labor. Anna-Louise Crago, “Unholy Alliance” in *Breakthrough: In the News*. 15 June 2003 <<http://www.Breakthrough.TV/news>>.

19 Ibid. As Crago notes, this policy may affect the funding of groups such as Empower, a sex workers’ group in Thailand that has expressed support for legalization and political organization of sex workers.

20 Quoted in Ibid.

21 Ibid.

ficking in women and thus is to be outlawed and banned completely ... the immense power of Western aid, coupled with the third-world states' desire for modernization ... [has led to interpretations of] all forms of women's migration toward economic betterment and sex work as mere trafficking."²²

One possible outcome of the new USAID policy, beyond the reproduction of paternalistic rescue and rehabilitation narratives, as Crago rightly notes, is the prospect that USAID will put their funding exclusively behind anti-migration agendas. To collapse the terms *trafficking* and *prostitution* is also to downplay the role of migration as a cause of the increase in human trafficking and to eclipse the men, women, and children trafficked for labor other than sex work. In addition to the trafficking of women and young girls for sex work, men, women, and children are trafficked for sweatshop labor, domestic labor, marriage, and, in the case of children, for illegal adoptions.

Many anti-trafficking campaigns that advocate the decriminalization of prostitution find the voluntary/forced distinction problematic, because it assumes that "voluntary" prostitutes don't have rights; only forced prostitutes (trafficked women) have rights that are violated. For instance, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)²³ campaign importantly argues for the application of human rights principles to address trafficking as a complex problem that involves context-specific issues of migration and labor. GAATW aims to combat the restrictive trends of crime control campaigns and neo-abolitionist agendas, which they argue infringe on the rights and protection of trafficked persons. GAATW's position is that "trafficking" as a concept is insufficient because it does not account for the wide "range of human rights violations and abuses inflicted upon migrant women workers."²⁴ GAATW's project therefore has been to "document, de-mystify and denounce repressive uses of anti-trafficking conventions and legislation" and to redefine "trafficking and anti-trafficking instruments in the interests of migrant women."²⁵

Bought and Sold: An Investigative Documentary About the International Trade in Women (1997),²⁶ was produced by Gillian Caldwell and Steven Galster as part of The Global Survival Network (a group whose investigative work focuses on exposing environmental and human rights abuses). It represents a more mediated view than both *Open your Eyes* and *So Deep a Violence* in its focus on the experiences of migrant women, attention to economic and social circumstances that enable and support the global sex trade, and embrace of GAATW's definition of trafficking. The video is based on a two-year hidden investigation of the trafficking of women from newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The video argues that the transition from communism to capitalism throughout Russia and Eastern Europe and decline of the economic status of women has contributed to the increase in human trafficking. Sex workers go into sex work because they have no alternatives but also because the transition to capitalism in the Eastern Bloc has led to women's economic decline. *Bought and Sold* also has a strong narrative thread of victimization narratives: these women are

²² Ibid.

²³ *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women*. 2004. Date of access June 29, 2004 <http://www.thai.net/gaatw/>.

²⁴ Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. *Human Rights in Practice: A Guide to Assist Trafficked Women and Children*. GAATW, 1999

²⁵ www.gaatw.net

²⁶ Gillian Caldwell and Steven Galster, dirs. *Bought and Sold: An Investigative Documentary About the International Trade in Women*. Witness.1997.

all “lured” with promises of a better life; recruited by friends; and some women are portrayed as seduced by the profession. However, the video negotiates the agent/victim binary very carefully, deploying victim narratives in ways that portray the complexities of trafficking and the issue of *transnationality*. In other words, the video presents the *kairos* of identification through recognition of the geopolitical conditions and contexts that shape women’s actions. These conditions include rising unemployment and economic decline in their home countries, which drive many women to seek work abroad, recruitment of women through front companies that present a legal façade (travel, model, and marriage agencies), and debt-bondage (contracts drawn between trafficking networks and women). Travel debts can range from US \$1000 to over US \$10,000, and these debts accrue for the women’s food, housing, and even penalty fees for misbehavior. Finally, *Bought and Sold* illustrates the role of internationally organized crime networks and government complicity, namely how in some countries traffickers bribe national security units and local law enforcement. In contrast, for example, to the International Organization for Migration’s video *Open Your Eyes*, *Bought and Sold* exposes how the systems designed to protect individuals facilitate their exploitation.

Bought and Sold does not fall into the trap of representing women as *only* duped victims, even though some of the women’s stories fit that mold. For instance, the video’s opening depicts a woman’s agency dealing with a man trying to lure Lowena into sex work, and then representing Lowena, as having consciously chosen a life in sex work abroad. The voice-over notes, “Lowena is ready to go. She is 22. She is willing to work as an escort abroad. She hopes it is her ticket to a life of adventure and glamour. This film is made for people like her.” Moreover, in its call to action at the end of the video (a section entitled “What can be done?”), the video calls for a variety of strategies by activists, governments, and media groups. Importantly, besides insisting that trafficking be recognized as a human rights violation, *Bought and Sold* insists that “governments must stop treating sex workers as illegal migrants.” Instead, governments should provide stays of deportation as well as services for sex workers, including health care, education and training, witness protection, etc. In other words, the video represents advocacy as a necessary transnational collaboration between many sectors.

Bought and Sold has been distributed to more than five hundred NGOs in countries around the world and to U.S. embassies abroad. In its screening manual The Global Survival Network identifies multiple audiences for the video, including at-risk women, namely women from countries undergoing socio-economic transition; NGO communities; governments and intergovernmental organizations; university students; the general public; and media. One of the major pedagogical goals identified by the screening manual is to foster an understanding of trafficking as a human rights abuse so that policies offer protections and compensation to victims and government and non-governmental organizations provide programs that address socio-economic causes of the problem. The Global Survival Network also aims to counter media coverage that sensationalizes or dehumanizes women whose human rights are being abused.

As my analysis of the videos of counter-trafficking campaigns suggests, the timeliness of certain identifications might be understood as adaptive, as strategic, as motivated by and meaningful within certain circumstances. To recognize how identifications are both imposed and claimed is to foreground *identity as embodied rhetorical action*. As feminist scholars and advocates, we need to become more attuned to the strategic mobilization of normative identity narratives, cultural myths, and rhetorical

commonplaces by advocates on all sides of the debate. The concept of identity as action also suggests that we revisit the politics of location, self-reflexivity, and the spatial rhetoric of the “new geographics of identity” that have come to characterize transnational feminism.²⁷

In response to this critical need, I focus below on two videos about the global sex trade, *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire*, by Ursula Biemann. Biemann is a white Western experimental video maker, whose interest lies not in reducing issues to messages that can be used in bringing about change on a legislative level but rather in revealing the constructedness of different positions articulated by trafficking NGOs (personal correspondence). These videos provide a critical opportunity to think further about the transnational identifications and publics that feminists imagine and how space and time are read differently through *kairos* than through feminist notions of positionality. The main distinction that I would like to highlight is between the rhetorical disclosure of identity and institutional positions (associated with feminist positionality) versus the analysis of the rhetoricity of identification practices within certain contexts.

Who advocates for whom, in what contexts, and via what representational practices? Which representational and analytical strategies are adequate to the challenges posed by recent geopolitical and technological developments? Who must *Kairos*—the shape shifter—become in order to be heard in the current climate and culture of war and security? Must *Kairos* emerge as a citizen of the world? A virtual cosmopolitan? Does the temporality and spatiality of cyberspace suggest or require new models for global citizenship and therefore new forms of transnational feminist analysis and advocacy?

Cyber-Sexualities, Cosmopolitics, and Transnational Identifications

Ursula Biemann’s experimental videos *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Writing Desire* (2000) trace the routes and displacements of female bodies in the global sex industry. Both videos create an alternative sense of space and time defined through the technological and geospatial lenses of transnationality. *Remote Sensing* points to how global capital and technologies sexualize and facilitate women’s movement into the sex industry and at the same time police geographical boundaries and hinder women’s migration for work other than sex work.²⁸ The film insists that stricter migration policies and control of the borders do not necessarily reduce the trafficking of women. Migration policies and the closing of borders may in fact contribute to the increase in prostitution and trafficking worldwide, namely because states hold onto structures that forbid women to migrate for work in other professions. *Remote Sensing* claims that “500,000 women migrate into the European sex industry every year. Two-thirds come from post-socialist countries.” As the narrator notes, migration laws reveal “the place of sex in...national space. These laws protect the flourishing sexual life of male citizens

27 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy” in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*. Ed. Marianne DeKoven. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 15.

28 For further discussion of Biemann’s construction of gender in transnational spaces see Jo-Anne Berelowitz, “A Journey Shared: Ursula Biemann’s *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*.” *Genders* 33, 2001, 1-7.

as privileged, and a source of power.”²⁹ In addition to illustrating the consequences of migration policies and national laws, the video challenges the victim/agent binary through its portrayal of the identity of sex workers at the former DDR/Czech border as transitory and fluid. “Here, everything is transitory, no sentimentality, no clinging to the past. The prostitutes are from distant places, many smuggled in, captured, and illegal. They all know that where they are, and what they are, is only temporary. The consumers, the German tourists just passing through, they too are aware that their time here is only temporary. Everything resonates with impending change.”



Remote Sensing

The videos neither resolve these contradictions nor solidify identity categories, but they do expose the oppositional logics, cultural values, and public policies that create and sustain them. Yet in their struggle against the logic of oppositions, such as the victim/agent binary, both *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire* reveal just how profound the obstacles are to systematic change and processes of re-signification even within transnational feminist advocacy. Despite Biemann’s claim that she is not primarily interested in the evidentiary function of representation, or in reinforcing the victim/agent binary, both films include narratives of women lured and tricked into sex work. For instance, *Remote Sensing* focuses on a case involving a group of Filipinas who were recruited by a German man and his Filipina wife in Metro Manila. As one woman notes, “One morning the recruiter approached me personally and promised me \$350 a month if I agreed to work in a restaurant in Germany. [...] We didn’t have to pay any placement fees [. . .] all the fees would be gradually deducted from our salary. At the moment of departure, we noticed that on the ticket it said Nigeria instead of Germany as we believed.” Eight women, recruited from a dislocated slum near Metro Manila, were promised restaurant jobs in Germany but were sent to a brothel in Nigeria. Yet this narrative is complicated by several factors, including by one woman whose story ends in Cyprus, where prostitution is legal, and who used the money she earned through prostitution to return home. Naomi’s testimony further complicates the victim/agent binary, especially her response to Biemann who asks her whether or not she has ever had a boyfriend. Naomi indicates that she has never had sex without getting paid for it. “No boyfriend... someone you loved,” Biemann repeats. Naomi clarifies, “I never say to a customer... I love you.” But she is likewise perplexed by the question itself: “No boyfriend. But customer, yes. But free, no. Why?” Naomi conveys a radically different set of values than those inherent in Biemann’s question. Here we see the limits of Biemann’s own comprehension and identification.

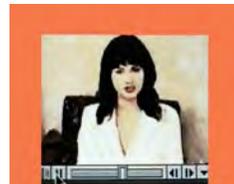
The sonic level of representational construction in the video provides yet another framing device, like the spatial definitions, for the women’s experiences. In this case of Filipinas in Nigeria, Biemann chose a strong mediating device, an English voice-over

29 In personal correspondence, Biemann indicated that she is narrating. But, she also notes that, “it’s not one authorial voice, it’s many theoretical voices that speak through me, not that I’m merely quoting, but it’s all shared knowledge somehow.”

– a device that she seldom uses. Typically, as Biemann has expressed, she aims to let her subjects, which include former sex workers and NGO women speak and analyze the international situation, rather than theorizing their experiences in a voice-over (personal correspondence). Rather than read the voice-over as an ethical breach by the Western white videographer in representing sex workers in the global south (an exchange that reproduces the social hierarchy of the global north), a more profitable reading for developing solidarity among women from the global south and north would be to view the gap as indicative of the challenges of transnational feminist representational practices.³⁰

Biemann generates a critical ambivalence in her critique of the victim/agent binary and yet turns to the testimonies of women victimized by the sex industry. This ambivalence illuminates the representational challenges posed by the rhetorical conventions of human rights discourse, namely the emphasis on the documentation of victimization, for transnational feminist scholars and advocates. For instance, *Remote Sensing* exposes the risks of documentary techniques in revealing multiple layers of surveillance: “Locked up in tiny rooms, confined in semi-darkness, guarded closely, she lives in the ghettos and the bars of the underworld, the semi-world, living a half-life. Guarded step by step, number by number, trick by trick.” The camera travels down long dark corridors of brothels at night, dimly lit by streetlights and the lights from clubs. The corridors echo the “semi-darkness” and the “underworld” quality of the narrator’s description of sex workers’ lives. They are dirty and crowded, choked with prostitutes and potential customers. Given the danger of filming in this milieu and the fact that the women didn’t want to be filmed,³¹ the camera does not focus on any individuals. The camera instead lingers on women’s eroticized body parts – breasts, lips – fragmenting the bodies it seeks to represent. Here the video plays on the cultural expectations that women will be objectified. But, we might ask, are such identifications necessary as forms of persuasion in transnational feminist advocacy? This choice, in part, is a result of difficult recording circumstances, but it also indicates the internationalization and limitations of certain representational strategies and journalistic conventions. These images of captivity progressively dissolve, however, as later parts of the film speak to more self-motivated decisions to enter the sex trade.

Writing Desire suggests that critical agency resides in the strategic mobilization of rhetorical and cultural commonplaces and juxtaposition of dominant and counter-discourses. For instance, the video opens with an exotic beach scene, palm trees, and upbeat music. Over this tourist image, the following text appears in succession: “Geography is imbued with the notion of passivity.” “Feminized national spaces awaiting rescue.” “With the penetration of foreign capital.” The opening sequence foregrounds the increasing disembodiment of sexuality, the links between sexual desire



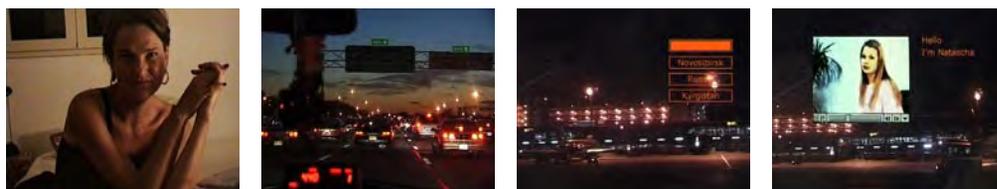
Writing Desire

30 Ursula Biemann, “Remotely Sensed: A Topography of the Global Sex Trade.” Date of Access < June 29, 2004. > <http://www.geobodies.org/video/sensing/sensingtxt1.htm>.

31 As indicated through personal correspondence with Biemann.

and electronic communication technologies, and the production of subjectivities through the compressed space of virtual exchanges. This sequence also constructs the viewers as (male) “First World” consumers: we hear Internet dial-up sounds, then categories and links appear on screen, allowing us to search and sort by country, age, height, weight, education, and ID code. The cursor scrolls down a list of “Third World” countries. The link for the Philippines is then opened, and digital representations (photographs and on-line videos) of young women appear. Women are ranked and described according to their country of origin; in this way the video highlights locational identifications and cultural stereotypes and myths. Women from the Philippines are described as the “most friendly.” Women from Brazil are listed as the “best lovers.” Women from Thailand are listed as the “most beautiful” and women from Costa Rica as the “most eager to please.”

Writing Desire focuses on commercialized gender relations on the Internet, namely the mail-order bride market and virgin market in the former Soviet Union and the Philippines (one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia). The video argues that women’s bodies, as symptoms of global culture, are racialized as objects of desire either waiting to be conquered or rescued. *Writing Desire* implies that new media and technology create mobile subjectivities, sever context, and in so doing enable alliances that otherwise might never occur. The video portrays the fantasy of individuals bridging the distance through technology without confronting the consequences of that fantasy—“a stream of desire troubled by nothing.” As a woman lying across a bed says “What’s interesting about it [e-mail desire] is that you create these love stories in which you are the protagonist ... What is important is the act of writing, while the real bodies are absent, it’s all in the writing. That’s why the sexual discourse becomes important. It would be wrong to infer that it replaces the body.” Instead, the body is “present in the writing.”



Writing Desire

This sequence highlights the challenge of technology in configuring a locational feminism, where identity is embodied as technology. Here the body and identity become first and foremost rhetorical, highlighting Biemann’s feminist agenda of representation, which as she puts it is “To bring the representation of women in poverty in connection with high technology and other concepts [such as mobility] that have a progressive high status in our eyes” (personal correspondence). In the case of *Remote Sensing*, “women become agents of transport and transformation for countries who struggle to make themselves a place on the global chart” (personal correspondence). The video proposes a link between the proliferation of global sex work and sex tourism and the technology of the Internet, which “capitalizes on this vulnerable set of motivations.”³² *Writing Desire* fractures presumptions about the stability of identity and geo-

32 Ursula Biemann, “Female Geobodies: Resignifying the Economic within Sexual Difference.” *n.paradoxa*. July, 2001, 3.

graphical contexts, and yet, also reminds us of how these new technologies are embedded in and foster inequitable material relations and oppressive conditions for much of the world's population.

At one point in the film, the rhetorical competence and strategies that women in the global sex industry employ becomes strikingly clear: on the screen overlaying Q-time videos advertising brides from post-soviet areas, the following text appears: "she is beautiful and feminine / she is loving and traditional / she is humble and devoted / she likes to listen to mellow music / the smile is her rhetorical gesture / she believes in a lasting marriage / and a happy home / she is a copy of the First World's past." The phrase her "smile is her rhetorical gesture" acknowledges the rhetorical dimensions of identification and agency in the context of transnationality. As Biemann notes in her commentary on the film, "To present herself as humble and unambitious, she denies the desirability of the financial and social rewards of marrying a Western man. Morality remains an economic issue but if women want to be seen as moral at all, they better mask their awareness of their relationship to property, mobility, and privilege."³³

In this sense, *Writing Desire* might be said to expose the foundational Western idea, as Caren Kaplan notes, in another context, that "travel produces the self, makes the subject through spectatorship and comparison with otherness."³⁴ Like *Remote Sensing*, a critical ambivalence characterizes this video. This critical ambivalence, however, does not emerge so much from the deployment and critique of victimization narratives but through the portrayal of cosmopolitan conceptions of identity acquired through travel, virtual or otherwise, depicted through the figure of Maris Bustamante. Bustamante is an artist based in Mexico City, who finds an American husband through an Internet dating service. She is a middle-aged, self-identified feminist, widow and mother, University professor and, as she puts it, a "radical of my own will," who turned to the Internet for a companion. After an "examination of [the] Mexican environment ... the 'Cradle of Machismo,'" and after working through "intellectual guilt," she posts her profile on an Internet dating service. She corresponds for six months with a man named John, a lieutenant with the U.S. Marine Corps, who she later marries and with whom she establishes a new family. Bustamante indicates that the Internet enabled her to suspend judgment and to reformulate her expectations; she would not ordinarily have been attracted to a military man. Bustamante's narrative is emblematic of the historical trajectory of future promise (construed in familial, heterosexual terms), a narrative that recasts the white middle-class feminist subject at the center and as normative. She and the lieutenant are pictured in a classic familial portrait. The centerpiece of the black-and-white photograph is the father, seated front and center, surrounded by his wife and three teenage children. His wife's hands are folded on his shoulder. The whole family is smiling.

Bustamante is figured as kind of virtual cosmopolitan, whose worldliness is acquired, in large part, via technology. Bustamante might be said to have seized the technological day, to have enacted *kairos* as a form of cultural cosmopolitanism. The term cosmopolitanism has been used negatively to signify liberal self-invention, tourism, and global travel, and to refer to carnivalesque cosmopolitanism.³⁵ Cosmopolitans

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 36.

³⁵ Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

are associated with movement of capital, of “knowing no boundaries.”³⁶ On the other hand, the term has been used affirmatively to categorize a new class of transnational cosmopolitans,³⁷ and to refer to migration, diasporic movements, and refugees, as in James Clifford’s notion of the “discrepant cosmopolitan.”³⁸ I use the term “cultural cosmopolitanism” here to refer to cultural and virtual tourism, self-invention, and discursive mobility and to highlight the risks that such movements pose in the name of critical advocacy.³⁹ The position of Bustamante’s story, defined by a conventional narrative arc, affords her character a certain status in *Writing Desire*. We might read this narrative as an example of the idiomatic particularity of contemporary geopolitical feminisms or as exemplary of the temporal rhetoric of awakening and rebirth common to second-wave feminism. Either way, Bustamante’s narrative highlights the venerable power of rhetorical *stasis* to usurp the transnational feminist project by reclaiming rhetorical commonplaces and hegemonic notions of freedom, movement, and liberation, and securing normative identifications through structures of opportunity (technology, privilege). Finally, the rhetorical weight of Bustamante’s narrative in *Writing Desire* offers a cautionary tale to transnational feminist scholars and advocates about the risks of transference (rhetorical, methodological, cultural, national), including the force of “traveling feminisms,”⁴⁰ and the lure and risks of cultural cosmopolitanism.

While the configuration of *identity as a field of action* allows us to trouble the victim/agent binary and to consider the strategic deployment of such contrasts, such a conceptualization also risks, if it loses all traces of the materiality of rhetoric, becoming the methodological equivalent of cultural cosmopolitanism. Just as we need to look beyond the academic transmission of new conceptions to consider how “social movements appropriate and transform global meanings, and materialize them in local practices,”⁴¹ so too do we need to understand how identities and identification practices are enabled and constrained by *kairos* – that is, by material and rhetorical circumstances. Placed against the geopolitical backdrop of the early 21st century, the classical figure of *Kairos* therefore emerges not so much as an accommodative figure of balance but as a critical subject negotiating the contradictions of transnationality. In other words, the dynamics of transnationality compel us to read the geopolitical (spatial and temporal) elements of identity and positionality rhetorically, in terms of the timeliness of certain identifications and their deployment. Finally, a *kairotic* understanding of identification is one that recognizes the colonial and imperial histories that shape the terms of identification associated with global sex work and feminist advocacy, and the identificatory practices that transform women into subjected others in increasingly transnational and cosmopolitan public spheres.

This essay has been published in a longer version in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, Rutgers University 2005.

36 Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 249.

37 Ulf Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture” in *Theory, Culture, and Society*. SAGE: London. Volume 7 (1990), 237-251.

38 James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures” in *Cultural Studies*. Eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, (1992), 96-117.

39 Kaplan, 2001, 220.

40 Millie Thayer, “Traveling Feminisms: From Embodied Women to Gendered Citizenship” in *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*. Ed. Michael Burawoy et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 207.

41 Thayer, 207-8.

VISUALIZING THE CITIZENSHIP GAP: EU BORDERS AND MIGRATION IN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

Uta Staiger

The border, as a territorial and political boundary, is the site where the tensions between sovereignty and post-national pressures, citizen and alien, universal rights and exclusive membership, become poignantly visible. It is therefore a particularly constructive site for research, be it academic, artistic, or policy-related, to examine the conditions under which people come to be admitted to or excluded from rights regimes, and the implications this may hold in stock for liberal democracies.

The following analysis aims to discuss this nexus by attending to discourses, which are primarily visual but also form part of academic, curatorial, and political-activist initiatives. More concretely, it will take recourse to contemporary non-fictional audiovisual productions – video essays or essay films – which like written essays tend to traverse disciplinary boundaries and problematize as they employ the methodology of analysis and narrative. This self-reflective critical art form will be set in relation to political theory on changing modes of membership in an integrating Europe, as well as on transnational migration. By doing so, the article aims to discuss how the contradictory pressures acting upon, or exercised by, democratic nation-states, particularly in the context of European integration and immigration, may be represented and analysed.

In particular, the article will be concerned with how such cultural practices respond to the political, judicial and ethical concerns raised by what has been called the citizenship gap – the legal discrepancy between citizen and human rights, made particularly evident at and through borders. For the context of this book, the visual essays of artist and researcher Ursula Biemann, and mainly her 20-minute synchronized double screen video installation *Contained Mobility* (2004), form the centrepiece of this discussion. While taking recourse to her work most explicitly, I am interested in showing how cultural practices of this genre more generally may account for changing modes of membership in contemporary Europe, both formally and substantively.

Europe's Borders

As Zygmunt Bauman has noted,¹ the contemporary world is obsessed with borders. While to some degree losing the fixity and significance formerly associated with them due to current globalizing tendencies, borders are increasingly enforced and invested with agency and meaning. Indeed, reflecting transformations in the global order of things and yet always configuring partition on a local scale, borders have become 'over-saturated'² or 'over-determined'³ with signification. The less borders seem to matter; the more is invested physically, politically and symbolically in their maintenance and substance. Both in terms of their increasing institutional ubiquity and of the issues they raise for changing modes of membership, the borders become paradigms for development in the context of European integration and migration.

In the EU, borders make two opposite political tendencies visible. Internally, the de-fortification and partial disappearance of borders between EU member states mark the precondition for European 'unity in diversity' in terms of economy (internal market), mobility (Schengen), and political legitimacy (a unified popular will). Indeed, the removal of border controls, along with uniform passports and a common education policy, are among the main arguments of early reports on how to foster a sense of solidarity, knowledge and community among European citizens.⁴ In turn, the union's external borders are increasingly fortified, particularly since the EU constituted itself as the "Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice" (AFSJ) in the Treaty of Amsterdam. Following the resolutions of the 1999 Tampere Council, the 2004 Hague Programme objectives, and the Global Approach to Migration adopted by the European Council in 2005, the European immigration policy is enforced through the integrated border management of the European agency Frontex.⁵ As national borders in Europe disappear, those separating the Union from its non-members grow: Fortress Europe emerges.

Paradoxically, then, the unification of a European demos seems to be concomitant with a certain ring-fencing around a Schengen *cordon sanitaire*, hinged between a latent Eurocentrism and an ever-increasing set of defences against its internal and external "others". Indeed, the European Council asserts that "the Union is faced with constant and growing expectations from citizens, who wish to see concrete results in matters such as cross-border crime and terrorism as well as migration."⁶ In EU policy discourse, an analogy seems to arise between the regulation of foreigners and the maintenance of the new transnational *body politic* in a language protective against corruption, crime or alien intrusion. Conversely of course, the question arises if, as Seyla Benhabib put it, "Europe's 'others', be they guest workers or refugees, asylum seekers or migrants, have become an obvious focus for the anxieties and uncertainties generated by Europe's own 'othering', its

1 Zygmunt Bauman, "New Frontiers and Universal Values" in *Fronteres. Debat de Barcelona VII* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, 2004).

2 Bauman, 147.

3 Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002).

4 Tindemans, Leo, "Report on the European Union", Bulletin of the European Communities, 1975.

5 See the website of the agency <http://www.frontex.europa.eu> for further information and policy documents.

6 Brussels European Council, 14/15 December 2006, Presidency Conclusions (16879/06, CONCL 3), 5.

transformation from a continent of nation-states into a transnational political entity, whose precise constitutional and political form is still uncertain.”⁷

It is in this latter vein that, in response to public discourses and representations of migration, specific contemporary cultural productions take Europe’s external borders as their theme. Many of these artistic practices emerge in transnational collaborative networks of researchers, artists, and curators in Europe and its neighbouring states, with the boundaries between these categories becoming increasingly fluid. Often with national or EU funding, these initiatives seem to represent a tendency in contemporary art productions which question the boundaries between theory, political activism, and artistic practice, and which betray particular interest in examining the changing modes of membership in Europe. While one cannot argue for a specific artistic movement as such, many of these artists-cum-theorists use video and multimedia formats to formulate and organize, in critical essayistic form, the complex political and theoretical implications faced by enlarging Europe. Ursula Biemann’s visual essays, particularly *Contained Mobility*, will serve as a point of departure to discuss their features. Without claiming one artist for a general movement in visual cultural production, the way Biemann negotiates the gaps between sovereignty and exclusion, citizenship and human rights, may offer perspectives on how culture takes a stance on the political changes facing Europe.

Knowledgescapes

If the essay in today’s world really is, as Carles Guerra argues, “the genre which best represents the conditions of knowledge production,”⁸ we need to understand how it positions itself with regard to heuristics. In terms of the borders, what the visual essay confronts is a twofold kind of expertise: the rise of coordinated transnational knowledge production for national border security and interstate legal agreements on the one hand (profiles, trajectories, motives and counterfeits, health risks), and the increasing knowledge of those involved in channelling migration into detecting debilities of the system on the other. Since its inception by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter, the essay film or video has been developed by artists as diverse as Harun Farocki, Alexander Kluge, Želimir Žilnik, or more recently Hito Steyerl, Angela Melitopoulos or Ursula Biemann, to name but a few, to include self-criticism into the methodology and narration of analysis and knowledge generation. In Biemann’s *Contained Mobility*, the dialectical circuit of transgression and re-fortification that the



Contained Mobility

7 Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 166-7.

8 Carles Guerra, „Negatives of Europe. Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies“ in *Political Typographies. Visual Essays on the Margins of Europe* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007), 161.

knowledge production around borders represents is abstracted into a double-screen projection. In the following discussion, it will serve to examine some of its implications in more detail.

A 20-minute visual essay commissioned by the Liverpool Biennale, *Contained Mobility* portrays on one screen a personally absent if omnipresent data production indicated visually through charts and graphs, navigation simulators, surveillance images, maps and trafficking systems. In the second, its protagonist, Belorussian permanent migrant Anatol Zimmerman, who Ursula Biemann interviewed in preparation for the piece, is observed pacing, studying, and sleeping in an industrial container lined with maps, documents and technical equipment. Across these, a running-text biography of his multiple border-crossings provides the narrative focus. The video projection thus traces two systems of expertise, which are interlocked. Together, to annex Arjun Appadurai's terminology, they describe a "knowledgescape", the suffix *-scape* hereby denoting "that these are not objectively given relations which at the same look from every angle of vision, but they are rather deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities [...]"⁹

At this intersection, the visual essay aims to generate a third layer of knowledge production: the visual representation and mediation of the pieces themselves. As a highly stylized and dissociative multi-channel visual format using simultaneous projections, audio tracks and running texts, and couched in a theoretical discourse that facilitated its dissemination in networks, conferences, and exhibition centres, the medium of the video essay acts as a third form of critical intelligence. Citing and invoking visual conventions from cartography and documentaries to databases and CCTV streams in order to inscribe trajectories and motion, surveillance and capture in the viewer's visual field, it presents itself as a self-reflexive arts practice hinged between transmission, information, and mediatisation.

Given that these visual knowledge regimes surround, in *Contained Mobility*, Zimmerman's biographical narrative and physical observation as if with a new kind of biometric data, what emerges as the object of knowledge production is the biopolitical body. The knowledge system defining the corporeal condition of the migrant subject seems to cohere with the way the states administer, according to Michel Foucault, individual biological life in order to generate a social *body politic*. Such technologies of power, "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,"¹⁰ count for Foucault as paradigmatic of the modern nation-state. And indeed, earlier pieces by Ursula Biemann, such as *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Europlex* (2003), can be read as reflections on Foucault's biopolitical concern, updated for the late 20th century European nation-state marked by mobility and migration. Here, "the boundaries of the body become analogous to the borders of the nation and the nation-state; both are vulnerable to penetration and corruption from the outside, susceptible to disease and alien intrusion respectively."¹¹

However, what is increasingly at issue in Biemann's work, is not so much the critique of social technologies of power regulating social and political life. Rather,

9 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Braziel, J. E. & A. Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 31.

10 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

11 Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 136.

and *Contained Mobility* shows this development clearly, her visual essays seem to be more and more drawn to the political and legal dimension of this nexus: the rights pertaining to the migrant in comparison to the citizen, and how to translate these into a visual format.

The Citizenship Gap

Video essayistic practice is interested in visualising narrative and heuristic elements, which viewers usually consume in the form of news item, commentary, or academic research. What *Contained Mobility* engages with visually is the longstanding and highly topical gap between two main legal rights traditions: citizenship rights and human rights. The “citizenship gap”¹² emerges out of the legal disparity between these two rights regimes, of which the first attaches rights to the individual’s membership in a particular, circumscribed community or demos, while the second precisely disconnects rights from such membership or context, and instead universalizes them.¹³

Since antiquity, citizenship rights as a framework for membership in a political and territorially defined community form part of Western philosophy and have been expanded, transformed and extended themselves from the *polis* over the medieval city to the contemporary nation-state. Human rights in turn emerge during the Enlightenment out of natural law philosophy and are based on the equal and natural character of a person.¹⁴ Their expansion has not been as progressive as that of citizenship rights, and only since World War II have they been increasingly institutionalized in an international rights regime by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and consequent covenants. It is a regime that is expanding, yet which remains enforceable mainly through the nation state via the incorporation of international legislation into domestic laws.¹⁵ Between these two regimes, however, there exists an “irresolvable contradiction”,¹⁶ as one anchors rights in a person by virtue of his or her status as member of a body politic, and the other by virtue of his or her humanity.

These incongruities are made most evident by the rise of the global economy and communication technologies, an emerging transnational civil society, the increase of transnational migration, and the development of post-national forms of membership in sub- or supranational spaces of attachment. However, even in the face of changing concepts of sovereignty, and within supranational constellations such as the EU,

12 Alison Brysk, *Globalization and Human Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

13 Geron Shafir, „Citizenship and Human Rights in an Era of Globalization“ in *People Out of Place. Globalization, Human Rights, and the Citizenship Gap*, edited by Brysk, A. & G. Shafir (New York: Routledge, 2004).

14 T.S. Marshall argued that citizenship rights expanded in three generations from civil rights to political and social rights. Theorists of multiculturalism now hope to propose a fourth, cultural citizenship, to the list. Human rights, by contrast, have not seen such a progressive expansion and despite international advances fail to harness similar enforcement.

15 Other pacts include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant of Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, or the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the establishment of the European Court of Justice. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms permits claims of citizens of adhering states to be heard by a European Court of Human Rights. That is, while the human rights regime continues to consolidate itself and spawns informal and international networks of activists and NGOs, it is still mainly enforceable through nation-states members of the pacts. For an alternative reading, see Bobbio, Norberto, *Das Zeitalter der Menschenrechte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2007).

16 Benhabib, 9.

territorial control continues to be exercised through immigration and citizenship policies, betraying the continued breach between the two traditions. It is precisely this gap or contradiction which Biemann's essays aim to visualize by situating their protagonists at the intersection of institutional and geopolitical discourses. The legal and political bases for this discrepancy are therefore worth pursuing in more detail, before investigating how they are being narrated and represented.

It was Hannah Arendt who had first pointed out the fundamental paradox at the heart of the territorially delimited sovereign state, in which supposedly universal and inalienable rights are in fact only enforceable as citizenship rights. Analysing the collapse of the nation-state system during the two world wars, she identified the impossibility of claiming one's "right to have rights"¹⁷ at the very moment in which one lost one's nationality status. Those suffering denationalization or denaturalization not only lost their citizenship rights, she argued, they were deprived of human rights *per se*. Indeed, Arendt claims that the awareness of the existence of a right to have rights and to belong to a community emerged precisely at the moment in which people appeared, whose rights were no longer safeguarded by a state. This represented the 'perplexities of the rights of man', as she phrased it:

"If a person loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights are provided. Actually, the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man."¹⁸

This "abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human" as Arendt also called it elsewhere,¹⁹ has more recently been used by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben to theorize the genealogy that he labels "bare life". Agamben points out that simple biological life (in ancient Greek: *zoē*) was originally defined as something different to the political life of an individual or group (*bios*). Heavily relying on Arendt, Agamben however argues that in fact, this "bare life" has always been used to constitute political power. Focusing on legal and political institutions, Agamben claims that the inclusion of this *zoē* in the political sphere is not in fact particular to the modern state (as Foucault had argued). Rather, it has always been the nucleus of sovereignty.²⁰ As such, he argues that life and law, inside and outside, become indistinguishable. The human being, who becomes a citizen at the moment of birth, signals that bare life is politicised as the very principle of sovereignty. What Agamben is most interested in, however, is not the biological, pre-political life of the citizen, but rather the absolute nakedness of a life from which law has recalled itself and yet wields power over. The life of the stateless person, the refugee and the migrant, breaks this identity of citizen and human, and thus by its very existence questions the trinity of state, nation and territory. Therefore, it is precisely through the exclusion of this life, which is continually expelled from the nation-state, as it cannot be represented politically in it, that the nation-state reaffirms itself.

While certain conclusions of his must count as highly problematic, Agamben's account complements the definition of the citizenship gap as put forward by political

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 296.

18 Arendt, 300.

19 Arendt, 297.

20 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6.

theory²¹ in a number of ways. We can define them as (1) the historical analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and exclusion; (2) the complexity of human rights regimes as they refer to an abstract human being (Arendt) or to bare life in the politico-juridical order (Agamben); and (3) the democratic paradox outlined by Arendt with regard to the stateless people of the early 20th century, made visible today as refugees, denizens or migrants.

Visualising Negatives

In our current context, of course, the question arises as to how cultural productions can possibly respond to a nexus, which in theoretical discourse betrays such a complexity. How can they visually or narratively portray lives, which are reduced to mere existence and thus are without representation?

At the centre of many visual works, we find human figures filtered through the system of international migration, and the distinct physical dimension they experience as pertaining to their legal status (or absence thereof). Želimir Žilnik's essay film *Fortress Europe* (2000), the film project *Rien ne vaut que la vie, mais la vie même ne vaut rien* by Brigitta Kuster and Mabouna II Moise Merlin (2003), or Angela Melitopoulos video essay *Passing Drama* (1999), are stylistically and conceptually diverse audiovisual productions. Yet, like Biemann's productions, they all take the figure of migrants, refugees, stateless or displaced persons²² as their starting point. These are figures caught in a paradoxical double bind: both outside of the law and at the same time captured by it, located in a long-term state of exception at Europe's fringes²³. Yet, as no national sovereignty can accept their territorial and legal position unaffiliated to citizenship, they cannot be granted membership status. The right to emigration is after all recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration, but not so the right to immigrate. The right to nationality, and to asylum in specific conditions, are also recognized, but the declaration does not pronounce itself on nation-states' obligations to grant entry to immigrants.

In *Contained Mobility*, this double bind is expressed in Zimmerman's continued suspension between polities, contained but also by now enthralled by a seemingly immobile legal vacuum, which represents his unending mobility. The paradox of a human rights regime that can only be enforced nationally expresses itself physically by placing the migrants in an exceptional legal gap between naturalization (integration in a host polity) and repatriation (return to the polity of origin), which cannot be overcome. Biemann's visual essays therefore bring into full colour the existence of the migrant as purely *ex negativo*, that is, the filmic positive of the migrant as a purely negative blueprint of a full complement of rights. The productions aim to locate "a condition of permanent non-belonging, of juridical non-existence", as the prologue to

21 See for example Seyla Benhabib *The Rights of Others* (2004), Linda Bosniak *The Citizen and Alien* (2006), and Alison Brysk (ed.) *Globalization and Human Rights* (2002).

22 Note that there are important distinctions between refugee and illegal immigrant status, mainly in the manner in which the former may be legally integrated (offered asylum) once within the host country, but this is not discussed here. See http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/ for EU-specific information.

23 In June 2008, the European Parliament approved a new directive on common standards and procedures in member states known as the 'return directive', which makes it possible to detain irregular migrants for a period of up to 18 months.

Contained Mobility phrases it.²⁴ The narrative voice-over from the off, and the material aesthetic mapping of the body and journey of Anatol Zimmerman as an object of discourse and image, illustrate the tension between biography and legality, humanity and citizenship. Deprived of locality, fixity, and rights, Zimmerman is only defined as not belonging to any order, be it territorial, juridical or political. As the essay visually argues, he is nothing but a “negative of Europe.”²⁵ What we now turn to is the material place, in which this citizenship gap is most clearly anchored: the border.

Spaces of Detainment

The citizenship gap is particularly present at borders, as they mark geographically and politically the limit of national entities. As Benhabib put it, “nowhere are the tensions between the demands of postnational universalistic solidarity and the practices of exclusive membership more apparent than at the site of territorial borders and boundaries.”²⁶ The extra-juridical position of migrants corresponds to the extra-territorial position within which they are contained at borders. In areas such as detention centres, refugee camps or the no man’s land, spaces which technically belong to the countries they guard but which are already outside their normative realm, the citizenship gap is spatially instituted.

In Biemann’s essays, these spaces therefore appear as symbols of the spaces outside the social imaginary they enclose. While productions like Žilnik’s *Fortress Europe* trace their protagonist’s quixotic journey within a legal corridor from detention centre to detention centre, non-place to non-place, country to country, *Contained Mobility* condenses these spaces into a single metaphorical container, an immobile box symbolizing the gap between protective rights regimes. Relaying motionless transit across years as well as across different Schengen crossings within a unified space, this container is defined in contradistinction and yet similarity to the boundlessness of the seascape, which introduces the film and accompanies it through navigational simulators and port landscapes. It is the spatial materialization of the state of exception, in which the protagonist finds himself.

The border areas thus visualized correspond to a wider array of spaces that, while located within a nation-state’s territory, remain outside the state’s legal framework. In 1996, for instance, the European Court of Human Rights censured the French government for their practice of keeping asylum seekers in so-called “international zones” which, while physically within the French state, were technically considered to be outside France so as not to fall under the European Convention of Human Rights.²⁷ Such a proposition of indefinite detention was also at the heart of the British 1999 initiative to create so-called “transit processing centres” near the EU’s external borders, thus literally creating a “permanent state of exception in the international refugee regime”²⁸ in which the migrant lives could be administered. They are also outside of, while incorporated within, the national policy framework.

24 Cf. Ursula Biemann and Imre Szeman, „Forced Transit“ in *Political Typographies. Visual Essays on the Margins of Europe* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007), 44.

25 Guerra, op. cit., 160-173.

26 Benhabib, 17.

27 David Jacobson and Galya Benarieh Ruffer, „Agency on a Global Scale: Rules, Rights, and the European Union“ in *People Out of Place. Globalization, Human Rights, and the Citizenship Gap*, edited by Brysk, A. & G. Shafir (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83.

28 Benhabib, 151.

The question that needs to be raised here, and which is raised explicitly in this case by visual productions outside the traditional political realm, is how the relationship between these spaces and the nation-state or EU territory may be understood. Do they appear as an exception to or are they constitutive of sovereignty, from which they are kept at bay? Is the camp as biopolitical space par excellence really, as Giorgio Agamben claimed, paradigmatic for the nation-state, or even more, “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity”?²⁹ Ursula Biemann’s visual essays, whether they concern trafficking (*Remote Sensing*), economic globalisation (*Performing the Border*) or transnational migration (*Contained Mobility*), seem to suggest that there is indeed a fallible but constitutive conjunction between a political territory to be protected and the normative regimentation of transnational movements across its borders. This conjunction materializes in the corridors, detention and interrogation rooms, airstrips, and transit camps attached to a border regime that internalizes, but at the same time excludes, these enclaves from its own normative framework.

Visual essays have the potential of condensing the function of these spaces metaphorically and rhetorically. Brigitta Kuster’s 2005 *S. – je suis – je lis à haute voix [passing for]*, for instance, examines how these usually inaccessible extra-territorial spaces may become known to the artist, how to ‘do’ and represent the border and its subjects/objects. Her and Biemann’s pieces visualize quasi-allegorically, Žilnik nearly documentarily, the exclaves and zones of detention specifically because they are usually relegated to invisibility. Furthermore, they contrast the disciplinary regulation of migration with the insistent desire of the protagonists for autonomy and self-rule, by bringing the camp structures in tension with an insistent biographical drive. Juxtaposed with visual imagery, these narratives complicate the relationship of both artist and viewer to normative frameworks on the one hand, and popular news culture on the other. Through the narratives, which question the distinction between objective truth and subjective opinion, the video essays are attempts at excavating the paradoxical relationship between citizen and human as it is institutionalized today.

At the same time, however, and conscious of the fact that part of the migrant’s predicament is precisely the impossibility of being represented, these attempts must for the sake of credibility also question their own visual omnipotence. Intriguingly, therefore, there are moments in which *Contained Mobility* also draws attention to the fallibility of its own medium. When Zimmerman suddenly steps out of the video image (this happens more than once), he reveals a blind spot of the surveillance camera that hitherto seemed omnipresent and – prescient. In this suspension, both the role of the migrant and his place in the knowledge systems of the border, and the position of the authorial subject (artist, theorist, researcher) towards his or her object, is momentarily questioned.

Exemplarity and Speech

How can the relationship between the object of enquiry and the critical author/artist doing the enquiry be adequately rendered? More to the point, what is the legitimacy of the author or critic to intervene for, or speak on behalf of, the migrant, and how does this relationship require us to rethink responsibility and agency? These are some of the questions raised by the formal and authorial stance of the authors/critics involved, and which we need to trace more closely in the following.

²⁹ Agamben, 1998, 123 and 175.

Clearly, the permanent migrant acts as a model case through which the citizenship gap, the post-national pressures on the nation-state, and their relationship to Schengen-Europe, can be made most visible. Indeed, his is necessarily a position that represents *in extremis* the contradiction of contemporary democracies: “From a philosophical point of view, transnational migrations bring to the fore the constitutive dilemma at the heart of liberal democracies: between sovereign self-determination claims on the one hand and adherence to universal human rights principles on the other.”³⁰

This is phrased similarly by Agamben who considered the refugee as a “limit concept” that challenges the nation-state by questioning the crucial link between birth and nation, man and citizen. However, it is in Agamben’s rhetoric that we can also find the dangers inherent in exclusively foregrounding this relationship of the migrant to the dilemma of the nation-state as exemplary. He believes the refugee to be “the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today [...] the forms and limits of a coming political community.”³¹ His insistence on the exemplarity of the refugee for “our” philosophy (to be entirely rebuilt, starting exclusively with this figure) shows up the potential pitfalls of his thought: a romanticising teleology investing messianic potential in the people most deprived of rights today. So how can the “constitutive dilemma” be thought about critically without instrumentalising migrant subjectivities? How can it appear in political, curatorial, theoretical, or artistic discourse – or in a conjunction of the four? The video essays propose two interrelated lines that may go some way towards resolving these questions: agency and speech.

As Hannah Arendt put it, “the fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective”.³² The loss of the relevance of speech, she argues, forms a crucial part in denuding a person of his or her human status. Indeed, in *Contained Mobility*, the protagonist Zimmerman never actually speaks. He is spoken about (running biographical text), theorized (prologue) or delimited in other (visual) discourses of knowledge. Clearly, the protagonist must have spoken to the author before the production,³³ but he never actively expresses himself. His agency is translated onto the discourse of the artist, who frames and represents him by evoking the public discourses that have previously framed and represented his trajectory.



Contained Mobility

30 Benhabib, 2.

31 Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” in *Means without End. Notes on Politics*, edited by Giorgio Agamben (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

32 Arendt, 296. Agamben also notes the proximity of law to language. As in speech, a word only acquires the ability to denote reality insofar as it is also meaningful in what it does not denote (“potentiality of suspension”), i.e. with the non-linguistic, with which it must maintain a virtual relationship.

33 This holds true if we assume that the production centres on a real-life migrant biography; an assumption later validated by the author herself, as she relates the interviews she conducted with Zimmerman in Liverpool in preparation for the biennale.

Performing this containment as a double act of deprivation – of speech and of rights – exemplifies the nexus I wish to bring into play: the assumed lack of speech of the subject motivates the shift of expression onto another speaker, the artist. This move is clearly testing, as the legitimacy of speaking in lieu of another deprived of speech may be both ethically challenging and at the same time potentially the only possible act of responsibility.

Agency and/as Authorship

It is from precisely this perspective, then, that visual essayists deduce the legitimacy and relevance of their discourses. While opinions and actions need to be transferred from the migrant subject onto another plane in order to become manifest, the very form of the video essay reflects upon the implications of representing an Other. Through this double bind, a specific kind of agency is ideally created at the level of the artist, who becomes a curator-cum-critic-cum-political-activist. This is in tune with a more general shift in political involvement following the expansion of rights and increasing possibilities to “force enforcement” of human rights through new international normative and legal instruments. Indeed, as some have argued, this agency, and the concomitant rise of the individual as agent, is symptomatic of the decline of the nation-state and the changing modes of governance.³⁴ With emerging post-national modes of membership, which are based on dissociating national identity from democratic rights, such an agency pushes for a “right to have rights” of universal personhood that is enforceable through international legal regimes.³⁵ In line with these considerations, the last textual phrase represented in *Contained Mobility* states that “everything new is born illegal”, expressing, in the words of the author herself, that the migrant appears as the radical “departure for the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation.”³⁶

The consistent use by essayistic video artists and filmmakers of biographical (and autobiographical) narrative to visualize agency is interesting in this respect. With the complexities of rights regimes and knowledge systems impacting on the migrant, the biographical narrative individualises the argument. At the same time, it allows authors to interrogate in different ways their own modes of mastering the discourses, by already including their own critical position in the process – here, in the form of a theorizing prologue as a commentary. The production of the body of work is thus immediately aligned to, and at the same time interrogates, the production of the migrant body and subject through political-juridical discourses.

This position has direct implications for the cultural practice and the potential of representation. Firstly, the works themselves are embedded in an analytic framework in which critical, political and theoretical discourses frame individual works. Most of the video and filmmakers mentioned in this article have not only theorised their own practice, accompanying their visual essays with detailed written analyses and conceptual interpretations; but their video essay becomes itself “theory-building through visual means.”³⁷ The piece I have examined throughout as an example of a trend of visual essayistic practice interrogating and working in an enlarging Europe

34 Jacobson, 73.

35 See notes 4 and 5, Shafir (2004) and Bobbio (2007) for further indication on this matter.

36 Biemann, 2007, 43.

37 Ursula Biemann, introduction to *Stuff it. The video essay in the digital age* (Zürich: Voldemeer/Springer, 2003), 9.

is thus clearly imbued with the specific modes of its spatial and textual context. Acknowledging the implications of producing and organising knowledge about, and thus representing the speech of, the subject(s) of migration, this conjunction represents a tacit, if to some extent unstable, performance of critical and auto-critical agency.

Secondly, the arts practice often structurally expands to include exhibition and curation concerns. As visual pieces, essay films often reorganise a multiplicity of intersecting actualities through montage and aesthetic-rhetorical abstraction. Similarly, including the pieces in exhibitions curated by the authors themselves allows them to enter into a substantive relationship with other forms of visual and textual material – as if inserting a phrase in a larger paragraph or argument. Rather than observing a social or political reality in linear documentary fashion, the visual essay stylises a complex argument, which in turn is implicated in a larger exhibition and a thus discursive context. It is a constellation from which the artwork itself may no longer be separable.

Thirdly, such pieces tend to emerge in a specific professional and intellectual context marked by transnational networks of collaborators from different disciplines, universities, arts academies or collectives. For instance, *Projekt Migration*, in the framework of which Žilnik produced his *Fortress Europe*, was initiated by the German Federal Culture Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) and comprised sociologists, ethnographers, artists, curators, and migrant associations, and developed across a web platform, a conference, and a major publication. Similarly, the collective *Multiplicity*, consisting of architects, geographers, artists, urban planners, photographers, sociologists, and economists from across Europe, have produced a number of projects dealing with the changing spatial appearance of Europe (*Uncertain States of Europe*) or border regimes (*Solid Sea*). In the same way, Biemann's *Black Sea Files*, shown at exhibitions such as the cross-disciplinary *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* in the Kunstwerke Berlin (2006),³⁸ formed part of the larger multi-annual research project *Transcultural Geographies*. A pan-European platform for collaboration thus tends to surround the production and dissemination of such work, allowing for expansion and networking of individual initiatives.

Inhabiting simultaneously the roles of artist, theorist, curator, and international project manager, visual essayists thus both experience and promote significant shifts in the authorial stance and the mode of production of their work. This has implications also for the academic subject aiming to theorize and analyze these works. Any analysis needs to work on two simultaneous levels – the artistic and the theoretical, or, in other words, the production and the commentary. In order to avoid a commentary on a commentary, the researcher is thus forced to rethink his or her position even more carefully, interrogate the legitimacy of his or her critical and political position in relation to the subject(s) under discussion. This position destabilizes, and thus challenges, the position and methodology of the cultural theorist and his or her perspective on the contemporary modes of citizenship in Europe. It is in this sense, too, that a cultural agency may be said to arise, if tentatively, from the production, distribution and reception of visual essays on the expanding Europe's potentials and pitfalls.

38 The related *Zona B: In the Margins of Europe* (Fundació Tàpies, Barcelona 2007) also included a projection of *Contained Mobility*.

Conclusion

The self-reflexive and cross-disciplinary character of visual-essayistic production raises a number of issues, which are worth recapitulating. Firstly, the involvement is one of conscious intervention into a system of knowledge generation regarding the maintenance and illegal crossing of the EU's external borders; an intervention characterized by a critical stance, not only towards the production of knowledge, but also its conventional mediatisation. Secondly, therefore, such visual productions often deal explicitly with the problematic negotiation of subjects in a political-juridical nexus, which by definition lacks any representation. Thematizing precisely the absolute nakedness of humanity in the gap between a universal human rights regime and a territorially inscribed enforcement of them, the essayistic content and stylistic form of such cultural productions bring to the fore the constitutive discrepancies that are at the heart, if invisibly so, of Europe's liberal democracies. Thirdly, it is due to a specific focus on biographical narrative, filtered through modified filmic genres and textual-visual abstraction that the pieces claim to represent these issues without falling into the trap of exemplarity. Finally, and precisely through the modes of production, presentation and theorizing which they experience and pilot, video essays like those we have discussed may be said to represent a form of visual and rhetorical agency relevant to current cultural and political changes.

That these visual essayistic practices are hosted by galleries or conference centres, places of cultural privilege inaccessible to the subject(s) of the work, is in this case symptomatic. While they aim for integration into a greater canon of expository and academic practice, driving a renewed political concern into the heart of cultural transmission and analysis (a concern, which is raised by the public funding of these initiatives), there remains a query regarding the limits of, or rather the responsibility for, being involved in speaking for and representing the absent other. Clearly, however, these productions, emerging as they do from transnational collaborations between researchers and universities, artists and artist networks, NGOs and publicly funded cooperative projects, provide a critical perspective on the changes and implications of an enlarging Europe, which otherwise often go unnoticed.

EXTRADISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS: TOWARDS A NEW CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONS

Brian Holmes

What is the logic, the need or the desire that pushes more and more artists to work outside the limits of their own discipline, defined by the notions of free reflexivity and pure aesthetics, incarnated by the gallery-magazine-museum circuit, and haunted by the memory of the normative genres, painting and sculpture?

Pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video each marked a rupture of the disciplinary frame, already in the 1960-70s. But one could argue that these dramatized outbursts merely *imported* themes, media or expressive techniques back into what Yves Klein had termed the “specialized” ambiance of the gallery or the museum, qualified by the primacy of the aesthetic and managed by the functionaries of art. Exactly such arguments were launched by Robert Smithson in his text on cultural confinement in 1972, then restated by Brian O’Doherty in his theses on the ideology of the white cube.¹ They still have a lot of validity. Yet now we are confronted with a new series of outbursts, under such names as net.art, bio art, visual geography, space art and database art – to which one could add an archi-art, or art of architecture, which curiously enough has never been baptized as such, as well as a machine art that reaches all the way back to 1920s constructivism, or even a “finance art” whose birth was announced in the Casa Encendida of Madrid in 2006.

The heterogeneous character of the list immediately suggests its application to all the domains where theory and practice meet. In the artistic forms that result, one will always find remains of the old modernist tropism whereby art designates itself first of all, drawing the attention back to its own operations of expression, representation, metaphorization or deconstruction. Independently of whatever “subject” it treats, art

¹ Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement” (1972), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976/1986).

tends to make this self-reflexivity its distinctive or identifying trait, even its *raison d'être*, in a gesture whose philosophical legitimacy was established by Kant. But in the kind of work I want to discuss, there is something more at stake.

We can approach it through the word that the Nettime project used to define its collective ambitions. For the artists, theorists, media activists and programmers who inhabited that mailing list – one of the important vectors of net.art in the late 1990s – it was a matter of proposing an “immanent critique” of the Internet, that is, of the techno-scientific infrastructure then in the course of construction. This critique was to be carried out inside the network itself, using its languages and its technical tools and focusing on its characteristic objects, with the goal of influencing or even of directly shaping its development – but without refusing the possibilities of distribution outside this circuit.² What’s sketched out is a two-way movement, which consists in occupying a field with a potential for shaking up society (telematics) and then radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change in the discipline of art (considered too formalist and narcissistic to escape its own charmed circle), in the discipline of cultural critique (considered too academic and historicist to confront the current transformations) and even in the “discipline” – if you can call it that – of leftist activism (considered too doctrinaire, too ideological to seize the occasions of the present).

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extradisciplinary investigations.

The concept was forged in an attempt to go beyond a kind of double aimlessness that affects contemporary signifying practices, even a double drift, but without the revolutionary qualities that the Situationists were looking for. I’m thinking first of the inflation of interdisciplinary discourses on the academic and cultural circuits: a virtuoso combinatory system that feeds the symbolic mill of cognitive capital, acting as a kind of supplement to the endless pinwheels of finance itself (the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a specialist of these combinatories). Second is the state of indiscipline that is an unsought effect of the anti-authoritarian revolts of the 1960s, where the subject simply gives into the aesthetic solicitations of the market (in the neopop vein, indiscipline means endlessly repeating and remixing the flux of prefabricated commercial images). Though they aren’t the same, interdisciplinarity and indiscipline have become the two most common excuses for the neutralization of significant inquiry.³ But there is no reason to accept them.

The extradisciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography, urbanism, psychiatry, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc., to bring forth on those terrains the “free play of the faculties”

2 See the introduction to the anthology *ReadMe!* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999). One of the best examples of immanent critique is the project “Name Space” by Paul Garrin, which aimed to rework the domain name system (DNS) which constitutes the web as a navigable space; cf. 224-29.

3 Cf. Brian Holmes, “L’extradisciplinaire,” in Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé (eds.), *Traversées*, (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2001).

and the intersubjective experimentation that are characteristic of modern art, but also to try to identify, inside those same domains, the spectacular or instrumental uses so often made of the subversive liberty of aesthetic play – as the architect Eyal Weizman does in exemplary fashion, when he investigates the appropriation by the Israeli and American military of what were initially conceived as subversive architectural strategies. Weizman challenges the military on its own terrain, with his maps of security infrastructures in Israel; but what he brings back are elements for a critical examination of what used to be his exclusive discipline.⁴ This complex movement, which never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either, can provide a new departure point for what used to be called *institutional critique*.

Histories in the Present

What has been established, retrospectively, as the “first generation” of institutional critique includes figures like Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. They examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of breaking out. They had a strong relation to the anti-institutional revolts of the 1960s and 70s, and to the accompanying philosophical critiques.⁵ The best way to take their specific focus on the museum is not as a self-assigned limit or a fetishization of the institution, but instead as part of a materialist praxis, lucidly aware of its context, but with wider transformatory intentions. To find out where their story leads, however, we have to look at the writing of Benjamin Buchloh and see how he framed the emergence of institutional critique.

In a text entitled “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” Buchloh quotes two key propositions by Lawrence Weiner. The first is *A Square Removed from a Rug in Use*, and the second, *A 36”x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (both 1968). In each it is a matter of taking the most self-referential and tautological form possible – the square, whose sides each repeat and reiterate the others – and inserting it in an environment marked by the determinisms of the social world. As Buchloh writes: *“Both interventions – while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry... – inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institutions and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed.... On the one hand, it dissipates the expectation of encountering the work of art only in a ‘specialized’ or ‘qualified’ location.... On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from their institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings...”*⁶

Weiner’s propositions are clearly a version of immanent critique, operating flush with the discursive and material structures of the art institutions; but they are cast as a purely logical deduction from minimal and conceptual premises. They just as

4 Eyal Weizman, “Walking through Walls,” at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.

5 Cf. Stefan Nowotny, “Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique,” http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/nowotny/en/#_ftn6.

6 Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990).

clearly prefigure the symbolic activism of Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" works, like *Splitting* (1973) or *Window Blow-Out* (1976), which confronted the gallery space with urban inequality and racial discrimination. From that departure point, a history of artistic critique could have led to contemporary forms of activism and technopolitical research, via the mobilization of artists around the AIDS epidemic in late 1980s. But the most widespread versions of 60s and 70s cultural history never took that turn. According to the subtitle of Buchloh's famous text, the teleological movement of late-modernist art in the 1970s was heading "From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." This would mean a strictly Frankfurtian vision of the museum as an idealizing Enlightenment institution, damaged by the bureaucratic state and the market spectacle.

Other histories could be written. At stake here is a tense double-bind between the desire to transform the specialized "cell" of the modernist gallery into a mobile potential of living knowledge that can reach out into the world, and the counter-realization that everything about this specialized aesthetic space is a trap, that it has been instituted as a form of enclosure. That tension produced the incisive interventions of Michal Asher, the sledgehammer denunciations of Hans Haacke, the paradoxical displacements of Robert Smithson, or the melancholic humor and poetic fantasy of Marcel Broodthaers, whose hidden mainspring was a youthful engagement with revolutionary surrealism. If we want to transform that initial tension, the first thing is never to reduce the diversity and complexity of artists who never voluntarily joined into a movement. Another reduction would arise from an obsessive focus on a specific site of the work's presentation, the museum, whether it is mourned as a fading relic of the "bourgeois public sphere," or exalted with a fetishizing discourse of "site specificity." Exactly these two pitfalls lay in wait for the discourse of institutional critique, when it took explicit form in the United States in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was the period of the so-called "second generation." Among the names most often cited are Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser. They pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the Other like an object to be shown in a vitrine. But they added a subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography, which allowed them to recast external power hierarchies as ambivalences within the self, opening up a conflicted sensibility to the coexistence of multiple modes and vectors of representation. There is a compelling negotiation here, particularly in the work of Renee Green, between specialized discourse analysis and embodied experimentation with the human sensorium. Yet most of this work was also carried out in the form of meta-reflections on the limits of the artistic practices themselves (mock museum displays or scripted video performances), staged within institutions that were ever-more blatantly corporate – to the point where it became increasingly hard to shield the critical investigations from their own accusations, and their own often devastating conclusions.

This situation of a critical process taking itself for its object recently led Andrea Fraser to consider the artistic institution as an unsurpassable, all-defining frame,

sustained through its own inwardly directed critique.⁷ Bourdieu's deterministic analysis of the closure of the socio-professional fields, mingled with a deep confusion between Weber's iron cage and Foucault's desire "to get free of oneself," is internalized here in a governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation.⁸ Unfortunately, it all adds very little to Broodthaers' lucid testament, formulated on a single page in 1975.⁹ For Broodthaers, the only alternative to a guilty conscience was self-imposed blindness – not exactly a solution! Yet Fraser accepts it, by posing her argument as an attempt to "defend the very institution for which the institution of the avant-garde's 'self-criticism' had created the potential: the institution of critique."

Without any antagonistic or even agonistic relation to the status quo, and above all, without any aim to change it, what's defended becomes little more than a masochistic variation on the self-serving "institutional theory of art" promoted by Danto, Dickie and their followers (a theory of mutual and circular recognition among members of an object-oriented milieu, misleadingly called a "world"). The loop is looped, and what had been a large-scale, complex, searching and transformational project of 60s and 70s art seems to reach a dead end, with institutional consequences of complacency, immobility, loss of autonomy, capitulation before various forms of instrumentalization...

Phase Change

The end may be logical, but some desire to go much further. The first thing is to redefine the means, the media and the aims of a possible third phase of institutional critique. The notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorize the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere.¹⁰ These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. They are based instead on a circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions – social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities – which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution.

The projects tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks. Their inventors, who came of age in the universe of cognitive capitalism, are drawn toward complex social functions which they seize upon in all their technical detail, and in full awareness that the second nature of the world is now shaped by technology and organizational form. In almost every case it is a political engagement that gives them the desire to pursue their

7 "Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc... if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered world,' or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves." Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique," in John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2006).

8 Cf. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en>.

9 Marcel Broodthaers, "To be bien pensant... or not to be. To be blind." (1975), in *October* 42, "Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs" (Fall 1987).

10 Cf. Félix Guattari, *Psychanalyse et transversalité: Essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003 (1972)).

exacting investigations beyond the limits of an artistic or academic discipline. But their analytic processes are at the same time expressive, and for them, every complex machine is awash in affect and subjectivity. It is when these subjective and analytic sides mesh closely together, in the new productive and political contexts of communicational labor (and not just in meta-reflections staged uniquely for the museum), that one can speak of a “third phase” of institutional critique – or better, of a “phase change” in what was formerly known as the public sphere, a change which has extensively transformed the contexts and modes of cultural and intellectual production in the twenty-first century.

An issue of *Multitudes*, co-edited with the *Transform* web-journal, gives examples of this approach.¹¹ The aim is to sketch the problematic field of an exploratory practice that is not new, but is definitely rising in urgency. Rather than offering a curatorial recipe, we wanted to cast new light on the old problems of the closure of specialized disciplines, the intellectual and affective paralysis to which it gives rise, and the alienation of any capacity for democratic decision-making that inevitably follows, particularly in a highly complex technological society. The forms of expression, public intervention and critical reflexivity that have been developed in response to such conditions can be characterized as extradisciplinary – but without fetishizing the word at the expense of the horizon it seeks to indicate.

On considering the work, and particularly the articles dealing with technopolitical issues, some will probably wonder if it might not have been interesting to evoke the name of Bruno Latour. His ambition is that of “making things public,” or more precisely, elucidating the specific encounters between complex technical objects and specific processes of decision-making (whether these are *de jure* or *de facto* political). For that, he says, one must proceed in the form of “proofs,” established as rigorously as possible, but at the same time necessarily “messy,” like the things of the world themselves.¹²

There is something interesting in Latour’s proving machine (even if it does tend, unmistakably, toward the academic productivism of “interdisciplinarity”). A concern for how things are shaped in the present, and a desire for constructive interference in the processes and decisions that shape them, is characteristic of those who no longer dream of an absolute outside and a total, year-zero revolution. However, it’s enough to consider the artists whom we invited to the *Multitudes* issue in order to see the differences. Hard as one may try, the 1750 km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline cannot be reduced to the “proof” of anything, even if Ursula Biemann did compress it into the ten distinct sections of the *Black Sea Files*. Traversing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey before it debouches in the Mediterranean, the BTC pipeline forms the object of political decisions even while it sprawls beyond reason and imagination, engaging the whole planet in the geopolitical and ecological uncertainty of the present. The video



Black Sea Files

11 See “Extradisciplinaire”, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.

12 Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2005).

makes certain aspects of the pipeline system public, by seizing the brief moment of its visibility during the construction process, before the whole thing was buried underground. But above all, it provides a first approach to the human geography of such a massive infrastructural project, whose status as a technological artifact and an economic resource cannot and should not be separated from an awareness of the people whose environments and lives it traverses.

Biemann's video was carried out within the framework of Transcultural Geographies, a collaborative research group formed in 2002 at her initiative. It included two other researchers: Lisa Parks, a specialist in media history and usage, who would study the destruction of the former Yugoslav telephone system during the wars of the 1990s and its replacement by transnational cell-phone services; and Angela Melitopoulos, a video-maker who undertook to film the present reality and historical memory of the integrated road, rail, airport and telecommunications network extending from Salzburg to Thessaloniki under the name "Corridor X." Melitopoulos in her turn assembled the Timescapes group to work on different aspects of this immense corridor-planning project, including the VideA collective from Ankara, the filmmaker Freddy Vianellis from Athens, the artist Dragana Zarevac from Belgrade, and the German video-maker Hito Steyerl. Ginette Verstraete, a professor of contemporary intellectual history, accompanied the Transcultural Geographies project from the start, along with numerous other theorists and artists who contributed their ideas, images and texts by participating in one of the four project seminars held in Amsterdam, Ljubljana, Istanbul and Zurich. This research project gave rise to a precise and poetic exhibition, *The B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, curated by Anselm Franke at the Kunst-Werke in Berlin.¹³ The exhibition can be counted among the deepest and richest extradisciplinary projects as yet completed, though it is certainly not the only one.

The Pan-European Transport and Communication Corridor running through the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, filmed by the participants of the Timescapes



Timescapes: Angela Melitopoulos, Hito Steyerl, Angela Melitopoulos

group, results from a complex infrastructure-planning process carried out at the transnational level. This is a highly specialized and disciplined endeavor, at the cutting edge of contemporary technology, organized and managed by means of sophisticated private-public partnerships. Yet such precisely designed economic projects are at once inextricable from the conflicted memories of their historical precedents (the Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway and the Yugoslav Highway of Brotherhood and Unity), and immediately delivered over to the multiplicity of their uses, which include the staging of massive, self-organized protests in conscious resistance to the instrumentalization of daily life by the corridor-planning process. Human beings do not necessarily

¹³ For documentation of the works and all aspects of the project, see Anselm Franke (editor and curator), *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Berlin/Barcelona: Kunst-Werke/Actar, 2005). The exhibition was shown at the Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Dec. 15, 2005 – Feb. 26, 2006, and then again under a different form at the Tapiès Foundation in Barcelona, March 9 – May 6, 2007.

want to be the living “proof” of an economic thesis, carried out from above with powerful and sophisticated instruments – including media devices that distort the images of those human beings, and seek to manipulate their most intimate affects. An anonymous protester’s insistent sign, brandished in the face of the TV cameras at the demonstrations surrounding the 2003 EU summit in Thessaloniki, offers this analysis of the televised spectacle: ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS UNINTENTIONAL.

Art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets. But in the same movement, the streets have taken up their place in our critiques, and their energy has cracked open the modernist cube. In the philosophical essays that we included in the *Multitudes* project, *institution* and *constitution* always rhyme with *destitution*. The specific focus on extradisciplinary artistic practices does not mean radical politics has been forgotten, far from it. Today more than ever, any constructive investigation has to raise the standards of resistance.

POLITICAL TYPOGRAPHIES¹

Jean-Pierre Rehm

Let us leave aside questions of “content” for the moment. Not that such questions are not important: quite the contrary. But Ursula Biemann and Angela Melitopoulos create works – films, videos, files: projects, as we will be inclined to call them – with entirely explicit narratives. In fact, these are works driven principally by the very process of making explicit. (And “driven”, I insist, must be understood in this context as literally as possible, so great is the degree to which these works are manifestly a matter of mechanics, cogs and speed, the unleashing of time and space, of mobility, of automobiles and auto-mobility, whether experienced or invented.) Indeed, it is this explicitness, this certainty of the subject to be exposed, unfolded, repeated, illuminated, which provides these projects with their frame – their format. And what format is that? The one known, in the list of genres, as documentary cinema. And here is an initial paradox: their “undercover mission”, to borrow an expression used by the narrator in *Black Sea Files*, affords them in the first place less a focus than a form – not to say a uniform, in this case quite a civilian one, that of a secret agent hiding in plain daylight. Their films are thus in dialogue with a history of the documentary genre. Now, what are the rules of this genre, rules ordinarily so globally integrated, that would make the genre seem to these two artists the most appropriate form in which to carry out their investigations, to bring to light the truth, to respond to injustice? Because after all, to put it as concisely as possible, that is the spirit of all of these works, their most radical and most obvious starting point: a politics of justice. Without considering origins, a lengthy and complex undertaking impractical within the present

¹ This is a shortened version of the essay “Printed Voices”, by Jean-Pierre Rehm, published in *Tipografias políticas/Political Typographies* (Fundació Antoni Tàpies: Barcelona, 2007).

scope, and thus restricting our study to only the most widespread rhetoric – and our television screens as well as, although fewer in number, our cinemas² have more than familiarized us with it – what is this rhetoric telling us?

In reality there are two versions, ostensibly contradictory. The first tells us that the end justifies the means. For this version, all that counts is truth, and the label of “truth” is claimed successively for information, denunciation, laying bare, bringing to light, no matter the kind of striptease practiced or the crudity of the lighting. Its watchword is justice, which gets right to the point and snaps its fingers at art, authorizing the interchangeability of images and sounds, of framing, editing, and mixing – rhetoric updated to contemporary taste with the help of a recycled, breathless militancy, using methods borrowed from the reality show. It goes without saying that this “dust of images”, as Debord contemptuously calls it, in the service of an alleged clean-up is nothing other than one more piece of merchandise, groaning under a surplus ballast of pretty lightweight right-thinking ideology. And although it proclaims its most cherished demands and legitimizations at the top of its lungs, it never manages to touch its audience, no matter what it may say about itself (because otherwise some effect would inevitably be seen), much less its presumed targets.

The second version is more attached to nuances and aims to achieve a balance between cinema and its causes: a legitimate end demands appropriate means. But such an end, as well as its means, will remain a known quantity in this second version, ultimately always recognized. It has appropriated the world and its conflicts in advance, made them its “subjects”, as the professional jargon would have it, and it remains

2 And this too, if one was obliged to take the frames into consideration, would no doubt provide ample material for reflection, from the point of view of a museum exhibition as is here the case. To put it succinctly, how does one get from the television to the museum in the fewest steps possible? How does the television format, which has now clearly usurped the documentary form from its former domain in the cinema, get transposed into the art exhibition, still a symbolically and practically privileged site? It is well known that many works of art from the 1990s, and many still to this day, are structured around a “relationship with film”, which is to say, around the last form still capable of generating mythologies. What is more, they have essentially deployed categories inherited from the historical painting, such as narrative, character, actor: the ultimate configuration midway between the epic and the novel. At the same time, when it has entered into the world of art, television has been considered primarily for its Pop qualities, whether as a new and ambiguous sculptural form (Nam Jun Paik, Vostell, etc.), or as the possibility of a flattened stream of undifferentiated images (Warhol, etc.). Allowing the documentary format, which has been baptized, if not ultimately adopted, by television as its own child, to escape its unequivocal definition by ennobling itself in contact with artistic institutions (such as Catherine David's *Dokumenta X* in 1997, which was sufficiently polemical in its advertisement of the anniversary) rather than by “going big” in cinemas raises more than simply technical questions. The size of the image, the indication (or lack of indication) of the end or the beginning of viewings, the spectator's position a priori within the architecture of these places and their identification, all these have yet to be considered. Leaving aside the details once more, one of the matters at stake no doubt appears paradoxical: that a “minor” form, to borrow a Deleuzian category, insists on claiming that it is precisely that. In other words, that its entrance into the museum is neither a beatification nor an over-exposure but rather, in the elastic, plastic sense of the term, an extension and an enlargement. Such a logic cannot be induced, no matter how indirect the manner, from that of the ready-made (in its most reductionist interpretation: migration transfigures the migrating object), but instead and inversely obeys Paul Celan's celebrated instruction to “take art with you, and enlarge it”. This migratory transition from a mass cultural space to Free Zones transforms these places and their objects alike. They effect a completely pragmatic oscillation from zones of sanctification to spheres of protection, and change into theaters of asylum. The “spectators” will have ample time to see for themselves just how closely linked this is with the subject of these various films.

familiar with its own tools as well. The twin keys to its method are putting a useful limit on the complexity of the issues broached, on the one hand, and advancing into a domesticated territory among images and sounds, on the other. Thus, for example, it knows how a body or a landscape appears within it, whatever they may be, and its framing and editing will distribute their components equitably, in identically smooth and insignificant parts. Furthermore, it knows how to connect two shots, and nothing, or almost nothing, will jar, or alienate, or exhibit an affinity with anything else.

Similarly, it also knows perfectly, indeed exemplarily, what it means to speak. And in any case, its interlocutors' framing and soundtrack will be infinitely repeatable. Because for this version, what is always at stake is the proof that being and word coincide. It needs to show that, while a word is perhaps nothing more than a residue amid alienation, this residue nevertheless remains inalienable. And that this coincidence in extremis between bodies and words is the confirmation that these speaking beings are free. This insistence on the synchronic fulfills a demand which is, one might say, very precise; it is supposed to reassure us at least of the fact that some harmony, a minimum of integrity, does exist. And what is that? The fact that the individual shares in belonging to itself. As a consequence, such delicate questions as those pertaining to translation, dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, and the sound level of voices are of course treated as trivial or excessively subtle. The whole range of kinds of silence – because that is what these various techniques for restoring or recording voices are for, that and nothing else, a way to represent silences – are eventually secondary. Or, to put it even more plainly, they offer the possibility of withdrawing what is portrayed into the very interior of the portrait itself, which makes necessary an entirely different way of conceiving of that celebrated “freedom of speech”, the enjoyment of which becomes less that of “expressing oneself” than of imprinting oneself, even if it means doing it in relief.

It is obvious that one could carry on indefinitely, given the infinite length of the list of technical decisions involved in the actual making of a film. At stake in this second version of the official documentary is the fact that the promise of the production of meaning is always made for what is filmed, which the film strives to accommodate as well as it can, without ever actually allowing the work of the film to be the echo of a disturbance, of a risk that could introduce a fatal gamble into conclusions made in advance.³

Why are these two versions not simply two variations of one single project? Because both of them, the one chilly with violent utilitarianism despite its naivety, the other polite, unarmed, benevolent, and yet just as authoritarian (and that is why the claim of authorship, a terribly impoverished notion in this case, is so often heard), rely on the same business. And what might that be? To put it brutally, it is a definition of human beings and of the world that claims to know their measure so as to enclose them within the limits of reason and familiarity. A definition, as we know, which has been justly criticized as humanistic. The charge sheet could be further expanded, out of loyalty to Pasolini's favorite anathemas, because such an ambition offers humanity nothing more than a reduced horizon, shrunk down to the only status known and assumed by the planetary petty bourgeoisie, that of owner of the universe, master of themselves.

3 As I have tried to do elsewhere, one could indicate the way a similar tempered staging obeys the violence of the trial principle. The distribution of roles, the assignment of places in front of the camera, the regulated order of the editing, the absolute necessity of synchronizing sound and image, all this – and all of it always without exception as an ensemble – leads ineluctably to a verdict, albeit unspoken, but already pronounced from on high.

And this is quite clearly the problem. Because what Angela Melitopoulos and Ursula Biemann have both decided to explore arises precisely out of immoderation, out of the unknown, or, to use a less sentimental and more rigorous term, out of an expropriation, an expropriation of beings, to begin (or to end) with; but also of things, of places and of functions, of countries and of laws, as well as, finally, of our opportunities for seeing them. At least these two artists have opted to take this circumstance for what it is, as the strict point of departure for their works. Neo-capitalism and its flows, geopolitics, exiles, deportations, poverty, alienated bodies, new landscapes, the illegibility or invisibility of financial interests and properly issued policies: all of this and more, for all that it adds up to as a whole (and whether it adds up to any whole at all is the question), cannot be so easily summed up, analysed, in a word: resolved.

Not that this means retreating to the ivory tower or into some dubious ambiguity, out of sheer laziness or aesthetic squeamishness. Once again, the narrator of *Black Sea Files* explains pacifically: “This is not an aesthetic project.” Nor does it mean giving up on the resolute quest for reason, convinced by the evidence of pseudo-mysteries, as Brecht demanded. On the contrary, the scrupulous patience of their maneuvers is token enough. The fact that we are required to acknowledge that a heretofore unseen complexity, or equally a more ancient complexity, is at work (as in *Passing Drama*, Angela Melitopoulos’s beautiful 1999 film⁴) demands that we take this complexity seriously as it wends its way, in all of its ramifications, its contradictions, in the intransigent reality which is precisely what renders its expulsive power effective. And that it bears its contradiction in the very heart of that which it claims to be embracing.

This is why the documentary frame here becomes the site of a twist. The temperance of the documentary is precisely what their respective works abuse, and against which, eventually, they rise up. But theirs is a tranquil revolution, since both treat the “documentary format” as a distant quotation, and use it with the ironic affection reserved for crumbling certitudes.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, it remains to say how this is done. An example will help make their methods clear, even if there is no doubt (and the critical project should not delude itself) that this example was intended to serve as a citation. Its manifest poetic charm, which it shares with the entire oeuvre, and its emphatically programmatic character make it seem to have been perforated around the edges to make it easier to cut out. It appears, furthermore, neither as an introduction nor as a conclusion, but in the midst of the images, even if one might attempt to say that it is still not particularly fortuitously placed. No matter how incongruous or futile they may seem in view of the intimidating issues, it is effects like these, tiny digressions from the tone of light irony, that begin to derail the plodding machine of belief. The extract in question, from file 4 of *Black Sea Files*, has already been referred to twice.

The sequence begins in a manner that could not be more conventional. A commentator speaks off camera in the same voice used throughout the entire work, in all the files as in the rest of the films. Her voice is the very embodiment of the neutrality,

4 This film, which is not included in this exhibition, is a quest for three-dimensionality, for the three-dimensionality of bodies, both those that are absent and merely evoked, and those that are present to our eyes, covered by the unflagging flatness of the surface of images. And it ends by granting to these very same flat images the favour of play within a three-dimensional space. Saving the landscape, understood in its generic sense, is what is essentially at stake here. There is here a great affinity with her project in *Timescapes*: to make not only mouths speak, but eyes and ears as well, in a utopia of the surface.

level-headedness, and rigor born of that anonymity purported to screen the guarantee of her objectivity. Speaking with particularly regular English diction – an attentive listener will however notice a foreign accent – this voice of impartial reason situates the shots and action visible on two adjacent screens. Close-ups and group shots are distributed on both the left and the right sides. And the narrative? By order of the Turkish government, with the aid of vicious armed police officers, Kurdish exiles are expelled from the paper recycling plants that had been providing them with an income. In return, the Kurds set fire to piles of paper, which release a thick black cloud of smoke. These are images of a civil war, waged by a small population, certainly, but whose visual brutality renders them instantly allegorical. Although the commentary does not mention it, the scandal here arises from the doubling of the scandal. Rellegated to the margins, these emigrants now find themselves expelled even from those margins. And then the commentator's voice ceases. It is replaced, on the left-hand screen, by a Kurd standing directly in front of the camera and urgently shouting his explanation of the violence. In his eyes, it represents a retaliation on the part of the government in Ankara for their having voted "wrong". There follows a threat, uttered before he runs off.

Next, the images of the Kurdish defeat return to the two screens, accompanied by the off-camera voice, which no longer situates and describes facts, but instead permits itself to provide a brief explanation linking this sequence to the rest of the files pertaining specifically to oil. "For them," observes the voice, "paper is as valuable as oil is to others." One might think that this excursus on the Kurds in file 4, justified as part of the initial project, is a "self-contained moment". On the contrary: the digression suddenly takes on extra weight, becomes a gripping analogy, which serves as a transition to a situation as yet unseen in the preceding *Files*. For the first time, the two screens seem to be disconnected, each showing a site without any immediately obvious relation to the other. On the left there is a camera angle new to the project, a plunging view from above characteristic of an anti-naturalist vision that reveals, at a slightly oblique angle, part of a domestic interior. A woman's head can be made out, her elbows on a table. Earphones on her head, she is facing three things: a microphone on a stand, a notebook (or a reading book, perhaps), and an ordinary tape recorder. Everything suggests that she is recording herself as she reads aloud from the text in front of her. But although the spectators see her working the buttons of the tape recorder now and then, and bending over the text and the microphone in turn, the overhead position of the camera prevents them seeing her lips move. It makes it still less possible to tell whether this image is in fact the source of the off-camera voice the spectators have now heard taking up its calm delivery once again.

But this is not simply a new space that appears here, intimate, with no geographic situation provided in contrast with the images in all of the other files. For if the images on the right in parallel projection continue to show shots of the Kurds being expelled, they now seem to match the commentator's remarks, as if to illustrate them. Because the commentary has also changed in character. From having been a



Writing Desire

description it has now become a meta-critique, analysing the conditions and reasons for the images shown thus far, and which continue to be shown. “What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go into the trenches?” asks the voice, and it goes on, objectifying at one and the same time the person who has created the images and the fatal moment of testimony: “How did it get to the point where *she* [my emphasis] stands at the front, next to the journalists, *at the very moment* [my emphasis] of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask? What kind of artistic practice does such a video document? That of an embedded artist immersed in a sort of human confusion and confrontation? How to resist making an image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol?” It is important to note that, precisely as the voice rejects the possibility of producing that instantaneous totality desired both by historical painting and by a journalism eager for legends, the image on the left changes. The camera axis has been modified, causing a jump cut. The female figure now turns her back to the camera. She has removed her headphones and is now contemplating the images on the narrow viewfinder of a handheld camera, images we cannot make out. The gesture is quite clear, all the more so for its accompaniment, on the right-hand screen, by a group of journalists, blinded as much by the smoke as by the cameras they bear on their shoulders.

Nevertheless, this critical feedback of the image, which turns against its own power to seek some sort of virginity in its newly rediscovered impotence, is certainly nothing new. Other celebrated artists (Resnais, Marker, Rouch, Godard, Farocki, Bittomsky, Kramer, to name but a few) have established its pedigree, at times at the risk of an almost Orphic emphasis. This is why the apparatus as we have briefly described it is so deliberately stressed: it is a displacement within a displacement, a quotation within a quotation. Not that the scruples expressed are not “authentic” – although they do shift the weight of the question onto the fraudulent game of authenticity, of “live” transmission. Not that similar questions do not run throughout all of the two artists’ films and projects, and affect the attitude of their entire oeuvre. All this is certainly true. The gist of the gesture here bears on something else, something infinitely more discreet: its placement within the succession of sequences. What is that placement? That which is offered by scenes of a sort of auto-da-fé. For what burns in this fourth file is obviously the place, the elements of the life or survival of a population ever more without hearth or home. And it is of course also the ancient signs, the black clouds of its indignation and the flames of its revolt. But what is consumed here is also, quite modestly (and this is said, shown, and analysed) – paper.

After a moment of silence, the voice declares: “Is an image made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives?” An examination of this kind, a fictional self-criticism placed at this point in the film’s progress, will not be satisfied with firing up old debates gone cold, poking at false oppositions between experience and knowledge, between action and reflection, between the immediate and the delayed, between the ordeal of risk and the comfort of study. It is not a matter, in short, of putting the opposition of image and text into perspective, but rather of overturning the opposition. Biemann and Melitopoulos both, each discreetly scandalous in her own way, propose that there is no opposition between image and text. One is the other, and vice versa. Let us be clear: this does not in any way amount to the primacy of the voice, as described above, as a sign of generic appropriation in the second version of the documentary format. It signifies first and foremost that image and text are similarly divided. That neither image nor text enjoys any integrity. Because one might say that the lesson of this Turkish sequence, at once so skillfully and so simply

organized, is this: the image of the burned paper must not be transcended, must not be forgotten (in the sense of losing one's head). To remain faithful to those who have been forgotten and on whose behalf it is testifying, it must be burned a second time. And how? By the analysis that extracts it, and refuses to make an image of this fire. How? By substituting another text, paper entirely new, reborn out of its ashes: a written text, displayed and spoken – without any simultaneity. And then shown again, because these are sentences that move past at great speed on the two screens which end the sequence just as the music swells, sentences that are virtually illegible because the joy that sustains the music carries them by *faster than the images*.

So it should now be all the more clear why the technique of the split screen is so recurrent in the work of Melitopoulos and Biemann. One could of course attempt to derive this use of the diptych from ancient pictorial practices – and one would not necessarily be wrong. One might also attempt a history of its use in cinema. Apart from the triple projection in Gance's *Napoléon* in 1926 (which Jean Vigo annihilated at one savage stroke, calling it “three times the size, three times the idiocy”), the split screen appears as a formal innovation in Hollywood when its scripts succumb to paranoid tendencies (*The Thomas Crown Affair* by Norman Jewison, significantly made in 1968, and then, later, virtually the signature of another great obsessional, in the work of Brian De Palma). It is easy to grasp what this technique serves to convey: a fantasy of control, an intensified return of the mark of Cain – everyone is guilty, and thus deserving of systematic surveyance. There is always another image, decrees the split screen, always an other of the image.

The horizon of guilt and the related horizon of generalized control are no strangers to the effect produced by the films presented here: the guilt of the incriminated, and, as we have just seen, to some extent the guilt of the secret agents and their files of images as well. Sticking to this proposition, however, would only translate and commend the vertigo of a fateful loop (as exemplified in the flat virtuosity of *Time Code* by Mike Figgis) against which the work of Biemann and Melitopoulos rebels, to say the least. What seems to interest them most in the split-screen technique, more than any paranoid symptom, is its manifest schizophrenia. *Contained Mobility* might be the singular illustration of this, given that it relates the schizophrenia at once geographic, linguistic and administrative to which an individual is *compelled*: imprisoned outside, incarcerated outside itself. To put it less clinically, what the image loses in the split-screen treatment is its solidity, its integrity, the illusion of its contemporaneity with itself.

What is the benefit of this? It allows voices to slide themselves in among the images. Unless the story has to be told the other way: that it is the meager power of the voices that has come to tear the theater curtain, that has forced itself in to divide the images, to peel them off, not at the point of editing between separate shots, but on the screen itself, *in view*. That the text, resonating through the voices, should come to make itself *visible* in the image itself, thus recalling their shared solidarity, their shared incandescent ability. This is why the use of subtitles, their very play of typographic size, speed, appearance and disappearance, is not in fact playful but, rather, driven by necessity. A necessity whose paradox arises from its manifestly playful manner, unattributable, always in flagrante delicto as it *performs the border*, to cite the title of a 1999 film.

So what trial have we actually experienced here? That of privileging particular printing systems over expressive resources. That of making visible the body of the text, a body buried under images, masked behind voiceless words, topographies turned typographies: that is the program sketched here, generously.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF VISION: THEORY OF IMAGES – IMAGES OF THEORY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF URSULA BIEMANN'S VIDEO WORK FOR A THEORY OF CULTURE

Jörg Huber

On August 2, 2007, a mini-submarine carrying Russian parliamentarians reached the North Pole and “raised” a Russian flag made of titanium at a depth of 4,261 meters below the surface of the ocean. The image of this symbolic gesture was distributed and shown around the world. The territorial claim it implies is part of a dispute pitting top politicians from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States, Canada, and Denmark against each other on the melting ice of the North Pole, arguing over their respective rights to waters still partly frozen. Global warming is opening up new prospects for transportation (an ice-free Northwest Passage) and the exploitation of natural resources (such as oil and gas). The dispute concerns waterways, and thus the international Law of the Sea Convention; at the same time, it is a *de facto* dispute over land, including the enormous underwater mountain range known as the Lomonosov Ridge.

On September 26, 2007, thousands of monks, students, members of opposition parties, and sympathizers took to the streets in Burma to protest the military junta and to call for freedom and democracy. While the military responded with ruthless brutality, the international political response was discreet and reserved. No one had any desire to jeopardize economic interests by taking a position. The black market and the traffic in human beings make a “peaceful border” vital to Thailand’s economy; meanwhile, India and China, two other neighbors of Burma, are interested in Burmese oil and gas reserves (which are also of some interest to Thailand as well), and China’s quest for access to the Bay of Bengal is a thorn in India’s side. What actually happened in Rangoon and other cities during those days in September is difficult to say, since information was compromised, internet connections closed, and images scarcely available. One image, however, did make it out of the country and was shown around the world: that of the execution of Japanese video journalist Kenji Nagai.

On October 6 the rightwing nationalist Swiss People's Party (SVP) planned to hold a propaganda event in Bern in the run-up to the national elections. An alliance of more than 50 organizations calling itself Black Sheep obstructed the march, and things escalated: there were skirmishes with police, property damage, and rioting. In an unusual move, the international media reported on Swiss domestic politics, focusing particularly on growing hostility to foreigners in Switzerland. The government was disturbed by the potential damage to the Swiss image, and had Presence Switzerland, its PR agency, implement counter-strategies. Founded in the late 1990s, the agency was originally intended as a response to Switzerland's diminished reputation in the wake of revelations of its connections with Nazi Germany. When conflicts become visible, they place "image" in danger. The product of branding known as "Switzerland" found itself struggling to gain control of the collective imagination in an era of geographic reconfiguration and increasing migration.

At the Interface of Occurrence and Imagination

This list of sites could be continued with a host of other examples. At the interface of actual occurrences and imagination, politics and the political are often grounded in territories and geography, in and by means of which they are bound up with economic factors, and effectively balance social relations. It is frequently difficult to interrogate these inflections so as to discern how they actually function, what is cause and what is effect. Political theory must therefore always also be a theory of geopolitics. Particularly at present, such a theory must take into account the fact that every political and social situation draws its form and significance from its global integration as well as from its local and regional particularities. This sort of geopolitical conditioning of social situations poses a challenge to cultural theory, not least because it presents problems of representation, and thus raises the question of how each situation is to be observed, described, and understood. This is a matter of media communication and representation, a question of sights and insights. Michel Foucault has taught us that the visibility of a given epoch constitutes a cultural apparatus with its own political causes and effects. What and how we are able to see today is an effect of power relations. The organization of vision and knowledge is contingent upon the organization of ways of living, and often arises as a specific practice of spatialization. As a strategy of a political culture it effectively shapes culture as conventionally understood. Furthermore, it is rooted in material practice, in institutions, places, machines, and equipment. A critique of political culture by way of an analysis of geopolitical relations, then, can be elaborated within the framework of a theory of aesthetics, as an aesthetic practice itself. As a critique of the dominant means of representation and interpretation, it focuses on the information industry. It insists upon the distinction between "information" and critical "knowledge", and thus upon the significance of aesthetic experience. It will not restrict itself to analyses of contingencies developed in language, but will instead open itself within, and into, work with images that can be pursued as an artistic practice, as the deconstruction and defiance of prevailing methods – with the very same media and different processes and intentions.

At the Institute for Theory (*ith*) we are at work on a theory of culture centered on questions of an aesthetic theory. At stake is the meaning of perception and aesthetic experience in the investigation and production of realities: aesthetic practice as an ensemble of specific ways of generating knowledge, and the peculiarity of the senses in

the production of significance. That is to say, what is at stake is also a critique of the prevailing practices of representation as well as the modes of organizing their logic of argumentation – a critique, in other words, that does not seek to trump or to know better, that not only fields other arguments but in fact draws a bead on the fielding of arguments in general. In the context of a critique of rationalism and hermeneutics, we inquire into the meaning of non-comprehension as comprehension suspended, and thus into other means of comprehension; into the potential relevance of contingency as a figure for a third option between necessity and chance; into the role of the imaginary in the construction of individual and collective identities; and into transgressions facilitated by the aesthetic experience of a critical practice.¹ These are questions that cannot be treated with the usual utensils of scientific rationalism, but require new and idiosyncratic procedures and the use of a variety of media that would cast doubt on the customary borders drawn between the disciplines and the genres of academic and cultural practice. These questions amount to a scrutiny of the self-understanding of the agent as author of an instance of criticism.

Work on a theory of culture that focuses on the political is based on four assumptions: that the given conditions of media information are not sufficient to afford a critical analysis and representation of relations; that the crucial aspects of mediation – think: a critique of representation – are often overlooked by the academic study of political realities; that the established definitions and distinctions of the cognitive terrain prevent artistic and academic work from effectively interacting; and that the significance of the (self-)positioning of the participants is elided, along with their subjective empirical context. So it is not surprising that a theory of culture which claims to contribute to a critique of political culture as aesthetic theory often elicits a feeling of alienation, just as an artistic practice that manifests and profiles itself in this same theoretical context continues to trigger alienation. It is against this backdrop that the work of Ursula Biemann has enjoyed such significance these past few years, for us as well, since that work is constantly trying its hand at practicing such a theory of culture, and thus at producing and conveying key experiences. In what follows I would like to discuss some of the aspects of Biemann's work that make it interesting and necessary for the elaboration of theory.

Geographic and Historical Positionality, and the Aesthetic Situation

One of the fundamental problems in the conception and realization of any theory or theoretical research project arises because of the question of the particular “disposition” and assessment of its inception. Whence, *from where*, is one to set out? How does one select the point of departure, and how does one position oneself there? Ursula Biemann begins with two complementary orientations. She selects a region, a place, a topographical context: a geography of (geo)political interest – border areas and transit routes as transitional zones and passages for economic projects, for tourism, the black market, migration, the traffic in women. At the same time, she selects an occurrence of historical significance, a moment of the transformation of a certain geography. Examples include the area between Azerbaijan and the Mediterranean as the corridor for a planned pipeline that will alter landscapes, force people to move, and destroy traditions (*Black Sea Files*); the Sahara as a space of various kinds of crossings and

¹ See also the T:G series, “Kultur Nicht Verstehen” (2005), “Ästhetik der Kritik” (2006), “Kontingenz-Gestalten” (2007), all published by *ith*.

connections, a range of sites that serve as meeting places and transit points for a wide variety of travelers in the Sahara, and which together constitute a network of migration (Agadez, Sicily, Lampedusa, Tangier, Cairo, etc.), as well as the Spanish border as a multi-functional trading zone (*The Maghreb Connection, Europlex*); the global routes of the traffic in women and prostitution, which inscribe their own new geography (*Remote Sensing*); e-mail and internet communication as the actual and imaginary space of the market in female partners (*Writing Desire*) – to name just a few. In reference to her Sahara project, Biemann notes that she could have focused on a variety of connections. “[F]or my part, I chose to tie migration systems in North Africa back to a history of local and colonial concepts of space and belonging and to current discourses on mobility and networks in the global logic, because in my observation, these are precisely the links that are often foreclosed in public debates.”² Place and region are determined on the basis of their geopolitical and economic significance, which in this case means on the basis of certain processes. Geographies are not (merely) interpreted as natural phenomena or as venues for events, but rather in their association with processes, occurrences, people, actors, and histories, as correlations of actions, and thus as the product of social and cultural processes. They have symbolic significance: “The material landscape is not just the backdrop for a plot, it is an iconographic index of the mind, a cultural product in which ideas and ideologies manifest themselves, and as such it has its own symbolic presence.”³ For this reason, one should not ask why these geographies are interesting politically, economically, and as social and cultural geographies, but rather how political and economic occurrences produce this geography and generate social relations. Geographies are both the premise *and* the effect of political and economic processes, and as such they are the scene of political and economic conflicts, which means, in turn, of social and cultural formation. The question is how a given situation or relation is constituted, and thus how it can also be altered. How does a given geography “take place”? Who produces it, and who controls it? These are questions best asked by those who are themselves part of the goings-on, that is, by people who go to the site themselves and confront the participants: those who champion the “view from the ground” against the satellite image, proximity against the controlling eye of surveyance, the embodied gaze against the mechanical regard, as Biemann repeatedly stresses and practices in her work. While field work is a necessary condition for the artistic practice of a theory of culture, experience with the more traditional forms of field work (in ethnography, journalism, humanitarian work, etc.) refers to the decisive question of self-reference, distance, and immediacy: in short, participation, and how the practitioner deals with the matter of observation,



Sahara Chronicle, Remote Sensing, Performing the Border

2 Biemann, “Agadez Chronicle,” in Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (eds.), *The Maghreb Connection* (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), 47.

3 Ibid.

that is, his or her own positioning, the possibilities of a first-person narrative in the perception and recognition of others in their otherness, as well as the opportunities afforded by others in their articulation.

Such a premise could be described as an aesthetic situation, and the protagonists of the project as aestheticians, analogous to cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme's sketch: "In the majority of situations, indeed, perhaps in all situations, social meaning emerges in aesthetic appearance, and then only insofar as the latter encodes the former. One can only remove social meaning from the aesthetic at the cost of embalming it as mere information. That would be sociology. Aestheticians, on the contrary, are vivisectionists. This makes them shady characters, but it is also their trump card. They are always concerned with specific cases, they linger over them; and yet they are never entirely *there*. They are necessarily present, and yet peculiarly removed from the present. They are closer to phenomena than scientists are, which is why all of their discoveries bear the marks of their subjectivity (which they do not deny, but reflect)."⁴ Sensory skill and reflection are here interconnected. The specific case sensitizes the protagonist to the performativities of a sensory event, one that is constituted in part by a given situation: actions, gestures, affects and emotions, colors and scents, sounds and noises, people, animals, landscapes, things, atmospheres. An occurrence that happens unexpectedly, that cannot be calculated or completely understood, something that befalls one, like a visitation, often overwhelming – if one allows oneself to be exposed to it: off-road geographies, *jungles* rather than the pre-ordained order of things, *terrain vague* – as Anselm Franke puts it in his preface to *B-Zone*⁵; an occurrence that concerns embodied, affective experience, and thus makes an affective experience possible – in moments of perception, often not capable of verbal representation, but which open a space for images. Work with photography and video/film is committed to the goal of not dismissing the occurrence of an aesthetic situation as simply "pre-rational" and "subjective". On the contrary, the goal is to give the aesthetic situation the space needed for precisely such an occurrence, along with the attendant affective experience.

Aesthetic Experience as Open-ended Cognition

Images exist in a realm beyond prescribed logics and arise out of an attention that is often not focused, but rather floating, open, passive. This opening up to experience corresponds to a receptivity that allows (aesthetic) experience to be an occurrence as well: the occurrence and the admission of the other, who also continually withdraws and resists control in his or her very otherness; the production of a familiarity that does not eliminate alienation, but instead preserves it intact. Aesthetic experience and sensory perception generate a temporary, necessarily open-ended cognition, one which tolerates the polyphony of various manifestations and representations and operates with images that, as spaces of suggestion and uncertainty, of appearance and vanishing, of threshold and transition, *place* the seal of approval on this epistemology of experience/occurrence. This "attitude" corresponds to the situation at the outset, which under the gaze and the sensibility of the protagonist turns out to be a situation and a space of movements, of transitions, of the temporary and uncertain.

4 Hartmut Böhme, "Einführung in die Ästhetik," in *Paragrana* vol. 4, no. 1 (Berlin, 1995), 243.

5 Anselm Franke, "Introduction", in *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Barcelona/Berlin: Actar/Kunst-Werke, 2005), 6.

“The charting of space coincides with the charting of knowledge about a subject that is dynamic and fluid. The geographies that are generated in the process, and I mean both the migratory and videographic ones, are likewise spaces of fluidity, relationality and multiplicity.”⁶ Biemann insists on the significance of this multi-layeredness: the kaleidoscope of relations, conversations, statements, impressions, perceptions, in which and out of which the construction of an authorial position must proceed; the significance of the poly-perspectivism, too, that combines various ways of observing (one’s own position as well as that of the others, and their mutual contingency), conversations and interviews, materials found or derived from questioning, analyses of historical and simulated situations, and the theoretical reflection that is the premise for political critique). It is clear that positionality is not determined this way in isolation, but rather in a mood of egalitarian impartiality as regards the others who are doing the same, who are also en route and on site, and who also manifest and inscribe themselves in the situation and in the geography. Depending on the particular situation, these may be tourists, media workers, members of the military, terrorists, resistance fighters, employees of international enterprises, humanitarian personnel, migrants, nomads, residents, or natives. Böhme notes the opportunity afforded by the fact that the aesthetic does not require stable order and clear relations, and stresses the similarity of this opportunity to that enjoyed by the traveler. At the same time, this does not mean giving oneself over to the affective event and losing oneself in it, the way the traveler can lose sight of herself and the others as she passes by. Aesthetic experience demands the connection of sensory cognition and reflection of positionality. “The analysis of complex aesthetic situations shows”, Böhme writes, “that the aesthetic phenomenon is constituted in the first place in a fluid and integrative process of perception and reflections, of knowing and remembering, of imagination and association, of sensed atmospheres and analytic insights, of projective relinquishments and introjective internalizations.”⁷ It is important that the work performed by the theory of culture, and the artistic practice as one of its possible processes, neither install any hierarchies nor practice any censorship during these proceedings – which describes the premise for what Biemann calls the dynamics of her work, consisting as it does in the development of a counter-geography, against the master narrative, the prevailing order and perspective. This counter-geography occurs as a reconfiguration in the field of representation, and faces the challenge of organizing the material.

Biemann’s work moves on these two levels of a critical encounter with the media: on the one hand by working with images that provide the space for the abovementioned dimensions of sensory experience, not utterly subordinated to an intentionalist logic; and on the other hand by working with images (and texts) that reveal and reflect the specific aesthetics and the epistemological quality of images and visualities. One could describe this doubleness as a feature of essay-writing,⁸ since the material is at one and the same time present in an unmediated way and, on a second level, adduced for observation and reflected upon. That said, they should not be understood as mutually opposing levels. Intentionality and non-intentionality intersect chiastically, manifesting their mutual surplus and respective specific latencies. This practice of mutual exposure by means of wholehearted deployment makes possible an actual and effective counter-position to the way in which the official business of politics and eco-

6 Biemann, “Agadez Chronicle,” 47.

7 Böhme, 246.

8 *Ursula Biemann (ed.), Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zürich/Vienna: Edition Voldemeer/Springer-Verlag, 2003).

nomics, the academy, and of the media goes about dealing with and representing geopolitics. The officially communicated reality is always given the appearance of a smooth surface; contradictions and paradoxes are either elided or factored in as the necessary evil of a “difficult” time. It appears to be autonomous, and is taken for granted. Occurrence is fragmented, singular processes are stylized as “events” – *facts* and *events* in place of what is actually going on. Peering behind these scenes calls for other measures and procedures, other ways of seeing, and other fields of vision. A counter-geography demands other regimes of vision. Accordingly, Biemann selects various research and “recording” procedures, as well as various medialities and forms/strategies of presentation. A video, for instance, can be sub-divided into “logs”, “files”, or chapters. And it can be presented in different venues and in a variety of contexts: together with books, in exhibitions, as an element in an installation, projected on the wall or on multiple screens, and so forth. As for context, that may be provided by an art exhibition, an academic symposium, a university classroom situation, or an intervention in a public space. Here too, the possibilities are open-ended, to be discovered and/or invented over and over again in relation to the particularities of each piece.

Images of various kinds and origins are used in the various videos, including footage or photographs created by Biemann herself, staged and coincidental pictures, found material from a range of sources, video, photography, and graphic work of all kinds. The images are then arranged in a montage within the discursive context of the work, so that their various aesthetic and media qualities as well as the traces of their origin and use are made plain. Discursive montages of contrasts alternate with the simultaneous presence of various images by way of screen-splitting; images also appear in their absence, in cases where they could not be produced, or their production was prohibited, or they were confiscated, and they are confronted with and accompanied by language and text: commentary, statements, stories, analyses, statistics. By way of such inter-media associations and overlaps, various ways of reading, as well as the interests correlated with them, are highlighted and exposed.



Remote Sensing, Contained Mobility, X-Mission

Generating Illegibility

The crucial point is that, in the course of these processes, text and image serve not only to render situations and occurrences – the world – legible, but also to make each other, and thus the world, illegible. While the information society believes and claims that everything – the world – is legible, and is thus available and capable of being appropriated, the counter-position insists upon the illegibility of the world as it continually flares up, upon its recurrent non-availability, that is, on a representational form that recognizes the radical alienation of the foreign in the familiar. Legibility always pretends that everything is clear, decipherable, something to be apprehended – ultimately a gesture of disempowerment; while illegibility insists on astonishment, alienation, on the recognition that the world is constantly withdrawn and unavailable. This does not mean that one does not seek knowledge, and must for instance analyse

the political circumstances; it means, rather, that aperçus are always only provisional, discursive, situative, and not – as the official opinion and the view from on high would have it – definitive and final. Illegibility is produced in use: for example, by means of abduction (assumptions, sketches, trials), in the simultaneity of various images (screen splitting), in the use of poetic images, in the significance of moods, in the experience of not being able to say something, in stammering – procedures condemned by hardcore journalism, for instance.

This simultaneity and equivalence of appropriation and withdrawal corresponds to a form of indifference of art, as recognized by Jacques Rancière as the sign of precisely that sort of art which is said to be *engagé*, an art of (political) commitment. “A critical art must in its way be an art of indifference, an art that determines the point at which knowledge and ignorance, activity and passivity are equivalent.”⁹ Such an artistic practice reacts to situations and occurrences that are ambiguous, and produces an intermediate level between theoretical discourse, academic field work, and artistic production. Such work cannot be resolved, in the name of achieving certainty and orientation, in a direction that promises formalized knowledge. At the same time, it does not mean, as is often claimed, that this involves mixing media and genres and methods at will. Inter- or trans-disciplinarity means that theoretical reflection, scientific observation, and aesthetic artistic practice must be distinguished, and that each of those activities demands its own specific kind of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they must be brought into relation in a new way in each separate project, mediated by the principal actors and/or the professionals participating in the project, as well as those to whom the project is addressed. In this sense, a work such as Biemann develops and exhibits is also the practice of visual and media criticism as well as an element of a critical discourse about the relationship of theory, art, and politics. This is the point at which her artistic practice dovetails with the practice of a theory of culture, in making a claim on criticism that depends on the question of how criticism can occur. In conclusion I would like to formulate five theses.

1. As a process and a measure, criticism should not be understood from the certainty of distance, but rather from involvement in a situation; not as a process of clarification, but rather of opening, of interruption, of bewilderment.
2. Criticism does not solve crises, it provokes them (with an eye perhaps to eventually finding a way out of them).
3. What criticism “is” arises out of a relation to what occasions it, that is, to the experience that motivates the critic.
4. Criticism that wishes to prove it is critical must examine its possibilities, the sense of possibility as well as the possibilities of the subject of critique.
5. Criticism as an occurrence essentially has something to do with perception, sensibility, configuration, mediality – with aesthetics.

This apparatus points to the site of criticism, which is no longer (institutionally and methodically) determined, but can arise anywhere and in a variety of constellations, and can be determined anew at any time by a variety of agents. Ursula Biemann’s aesthetic-artistic practice, as a theory-practice, is in this sense a form of criticism.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, “Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien,” in Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen* (b books Verlag: Berlin 2006), 87.

SAHARA CHRONICLE: VIDEO'S MIGRANT GEOGRAPHY

T.J. Demos

In “Oujda Frontierland”, one of twelve videos that comprise *Sahara Chronicle* 2006–07, we follow a group of Moroccan police patrolling their country’s western border with Algeria as they check desert locations known for migrant activity. These guards are in charge of stemming the tide of sub-Saharan Africans coming north with the intention of finding a better life in Morocco or further on in Europe. This time, the guards come across nothing in particular, even though they are aware that migrants are always in their midst, hiding and waiting for the right moment to cross the border. In the course of conducting their operations, a sand storm rises, bringing with it the loss of geographical markers and spatial orientation. A visual blindness ensues that is at once reflective of Saharan weather conditions and allegorical in that it symbolizes the struggle between mobility and the politics of containment that is Ursula Biemann’s object of inquiry. As the camera’s perception of the desert is denied, the storm dramatizes the breakdown of the advanced technologies of surveillance and the Moroccan police’s inability to maintain its country’s national integrity. What happens to the concept of a geographical border when the land itself moves? Containment becomes an impossible task, and the contours of the nation as a locus of economic, linguistic, and legal identity begin to blur. In its place a vague terrain emerges that is the space of the migrant.

It is this migrant geography – composed of shifting terrains, fluid borders, and mobile passages – that *Sahara Chronicle* reveals via a sequence of twelve short videos, each between three and thirteen minutes in length. The project represents a further step in Biemann’s quasi-ethnographic video-based practice, which, drawing on exten-



Sahara Chronicle

sive fieldwork, investigative research, and on-site interviews, has examined several different but structurally related border-zone geographies to date. *Performing the Border* (1999), considers the exploitation of female labor in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez. *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Writing Desire* (2002) both investigate the post-Cold War's marketplace of desire surrounding the transnational sexual commodification of women over the Internet. *Europlex* (2003), examines the informal practices of domestic labor and smuggling activities that occur over the Moroccan-Spanish border. *Black Sea Files* (2005), explores the Caspian multinational oil industry and its political and social effects on the surrounding Caucasus area. What joins these projects in defining a consistent practice is the rigorous and varied approach to documenting real conditions in transitional social-economic areas, and a complex relation to representation that exceeds the protocols of traditional documentary conventions.



Sahara Chronicle

These two tendencies equally mark *Sahara Chronicle*. Over the course of the seventy-six minute video – although it is typically displayed as simultaneously playing component sections – we follow Biemann’s camera as it offers diverse accounts of the experienced conditions of migration. We see footage of the transit business in Agadez, Niger, where migrants purchase tickets for their overland journeys north, eventually setting out into the desert on trucks overloaded with bags that will take them to Algeria or Libya (Desert Truck Terminal). We watch shots of the cargo trains that carry iron ore to Western Mauritania’s coast, which serves as a vector of passage to Spain’s Canary Islands (Iron Ore Train). We also view aerial footage of precarious desert camps surrounded by sand dunes, where travelers lay low before making their border crossings (Architectures of Mobility). To tell these stories, Biemann deploys a diversity of representational strategies and presents a variety of perspectives, including interviews conducted by the artist with transportation providers in Agadez (Desert Truck Terminal); footage that simulates the imagery of surveillance aircraft equipped with night-vision and thermal cameras, which track movement near the Libyan-Niger border (“Desert Radio Drone”); and documentation of a prison in Laayoune, Morocco where unsuccessful migrants end up before being bussed off to their countries of origin empty-handed, only to start the journey anew (Deportation Prison Laayoune). In this last passage we hear the personal stories told by several migrants, all young men who were intercepted in the Sahara: one from Senegal saved his money for three years to come up with the four hundred Euros needed for travel expenses, only to lose it in his failed attempt to get to Morocco; another left Niger because he couldn’t find a job and thus felt socially excluded, unable to marry; a man from Nigeria claims Moroccans typically rob immigrants, treating them as if they aren’t human beings. These are no doubt typical stories, picked out seemingly randomly from the crowd of men in this camp, one of many such places found increasingly across North Africa and Southern Europe. Yet while their tales may be heart-wrenching, *Sahara Chronicle* is far from pessimistic: in fact the video remains ever hopeful in its attempts to offer a positive account of migration that extends a sense of organization, determination, and agency to its subjects.

As Biemann makes clear, *Sahara Chronicle* is motivated by the desire to challenge the representational conditions of clandestine migration. As is common knowledge, over the last decade thousands of migrants have died of exposure in the desert or have drowned in the Mediterranean, all because they have sought to challenge increasingly restrictive African and European travel regulations, which help to maintain a global system of economic and political inequality. Belying the neo-liberal rhetoric of globalization that continues to vaunt the liberties of personal freedom, the reality of inequality could not be greater than when the mass media advertises cheap travel and simultaneously runs stories about the tragic fate of refugees trying unsuccessfully to gain passage to Europe. For Biemann, the goal is not so much to supplement or correct the mass media's conventional picture by providing her own claim to "truth," but rather to intervene in prevailing perceptions of the situation of migration, as she writes: "to present an empowered vision of organized migration in which geopolitics is not strictly reserved to powerful nations who wish to dominate a region for its resources, but instead is a strategy that can equally apply to a large movement of exiles or work migrants who target another territory for more economic plenitude." For her, this is a way "to turn a stigma into an enabling force" – even while she remains quite realistic about the political effectiveness of her individual practice.¹

As if by necessity, Biemann's work emerges out of a critical relationship to mass media reportage, which, as she explains, either fails completely to cover Saharan migration or when it does tends to reduce it to sensationalist images corresponding to an easily consumable repertoire of stories.² Going beyond these reductive approaches, Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle* acts as a "diagram" of the geopolitical reality of North African migration – that is, a function that joins different regimes of signs into a heterogeneous assemblage: *Sahara Chronicle* links everyday life with colonial history, legal structures with economic facts, the politics of containment with the will toward mobility.³ Yet without over-arching narrative or authoritative voice-over, the video distinguishes itself from the rhetoric of authority and the claims of truthfulness that characterize official and media-based representations, even if in some ways *Sahara Chronicle* bears comparison to the mixed-media platforms of television news broadcasts, such as Al Jazeera, and the heterogeneous structure of the multiple-imaged web page. The piece's installation extends this experimental mode of address, showing its video sections according to a variable configuration, split between projections and monitors (for instance in recent shows at Arnolfini in Bristol or Bildmuseet in Umeå, Biemann has projected some of the videos and played others on monitors). By looping sections of variable length that play simultaneously, the diagram of connections is always shifting, promoting a continually renewed set of narrative directions that is

1 Ursula Biemann, "Agadez Chronicle: Post-Colonial Politics of Space and Mobility in the Sahara," in *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), 67. The Maghreb Connection represented a collaborative art and visual research project on North African migration, including an exhibition of videos at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo and the *Centre d'Art Contemporain Geneva*, which Biemann organized.

2 Biemann also explains that "I do see the necessity to liberate the trans-Saharan migration from its hypnotizing media mantra of captured boat people or victims of a grim trafficking business. The media seem to surrender to every temptation of reducing reality and condensing it into a symbol, thrusting the whole issue into discursive disrepair." "Agadez Chronicle," 45.

3 I borrow the concept of the diagram from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion of it in *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 145-46.

at once transformative of conventions and generative of new possibilities. Spatialized and dispersed, *Sahara Chronicle* defines a heterogeneous space, allowing the viewer to enter at any point and create his or her own linkages between the diverse elements.

In so doing, *Sahara Chronicle* forms an unexpected space where the stratifications of digital video translate the heterogeneous geopolitical space of the Sahara. This correspondence is far from an unwitting coincidence, as, for Biemann, geography designates “a signifying system that allows us to grasp the relations between subject, movement and space,”⁴ a definition that also characterizes her video-essay. Nor is this relationship between video and geography a simple mimicry; Biemann’s video disconnects from the conventional system of reporting in which the sign forms reality’s substitute, which is the presumption of media’s “truth” telling. Conversely, for Biemann, the event of the sand storm dramatizes how *Sahara Chronicle* confronts the opacity of the desert and its inhabitants, visualizing reality’s resistance to representation. The tumultuous weather not only derails the border guards, but also Biemann’s own camera, and in this seemingly insignificant but telling detail we witness as well a confrontation with the limits of the documentary approach. In its place, *Sahara Chronicle* re-invents the relation between video’s politics of representation and its space of reception, one that differs radically from conventional media images of migration. While *Sahara Chronicle*’s heterogeneous and spatialized structure mirrors the fluidity and infinite complexity of its subject, it moves beyond the simple equivalence between sign and image. Here the goal is not the truthful depiction of an already existing subject, but rather the construction of a system of possibility that remains open, realizable in a multiplicity of ways by the viewer. In this way, *Sahara Chronicle* generates a transformative experience by extending the dislocating forces of migration into a mode of reception that shifts perspectives and thereby creates its political effect.

Biemann’s chosen term for her work is the “video essay,” which suggests a category that joins images and writing, but also, more complexly, images as a form of writing and writing a mode of images. As a result, the image is denaturalized as much as language is materialized, both requiring a subtle and considered approach. The essay form emphasizes video’s discursive condition, one that is composite and that overcomes positing the image as either documentary or aesthetic. Rather, it’s indissolubly both, which is clear in those passages in *Sahara Chronicle* that provide information but also offer allegorical interpretations, as well as in shots that join to express the video’s development over time, placing documentary elements into subjectively organized passages. As such, Biemann’s work advances a new kind of video practice, which, emerging over the last fifteen years or so, shares certain of its concerns with the work of likeminded practitioners of the video-essay, including Harun Farocki, Amar Kanwar, Hito Steyerl, and the Otolith Group.⁵ What marks this development is the tendency to link documentary functions to imaginative scenarios, in order to both retain video’s representational relation to social reality and nuance its meanings via carefully

4 Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, “Introduction,” *The Maghreb Connection*, 7.

5 Also relevant are the critical mapping practices of Bureau d’étude, Frontera Sur RRVT, Macrolab, Multiplicity, and Raqs Media Collective, which were included in *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, an exhibition Biemann organized for Vienna’s Generali Foundation in 2003, including an eponymous catalogue. See Biemann (ed.), *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* (Köln: Generali Foundation, Wien: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003).

elaborated constructions.⁶ What results is a new mode of address that replaces the stultifying conventions of truth-telling with the transformative capacity of representation to shift perspectives and invite collaborative and creative interpretation.

While it's true that within this grouping of artists Biemann's project may stand the closest to an activist modeling of video, equally evident is that her work resists adopting the claims of transparency, objectivity, and truth that have marked socially-engaged documentary practice. Rather, as her careful and theorized use of the term video-essay makes apparent, Biemann takes her video's representations to be heterogeneous and internally divided, unfolding according to spatially and temporally determined montage: the video-essay is "dissociative, multi-perspective and hypertextual in the structuring of images and sounds," she explains.⁷ Her highly mediated videos follow suit and are thus characterized by texts streaming over images sourced from a variety of origins, including maps, appropriated footage from official sources, and her own raw live-action recordings. Her video-essays thereby pull apart the ostensible naturalness of the image, refusing any assumption of its bearing a direct or transparent connection to reality, and likewise, any presumption of its possessing an immanent meaning.

In this regard, Biemann's model of the video-essay is not unlike the more established one of the film-essay, even while the two forms must also be differentiated, for the use of digital technology recalibrates film's relation to representation. While the film-essay's heterogeneous structure emphasizes representational mediation over the direct transcription of reality, the video-essay might be thought to banish the real even further from its images, especially when it comes to animation and special effects constructed fully by computerized technology. As has often been remarked, recent video signals a crisis of the real because it severs analogue photography's indexical relation between sign and referent by translating the image into digital code, thus preparing it for easy future processing. Yet this does not mean that digital video is condemned to mere artifice. Predictions of the eclipse of reality by simulation – as in Baudrillard's famous remarks about the death of the real – are doubtlessly overstated, for digital video continues to offer automatic recordings of the visual field, forming images capable still of functioning as evidence in legal contexts, documents in historical archives, or actionable data in military reconnaissance. Indeed, *Sahara Chronicle* includes aerial footage of the Sahara that is similar to that used by the Libyan military precisely in this way. Creating "dissociative, multi-perspectival and hypertextual" videos, Biemann has nevertheless exploited digital technology. Working in the digital format since *Performing the Border* (recorded in hi8 video), she employs numerous digital postproduction procedures – such as her use of split screen displays and composite images, subtitling, and stop-action and slow-motion functions – which hybridize her videos, including *Sahara Chronicle*, by situating documentary footage

- 6 There is a growing literature in this area. Exemplary contributions include: David Joselit, "Inside the Light Cube: Pierre Huyghe's *Streamside Day Follies* and the Rise of Video Projection," *Artforum* (March 2004); and Tom McDonough, "No Ghost," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 107-130. I have also written on this issue in several essays, including "Life Full of Holes," *Grey Room*, no. 24 (Fall 2006), 72-88, "Openings: The Otolith Group," *Artforum* (September 2006), 360-62, and "Out of Beirut," *Artforum* (October 2006), 234-38.
- 7 Ursula Biemann, "The Video Essay in the Digital Age," in Biemann, ed., *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zürich: Institute for Theory of Art and Design, 2003), 9. An extension of this hybridity is the multidisciplinary nature of Biemann's engagement, as she sees the video-essay's "strength" as lying "in the quality of the mediator and communicator between differential cultural spaces."

in highly artificial digital environments. Yet Biemann's reliance on documentary elements and strategies – including the use of a hand-held camera that mimics everyday perception, the integration of unprocessed live-action imagery of real people and places, and captions that pin visual images to specific geographical and historical locations – clearly serves to maintain the connection of her videos to the ground of social reality. In fact, the clear division between digital video and film may be a false one (as is evident in Biemann's case), since montage and processing strategies have frequently rendered film an artificial construction in the past, particularly in avant-garde practice. To view the video-essay as newly artificial presupposes – falsely – that the real was once, un-problematically, available to film.⁸

Rather than reinforcing a rupture between different technological platforms, whether between film and video, or electronic and digital video, Biemann's use of the video-essay defines a line of continuity with the essay film. It is thus not surprising that she references Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, 1983, as an important precedent for her work. Marker's film-essays, including *Grin Without a Cat*, 1977, similarly assemble a mixed array of documentary imagery and places them in relation to highly poetic, subjective, and analytical voice-overs. These techniques prefigure Biemann's own work, even if her video-essays exchange Marker's meditative, elegiac style for more of an activist engagement.⁹ The film-essay similarly constitutes a hybrid form, mixing writing and images, and frequently fiction and documentary elements. As Nora Alter points out in her study of Marker's work, the term "film essay" was used first in 1940 by Hans Richter in a short text "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film," in which Richter wrote about how this new form allows one to make "problems, thoughts, even ideas" perceptible in a way that conventional film could not. André Bazin also employed the term, using it later in relation to Marker's work to identify its composite filmic mode that is simultaneously historical and political, documentary and poetic. For Alter, the film-essay is inherently diverse in its discursive positioning, potentially combining autobiography, history, social commentary, critical exegesis, epistolary form, anecdotal digression, and self-reflexive elements.¹⁰

But one can go even further than this analysis, which separates the film-essay from film proper. As Jacques Rancière argues, the film-essay makes apparent the very condition of film, as it brings out film's fundamental dual tendency: to capture luminous traces of matter in movement, and to arrange those elements into a sequence over time. This unification of a machine account of the visual world with its subjective arrangement results in "documentary fiction," which, however, does not mean the end result is purely imaginary. Rather, Rancière retrieves the old Latin meaning of fiction – *ingere* – meaning "to forge" rather than "to feign," in order to reclaim fiction's original productive function. Accordingly, fiction aligns with documentation, which comes close to describing the character of the film-essay: "Fiction means using the means of art to construct a 'system' of represented actions, assembled forms, and in-

8 Cf. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (London: MIT, 2002), 307-08: "The mutability of digital data impairs the value of cinema recordings as documents of reality. In retrospect, we can see that twentieth-century cinema's regime of visual realism, the result of automatically recording of visual reality [based on live-action footage], was only an exception, an isolated accident in the history of visual representation, which has always involved, and now again involves, the manual construction of images."

9 Biemann indicates her debt to Marker's "post-structuralist cinematographic practice" in her introductory essay in *Stuff It*, 8.

10 Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 17-20.

ternally coherent signs,” writes Rancière.¹¹ Similarly for Biemann, “the essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.”¹² Rather than pursuing “the representability of truth,” “[t]he essayist intention lies much rather in a reflection on the world and the social order,” Biemann notes, “and it does so by arranging the material into a particular field of connections.” By emphasizing the subjective rendering of social reality, the video-essay thus proposes an “imaginary space,” an “artificial construct,” built on documentary elements, which approximates Rancière’s notion of “documentary fiction.”¹³ The result brings about a critical reversal of the conventional opposition between documentary and fictional film, as Rancière explains: “The real difference between them isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood.”¹⁴ But what would it mean to build a documentary practice that does not treat the real as a fact to be understood, but as an effect to be produced? It would mean that the documentary would “forge” new stories – Rancière calls them “film fables” – by reconstructing reality, directing its power of affect to alter perspectives, build memories, and create modes of identifications not experienced before in representation. It would mean defining documentary’s ambition as not only the representation but constitution of reality, inspiring belief in the world of its own constructions. This is, in my view, the ambitious achievement of Biemann’s video practice.

Toward its middle, *Sahara Chronicle* presents a video interview with a man identified as Adawa, an ex-rebel Tuareg based in Niger. Wearing indigo colored robes and mirrored sunglasses, he is portrayed sitting against red earthen walls, forming a striking image split between tradition and modernization as he relays stories about his people and their difficult geopolitical circumstances. The traditionally nomadic Tuareg, we learn, have historically lived without clear boundaries in the expansive Sahara region, which came to be divided by European colonial powers during the late nineteenth century into the nations of Chad, Niger, Libya, Algeria, and Mali.¹⁵ To this day, however, there is virtually no organization between those countries – at least when it comes to the Tuareg – and none of the countries have consequently integrated the Tuareg into its national fold, explains Adawa in French, whose account is supplemented with additional information that scrolls intermittently across the screen during the interview. Although the Tuareg are nominally recognized by Niger, they accrue none of the rights or benefits of citizenship from that country or from any of the surrounding ones. This political disenfranchisement culminated in



Sahara Chronicle

- 11 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 158.
- 12 Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video,” in *Stuff It*, 83.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 83 and 85.
- 14 Rancière, 158.
- 15 This was decided at the infamous Berlin Conference in 1884, as Biemann notes in “*Agadez Chronicle*,” 49. In this essay, she also provides further details on the Tuareg, which informs my account presented here.

a violent rebellion against the Nigerien authorities during the early 1990s, when the Tuareg revolted because they found themselves excluded from the labor force at the major uranium mine in Arlit. Developed by the French when valuable deposits were discovered near Agadez in the early 1960s, Arlit's mine was soon staffed by managers and engineers brought from Europe and miners from southern Niger. The Tuareg, however, received no job opportunities, even though they had long considered Arlit part of their territory. When the rebellion came to an end in 1994, owing partly to the crash of uranium prices when formerly Soviet Russia dumped its reserves on the world market, the Tuareg re-channeled their energies into the development of a semi-clandestine transportation system catering to West African migrants traveling north to Algeria and Libya. With intimate knowledge of the merciless terrain of the Sahara and given their multilingual ability, the Tuareg soon became key players in the transnational migration industry, carrying Sub-Saharan travelers in four-wheel-drive vehicles over the desert to Niger's northern borders. The Tuareg do so at the risk of arrest by various state authorities for assisting with the transportation of undocumented persons, and even death owing to the nature of their clandestine and dangerous activities. They consequently consider themselves to be engaged in "a continuing rebellion" with the nations that surround them, as Adawa explains: "It's as if we live outside of law, always."

To live outside the law, always. Adawa's conclusion identifies the Saharan terrain as a legal void wherein national sovereignty (in this case, of several countries at once) denies political rights to inhabitants, which corresponds to what Giorgio Agamben terms a zone of bare life. Not only does this definition characterize the status of the Tuareg, deprived of the rights of citizenship by the state, but also that of migrants who have traded national identity for stateless status (and oftentimes they destroy their identification papers to avoid the forced repatriation to their country of origin). It is fitting that the locus of statelessness is the desert, as the vast Sahara – a migrant land as much as a land of migrants – represents a smooth space that geologically defies borders as much as national inscription. For Agamben, the designation of such a territory performs a "dislocating localization," where the "political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space."¹⁶ Instead space becomes indeterminate, a partitioning carved out of national space where political existence is withdrawn from life, isolating *zoe* (biological life) from *bios* (qualified life, as by political and national identity). In fact Biemann's practice focuses repeatedly on such spaces, and her own Foucauldian conceptualization of these "heterotopic" terrains – "where civil realities and national regulations are largely suspended in favor of a special corporate arrangement" – correlates with Agamben's theorization of the "state of exception" in which the exemption from legal recognition becomes the norm, one exploited by the state or by its corporate proxies, whether within a specific delimited area, such as the camp or prison, or as a generalized condition.¹⁷

There are in fact certain benefits for North African states to maintain such states of exception, as pointed out in the *Sahara Chronicle*. The incentive to preserve the instability of the Tuareg, for instance, is twofold: they are kept active with their trans-

16 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

17 Biemann, "Performing Borders," 85. Biemann's reference here is to Michel Foucault's discussion of heterotopias in his essay "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* (Spring 1986). Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

portation operations, which serves to minimize their desire for rebellion; and they are consigned to the edges of legality, where their potential criminal status grants the state a convenient reason to arrest them at any point should the need present itself. Far from opposed by North African states, then, migration appears to be tacitly tolerated by the governing regimes and even strategically managed at the national levels. Because the European Union promises aid to African countries that demonstrate the ability and political commitment to control their own borders, migration is used as a bargaining chip by African nations to exact further resources from the EU in terms of funding for internal security, military provisions, and border protection.¹⁸ The result is that the cynical politics of migration tend to reinforce the repressive character of those African countries' governments, which, in bringing about further misery and oppression to their peoples, fuels the desire for emigration in turn.

By creating a representational analogue for this geopolitical space, *Sahara Chronicle* exposes and thus contests its lawlessness, for it is precisely through representation and discourse that the strategic invisibility of North African migration must be challenged. In doing so, the video answers a longstanding imperative to develop new ways of charting the nebulous geographies of globalization under advanced capitalism, as made most forcefully by Fredric Jameson in the mid 1980s. According to Jameson's now classic analysis, advanced capitalism introduced broad shifts in cultural conditions, including the commercial image's severing of signs from references and the mediatized disconnection from historical consciousness. By producing a generalized "schizophrenic" experience that renders consumers affectless and socially atomized, deprived of the ability to locate themselves in either space or time, the system thus disables critical challenge and maximizes its own efficiency. Indeed, Jameson argued that the technological advances of globalization left us unable to situate ourselves within its new simulacral reality: the "faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism."¹⁹ The proposed response to this situation – the need for which, if anything, only has intensified today – was the call for a new form of "cognitive mapping," which could "enable a situational representation on the part of the subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality, which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."²⁰

Biemann's mapping project resonates with this mapping imperative insofar as it provides a system of representation that charts the territories of global capitalism, particularly the visual regimes of its security systems and border zones. Rather than focusing solely on the virtual worlds of new media to which Jameson refers, *Sahara Chronicle* maps the informal social organizations in the under-developed world, spaces of exemption from national and economic regulation, which nonetheless connect with and support the more visible, media-focused areas of globalization in the West. The video-essay does not merely represent that geography, but, as Biemann notes, also proposes a structural correlation to it. As Biemann claims, "the transnational video explores the parallels between the transnational spaces of the global economy and

18 See Ali Bensaad, "The Militarization of Migration Frontiers in the Mediterranean," in *The Maghreb Connection*, 16-17.

19 Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 37.

20 *Ibid.*, 51.

the structures of essayist mental space.”²¹ The same can be said of *Sahara Chronicle*, which diagrams globalization’s states of exception. As such Biemann’s video offers an “organization of complexities” that partly mirrors the Sahara’s own. Information flows over geographical space, and images are fractured and doubled within the single video image or between monitors and projectors, paralleling the fragmentary and transitional experiences of Saharan everyday life. The video, moreover, reflects a multiplicity of perspectives, from individual migrants to official spokespersons of local industries, from documentary footage of clandestine transit operations to military reconnaissance from drone aircraft tracking illegal migration. These elements link the conflicting pressures that define the Sahara as a contested area between official containment and human passage, between informal economies and military enforcement. Local practices are thereby joined to global geopolitical networks via the contiguity of image sequences and the montage of image-text combinations. *Sahara Chronicle* thus enables a what Jameson terms a “situational representation on the part of the subject” to the economic and social-political conditions of North African migration.

Without such an intervention, the danger is that the present regime of media and official representations will only continue uncontested, which commonly reduces migrants to the status of scapegoats for national(ist) agendas in Europe and Africa, feeding the cycle of intensified security measures and xenophobic policies that answer the media’s production of fear. The image of migration as lawless and criminal, and threatening to European stability, is crucial to that exploitation. It is this perspective that the mass media commonly emphasizes in its sensationalized accounts of migration, even when it reports on European abuses of and reactionary responses to African immigrants.²² Why is it common to read of sunken boats, drowned migrants, and brutal responses to foreigners, but to hear virtually nothing in the mainstream media of the local and global conditions that drive people to make the perilous voyage to Europe in the first place? Faced with an apparent complicity between media, government policy, and the military, *Sahara Chronicle* challenges that system by inventing a new mode of representation that gives expression to the migrants’ own contestation of their disempowered status. This perspective is largely presented from “below” official and media narratives by migrants, whom Biemann allows to speak for themselves, by revealing the highly organized network of transportation, economic conditions, and politics that sustains migration. Through her video-essays’ organizational power, Biemann contests the perception of migration’s lawlessness and the victimized status of migrants.

As a result, *Sahara Chronicle* brings out the positive potential of statelessness, as advanced as well in Agamben’s own theory. Although the migrant signifies a powerless condition of life stripped of rights by the state, exposing it to “legally” unmediated violence, for Agamben it also comes – somewhat unexpectedly – to suggest a new

21 Biemann, “The Video Essay in the Digital Age,” 10. Also see Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, “Introduction,” *The Maghreb Connection*, 47: “When it comes to representation of migration, digital and material landscapes have to be thought together. In this combined symbolic practice, the charting of space coincides with the charting of knowledge about a subject that is dynamic and fluid. The geographies that are generated in the process, and I mean both the migratory and videographic ones, are likewise spaces of fluidity, relationality and multiplicity.”

22 See Mehdi Alioua, “Silence! People Are Dying on the Southern Borders of Europe,” in *The Maghreb Connection*, 99. Also, see Étienne Balibar, who warns of a coming European Apartheid if the trend is not stopped, in *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. J. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

potential political engagement, one capable of remaking the world from a position outside of national identity.²³ Indeed, even as the figure of bare life is exposed to the unconditional threat of death, no life is more political than this, as Agamben points out in *Homo Sacer*: The stateless condition of bare life thus suggests radical uncertainty and political ambivalence. On the one hand, it represents a defenseless position: “nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power.”²⁴ But on the other, it contains the seeds of radical transformation: “This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own zoe.”²⁵ In other words, Agamben insists that bare life become the site of struggle between sovereign rule and autonomous resistance, implying that at the very moment when biological fact and political command seem mutually exclusive, bare life must defy the reduction of life to its mere fact of existence. In a similar way, migration must become a site of empowerment, a source of freedom and the basis of choice, going beyond our concepts of exclusive citizenship and sovereign national territory, proposing a potential new horizon of political engagement founded upon the individual’s rights and liberties. While for Agamben this theoretical outline proposes a potential politics, it is a theory that *Sahara Chronicle* attempts to realize.

Biemann’s use of associative montage in the *Sahara Chronicle* is a key element in this regard, for it allows viewers to connect the precarious situation of the Tuareg, as seen through Adawa’s eyes, for example, to related conditions across the Sahara region, which may in turn be linked to Europe’s economy and politics. As a result, we are presented with the perception of a global network that provides explanation and historical contextualization for the causes of North African migration. The interview with Adawa, for instance, connects to shots of the uranium mine in Arlit that depict laboring miners, drilling machines, and mining tunnels. Taken with a hand-held camera, the passage relays the spontaneity and immediacy of an embodied perception, which extends a visceral account of current mining conditions to Adawa’s narrative. The section on the uranium mine may then join with coverage of the iron ore terminal in Mauritania, which includes footage of a railway line operated by the Mauritanian Mining Company. Connecting the inland mining town of Zouerate to the coastal port of Nouadhibou, the cargo train doubles as a furtive transportation system that shuttles migrants to the coast, from where they seek passage to the Canary Islands. At the same time, individual elements of this diagram are deepened by researched and informed presentations. At one point, *Sahara Chronicle* includes an interview with Sid’Ahmed Ould Abeid, president of the Fisheries Federation in Nouadhibou, who speaks of the over-fishing of octopus off Mauritania’s coast. Even though state law requires fishing boats to offload yields on Mauritania’s mainland, Europeans fail to do so and operate with impunity, explains Abeid. Adding insult to injury, the European Union demands ever more fishing contracts, which suggests the continuation of a longstanding colonial paradigm according to which goodwill rhetoric masks the reality

23 See also Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” (1993), in *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 16: “the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today – at least until the process of dissolution of the nation-state and of its sovereignty has achieved full completion – the forms and limits of a coming political community.”

24 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

25 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

of the expropriation of natural resources. As Abeid points out logically, if the EU were to invest in local African industries – as it has promised to do on record – then the influx of capital would lead to an increase in employment opportunities in Mauritania, bringing a higher standard of living, helping to eliminate poverty and disorder, and lessening the stimulus for emigration. Rather than supporting the intensification of economic inequality and the protection of its own borders, the EU could stimulate African economies, cultivating local businesses and promoting a sustainable way of life. Instead, it propels the very cycle of migration it is otherwise intent on stopping, thus renewing the demand for migration that, bringing us full circle, drives the Tuareg transportation system.

In this way, *Sahara Chronicle* builds its argument through a web of connections, bringing documentary footage into contact with syntactical arrangements, organizing complexities so that a substantive picture of migration is established. Yet while it provides a transformative map of this North African zone of migration, *Sahara Chronicle* resists the foundationalist elements of Jameson's argument – for whom the map of the future, neither mimetic nor analogical, will offer a “representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real condition of existence,” which will coordinate existential experience with the un-lived, abstract processes of geographical totality.²⁶ While the map that is *Sahara Chronicle* fulfills certain elements of this description, it resists Jameson's conceptualization, which disregards the implications of its own psychoanalytic reference – namely that for Lacan, “the real” is precisely what defies symbolization, rendering any representation of totality impossible. The danger in positioning the real as a fact to be represented, to return once again to Rancière's position, is the reification of representation as ‘truth,’ bringing about the attendant problems of rendering language authoritarian, assuming meaning to be immanent to signs, and situating the viewer as a passive recipient of information. Repositioning the video-essay as a reinvented mapping project, *Sahara Chronicle* avoids these assumptions by opening up a state of uncertainty between the real and the artificial, between the objective documentary and the fictional construct, which extends an interpretive and emancipating agency to the viewer.

This is, in my view, where *Sahara Chronicle* unleashes its political force: Biemann's mapping project is ultimately no mere mimicry of geographical relationships, but rather represents the creation of a video-essay that generates a transformative power, one that dissolves borders rather than recreating them. In other words, this mode of representation is performative, invoking Biemann's earlier *Performing the Border*, which destabilized borders by locating them within the institutional, legal, and everyday practices that grant them their force, but also invites their transgression. As in the definition of geography advanced in *The Maghreb Connection*, the video-essay also becomes performative in that it models “an affective, imaginary and symbolic cartography,” which is “intended to contribute to the emergence of a transnational consciousness and in this way to help empower political participation...”²⁷ In other words, it's not about presenting the Real as fact, or viewing it as an already existing reality that simply lacks representation – which would risk reifying borders as well – but instead treating the real as an effect to be produced, an effect that transforms migration into an empowered form of life. As the sociologist Mehdi Alioua asks in his own study of North African migration, “How to rethink migration as freedom?”

²⁶ Jameson, 51.

²⁷ Biemann and Holmes, “Introduction,” *The Maghreb Connection*, 8.

How to recognize that it is a fundamental choice? How to go beyond our concepts of exclusive citizenship and sovereign national territory, in order to recognize the preeminence of the individual's rights and liberties?"²⁸ These are poignant questions, and ones that guide the direction and form of Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle*, wherein migrants are shown as definers of their own destiny, existing outside of the nation's attempts at controlling them. According to their geography of resistance, migrants chart their course defiantly through the state's space, rendering its borders porous, positioning themselves as rebels against the sovereignty that otherwise excludes them.

28 Alioua, "Silence! People Are Dying on the Southern Borders of Europe," 105.

ESSAYS

THE VIDEO ESSAY AND REAL-WORLD POLITICS

MATERIALIST FEMINISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE VIDEO ESSAYS OF URSULA BIEMANN

Angela Dimitrakaki

Despite all the difficulties involved in charting the terrain of visual art today, four tendencies stand out: first, the confluence of “art” and “documentation”; second, the advent of a new “cinematic regime” that, accelerated by the digital “revolution”, prioritizes the moving image as such rather than distinct media; third, related to the above, the tenet of the post-medium condition, which clearly exceeds the scope of the cinematic and refers us to art in general; finally, the overall entrenchment of art by various institutions of a corporate mentality. Critics have noted, for instance, yet another institutionally endorsed “back to basics” attitude promoting “reactionary registers such as the New Gentleness and New Formalism” through various “returns to painting, sculpture and objecthood”.¹ These tendencies describe a rather polarized condition for contemporary art. What remains unclear is the fate of the moving image, since references to a new cinematic regime and the technologies that underpin it do not incite us to think about the political interventions enabled in its context, or even about what moving-image art can offer that “popular” visual culture cannot.

My intention here then is to discuss Ursula Biemann’s video essays as exemplary of a practice that, I will argue, cuts across key problematics of contemporary visual art as described above. Biemann’s video essays make manifest what is at stake in the debate about the relation between art and documentation. They are a hybrid practice, although their relationship to the post-medium condition is more complex; they see the moving image in the digital age as a historically prioritized mediator of a global condition and try to do with it what popular visual culture does not; and they impli-

1 See Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Anthony Davies, “Basic Instinct: Trauma and Retrenchment 2000-4,” in *Mute: Culture and Politics after the Net*, volume 29 (February 2005), 1-14 (specifically 8-9).

citly reveal what art's current return to "basics" obscures from view. Yet what makes Biemann's work contemporary in a strong sense is its attempt to move beyond the mainstays of a postmodern idiom. More importantly, in their complex re-politicization of the feminine subject, enabled by the shift of focus from "patriarchy" to "capitalism", the specific video essays examined in this chapter constitute a convincing negation of the premises of post-feminism, if the term describes – as it often did in the 1990s – the advent of a sufficiently transformed social field where a feminist politics is redundant. In addition, this body of work articulates an unapologetic re-assertion of materialist feminism.

The video essays' primary concern is to engage critically with the circuits where women find "their place" in the global capitalist economy, with a major role reserved for the geographies realized by the labor relations (and their "satellite" identities) required by capital in late modernity and the ways these re-fashion both female subjectivity and the consumption of women in spaces ranging from the factory floor and the Internet to the brothel and the desert. "Consumption" is invoked to suggest Biemann's departure from an earlier moment of materialist feminism that investigated primarily the *production* of gendered subjects, which dictated for many the turn to psychoanalysis. Undeniably, part of this rich and diverse body of theory addressed the consumption of the feminine as well, but this consumption mainly referred to the feminine as image. In this regard, Biemann's practice marks a crucial turn while also providing a platform for revisiting the "aesthetics and politics" debates of the 1960s and 1970s. Implicitly, the video essays address the processes by which history effects the re-signification of concepts. History for Biemann demands the examination of – and reflection upon – a horizontal archive (structured by space rather than time) and a synthesis of synchronicities of diverse orders (say, the tourist gaze in physical space and cyberspace), connected and always somehow in motion.

But what does it mean to make a connection between Biemann's video essays and a re-engagement with materialist feminism? First, Biemann's practice unambiguously prioritizes the economic as the axis of social subjectivity. Furthermore, this return to materialism incorporates the availability of digital technology to reflect on how capital organizes itself as reality and vice versa, how reality is organized as capital. The video essays pay equal attention to production (travelling and investigating with a video camera, filming *in situ* and collecting "footage" from disparate sources) and post-production (the manipulation of the image, giving us frames within frames, split-screens, the destabilization of the "documentary effect" of a hand-held camera, the wide range of combinations of image and text, or voice-over and image). The above points are, however, not meant to suggest that a materialist strategy is somehow embedded in the formal elements of the work. Rather, what I wish to put forward is the notion that the materialist strategy of Biemann's work is not reducible to its thematic focus but extends to its methods as well, as it sets out to map the multiple instances where an expanded feminine – both materially instantiated and ideologically coded – enters the circuits of global capital. My efforts will concentrate on exploring the historicity of Biemann's practice, on how it came to being and on the discourses that have shaped it. And I am also to understand how this practice, when linked to a materialist-feminist project, intervenes in contemporary discourses and practices that traverse cultural production but are not limited to it. I begin with the latter.

THE MATERIALIST-FEMINIST VIDEO ESSAY I: RELATIONS IN SPACE

Biemann's video essays involve the re-appropriation of video from the ideological construct of "video art" – a construct that, as Martha Rosler has argued, authorized the entry of video in the museum – and its re-signification as a tool of social research capable of challenging art as an *institution* condemned perpetually to re-assert its own boundaries.² The "back to basics" tendency discussed earlier is precisely an expression of this recently re-claimed autonomy of art. Biemann's writings, as much as her video work, go some way towards countering claims to a new autonomy of art, in acknowledgement of the fact that the new order of capital leaves little room for such territorial considerations. It is in this sense that the video essay has emerged today as a more historically relevant (rather than new) hybrid form. One aspect of the work's engagement with digital media is that images purloined and reworked from digital sources enter, through the video-essay format, social spaces that may be excluded from the World Wide Web's universal but exclusive community. It is integral to Biemann's practice that her video essays are shown in art galleries, at video and film festivals and activists' meetings, reaching widely diverse constituencies.

Primarily interested in representing the concrete embodiment of abstract economic relations, Biemann understands the video essay as a "practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political" and "a distinct aesthetic strategy".³ Two things need to be noted. First, the mention of an *aesthetic strategy* does not designate and deliver "the artistic" as separate from the social. Rather, the video essay witnesses the rise of the aesthetic as a currently privileged dimension both of the social world and of the process by which this social world becomes *intelligible*. Like Fredric Jameson, Biemann's work begins from the premise that the ubiquity of the image is a *symptom* of the overt aestheticization of every aspect of life in late capitalism.⁴ Secondly, the prioritization of the moving image, and especially video, is far from accidental. Formalist analyses of the moving image stress the "spatial density" of video where "the characteristics of temporal representation of spatial distance in the interval [of the film image] are restructured into forms of the image that *spatially* represent temporal distance through different layers of images merged with each other into the same image unit".⁵ Seen in this light, Biemann's choice of video acquires almost a symbolic significance, since it registers, and works with, simultaneity, compression,



Writing Desire, Remote Sensing, Europlex

- 2 Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture and Bay Area: BAVC, 1990).
- 3 Ursula Biemann, ed., *Stuff It! The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 8.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 109-12.
- 5 My emphasis. Yvonne Spielmann, "Expanding Film into Digital Media", *Screen*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 138.

inter-layering and opacity, all key attributes of the geographies of global capital. It is however worth recalling Raymond Bellour's observation that video, a technology of the image, is best understood as a practice of writing.⁶ Despite Biemann's mention of Chris Marker's film essays of the early 1980s as the ancestry of her practice, her turn to video, especially in its coupling with the essay, is an implicit prioritization of both *textual* and *spatializing* critical cultural practices. This, of course, challenges the facile categorization of any hybrid practice (here, the video essay) under the umbrella term "post-medium". Instead, the video essays propose a strategic intermediality, since "within one and the same artefact, simultaneous and oscillating, both verbal and iconic signs are present..."⁷ And yet the textuality animating the materialist-feminist video essay hardly abides by the postmodern law of the "unfixity" of meaning and the "open-endedness" of the text. This becomes clear even by a brief analysis of Biemann's three major projects to date dealing with women in late capitalism.

Performing the Border, Writing Desire, Remote Sensing

Performing the Border (1999, 43 min.) takes as its subject Mexican working-class women. Divided into four chapters ("The Plant", "The Settlement", "Sex Work", "The Killings"), this video essay is concerned with the *maquiladoras* of the Mexico – USA border where many U.S. corporations have their assembly plants. A key issue is the role of a contemporary working-class femininity in shaping the border.⁸ This video essay offers a complex tour of border culture, from the slum neighborhoods to the male strippers of the night clubs of Juarez frequented by young female workers and to the efforts to revive traditional union politics.⁹



Performing the Border

Performing the Border's greatest moment is possibly its concluding section. "The Killings" narrates a situated form of criminality: the abductions, rapes, and murders (the notorious "femicides") of women in the desert by the border, lending the latter a creepier form of bio-political identity. The victims are the female workers who have to cross the desert in the early hours to go to the *maquiladoras*. By forging an explicit link between the border-operating serial killer and capitalism, the video essay revisits Donna Haraway's much-hyped figure of the female cyborg from her widely cited essay of 1985, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the

6 Raymond Bellour, "Video Writing" in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture 1991), 421.

7 Aage A. Hansen-Löve quoted in Spielmann, 136.

8 See Imre Szeman, "Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 24.1/2 (January-June 2002), 94-95.

9 See Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums: Urban Revolution and the Informal Proletariat," *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004), 17.

Late Twentieth Century”.¹⁰ Fifteen years later, *Performing the Border* suggests that the female cyborg, actualized by the technologies of advanced capitalism, remains a split identity that is most certainly classed – rather conspicuously so in the case of Third World women.¹¹ The bodies of the female workers turn into cyborgs on the factory floor, when they enter “culture”, which for these women is the *direct consumption* of their energies by capital (the video shows these women connected with cables to their benches).¹² But outside the work space, where this identity collapses, when the link with technology breaks down, the bodies of women return to their pre-cyborg state: they relapse into vulnerable, gendered human biologies and social identities. The exchangeability of the working-class women in the maquiladoras is symbolically replicated in the desert where in many cases the clothes of one female corpse are found to be worn by another.

Writing Desire (2000, 25 min.) takes as its focus the economy of desire of the Internet – an “economy” in the literal and metaphorical sense, where the boundaries between economics and sexuality further blend. The video essay turns its gaze at women who use the Internet to pursue virtual, and then real, encounters with potential husbands from affluent geographies – women who “freely” enter into new forms of arranged marriages with Western men. *Writing Desire* articulates an intricate narrative that incorporates the economic and the ideological: women excluded from the West (the true object of desire) seem to believe that if they treat their *femininity as a form of capital* and invest wisely, they will be rewarded with profit. And since “in economies with highly developed financial markets, capital itself becomes a commodity”, the Internet facilitates – indeed, makes possible and encourages – the entry of these women into such economies, suggesting that the form of entry is that of the capital-commodity.¹³ This advanced form of reification casts the Internet in a double role: its materiality as technology, contributing to the expansion of the global market, and its ideological form through which *appearances that are not necessarily false* (femininity as capital-commodity) *conceal nevertheless real relations* (the reification of women in an advanced market place).¹⁴ That this materialist reading is tentatively proposed through the analytical structure of *Writing Desire*, rather than authoritatively asserted in the video essayist’s own narrative, makes this video essay an exemplary form of intervention in the often elusive social spaces of advanced technology.

Remote Sensing (2001, 53 min.) follows the movement of women around the globe, addressing specifically the “displacement of large numbers of women” either looking

10 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181. Originally in *Socialist Review*.

11 “It is not the jet-setting, palm-using business elite nor the skate-boarder computer nerd who retires at age 30, it is the Mexican female cyborg who is linked to her workbench by an electric discharge cable and returns to her shack without electricity at night.” Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video” in Biemann, 2003, 86.

12 “Experience shows that the average eyesight is sharp enough for about eight years, then she will have to be replaced by a fresh young worker. This means that her organic vision is consumed in the making of the visualization technologies our society relies on. These female bodies need to be continuously recycled.” Biemann in Szeman, 99.

13 Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell 1991 [1985]), 87.

14 “The simplicity of commodity fetishism makes it a starting point for analyzing non-economic relations. It establishes a dichotomy between appearance and concealed reality (without the former being necessarily false) which can be taken up in the analysis of ideology”. Bottomore, 87.

for work or entering labor relations against their will.¹⁵ The video essay observes a contradiction between the encouragement of (women’s) movement in cyberspace and the function of the border as the least deregulated space of human activity, through which women are nevertheless ushered into the sex industry. *Remote Sensing* integrates and reworks images and data from NASA satellites, among other sources, in order to rethink the ability of contemporary technology to track movement. It uses this technology to *explain* movement as a profoundly gendered and classed activity.

Significantly, there is no glamorization of non-Western peasant societies exemplifying the doctrine of “uneven development” that profoundly complicates the trajectories of capitalist migration: in the first half of the video we hear about how certain Chinese farmers abduct Vietnamese women for breeding purposes and as unpaid “family” labor on farms. Back in Europe, a journey across the Czech/German border where women stand semi-naked in the cold becomes more profoundly melancholic when the voice-over narration informs us that the Eastern European prostitutes “feel that where they are and what they are is only *temporary*”. “Where” and “what”: *place* and *the self* become conflated, immersed, disoriented and exchangeable in the abyss of the fleeting. The question is whether this “fleeting” differs in a strong sense from that of an earlier modernity articulated through the urban mapping of the male flâneur and the “face in the crowd”. If it does, as *Remote Sensing* suggests, then this is because contemporary technology far exceeds the specificity of the urban, zooming-out to survey the interconnectivity of multiple spaces. Indeed, the production of global space as a form of technological achievement is propagated by capital *as a social relation*, or a “pan-capitalist reality”, as the female voice states over a slowly rotating, frame-by-frame image of the half-dark, half-illuminated globe. *Remote Sensing* repudiates the postmodern fixation on the “micro” as an end in itself and reasserts the *currently necessary* universality of the materialist-feminist project as a response to the dominant “grand narrative” of global (capitalist) space.



Remote Sensing

In general then, the video essay becomes an instrument for thinking in relational terms and for making sense of “crude” data. This is precisely why the video essay is currently gaining momentum as an adequate format for extending and renewing the project of materialist feminism in the arts and beyond: the wider scope of Biemann’s project appears to be the re-articulation of a *comparative methodology* that, working against the dominant tendencies of postmodern relativism, returns us to the critical observation of space as productive of that which postmodernists despised most: a “totality”. This totality provides the video essays’ outside (capitalism) and the video essays’ task is to reveal its presence while simultaneously acknowledging it as *constitutive of their own existence*. Capitalism (the “outside”) offers both the technologies that make the video essays possible and is also these technologies’ recursive subtext.

15 See www.geobodies.org/video/sensing/sensing_descript.html, accessed 5 May 2005.

The hybrid form of the video essay appears to admit to a certain failure – the failure of contemporary art to contest what Jameson has called “the perceptual system of late capitalism” that has made the safeguarding of a “properly aesthetic sphere... obsolete”.¹⁶ In its disavowal of this failure and its implications, the art establishment today is actually bent on defending such a properly aesthetic sphere and this is why the contemporary art museum embraces those practices that, while often annulling the mobility of the moving image in the installation environments where the former has to operate as sculpture, simultaneously assert the primacy of fiction over non-fiction, with a distinct emphasis on spirituality, transcendental subjects and the construction of a surrealist rather than realist space.¹⁷ Biemann’s materialist-feminist video essays find themselves at the antipode of these tendencies both in the connections they pursue between gendered subjects and economic forces, and in the kind of authorial subject they propose as the narrative’s nodal point. What follows then is a summary of the features of this project that best illustrate its historically specific modalities of intervention.

The Instrumentality of the Author

On a first level, the intention of the video essays is to inflect quantitative data with qualitative meaning and place themselves in a common space for activism, art and theory. But to achieve this without resorting to a prescriptive didacticism in the guise of “objectivity” of which political discourses have often been accused was the real challenge – or, more accurately, the challenge of a realist method (a point to which I shall return). To counter this, the video essays’ narrative instantiates a subjective “I”, the video essayist. But the role of this figure is far from transparent. For some, it will undoubtedly imply the revival of an older form of pre-Althusserian Marxist humanism, although it would be more correct to say that this particular revival of the authorial subject constitutes an effort to re-articulate the relationship between “structure” and “agency”. Both terms have a double point of reference: “structure” refers us to the mode of production and the particular configurations of image and text, while “agency” refers us to the work of the narrator and that of the viewer. The video essays are the platform where the relationship among these four points of reference is negotiated.

To grasp the connection between these four referents we must consider the video essay’s strategic use of the moving image as “detached display” where the viewing subject’s perspective never coincides with the perspective of the monitor.¹⁸ The moving image is thus seen as fundamentally expressive of alienation, and the subjective “I”, to which Biemann ascribes such importance, is an effort to alleviate this effect and propose this detached architecture of the image as the outcome of human action on technology. In addition, the video essayist’s speech (as voice-over and text) typically does not pose questions: instead, it operates through the statement, which can be either continuous or discontinuous with the image. It is through this unpredictable relationship between statement and image that theory oscillates between a poetic re-inscription and its normative, exegetic capacity. And paradoxically, the constant effort of this speech to rise beyond ideology cannot be characterized as either suc-

16 Jameson, 110-12.

17 See James Meyer, “‘The Strong and the Weak’: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy” *Grey Room* 17 (Fall 2004), 92.

18 See Noel Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63.

cessful or failing. Hence Biemann stresses that her main interest is in the “artificial construct”¹⁹ that the video essayist, the subjective “I”, necessarily produces despite her/his emphasis on an objective, extra-discursive reality. In other words, we are faced here with the instrumental revival of the authorial subject that makes explicit the video essayist’s own struggle with ideology.

Significantly, the video essays depart from the autobiographical “I”, a key strategy of second-wave feminism in the arts which rests on the *political* articulation of a transformed female subject (a strategy expressed in the slogan “the personal is political”). The video essays thus resist psychoanalysis in an effort to shift attention from the individual to the collective, by replacing feminist counter-cinema’s emphasis on fiction with counter-geography’s emphasis on non-fiction.²⁰ This resistance to psychoanalysis is indicative of the major “turn” that the historically precipitated rise of the feminist video essay constitutes today. The non-autobiographical “I” permits the video essayist both to be in the artificial construct of representation (where the shift from the unconscious as a marker of the individual gives way to ideology as the unconscious’s equivalent in the arena of political struggle) and to register the attempt to articulate a speech at the margins of this artificial construct, exemplifying a radical desire to cut through ideology. The non-fictional, subjective “I” is constantly undermined by the “objective” but dispersed reality it strives to represent. In the course then of rendering visible the process of its making – from the moment of proposing the connections and assembling the information to the moment of screening the edited, manipulated, stratified results – *the video essay mimics the position of the alienated spectator, a subject who is nevertheless keen to resist her alienation*. This is the instance of *gratification* that the video essay constructs for its audiences.

The Turn to the Multitude of Femininity

The video essays write into the increasingly audiovisual language of representation the *movement of the multitude of femininity*. In the context of the most contemporary of contemporary political theory, which is attempting to rethink Marxism through the real and hyperreal geographies of capital, the “multitude” refers us to a peculiar form of collectivity that emerges in a provisional form out of networked activity where singularities engage in a variety of encounters. The current ascendance of a political theory of the multitude and the shift of focus witnessed in the practice of the video essay appeared at the same historical juncture, at the end of the 20th century, as responses to the new conditions of capital. The resurrection of the “multitude” is – not so curiously – witnessed in parallel with the resurrection of the author, and both trends testify to the demand for agency. Biemann’s video essays share three basic premises with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s analysis in their celebrated, but equally controversial, *Empire* and *Multitude*, published in 2000 and 2004 respectively.

First, the view that there is no longer a place external to capital, no remaining space to be conquered: in general terms, this is the historical condition prompting as much as enabling the function of the video essay as a comparative methodology addressing the interpenetration of capitalist spaces; in particular terms, this is, for

19 Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video” in *Stuff it* 2003, 85.

20 Biemann draws on Saskia Sassen’s definition of the latter term to undermine the positivism currently embedded in the discourse of networks: whereas women’s counter-cinema was a practice of subversion directed against the normative. See Biemann in Szeman 2002, 101.

example, why *Writing Desire* turns to cyberspace as a prime example of new space literally invented by the technologies of capital and used to expand the market.

Secondly, the view that contemporary, global capital (articulated as “empire”) is not just productive of classed subjects but of a *whole fabric of life*: the multitude of femininities that Biemann traces includes but also exceeds, the same as Hardt and Negri’s “multitude”, a working class proper, shifting attention instead to *the movement of the global poor* – arguably, an anticipated shift, given the feminization of poverty today.

Thirdly, the view that resistance to the practices of global capital is an important parameter in shaping the geographies of capital: the “documentary” aspect of the video essays often appears to serve the purpose of balancing the critical melancholy of the video essayist’s own reflections, by registering the efforts made by dispossessed subjects to name the problem, analyze its repercussions, and resist its effects. Yet for the time being, the video essays *work towards*, but have not yet achieved, a representational platform that would completely replace victimization with agency. Needless to say, that would be quite an achievement. Biemann’s work resists the temptation (to which Hardt and Negri succumb) to name a new revolutionary subject. To name a new revolutionary subject would in a sense be premature, for the very reason that the movement (firstly, in geographical and, secondly, in political terms) of women does not permit such leaps of imagination. Therefore Biemann’s video essays constitute, to an extent, a critique of Hardt and Negri’s unreflective optimism that amounts to a bizarre ending to their otherwise perceptive analysis. Similarly, the video essays depart from the unspoken rule in much feminist art theory to search obsessively for successful instances of “subversion” in women’s cultural practices. Biemann’s turn to social (as opposed to cultural) practices enables her to record and negotiate *processes of resistance* but also to accept and render visible the interplay between coercion and consent that produces the vast majority of feminine subjectivities today. The video essay thus signals the end of liberal (post)feminism and the emergence of the feminism of Empire, and that is why references to “patriarchy” have been replaced by references to “global capitalism”.

Biemann’s video essays perform this double role: on the one hand, they provide concrete evidence that if there is indeed an emergent collectivity it remains profoundly gendered. Secondly, the gendering (feminization) of the multitude poses some important questions about the hegemonic presence of “immaterial labor” that allegedly has a global scope – a key concept in Hardt and Negri’s analysis.²¹ “Immaterial labor” is the work done by the video essayist: the subjective “I”, the resurrected author, brings together information, transvaluates images, de-naturalizes values. She encases her data in theory and technology, and *cooperation* (another key term in *Empire*) is indeed “completely immanent” to this kind of activity. Yet the data are about the lives of other women as producers of precisely “non-immaterial labor”: the cable that connects female Mexican workers to their work benches and makes a cyborg out of them leads to the production of material goods in a way that requires the consumption of the body’s materiality. Thus the video essays dispel any notion that the “biopolitical production” of the multitude of femininity – operating on a planetary scale – is patterned

21 “Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production as immaterial labor – that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 290.

upon immaterial labor (even if the latter is a component of women's labor), drawing a sharp distinction between their "work" and the "work" of the researcher/videomaker.

However, the attempted deconstruction of the documentary mode through the rejection of a purportedly objective vision is never completed. For in embracing contradiction, the video essay exploits to a certain extent the illusionism of the moving image to leave open the possibility of traditional "realism" for those who need it. The video essays anticipate that different audiences will prioritize different registers and effects of the image-text: some will be attracted to the meditative aspects of the video essayist's speech, others to the recitation of hard numbers, factual information or the emotive response invited by the interviewed or observed subjects. Also, the video essays' desire to reach a wide range of audiences prompts a more *populist* re-inscription of theory, ranging from a mimesis of poetry to the tropes of advertising. The fragments of text hovering on the screen become intelligible not as a result of their "objective value" but in the ideologically overdetermined positions foregrounded by the video essayist in her attempt to counter a dominant ideology. The problem then is that the viewer, unless fully versed in deconstruction techniques, may very well be unaware of the processes by which "an artificial construct" is indeed constructed, and may forget that the video essay uses data to illustrate a situation on which it takes a "position". The eclectic use of documentary techniques will only facilitate this misreading. In other words, the video essay has not yet resolved the thorny issue of realism. But to understand this problematics we need to turn to the past.

THE MATERIALIST-FEMINIST VIDEO ESSAY II: RELATIONS IN TIME

The renewed interest in the video essay, of which Biemann's work is an example, is not merely an outcome of transnational capitalism but also a response to earlier feminist debates, encompassing everything from film to visual art, where realism was often cited as a point of contention. The critique of feminist art practices attempting to show what "real women are really like" is a theme that runs through many of the essays archived in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Framing Feminism*.²² The reference to the video essay as an image-text practice echoes Pollock's strategic emphasis on Mary Kelly's "scripto-visual" work in the 1970s and 1980s. What Kelly's practice shares with Biemann's video essays is the conscious effort to articulate a representational space where the image interweaves with its own analysis of "real (female) subjects" to enable the transgression of conventional modes of pleasure in images of women. But there are important differences between Kelly's and Biemann's work, among which the latter's departure from the politicized autobiographical "I" is of great importance. Whereas Kelly's work retained a strong interest in the author (Kelly) as an experiential subject, as for example seen in *Post-Partum Document* from the 1970s, where the artist approached her experience as a mother through the lens of a highly theorized discourse, Biemann uses theory in a more ludic fashion and her utterances in the form of statements are closer in spirit to Adrian Piper's and Barbara Kruger's photo-text montages where we find the statement-text superimposed on the image. The non-autobiographical authorial subject serves to contest what Victor

²² Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement*, (London: Pandora, 1985).

Burgin has called “the narcissistic fervor with which humanist ideology defends the “individual””,²³ manifested in the ease with which the erstwhile politicized feminist autobiographical subject deteriorated into a profoundly de-politicized confessional mode animating much post-feminist work and fully endorsing the celebrity-artist culture.

But the roots of the materialist-feminist video essay should also be sought in cinema, especially in the complex exchanges between Third- and First-World cinemas – the attending to large numbers of women, and especially to the routes through and by which Third- and Second-World women are allowed to enter First-World spaces, coupled with the explicit imperative to use the video-essay text politically to situate the video essay closer to a Third-Cinema modality. Michael Chanan has discussed the mixed ancestry of Third Cinema as such which, he has argued, “is not restricted to the third world, even in the original conception of the idea,” since the authors of the Third Cinema manifesto “immediately cited examples which come from the first world,” including “Chris Marker in France [...]”²⁴ Already in the late 1960s, then, Third Cinema brings together post-colonial critique and new-left topics in order to effect politically mobilized experiments with the languages of the moving image. Significantly, Biemann also cites as her inspiration Chris Marker and specifically Marker’s “film essays”, citing *Sans soleil* of 1982–83.²⁵ *Sans soleil* [*Sunless*] opens up to global space in a way that highlights both the referenced objective reality and its necessarily partial integration into the narrative (the voice-over of a woman reading out letters addressed to an unspecified subject and functioning at the same time as a provisional, poetic commentary on the image). On the other side of the Atlantic, in 1980–1981, Edin Velez used the term “video essay” to describe his “non-linear, poetic documentaries.”²⁶ Velez’s work was of a distinctly anti-colonial ethos and his video essays seemed to provide a solution to what was effectively *a problem of language*: how to re/represent the contradictions suffered in the context of the Mayan colonized society without pretending to be emotionally and intellectually unaffected by them. In the 1980s the moving-image essay becomes of increasing relevance through works such as John Akomfrah’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986), which addressed race and its discontents in Britain. In any case, in the 1980s, both in Europe and America, we witness a move away from the choice “art, documentary, or theory” and towards a hybrid form of engagement that constitutes an attempt to reform a realist method. It can hardly be a coincidence that the realist debate in feminist film criticism was then at its peak.

Already in the first half of the 1980s both E. Ann Kaplan in *Women & Film* and Annette Kuhn in *Women’s Pictures* raised the issue: was realism a politically viable strategy for the feminist filmmaker? Their accounts make obvious that although the feminist objective was to change the reality (life) of real women, realism was not necessarily the means most suited to that goal. Importantly, it was an issue relevant to fiction and documentary film alike, since both these representational practices could seek to reference “the experience of ordinary people”, which was what realism was about.²⁷

23 Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 211.

24 Michael Chanan, “The Changing Geography of Third Cinema,” *Screen*, Vol 38, No 4 (Winter 1997), 374.

25 Ursula Biemann, “The Video Essay in the Digital Age” introduction, *Stuff It – the video essay in the digital age*, ed. Biemann 2003, 8.

26 Boyle, *Illuminating Video*, eds. Hall and Fife (New York: Aperture, 1991), 65.

27 Ann E. Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Routledge, 1988 [1983]), 126.

The emergence of feminist counter-cinema in the late 1970s is a direct effort to move beyond the mere modification of already tested realist techniques. European counter-cinema and its British branch, identified as “avant-garde theory cinema”, was the 1970s answer to the question of realism in the visual field. A prevalent feature of avant-garde theory cinema was the intention to do away with the distinction between theory and practice. Along with its involvement with semiology, structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis, Kaplan notes its deliberate “mix[ing of] documentary and fiction”.²⁸ Kuhn also turns to an examination of feminist counter-cinema, identifying the two main tendencies of “deconstruction” and “feminine writing”.²⁹ Beginning with Johnston’s admonition about the importance of articulating the “female subject in process...by textual practice”, Kuhn deploys the notion of “feminine cinematic writing”, a concept adapted from the French term *écriture féminine*. Here, “narrativity and narrative discourse” along with “fiction as against non-fiction” and “openness as against closure” are preferred sites for the inscription of the “other” voice of the feminine. As for those unrepentant realists, there was a demand for unobtrusive technology.³⁰ We are further informed that voice-over is absent from feminist documentary unless it is the voice of the female autobiographical subject and that such films largely function as oral history. Kaplan urges women to begin the job of *reconstruction* following the knowledge accumulated in the 1970s.

Starting with the mobility and unobtrusiveness of video, the fusion of theory and practice, and the emphasis on textuality, it already becomes obvious that Biemann’s video essays converge in many ways with feminist strategies aiming at the politicization of the moving image as much as they attempt to address the shortcomings of some dominant tendencies. Indeed, they attempt a form of “reconstruction”, as Kaplan suggested, that would not however resort to a naive realism, addressing instead the gap between “theoretically aware deconstruction” and “accessibility” (a code name for realism). Biemann’s work constitutes an extension of the project of the deliberate “mixing” of documentary with other forms of narration. In departing from the feminist documentary by breaking the rule of the voice-over, this work is also, in its self-reflexive focus on its own constructedness, antithetical to a project of oral history. The intensification of key features of global capital expansion, including the particular roles reserved for women in the visible (legitimate) and hidden (illegitimate) “networked” economies, dictated an engagement with the given modes in which information is collected, processed, and analyzed rather than with the disarticulation of dominant gender codes. In practice this has meant a preoccupation not with the mixing of documentary and fiction, but with the mixing of documentary (the empirical) and the *re-articulation of the authorial subject*. The resurrected authorial subject, the



Remote Sensing, Europlex

28 My emphasis. Kaplan 1988, 138.

29 Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1993 [1982]), 160.

30 Kuhn, 147.

subjective, non-fictional “I” encountered in Biemann’s video essays, performs several roles at once: it negates postmodern “openness” by proposing a coherent locus of meaning; it acknowledges the always “situated” viewer whose position the “I” mimics; and it reinstates the relationship of the author to reality *as materially stable but discursively unstable*, challenging thus the strategic primacy of fiction. Significantly, whereas for second-wave feminism, “fiction” was an attractive option for the self-consciousness it displayed, the institutionalization and de-politicization of “fiction” in the visual arts by the end of the 1990s, and especially in the art embraced by the art museum, has made it less of an attractive option today. Biemann’s intentions explicitly cite the performative aspect that is the *modus operandi* of the video essay.

My videos tackle *topics which are typically associated with a documentary practice* – topics over which feminists have articulated clear positions in the past decades – only to break open speculative spaces by making unusual associations and juxtapositions which defy causal explanations or the simple affirmation of facts. The process *from the imaginary to representation* is not a smooth, linear one. How can you document this process? You cannot. All you can do is perform it.³¹

Her position is indeed very close to John Roberts’ reading of Henri Lefebvre’s “model of critical practice based on art and theory as *practical* forms of knowledge and activity.” Roberts explains: “Lefebvre wants to drive home the point that artistic and theoretical activity is actually *performed out of* the contradictions of everyday life.”³² But of course, Biemann’s video essays are not strictly speaking concerned with “the everyday”, which belongs perhaps to the discourse of an earlier phase of modernity. That “the everyday”, along with “the autobiographical”, was recuperated within second-wave feminism and extended thus its lifespan all the way to the “post-feminist” 1990s testifies to the essentially *modern* discourse of second-wave feminism – which provided its fundamental contradiction in the context of hegemonic postmodern demands, leading to the dissolution of Western women’s movements in general and the women’s art movement in particular. Yet materialist feminism in the twenty-first century makes a critical departure from the everyday to large-scale transformations where autobiographical devices fade away and where the return of the authorial subject becomes a *condition* for turning the gaze outwards. By tracing the movement of large numbers of women, *always exceeding the analytical capabilities of a subjective, narrative “I”*, it tests the realized power of a mode of production against the unrealized power of the subjects this very mode of production forms. The emphasis on this precarious, dialectical asymmetry is an acknowledgement of the fact, to quote David Harvey, “that elements, things, structures, and systems do not exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain and undermine them.”³³ For all these reasons, the materialist-feminist video essay makes manifest the possibilities of a politically aware practice, more radically irreverent than predictably ironic in its crossing through art, activism, and theory.

“Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-first Century” has been published in a longer version in the *Oxford Art Journal*, 30/2, 2007

31 My emphasis. Electronic interview with the author (December 2004).

32 Emphasis in the text. John Roberts, *Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 8-9.

33 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 49

GLOBAL SEX WORK AND VIDEO ADVOCACY: THE GEOPOLITICS OF RHETORICAL IDENTIFICATION

Wendy S. Hesford

Sad, foreboding music plays as the camera focuses on partially-hidden women, their faces blackened out, looking down or facing away from the camera as they tell stories about the global sex trade.¹ Narratives of confinement, betrayal, violation, and rescue characterize the documentary video *Open Your Eyes*, produced by the International Organization for Migration, as part of their counter-trafficking campaign. The opening image depicts this betrayal and violation through a close-up shot on an unnamed woman's face and bare shoulders. Her vulnerability is highlighted when, unexpectedly, a black-gloved hand smashes an invisible pane of glass between the woman and the viewer, fragmenting her face and startling the audience. The text below her reads, in English and Czech, "OPEN YOUR EYES."²

Human rights is an empowering and disciplining discourse; for instance, the exposure of human rights violations can threaten nation-states and governments with sanctions deployed for political purposes. In *Open Your Eyes*, however, the disciplining function of human rights discourse is transported to victims and potential victims, to whom the video is targeted. The women who provide testimony in *Open Your Eyes*

1 Human rights groups estimate that more than 700,000 people are trafficked annually worldwide, with a sizable portion of those trafficked from South Asia. Reliable statistics are not available due to covert channels of human trafficking (hr-education@hrea.org). The Global Human Rights Education fact sheet indicates that trafficking has grown expediently in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. They also report that the CIA estimates that between 45,000-50,000 women and children are trafficked into the U.S. under false pretenses. Additionally, UNICEF estimates that more than 200,000 children are enslaved by cross-border smuggling in West and Central Africa.

2 International Organization for Migration. *Open Your Eyes*, 2001.

are those who fled their situations and sought help from the embassy or city officials. Their stories are mobilized by the International Office of Migration to support a larger cautionary tale. *Open Your Eyes* frames women's victimization narratives by the imperatives of border control and the increased surveillance of migrating bodies, with little recognition of the causes for such movements, which include the opening of borders to trade and tourism, war and military enterprises on foreign territory, gender discrimination, poverty, improved communication and transport links, and the lucrative profits that can be made in the sex industry.

The identification of women as passive and naïve victims lured and tricked into sex work, and therefore in need of rescuing, is a prominent narrative in international human rights campaigns, including some feminist anti-trafficking campaigns, and in public media representations of the global sex trade. What cultural and political forces contribute to the acceptability and public readiness for such identifications and appropriations? For whom and in what contexts are such narratives and identifications persuasive? In what ways are the models of identity particular to anti-trafficking campaigns part of the pathology of domination?

One way of analyzing why an issue or identification is persuasive or has a sense of urgency at a particular historical moment and context is to examine its *kairos*. *Kairos* is a multi-dimensional term that refers to a situational understanding of space and/or time and the material circumstances – namely the cultural climate – of rhetorical situations.³ To foreground *kairos* in the creation and analysis of political and/or artistic texts is to represent a qualitative notion of time and space, adaptable, opportune, and contingent on material circumstances. *Kairos* is an important concept to rhetorical studies at this particular moment as scholars wrestle with articulating the temporal and spatial features of transnational publics. Transnational publics do not exist in static spatial or temporal locations but rather emerge as processes. Transnational publics may be protean, but as processes they are nonetheless governed by rhetorical principles, cultural norms, and social and economic materialities. To employ *kairos* as part of a transnational analytic is to engage *kairos* with the problem of identification as it operates within and across a range of publics and to examine the experiences and discourses with which particular acts of identification are entangled or associated.

Narratives of victimization are central to legal and cultural representations of human rights violations, such as the trafficking of women and girls. Victims' testimonies are employed in human rights campaigns to persuade audiences to remember; to establish historical consciousness; and to encourage target audiences and institutional venues to act. For instance, U.S. Trafficking Legislation requires individuals to prove they were victims of a severe form of trafficking in order to receive legal benefits

3 See Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 3rd Ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 37. Social theorists use the term "opportunity structures" in ways that parallel rhetoricians' use of the term *kairos*. Similar to the methodology of Kirk and Sikkink, my methodological emphasis on social, cultural, and political "frames" share concerns with constructionists in international relations theory and social movement theory.

and social services.⁴ To empower trafficked and enslaved persons to full access to justice and victim-centered services, organizations such as the Freedom Network, (a national coalition of anti-trafficking organizations and advocates in the US), must ensure that trafficked and enslaved persons are perceived, in part, as victims.

My goal in this essay is not to silence narratives of violation but rather to draw attention to the rhetorical dynamics of women's accounts of violation within the context of anti-trafficking campaigns, with particular attention to contrasting feminist mobilizations of certain identity-narratives and identification practices. The risks are simply too great for women, men, and children around the world for feminist academics and advocates to get caught up in an old debate over incommensurate theoretical views of agency and identity politics. Instead, we need to become more attuned to advocates' (including academics and artists) strategic and at times uncritical mobilization of victimization narratives in ways that may re-victimize women and support repressive cultural and political agendas. Additionally, we need to account for the geopolitical structures and technological developments – nationally and internationally – which affect the mobility and marketability of certain identifications associated with female bodies and sexuality and the transnational spectacle of suffering.

To place identification practices and identity claims within the drama of *kairos* is to understand human agency as a rhetorical-geopolitical practice and identification, or, for that matter, dis-identification, as a means of rhetorical invention and embodied action. As Patricia Williams suggests in another context, identity categories are rhetorical gestures. Such recognition, “complicates the supposed purity of gender, race, voice, boundary [and] allows us to acknowledge the utility of such categorization for certain purposes and the necessity of their breakdown on other occasions.”⁵ Hence, my call to shift our focus from the identity categories of victim and agent to consider material-rhetorical processes of identification and their mobilization within action-defined contexts. Such a shift opens up important new ground for thinking through the complexities and particularities of women's agency and processes of identification that define the terms of transnational feminist scholarship and advocacy. Just as new global connections call out for new studies to understand the “asymmetrical formations created by global capitalism's expansionary moves”,⁶ so too do they call out for new methodologies that enable a contextual rhetorical understanding of identity categories and identification practices as forms of commodity and symbolic exchange. The interrogation of cultural and political practices of rhetorical identification leads us to question the contexts created for and by such identifications. The rhetorical, namely *kairotic*, dimensions of identification remain under theorized in transnational feminist studies and human rights advocacy, and it is precisely in thinking through these concepts that rhetorical studies can most productively meet and shape these fields.

4 U.S. Trafficking Legislation, namely the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000*, aims to assist and to protect trafficked persons and to increase the penalties for traffickers. The Act defines severe forms of trafficking as sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion; or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purposes of subjecting to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.

5 Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10-11.

6 Caren Kaplan, “Hillary Rodham Clinton's Orient: Cosmopolitan Travel and Global Feminist Subjects” *Meridians*. 2.1. (2001), 236.

Feminist Anti-Trafficking Campaigns: Kairotic Coalitions and Clashes

Recent feminist anti-trafficking campaigns' emphases on victimization narratives can be understood, in part, as a consequence of the primacy of *violence against women* as an organizing device in the international women's human rights movement. Violence against women became a prominent focus of the international women's movement in the early 1980s, which helped to counteract historical divisions between Western feminists, who emphasized women's discrimination, and feminists from the developing world, who underscored development and social justice and its effects on both men and women. The rhetorical appeal of the transnational identity of women as victims of oppression is persuasive, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink suggest, because the issue of "bodily harm resonate[s] with the ideological traditions of Western liberal countries like the U.S. and Western Europe [and] with basic ideas of human dignity common to most cultures ... Issues of bodily harm also lend themselves to dramatic portrayal and personal testimony that are such an important part of network tactics."⁷

Neo-abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns, such as that of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW),⁸ mobilize women's testimonies of victimization as a means of influencing anti-trafficking legislation to resist the movement to legalize prostitution as a form of work and to make the harm of prostitution visible. Within CATW's campaign materials, experiential narratives appeal to a moral understanding of human rights premised on the coherence of "women" as a universal category. Despite recognition of women's consent to sex work, CATW claims that prostitution "reduces all women to sex" and therefore that all prostitution is exploitative. CATW employs a broad definition of prostitution, which includes casual, brothel, escort agency, militarily prostitution, sex tourism, mail-order bride selling and trafficking in women.⁹

In CATW's campaign video *So Great a Violence: Prostitution, Trafficking, and The Global Sex Industry*¹⁰ the representation of sex workers as victims highlights the global and local contexts and forces (for example poverty and sexism) that drive women into sex work, and the material forces that constrain women's choices. But the video does not expand upon the contextual forces in its portrayal and identification of women as victims. An *ethos* of individual victimization emerges over a contextual understanding. According to the testimonies, these women have "little or no sexual autonomy." The video claims, for instance, those women "don't understand that the mail-order bride marketers are promoting women of their country as subordinate domestic and sexual servants." Women's testimonies attest to how they were duped and trapped into prostitution. As one woman, a former sex worker, put it, "I felt trapped, like I had no other choice." She continues, "We have no resources or money to create our own business ... [prostitution] is a survival strategy ... I just wanted to live a nor-

7 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 205.

8 *Coalition Against Trafficking in Women*. 2003. <http://www.catwinternational.org/>

9 CATW defines sexual exploitation as practices "by which persons achieve sexual gratification or financial gain or advancement through the abuse of a person's sexuality by abrogating that person's human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being" (quoted in Crago).

10 Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). *So Deep a Violence: Prostitution, Trafficking, and the Global Sex Industry*. Documentary. CATW, 2000.

mal life.” This woman’s narrative alludes to contextual constraints, including the lack of economic opportunity, but this larger abolitionist argument is one that places little or no responsibility on those contextual constraints.

The commonplace notion that sex workers or consumers of commercial sex are passive victims of patriarchy assumes a static notion of gender identity attached to victimization – an injury or wound – and ignores the myriad forces and range of identifications (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.) that shape human agency and subjectivity. This configuration also produces a static notion of context that does not account for how the economy structures and creates sexual desire and the demand for commercial sex work.¹¹ According to Jo Doezema, activist and researcher with the Network of Sex Work Projects and former sex worker, images of “trafficking victims” as naïve, innocent young women lured by traffickers bears little resemblance to the realities of the majority of women who migrate for work in the sex industry. Yet, as she also notes, “it is easier to gain support for victims of evil traffickers than for challenging structures that violate sex workers’ human rights ... The picture of the ‘duped innocent’ is a pervasive and tenacious cultural myth.”¹² Moreover, a segment of the anti-trafficking lobby depicts “victims of trafficking” as un-emancipated, poor, Third World Women “kidnapped or lured from [their] village[s] with promises of a lucrative, respectable job overseas.”¹³ Choice is an option, Doezema claims, that in some anti-trafficking campaigns is given only to Western prostitutes.¹⁴ The majority of migrant sex workers, she notes, are aware that they will work as prostitutes; what they are lied to about are the slavery-like conditions under which they must work.¹⁵ Stereotypes of prostitutes as social deviants or as helpless victims maintain their rhetorical appeal because they keep the focus on the “other,” and thereby deflect attention from the national and international policies, economic and socio-political forces, and cultural traditions that contribute to the material conditions that drive many women to work in the sex industry. The identification of women solely as victims serves a crime-control agenda that ignores the complications of *transnationality*.

The persuasiveness of neo-abolitionist campaigns in the current climate is achieved through their *kairotic*, namely timely and opportunistic, association with

11 Ara Wilson, “Remapping Trafficking: Conceptualizing Customer Demand” Prepared for the conference, The Dark Side of Globalization: Trafficking in People. The Ohio State University. May 15, 2004.

12 Jo Doezema, “Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy” in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 42-43. Given Doezema’s recognition of the power of rhetorical appeals and pervasive cultural myths, I find her claim that the “image of the ‘trafficking’ victim . . . [is] a figment of neo-Victorian imaginations” a bit puzzling. At the macro-level her claim at first appears reasonable, but what it ignores is the micro-politics of particular rhetorical situations. For example, in this piece, though she does allude to this dynamic elsewhere, she doesn’t address the limitations of geo-political realities and the context that enables the proliferation of such myths. Distinctions need to be made in terms of who or which groups invoke certain cultural myths and with what intent. In other words, claims of the agency of sex workers can just as easily become overly romanticized as cultural myths of victimization. Jo Doezema, “Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women” *Gender Issues* 18.1, January 1, 2000, 23-50.

13 Jo Doezema, “Trafficking in Myths?” in *Sex Work and Sex Workers*. Ed. Barry M. Dank and Roberto Refinetti. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 165-168.

14 Doezema references the 1995 Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women’s Human Rights as an example of a recent publication that reproduces trafficking stereotypes. *Ibid*, 166.

15 Doezema, 1998, 24.

national narratives of crisis, vulnerability, and security. The anxiety and panic over the violation of moral and geographic boundaries that characterize neo-abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns might be considered, as Doezema suggests, a modern version of century-old cultural myths about “white slavery.”¹⁶ Dominated by repressive moralists, anti-white-slavery campaigns forged alliances with religious and social purity organizations and feminist organizations that sought to abolish prostitution.

Opportunistic alliances continue to exist today between neo-abolitionist feminists and rightwing groups. Although a range of forces paved the way for the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA)¹⁷ by the U.S. Congress in 2000, including the efforts of Senator Paul Wellstone, rightwing and feminist groups coalesced around the passage to advance their own political agendas. As Anna-Louise Crago notes, “a successful joint campaign was mounted to ensure that the TVPA would not only condemn forced labor and forced prostitution but condemn sex work as a whole – forced or not.”¹⁸ For instance, on January 15, 2003, USAID (the United States International Aid Agency) notified organizations around the world that no funds would go to anti-trafficking projects that advocate “prostitution as an employment choice or advocate or support the legalization of prostitution.”¹⁹ The U.S. government is not alone in its anti-prostitution abolitionist agenda but is joined by Christian right-wing groups and non-governmental feminist groups. As Laura Lederer, appointee to the U.S. State Department’s Anti-trafficking Office, put it, faith-based groups have brought “a fresh perspective and a biblical mandate to the women’s movement. Women’s groups don’t understand that the partnership on this issue has strengthened them, because they would not be getting attention internationally otherwise.”²⁰ Likewise, Donna Hughes, an affiliate with CATW, in her response to the new USAID policy, states that “The challenge now is to implement these landmark [anti-prostitution] policies in order to free women and children from enslavement.”²¹

Such couplings, however, can have serious consequences. Josephine Ho from ZiTeng, a sex workers’ rights group in Hong Kong, notes, for example, how domestic policies designed for their national appeal impose themselves on other nations: “first-world feminists and women’s NGOs ... have now joined with UN workers and other international organizations in characterizing Asian sex work as nothing but the traf-

16 Anti-white slavery campaigns in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century attempted to regulate female sexuality under the pretext of protecting women. Then, as now, such claims reflect uncertainties over national identity and fears over women’s increased desire for autonomy. Ibid, 23-4.

17 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. 2000. <usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0801/ijge/gj09>

18 CATW’s web-site www.catwinternational.org refers to Article 3 of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, which supplements the UN Conventions Against Transnational Organized Crime, in defense of their position that even consensual prostitution is exploitation. The supplement states that “The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to be intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.” CATW calls for the decriminalization of women in prostitution and criminalization of the men who buy women and children and anyone who promotes sexual exploitation. However, the organization does not position itself as advocate for the decriminalization of prostitution as labor. Anna-Louise Crago, “Unholy Alliance” in *Breakthrough: In the News*. 15 June 2003 <<http://www.Breakthrough.TV/news>>.

19 Ibid. As Crago notes, this policy may affect the funding of groups such as Empower, a sex workers’ group in Thailand that has expressed support for legalization and political organization of sex workers.

20 Quoted in Ibid.

21 Ibid.

ficking in women and thus is to be outlawed and banned completely ... the immense power of Western aid, coupled with the third-world states' desire for modernization ... [has led to interpretations of] all forms of women's migration toward economic betterment and sex work as mere trafficking."²²

One possible outcome of the new USAID policy, beyond the reproduction of paternalistic rescue and rehabilitation narratives, as Crago rightly notes, is the prospect that USAID will put their funding exclusively behind anti-migration agendas. To collapse the terms *trafficking* and *prostitution* is also to downplay the role of migration as a cause of the increase in human trafficking and to eclipse the men, women, and children trafficked for labor other than sex work. In addition to the trafficking of women and young girls for sex work, men, women, and children are trafficked for sweatshop labor, domestic labor, marriage, and, in the case of children, for illegal adoptions.

Many anti-trafficking campaigns that advocate the decriminalization of prostitution find the voluntary/forced distinction problematic, because it assumes that "voluntary" prostitutes don't have rights; only forced prostitutes (trafficked women) have rights that are violated. For instance, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)²³ campaign importantly argues for the application of human rights principles to address trafficking as a complex problem that involves context-specific issues of migration and labor. GAATW aims to combat the restrictive trends of crime control campaigns and neo-abolitionist agendas, which they argue infringe on the rights and protection of trafficked persons. GAATW's position is that "trafficking" as a concept is insufficient because it does not account for the wide "range of human rights violations and abuses inflicted upon migrant women workers."²⁴ GAATW's project therefore has been to "document, de-mystify and denounce repressive uses of anti-trafficking conventions and legislation" and to redefine "trafficking and anti-trafficking instruments in the interests of migrant women."²⁵

Bought and Sold: An Investigative Documentary About the International Trade in Women (1997),²⁶ was produced by Gillian Caldwell and Steven Galster as part of The Global Survival Network (a group whose investigative work focuses on exposing environmental and human rights abuses). It represents a more mediated view than both *Open your Eyes* and *So Deep a Violence* in its focus on the experiences of migrant women, attention to economic and social circumstances that enable and support the global sex trade, and embrace of GAATW's definition of trafficking. The video is based on a two-year hidden investigation of the trafficking of women from newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The video argues that the transition from communism to capitalism throughout Russia and Eastern Europe and decline of the economic status of women has contributed to the increase in human trafficking. Sex workers go into sex work because they have no alternatives but also because the transition to capitalism in the Eastern Bloc has led to women's economic decline. *Bought and Sold* also has a strong narrative thread of victimization narratives: these women are

²² Ibid.

²³ *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women*. 2004. Date of access June 29, 2004 <http://www.thai.net/gaatw/>.

²⁴ Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. *Human Rights in Practice: A Guide to Assist Trafficked Women and Children*. GAATW, 1999

²⁵ www.gaatw.net

²⁶ Gillian Caldwell and Steven Galster, dirs. *Bought and Sold: An Investigative Documentary About the International Trade in Women*. Witness.1997.

all “lured” with promises of a better life; recruited by friends; and some women are portrayed as seduced by the profession. However, the video negotiates the agent/victim binary very carefully, deploying victim narratives in ways that portray the complexities of trafficking and the issue of *transnationality*. In other words, the video presents the *kairos* of identification through recognition of the geopolitical conditions and contexts that shape women’s actions. These conditions include rising unemployment and economic decline in their home countries, which drive many women to seek work abroad, recruitment of women through front companies that present a legal façade (travel, model, and marriage agencies), and debt-bondage (contracts drawn between trafficking networks and women). Travel debts can range from US \$1000 to over US \$10,000, and these debts accrue for the women’s food, housing, and even penalty fees for misbehavior. Finally, *Bought and Sold* illustrates the role of internationally organized crime networks and government complicity, namely how in some countries traffickers bribe national security units and local law enforcement. In contrast, for example, to the International Organization for Migration’s video *Open Your Eyes*, *Bought and Sold* exposes how the systems designed to protect individuals facilitate their exploitation.

Bought and Sold does not fall into the trap of representing women as *only* duped victims, even though some of the women’s stories fit that mold. For instance, the video’s opening depicts a woman’s agency dealing with a man trying to lure Lowena into sex work, and then representing Lowena, as having consciously chosen a life in sex work abroad. The voice-over notes, “Lowena is ready to go. She is 22. She is willing to work as an escort abroad. She hopes it is her ticket to a life of adventure and glamour. This film is made for people like her.” Moreover, in its call to action at the end of the video (a section entitled “What can be done?”), the video calls for a variety of strategies by activists, governments, and media groups. Importantly, besides insisting that trafficking be recognized as a human rights violation, *Bought and Sold* insists that “governments must stop treating sex workers as illegal migrants.” Instead, governments should provide stays of deportation as well as services for sex workers, including health care, education and training, witness protection, etc. In other words, the video represents advocacy as a necessary transnational collaboration between many sectors.

Bought and Sold has been distributed to more than five hundred NGOs in countries around the world and to U.S. embassies abroad. In its screening manual The Global Survival Network identifies multiple audiences for the video, including at-risk women, namely women from countries undergoing socio-economic transition; NGO communities; governments and intergovernmental organizations; university students; the general public; and media. One of the major pedagogical goals identified by the screening manual is to foster an understanding of trafficking as a human rights abuse so that policies offer protections and compensation to victims and government and non-governmental organizations provide programs that address socio-economic causes of the problem. The Global Survival Network also aims to counter media coverage that sensationalizes or dehumanizes women whose human rights are being abused.

As my analysis of the videos of counter-trafficking campaigns suggests, the timeliness of certain identifications might be understood as adaptive, as strategic, as motivated by and meaningful within certain circumstances. To recognize how identifications are both imposed and claimed is to foreground *identity as embodied rhetorical action*. As feminist scholars and advocates, we need to become more attuned to the strategic mobilization of normative identity narratives, cultural myths, and rhetorical

commonplaces by advocates on all sides of the debate. The concept of identity as action also suggests that we revisit the politics of location, self-reflexivity, and the spatial rhetoric of the “new geographics of identity” that have come to characterize transnational feminism.²⁷

In response to this critical need, I focus below on two videos about the global sex trade, *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire*, by Ursula Biemann. Biemann is a white Western experimental video maker, whose interest lies not in reducing issues to messages that can be used in bringing about change on a legislative level but rather in revealing the constructedness of different positions articulated by trafficking NGOs (personal correspondence). These videos provide a critical opportunity to think further about the transnational identifications and publics that feminists imagine and how space and time are read differently through *kairos* than through feminist notions of positionality. The main distinction that I would like to highlight is between the rhetorical disclosure of identity and institutional positions (associated with feminist positionality) versus the analysis of the rhetoricity of identification practices within certain contexts.

Who advocates for whom, in what contexts, and via what representational practices? Which representational and analytical strategies are adequate to the challenges posed by recent geopolitical and technological developments? Who must *Kairos*—the shape shifter—become in order to be heard in the current climate and culture of war and security? Must *Kairos* emerge as a citizen of the world? A virtual cosmopolitan? Does the temporality and spatiality of cyberspace suggest or require new models for global citizenship and therefore new forms of transnational feminist analysis and advocacy?

Cyber-Sexualities, Cosmopolitics, and Transnational Identifications

Ursula Biemann’s experimental videos *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Writing Desire* (2000) trace the routes and displacements of female bodies in the global sex industry. Both videos create an alternative sense of space and time defined through the technological and geospatial lenses of transnationality. *Remote Sensing* points to how global capital and technologies sexualize and facilitate women’s movement into the sex industry and at the same time police geographical boundaries and hinder women’s migration for work other than sex work.²⁸ The film insists that stricter migration policies and control of the borders do not necessarily reduce the trafficking of women. Migration policies and the closing of borders may in fact contribute to the increase in prostitution and trafficking worldwide, namely because states hold onto structures that forbid women to migrate for work in other professions. *Remote Sensing* claims that “500,000 women migrate into the European sex industry every year. Two-thirds come from post-socialist countries.” As the narrator notes, migration laws reveal “the place of sex in...national space. These laws protect the flourishing sexual life of male citizens

27 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy” in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*. Ed. Marianne DeKoven. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 15.

28 For further discussion of Biemann’s construction of gender in transnational spaces see Jo-Anne Berelowitz, “A Journey Shared: Ursula Biemann’s *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*.” *Genders* 33, 2001, 1-7.

as privileged, and a source of power.”²⁹ In addition to illustrating the consequences of migration policies and national laws, the video challenges the victim/agent binary through its portrayal of the identity of sex workers at the former DDR/Czech border as transitory and fluid. “Here, everything is transitory, no sentimentality, no clinging to the past. The prostitutes are from distant places, many smuggled in, captured, and illegal. They all know that where they are, and what they are, is only temporary. The consumers, the German tourists just passing through, they too are aware that their time here is only temporary. Everything resonates with impending change.”



Remote Sensing

The videos neither resolve these contradictions nor solidify identity categories, but they do expose the oppositional logics, cultural values, and public policies that create and sustain them. Yet in their struggle against the logic of oppositions, such as the victim/agent binary, both *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire* reveal just how profound the obstacles are to systematic change and processes of re-signification even within transnational feminist advocacy. Despite Biemann’s claim that she is not primarily interested in the evidentiary function of representation, or in reinforcing the victim/agent binary, both films include narratives of women lured and tricked into sex work. For instance, *Remote Sensing* focuses on a case involving a group of Filipinas who were recruited by a German man and his Filipina wife in Metro Manila. As one woman notes, “One morning the recruiter approached me personally and promised me \$350 a month if I agreed to work in a restaurant in Germany. [...] We didn’t have to pay any placement fees [. . .] all the fees would be gradually deducted from our salary. At the moment of departure, we noticed that on the ticket it said Nigeria instead of Germany as we believed.” Eight women, recruited from a dislocated slum near Metro Manila, were promised restaurant jobs in Germany but were sent to a brothel in Nigeria. Yet this narrative is complicated by several factors, including by one woman whose story ends in Cyprus, where prostitution is legal, and who used the money she earned through prostitution to return home. Naomi’s testimony further complicates the victim/agent binary, especially her response to Biemann who asks her whether or not she has ever had a boyfriend. Naomi indicates that she has never had sex without getting paid for it. “No boyfriend... someone you loved,” Biemann repeats. Naomi clarifies, “I never say to a customer... I love you.” But she is likewise perplexed by the question itself: “No boyfriend. But customer, yes. But free, no. Why?” Naomi conveys a radically different set of values than those inherent in Biemann’s question. Here we see the limits of Biemann’s own comprehension and identification.

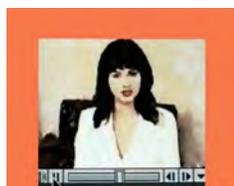
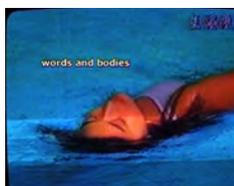
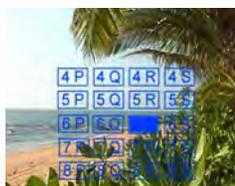
The sonic level of representational construction in the video provides yet another framing device, like the spatial definitions, for the women’s experiences. In this case of Filipinas in Nigeria, Biemann chose a strong mediating device, an English voice-over

29 In personal correspondence, Biemann indicated that she is narrating. But, she also notes that, “it’s not one authorial voice, it’s many theoretical voices that speak through me, not that I’m merely quoting, but it’s all shared knowledge somehow.”

– a device that she seldom uses. Typically, as Biemann has expressed, she aims to let her subjects, which include former sex workers and NGO women speak and analyze the international situation, rather than theorizing their experiences in a voice-over (personal correspondence). Rather than read the voice-over as an ethical breach by the Western white videographer in representing sex workers in the global south (an exchange that reproduces the social hierarchy of the global north), a more profitable reading for developing solidarity among women from the global south and north would be to view the gap as indicative of the challenges of transnational feminist representational practices.³⁰

Biemann generates a critical ambivalence in her critique of the victim/agent binary and yet turns to the testimonies of women victimized by the sex industry. This ambivalence illuminates the representational challenges posed by the rhetorical conventions of human rights discourse, namely the emphasis on the documentation of victimization, for transnational feminist scholars and advocates. For instance, *Remote Sensing* exposes the risks of documentary techniques in revealing multiple layers of surveillance: “Locked up in tiny rooms, confined in semi-darkness, guarded closely, she lives in the ghettos and the bars of the underworld, the semi-world, living a half-life. Guarded step by step, number by number, trick by trick.” The camera travels down long dark corridors of brothels at night, dimly lit by streetlights and the lights from clubs. The corridors echo the “semi-darkness” and the “underworld” quality of the narrator’s description of sex workers’ lives. They are dirty and crowded, choked with prostitutes and potential customers. Given the danger of filming in this milieu and the fact that the women didn’t want to be filmed,³¹ the camera does not focus on any individuals. The camera instead lingers on women’s eroticized body parts – breasts, lips – fragmenting the bodies it seeks to represent. Here the video plays on the cultural expectations that women will be objectified. But, we might ask, are such identifications necessary as forms of persuasion in transnational feminist advocacy? This choice, in part, is a result of difficult recording circumstances, but it also indicates the internationalization and limitations of certain representational strategies and journalistic conventions. These images of captivity progressively dissolve, however, as later parts of the film speak to more self-motivated decisions to enter the sex trade.

Writing Desire suggests that critical agency resides in the strategic mobilization of rhetorical and cultural commonplaces and juxtaposition of dominant and counter-discourses. For instance, the video opens with an exotic beach scene, palm trees, and upbeat music. Over this tourist image, the following text appears in succession: “Geography is imbued with the notion of passivity.” “Feminized national spaces awaiting rescue.” “With the penetration of foreign capital.” The opening sequence foregrounds the increasing disembodiment of sexuality, the links between sexual desire



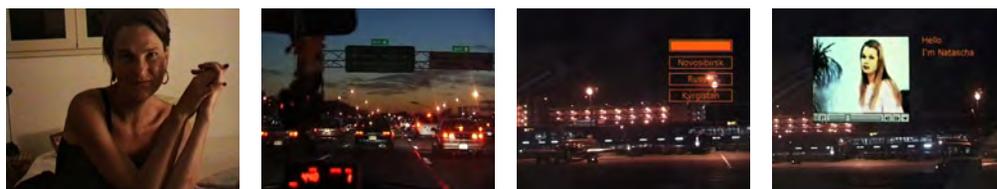
Writing Desire

30 Ursula Biemann, “Remotely Sensed: A Topography of the Global Sex Trade.” Date of Access < June 29, 2004. > <http://www.geobodies.org/video/sensing/sensingtxt1.htm>.

31 As indicated through personal correspondence with Biemann.

and electronic communication technologies, and the production of subjectivities through the compressed space of virtual exchanges. This sequence also constructs the viewers as (male) “First World” consumers: we hear Internet dial-up sounds, then categories and links appear on screen, allowing us to search and sort by country, age, height, weight, education, and ID code. The cursor scrolls down a list of “Third World” countries. The link for the Philippines is then opened, and digital representations (photographs and on-line videos) of young women appear. Women are ranked and described according to their country of origin; in this way the video highlights locational identifications and cultural stereotypes and myths. Women from the Philippines are described as the “most friendly.” Women from Brazil are listed as the “best lovers.” Women from Thailand are listed as the “most beautiful” and women from Costa Rica as the “most eager to please.”

Writing Desire focuses on commercialized gender relations on the Internet, namely the mail-order bride market and virgin market in the former Soviet Union and the Philippines (one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia). The video argues that women’s bodies, as symptoms of global culture, are racialized as objects of desire either waiting to be conquered or rescued. *Writing Desire* implies that new media and technology create mobile subjectivities, sever context, and in so doing enable alliances that otherwise might never occur. The video portrays the fantasy of individuals bridging the distance through technology without confronting the consequences of that fantasy—“a stream of desire troubled by nothing.” As a woman lying across a bed says “What’s interesting about it [e-mail desire] is that you create these love stories in which you are the protagonist ... What is important is the act of writing, while the real bodies are absent, it’s all in the writing. That’s why the sexual discourse becomes important. It would be wrong to infer that it replaces the body.” Instead, the body is “present in the writing.”



Writing Desire

This sequence highlights the challenge of technology in configuring a locational feminism, where identity is embodied as technology. Here the body and identity become first and foremost rhetorical, highlighting Biemann’s feminist agenda of representation, which as she puts it is “To bring the representation of women in poverty in connection with high technology and other concepts [such as mobility] that have a progressive high status in our eyes” (personal correspondence). In the case of *Remote Sensing*, “women become agents of transport and transformation for countries who struggle to make themselves a place on the global chart” (personal correspondence). The video proposes a link between the proliferation of global sex work and sex tourism and the technology of the Internet, which “capitalizes on this vulnerable set of motivations.”³² *Writing Desire* fractures presumptions about the stability of identity and geo-

32 Ursula Biemann, “Female Geobodies: Resignifying the Economic within Sexual Difference.” *n.paradoxa*. July, 2001, 3.

graphical contexts, and yet, also reminds us of how these new technologies are embedded in and foster inequitable material relations and oppressive conditions for much of the world's population.

At one point in the film, the rhetorical competence and strategies that women in the global sex industry employ becomes strikingly clear: on the screen overlaying Q-time videos advertising brides from post-soviet areas, the following text appears: "she is beautiful and feminine / she is loving and traditional / she is humble and devoted / she likes to listen to mellow music / the smile is her rhetorical gesture / she believes in a lasting marriage / and a happy home / she is a copy of the First World's past." The phrase her "smile is her rhetorical gesture" acknowledges the rhetorical dimensions of identification and agency in the context of transnationality. As Biemann notes in her commentary on the film, "To present herself as humble and unambitious, she denies the desirability of the financial and social rewards of marrying a Western man. Morality remains an economic issue but if women want to be seen as moral at all, they better mask their awareness of their relationship to property, mobility, and privilege."³³

In this sense, *Writing Desire* might be said to expose the foundational Western idea, as Caren Kaplan notes, in another context, that "travel produces the self, makes the subject through spectatorship and comparison with otherness."³⁴ Like *Remote Sensing*, a critical ambivalence characterizes this video. This critical ambivalence, however, does not emerge so much from the deployment and critique of victimization narratives but through the portrayal of cosmopolitan conceptions of identity acquired through travel, virtual or otherwise, depicted through the figure of Maris Bustamante. Bustamante is an artist based in Mexico City, who finds an American husband through an Internet dating service. She is a middle-aged, self-identified feminist, widow and mother, University professor and, as she puts it, a "radical of my own will," who turned to the Internet for a companion. After an "examination of [the] Mexican environment ... the 'Cradle of Machismo,'" and after working through "intellectual guilt," she posts her profile on an Internet dating service. She corresponds for six months with a man named John, a lieutenant with the U.S. Marine Corps, who she later marries and with whom she establishes a new family. Bustamante indicates that the Internet enabled her to suspend judgment and to reformulate her expectations; she would not ordinarily have been attracted to a military man. Bustamante's narrative is emblematic of the historical trajectory of future promise (construed in familial, heterosexual terms), a narrative that recasts the white middle-class feminist subject at the center and as normative. She and the lieutenant are pictured in a classic familial portrait. The centerpiece of the black-and-white photograph is the father, seated front and center, surrounded by his wife and three teenage children. His wife's hands are folded on his shoulder. The whole family is smiling.

Bustamante is figured as kind of virtual cosmopolitan, whose worldliness is acquired, in large part, via technology. Bustamante might be said to have seized the technological day, to have enacted *kairos* as a form of cultural cosmopolitanism. The term cosmopolitanism has been used negatively to signify liberal self-invention, tourism, and global travel, and to refer to carnivalesque cosmopolitanism.³⁵ Cosmopolitans

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 36.

³⁵ Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

are associated with movement of capital, of “knowing no boundaries.”³⁶ On the other hand, the term has been used affirmatively to categorize a new class of transnational cosmopolitans,³⁷ and to refer to migration, diasporic movements, and refugees, as in James Clifford’s notion of the “discrepant cosmopolitan.”³⁸ I use the term “cultural cosmopolitanism” here to refer to cultural and virtual tourism, self-invention, and discursive mobility and to highlight the risks that such movements pose in the name of critical advocacy.³⁹ The position of Bustamante’s story, defined by a conventional narrative arc, affords her character a certain status in *Writing Desire*. We might read this narrative as an example of the idiomatic particularity of contemporary geopolitical feminisms or as exemplary of the temporal rhetoric of awakening and rebirth common to second-wave feminism. Either way, Bustamante’s narrative highlights the venerable power of rhetorical *stasis* to usurp the transnational feminist project by reclaiming rhetorical commonplaces and hegemonic notions of freedom, movement, and liberation, and securing normative identifications through structures of opportunity (technology, privilege). Finally, the rhetorical weight of Bustamante’s narrative in *Writing Desire* offers a cautionary tale to transnational feminist scholars and advocates about the risks of transference (rhetorical, methodological, cultural, national), including the force of “traveling feminisms,”⁴⁰ and the lure and risks of cultural cosmopolitanism.

While the configuration of *identity as a field of action* allows us to trouble the victim/agent binary and to consider the strategic deployment of such contrasts, such a conceptualization also risks, if it loses all traces of the materiality of rhetoric, becoming the methodological equivalent of cultural cosmopolitanism. Just as we need to look beyond the academic transmission of new conceptions to consider how “social movements appropriate and transform global meanings, and materialize them in local practices,”⁴¹ so too do we need to understand how identities and identification practices are enabled and constrained by *kairos* – that is, by material and rhetorical circumstances. Placed against the geopolitical backdrop of the early 21st century, the classical figure of *Kairos* therefore emerges not so much as an accommodative figure of balance but as a critical subject negotiating the contradictions of transnationality. In other words, the dynamics of transnationality compel us to read the geopolitical (spatial and temporal) elements of identity and positionality rhetorically, in terms of the timeliness of certain identifications and their deployment. Finally, a *kairotic* understanding of identification is one that recognizes the colonial and imperial histories that shape the terms of identification associated with global sex work and feminist advocacy, and the identificatory practices that transform women into subjected others in increasingly transnational and cosmopolitan public spheres.

This essay has been published in a longer version in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, eds. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, Rutgers University 2005.

36 Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 249.

37 Ulf Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture” in *Theory, Culture, and Society*. SAGE: London. Volume 7 (1990), 237-251.

38 James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures” in *Cultural Studies*. Eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, (1992), 96-117.

39 Kaplan, 2001, 220.

40 Millie Thayer, “Traveling Feminisms: From Embodied Women to Gendered Citizenship” in *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*. Ed. Michael Burawoy et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 207.

41 Thayer, 207-8.

VISUALIZING THE CITIZENSHIP GAP: EU BORDERS AND MIGRATION IN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

Uta Staiger

The border, as a territorial and political boundary, is the site where the tensions between sovereignty and post-national pressures, citizen and alien, universal rights and exclusive membership, become poignantly visible. It is therefore a particularly constructive site for research, be it academic, artistic, or policy-related, to examine the conditions under which people come to be admitted to or excluded from rights regimes, and the implications this may hold in stock for liberal democracies.

The following analysis aims to discuss this nexus by attending to discourses, which are primarily visual but also form part of academic, curatorial, and political-activist initiatives. More concretely, it will take recourse to contemporary non-fictional audiovisual productions – video essays or essay films – which like written essays tend to traverse disciplinary boundaries and problematize as they employ the methodology of analysis and narrative. This self-reflective critical art form will be set in relation to political theory on changing modes of membership in an integrating Europe, as well as on transnational migration. By doing so, the article aims to discuss how the contradictory pressures acting upon, or exercised by, democratic nation-states, particularly in the context of European integration and immigration, may be represented and analysed.

In particular, the article will be concerned with how such cultural practices respond to the political, judicial and ethical concerns raised by what has been called the citizenship gap – the legal discrepancy between citizen and human rights, made particularly evident at and through borders. For the context of this book, the visual essays of artist and researcher Ursula Biemann, and mainly her 20-minute synchronized double screen video installation *Contained Mobility* (2004), form the centrepiece of this discussion. While taking recourse to her work most explicitly, I am interested in showing how cultural practices of this genre more generally may account for changing modes of membership in contemporary Europe, both formally and substantively.

Europe's Borders

As Zygmunt Bauman has noted,¹ the contemporary world is obsessed with borders. While to some degree losing the fixity and significance formerly associated with them due to current globalizing tendencies, borders are increasingly enforced and invested with agency and meaning. Indeed, reflecting transformations in the global order of things and yet always configuring partition on a local scale, borders have become 'over-saturated'² or 'over-determined'³ with significance. The less borders seem to matter; the more is invested physically, politically and symbolically in their maintenance and substance. Both in terms of their increasing institutional ubiquity and of the issues they raise for changing modes of membership, the borders become paradigms for development in the context of European integration and migration.

In the EU, borders make two opposite political tendencies visible. Internally, the de-fortification and partial disappearance of borders between EU member states mark the precondition for European 'unity in diversity' in terms of economy (internal market), mobility (Schengen), and political legitimacy (a unified popular will). Indeed, the removal of border controls, along with uniform passports and a common education policy, are among the main arguments of early reports on how to foster a sense of solidarity, knowledge and community among European citizens.⁴ In turn, the union's external borders are increasingly fortified, particularly since the EU constituted itself as the "Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice" (AFSJ) in the Treaty of Amsterdam. Following the resolutions of the 1999 Tampere Council, the 2004 Hague Programme objectives, and the Global Approach to Migration adopted by the European Council in 2005, the European immigration policy is enforced through the integrated border management of the European agency Frontex.⁵ As national borders in Europe disappear, those separating the Union from its non-members grow: Fortress Europe emerges.

Paradoxically, then, the unification of a European demos seems to be concomitant with a certain ring-fencing around a Schengen *cordon sanitaire*, hinged between a latent Eurocentrism and an ever-increasing set of defences against its internal and external "others". Indeed, the European Council asserts that "the Union is faced with constant and growing expectations from citizens, who wish to see concrete results in matters such as cross-border crime and terrorism as well as migration."⁶ In EU policy discourse, an analogy seems to arise between the regulation of foreigners and the maintenance of the new transnational *body politic* in a language protective against corruption, crime or alien intrusion. Conversely of course, the question arises if, as Seyla Benhabib put it, "Europe's 'others', be they guest workers or refugees, asylum seekers or migrants, have become an obvious focus for the anxieties and uncertainties generated by Europe's own 'othering', its

1 Zygmunt Bauman, „New Frontiers and Universal Values“ in *Fronteres. Debat de Barcelona VII* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, 2004).

2 Bauman, 147.

3 Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002).

4 Tindemans, Leo, „Report on the European Union“, Bulletin of the European Communities, 1975.

5 See the website of the agency <http://www.frontex.europa.eu> for further information and policy documents.

6 Brussels European Council, 14/15 December 2006, Presidency Conclusions (16879/06, CONCL 3), 5.

transformation from a continent of nation-states into a transnational political entity, whose precise constitutional and political form is still uncertain.”⁷

It is in this latter vein that, in response to public discourses and representations of migration, specific contemporary cultural productions take Europe’s external borders as their theme. Many of these artistic practices emerge in transnational collaborative networks of researchers, artists, and curators in Europe and its neighbouring states, with the boundaries between these categories becoming increasingly fluid. Often with national or EU funding, these initiatives seem to represent a tendency in contemporary art productions which question the boundaries between theory, political activism, and artistic practice, and which betray particular interest in examining the changing modes of membership in Europe. While one cannot argue for a specific artistic movement as such, many of these artists-cum-theorists use video and multimedia formats to formulate and organize, in critical essayistic form, the complex political and theoretical implications faced by enlarging Europe. Ursula Biemann’s visual essays, particularly *Contained Mobility*, will serve as a point of departure to discuss their features. Without claiming one artist for a general movement in visual cultural production, the way Biemann negotiates the gaps between sovereignty and exclusion, citizenship and human rights, may offer perspectives on how culture takes a stance on the political changes facing Europe.

Knowledgescapes

If the essay in today’s world really is, as Carles Guerra argues, “the genre which best represents the conditions of knowledge production,”⁸ we need to understand how it positions itself with regard to heuristics. In terms of the borders, what the visual essay confronts is a twofold kind of expertise: the rise of coordinated transnational knowledge production for national border security and interstate legal agreements on the one hand (profiles, trajectories, motives and counterfeits, health risks), and the increasing knowledge of those involved in channelling migration into detecting debilities of the system on the other. Since its inception by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter, the essay film or video has been developed by artists as diverse as Harun Farocki, Alexander Kluge, Želimir Žilnik, or more recently Hito Steyerl, Angela Melitopoulos or Ursula Biemann, to name but a few, to include self-criticism into the methodology and narration of analysis and knowledge generation. In Biemann’s *Contained Mobility*, the dialectical circuit of transgression and re-fortification that the



Contained Mobility

7 Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 166-7.

8 Carles Guerra, „Negatives of Europe. Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies“ in *Political Typographies. Visual Essays on the Margins of Europe* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007), 161.

knowledge production around borders represents is abstracted into a double-screen projection. In the following discussion, it will serve to examine some of its implications in more detail.

A 20-minute visual essay commissioned by the Liverpool Biennale, *Contained Mobility* portrays on one screen a personally absent if omnipresent data production indicated visually through charts and graphs, navigation simulators, surveillance images, maps and trafficking systems. In the second, its protagonist, Belorussian permanent migrant Anatol Zimmerman, who Ursula Biemann interviewed in preparation for the piece, is observed pacing, studying, and sleeping in an industrial container lined with maps, documents and technical equipment. Across these, a running-text biography of his multiple border-crossings provides the narrative focus. The video projection thus traces two systems of expertise, which are interlocked. Together, to annex Arjun Appadurai's terminology, they describe a "knowledgescape", the suffix *-scape* hereby denoting "that these are not objectively given relations which at the same look from every angle of vision, but they are rather deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities [...]"⁹

At this intersection, the visual essay aims to generate a third layer of knowledge production: the visual representation and mediation of the pieces themselves. As a highly stylized and dissociative multi-channel visual format using simultaneous projections, audio tracks and running texts, and couched in a theoretical discourse that facilitated its dissemination in networks, conferences, and exhibition centres, the medium of the video essay acts as a third form of critical intelligence. Citing and invoking visual conventions from cartography and documentaries to databases and CCTV streams in order to inscribe trajectories and motion, surveillance and capture in the viewer's visual field, it presents itself as a self-reflexive arts practice hinged between transmission, information, and mediatisation.

Given that these visual knowledge regimes surround, in *Contained Mobility*, Zimmerman's biographical narrative and physical observation as if with a new kind of biometric data, what emerges as the object of knowledge production is the biopolitical body. The knowledge system defining the corporeal condition of the migrant subject seems to cohere with the way the states administer, according to Michel Foucault, individual biological life in order to generate a social *body politic*. Such technologies of power, "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,"¹⁰ count for Foucault as paradigmatic of the modern nation-state. And indeed, earlier pieces by Ursula Biemann, such as *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Europlex* (2003), can be read as reflections on Foucault's biopolitical concern, updated for the late 20th century European nation-state marked by mobility and migration. Here, "the boundaries of the body become analogous to the borders of the nation and the nation-state; both are vulnerable to penetration and corruption from the outside, susceptible to disease and alien intrusion respectively."¹¹

However, what is increasingly at issue in Biemann's work, is not so much the critique of social technologies of power regulating social and political life. Rather,

9 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Braziel, J. E. & A. Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 31.

10 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

11 Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 136.

and *Contained Mobility* shows this development clearly, her visual essays seem to be more and more drawn to the political and legal dimension of this nexus: the rights pertaining to the migrant in comparison to the citizen, and how to translate these into a visual format.

The Citizenship Gap

Video essayistic practice is interested in visualising narrative and heuristic elements, which viewers usually consume in the form of news item, commentary, or academic research. What *Contained Mobility* engages with visually is the longstanding and highly topical gap between two main legal rights traditions: citizenship rights and human rights. The “citizenship gap”¹² emerges out of the legal disparity between these two rights regimes, of which the first attaches rights to the individual’s membership in a particular, circumscribed community or demos, while the second precisely disconnects rights from such membership or context, and instead universalizes them.¹³

Since antiquity, citizenship rights as a framework for membership in a political and territorially defined community form part of Western philosophy and have been expanded, transformed and extended themselves from the *polis* over the medieval city to the contemporary nation-state. Human rights in turn emerge during the Enlightenment out of natural law philosophy and are based on the equal and natural character of a person.¹⁴ Their expansion has not been as progressive as that of citizenship rights, and only since World War II have they been increasingly institutionalized in an international rights regime by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and consequent covenants. It is a regime that is expanding, yet which remains enforceable mainly through the nation state via the incorporation of international legislation into domestic laws.¹⁵ Between these two regimes, however, there exists an “irresolvable contradiction”,¹⁶ as one anchors rights in a person by virtue of his or her status as member of a body politic, and the other by virtue of his or her humanity.

These incongruities are made most evident by the rise of the global economy and communication technologies, an emerging transnational civil society, the increase of transnational migration, and the development of post-national forms of membership in sub- or supranational spaces of attachment. However, even in the face of changing concepts of sovereignty, and within supranational constellations such as the EU,

12 Alison Brysk, *Globalization and Human Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

13 Gerfon Shafir, „Citizenship and Human Rights in an Era of Globalization“ in *People Out of Place. Globalization, Human Rights, and the Citizenship Gap*. edited by Brysk, A. & G. Shafir (New York: Routledge, 2004).

14 T.S. Marshall argued that citizenship rights expanded in three generations from civil rights to political and social rights. Theorists of multiculturalism now hope to propose a fourth, cultural citizenship, to the list. Human rights, by contrast, have not seen such a progressive expansion and despite international advances fail to harness similar enforcement.

15 Other pacts include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant of Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, or the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the establishment of the European Court of Justice. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms permits claims of citizens of adhering states to be heard by a European Court of Human Rights. That is, while the human rights regime continues to consolidate itself and spawns informal and international networks of activists and NGOs, it is still mainly enforceable through nation-states members of the pacts. For an alternative reading, see Bobbio, Norberto, *Das Zeitalter der Menschenrechte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2007).

16 Benhabib, 9.

territorial control continues to be exercised through immigration and citizenship policies, betraying the continued breach between the two traditions. It is precisely this gap or contradiction which Biemann's essays aim to visualize by situating their protagonists at the intersection of institutional and geopolitical discourses. The legal and political bases for this discrepancy are therefore worth pursuing in more detail, before investigating how they are being narrated and represented.

It was Hannah Arendt who had first pointed out the fundamental paradox at the heart of the territorially delimited sovereign state, in which supposedly universal and inalienable rights are in fact only enforceable as citizenship rights. Analysing the collapse of the nation-state system during the two world wars, she identified the impossibility of claiming one's "right to have rights"¹⁷ at the very moment in which one lost one's nationality status. Those suffering denationalization or denaturalization not only lost their citizenship rights, she argued, they were deprived of human rights *per se*. Indeed, Arendt claims that the awareness of the existence of a right to have rights and to belong to a community emerged precisely at the moment in which people appeared, whose rights were no longer safeguarded by a state. This represented the 'perplexities of the rights of man', as she phrased it:

"If a person loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights are provided. Actually, the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man."¹⁸

This "abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human" as Arendt also called it elsewhere,¹⁹ has more recently been used by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben to theorize the genealogy that he labels "bare life". Agamben points out that simple biological life (in ancient Greek: *zoé*) was originally defined as something different to the political life of an individual or group (*bios*). Heavily relying on Arendt, Agamben however argues that in fact, this "bare life" has always been used to constitute political power. Focusing on legal and political institutions, Agamben claims that the inclusion of this *zoé* in the political sphere is not in fact particular to the modern state (as Foucault had argued). Rather, it has always been the nucleus of sovereignty.²⁰ As such, he argues that life and law, inside and outside, become indistinguishable. The human being, who becomes a citizen at the moment of birth, signals that bare life is politicised as the very principle of sovereignty. What Agamben is most interested in, however, is not the biological, pre-political life of the citizen, but rather the absolute nakedness of a life from which law has recalled itself and yet wields power over. The life of the stateless person, the refugee and the migrant, breaks this identity of citizen and human, and thus by its very existence questions the trinity of state, nation and territory. Therefore, it is precisely through the exclusion of this life, which is continually expelled from the nation-state, as it cannot be represented politically in it, that the nation-state reaffirms itself.

While certain conclusions of his must count as highly problematic, Agamben's account complements the definition of the citizenship gap as put forward by political

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 296.

18 Arendt, 300.

19 Arendt, 297.

20 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6.

theory²¹ in a number of ways. We can define them as (1) the historical analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and exclusion; (2) the complexity of human rights regimes as they refer to an abstract human being (Arendt) or to bare life in the politico-juridical order (Agamben); and (3) the democratic paradox outlined by Arendt with regard to the stateless people of the early 20th century, made visible today as refugees, denizens or migrants.

Visualising Negatives

In our current context, of course, the question arises as to how cultural productions can possibly respond to a nexus, which in theoretical discourse betrays such a complexity. How can they visually or narratively portray lives, which are reduced to mere existence and thus are without representation?

At the centre of many visual works, we find human figures filtered through the system of international migration, and the distinct physical dimension they experience as pertaining to their legal status (or absence thereof). Želimir Žilnik's essay film *Fortress Europe* (2000), the film project *Rien ne vaut que la vie, mais la vie même ne vaut rien* by Brigitta Kuster and Mabouna II Moïse Merlin (2003), or Angela Melitopoulos video essay *Passing Drama* (1999), are stylistically and conceptually diverse audiovisual productions. Yet, like Biemann's productions, they all take the figure of migrants, refugees, stateless or displaced persons²² as their starting point. These are figures caught in a paradoxical double bind: both outside of the law and at the same time captured by it, located in a long-term state of exception at Europe's fringes²³. Yet, as no national sovereignty can accept their territorial and legal position unaffiliated to citizenship, they cannot be granted membership status. The right to emigration is after all recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration, but not so the right to immigrate. The right to nationality, and to asylum in specific conditions, are also recognized, but the declaration does not pronounce itself on nation-states' obligations to grant entry to immigrants.

In *Contained Mobility*, this double bind is expressed in Zimmerman's continued suspension between polities, contained but also by now enthralled by a seemingly immobile legal vacuum, which represents his unending mobility. The paradox of a human rights regime that can only be enforced nationally expresses itself physically by placing the migrants in an exceptional legal gap between naturalization (integration in a host polity) and repatriation (return to the polity of origin), which cannot be overcome. Biemann's visual essays therefore bring into full colour the existence of the migrant as purely *ex negativo*, that is, the filmic positive of the migrant as a purely negative blueprint of a full complement of rights. The productions aim to locate "a condition of permanent non-belonging, of juridical non-existence", as the prologue to

21 See for example Seyla Benhabib *The Rights of Others* (2004), Linda Bosniak *The Citizen and Alien* (2006), and Alison Brysk (ed.) *Globalization and Human Rights* (2002).

22 Note that there are important distinctions between refugee and illegal immigrant status, mainly in the manner in which the former may be legally integrated (offered asylum) once within the host country, but this is not discussed here. See http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/ for EU-specific information.

23 In June 2008, the European Parliament approved a new directive on common standards and procedures in member states known as the 'return directive', which makes it possible to detain irregular migrants for a period of up to 18 months.

Contained Mobility phrases it.²⁴ The narrative voice-over from the off, and the material aesthetic mapping of the body and journey of Anatol Zimmerman as an object of discourse and image, illustrate the tension between biography and legality, humanity and citizenship. Deprived of locality, fixity, and rights, Zimmerman is only defined as not belonging to any order, be it territorial, juridical or political. As the essay visually argues, he is nothing but a “negative of Europe.”²⁵ What we now turn to is the material place, in which this citizenship gap is most clearly anchored: the border.

Spaces of Detainment

The citizenship gap is particularly present at borders, as they mark geographically and politically the limit of national entities. As Benhabib put it, “nowhere are the tensions between the demands of postnational universalistic solidarity and the practices of exclusive membership more apparent than at the site of territorial borders and boundaries.”²⁶ The extra-juridical position of migrants corresponds to the extra-territorial position within which they are contained at borders. In areas such as detention centres, refugee camps or the no man’s land, spaces which technically belong to the countries they guard but which are already outside their normative realm, the citizenship gap is spatially instituted.

In Biemann’s essays, these spaces therefore appear as symbols of the spaces outside the social imaginary they enclose. While productions like Žilnik’s *Fortress Europe* trace their protagonist’s quixotic journey within a legal corridor from detention centre to detention centre, non-place to non-place, country to country, *Contained Mobility* condenses these spaces into a single metaphorical container, an immobile box symbolizing the gap between protective rights regimes. Relaying motionless transit across years as well as across different Schengen crossings within a unified space, this container is defined in contradistinction and yet similarity to the boundlessness of the seascape, which introduces the film and accompanies it through navigational simulators and port landscapes. It is the spatial materialization of the state of exception, in which the protagonist finds himself.

The border areas thus visualized correspond to a wider array of spaces that, while located within a nation-state’s territory, remain outside the state’s legal framework. In 1996, for instance, the European Court of Human Rights censured the French government for their practice of keeping asylum seekers in so-called “international zones” which, while physically within the French state, were technically considered to be outside France so as not to fall under the European Convention of Human Rights.²⁷ Such a proposition of indefinite detention was also at the heart of the British 1999 initiative to create so-called “transit processing centres” near the EU’s external borders, thus literally creating a “permanent state of exception in the international refugee regime”²⁸ in which the migrant lives could be administered. They are also outside of, while incorporated within, the national policy framework.

24 Cf. Ursula Biemann and Imre Szeman, „Forced Transit“ in *Political Typographies. Visual Essays on the Margins of Europe* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007), 44.

25 Guerra, op. cit., 160-173.

26 Benhabib, 17.

27 David Jacobson and Galya Benarieh Ruffer, „Agency on a Global Scale: Rules, Rights, and the European Union“ in *People Out of Place. Globalization, Human Rights, and the Citizenship Gap*, edited by Brysk, A. & G. Shafir (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83.

28 Benhabib, 151.

The question that needs to be raised here, and which is raised explicitly in this case by visual productions outside the traditional political realm, is how the relationship between these spaces and the nation-state or EU territory may be understood. Do they appear as an exception to or are they constitutive of sovereignty, from which they are kept at bay? Is the camp as biopolitical space par excellence really, as Giorgio Agamben claimed, paradigmatic for the nation-state, or even more, “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity”?²⁹ Ursula Biemann’s visual essays, whether they concern trafficking (*Remote Sensing*), economic globalisation (*Performing the Border*) or transnational migration (*Contained Mobility*), seem to suggest that there is indeed a fallible but constitutive conjunction between a political territory to be protected and the normative regimentation of transnational movements across its borders. This conjunction materializes in the corridors, detention and interrogation rooms, airstrips, and transit camps attached to a border regime that internalizes, but at the same time excludes, these enclaves from its own normative framework.

Visual essays have the potential of condensing the function of these spaces metaphorically and rhetorically. Brigitta Kuster’s 2005 *S. – je suis – je lis à haute voix [passing for]*, for instance, examines how these usually inaccessible extra-territorial spaces may become known to the artist, how to ‘do’ and represent the border and its subjects/objects. Her and Biemann’s pieces visualize quasi-allegorically, Žilnik nearly documentarily, the exclaves and zones of detention specifically because they are usually relegated to invisibility. Furthermore, they contrast the disciplinary regulation of migration with the insistent desire of the protagonists for autonomy and self-rule, by bringing the camp structures in tension with an insistent biographical drive. Juxtaposed with visual imagery, these narratives complicate the relationship of both artist and viewer to normative frameworks on the one hand, and popular news culture on the other. Through the narratives, which question the distinction between objective truth and subjective opinion, the video essays are attempts at excavating the paradoxical relationship between citizen and human as it is institutionalized today.

At the same time, however, and conscious of the fact that part of the migrant’s predicament is precisely the impossibility of being represented, these attempts must for the sake of credibility also question their own visual omnipotence. Intriguingly, therefore, there are moments in which *Contained Mobility* also draws attention to the fallibility of its own medium. When Zimmerman suddenly steps out of the video image (this happens more than once), he reveals a blind spot of the surveillance camera that hitherto seemed omnipresent and – prescient. In this suspension, both the role of the migrant and his place in the knowledge systems of the border, and the position of the authorial subject (artist, theorist, researcher) towards his or her object, is momentarily questioned.

Exemplarity and Speech

How can the relationship between the object of enquiry and the critical author/artist doing the enquiry be adequately rendered? More to the point, what is the legitimacy of the author or critic to intervene for, or speak on behalf of, the migrant, and how does this relationship require us to rethink responsibility and agency? These are some of the questions raised by the formal and authorial stance of the authors/critics involved, and which we need to trace more closely in the following.

²⁹ Agamben, 1998, 123 and 175.

Clearly, the permanent migrant acts as a model case through which the citizenship gap, the post-national pressures on the nation-state, and their relationship to Schengen-Europe, can be made most visible. Indeed, his is necessarily a position that represents *in extremis* the contradiction of contemporary democracies: “From a philosophical point of view, transnational migrations bring to the fore the constitutive dilemma at the heart of liberal democracies: between sovereign self-determination claims on the one hand and adherence to universal human rights principles on the other.”³⁰

This is phrased similarly by Agamben who considered the refugee as a “limit concept” that challenges the nation-state by questioning the crucial link between birth and nation, man and citizen. However, it is in Agamben’s rhetoric that we can also find the dangers inherent in exclusively foregrounding this relationship of the migrant to the dilemma of the nation-state as exemplary. He believes the refugee to be “the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today [...] the forms and limits of a coming political community.”³¹ His insistence on the exemplarity of the refugee for “our” philosophy (to be entirely rebuilt, starting exclusively with this figure) shows up the potential pitfalls of his thought: a romanticising teleology investing messianic potential in the people most deprived of rights today. So how can the “constitutive dilemma” be thought about critically without instrumentalising migrant subjectivities? How can it appear in political, curatorial, theoretical, or artistic discourse – or in a conjunction of the four? The video essays propose two interrelated lines that may go some way towards resolving these questions: agency and speech.

As Hannah Arendt put it, “the fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective”.³² The loss of the relevance of speech, she argues, forms a crucial part in denuding a person of his or her human status. Indeed, in *Contained Mobility*, the protagonist Zimmerman never actually speaks. He is spoken about (running biographical text), theorized (prologue) or delimited in other (visual) discourses of knowledge. Clearly, the protagonist must have spoken to the author before the production,³³ but he never actively expresses himself. His agency is translated onto the discourse of the artist, who frames and represents him by evoking the public discourses that have previously framed and represented his trajectory.



Contained Mobility

30 Benhabib, 2.

31 Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” in *Means without End. Notes on Politics*, edited by Giorgio Agamben (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

32 Arendt, 296. Agamben also notes the proximity of law to language. As in speech, a word only acquires the ability to denote reality insofar as it is also meaningful in what it does not denote (“potentiality of suspension”), i.e. with the non-linguistic, with which it must maintain a virtual relationship.

33 This holds true if we assume that the production centres on a real-life migrant biography; an assumption later validated by the author herself, as she relates the interviews she conducted with Zimmerman in Liverpool in preparation for the biennale.

Performing this containment as a double act of deprivation – of speech and of rights – exemplifies the nexus I wish to bring into play: the assumed lack of speech of the subject motivates the shift of expression onto another speaker, the artist. This move is clearly testing, as the legitimacy of speaking in lieu of another deprived of speech may be both ethically challenging and at the same time potentially the only possible act of responsibility.

Agency and/as Authorship

It is from precisely this perspective, then, that visual essayists deduce the legitimacy and relevance of their discourses. While opinions and actions need to be transferred from the migrant subject onto another plane in order to become manifest, the very form of the video essay reflects upon the implications of representing an Other. Through this double bind, a specific kind of agency is ideally created at the level of the artist, who becomes a curator-cum-critic-cum-political-activist. This is in tune with a more general shift in political involvement following the expansion of rights and increasing possibilities to “force enforcement” of human rights through new international normative and legal instruments. Indeed, as some have argued, this agency, and the concomitant rise of the individual as agent, is symptomatic of the decline of the nation-state and the changing modes of governance.³⁴ With emerging post-national modes of membership, which are based on dissociating national identity from democratic rights, such an agency pushes for a “right to have rights” of universal personhood that is enforceable through international legal regimes.³⁵ In line with these considerations, the last textual phrase represented in *Contained Mobility* states that “everything new is born illegal”, expressing, in the words of the author herself, that the migrant appears as the radical “departure for the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation.”³⁶

The consistent use by essayistic video artists and filmmakers of biographical (and autobiographical) narrative to visualize agency is interesting in this respect. With the complexities of rights regimes and knowledge systems impacting on the migrant, the biographical narrative individualises the argument. At the same time, it allows authors to interrogate in different ways their own modes of mastering the discourses, by already including their own critical position in the process – here, in the form of a theorizing prologue as a commentary. The production of the body of work is thus immediately aligned to, and at the same time interrogates, the production of the migrant body and subject through political-juridical discourses.

This position has direct implications for the cultural practice and the potential of representation. Firstly, the works themselves are embedded in an analytic framework in which critical, political and theoretical discourses frame individual works. Most of the video and filmmakers mentioned in this article have not only theorised their own practice, accompanying their visual essays with detailed written analyses and conceptual interpretations; but their video essay becomes itself “theory-building through visual means.”³⁷ The piece I have examined throughout as an example of a trend of visual essayistic practice interrogating and working in an enlarging Europe

34 Jacobson, 73.

35 See notes 4 and 5, Shafir (2004) and Bobbio (2007) for further indication on this matter.

36 Biemann, 2007, 43.

37 Ursula Biemann, introduction to *Stuff it. The video essay in the digital age* (Zürich: Voldemeer/Springer, 2003), 9.

is thus clearly imbued with the specific modes of its spatial and textual context. Acknowledging the implications of producing and organising knowledge about, and thus representing the speech of, the subject(s) of migration, this conjunction represents a tacit, if to some extent unstable, performance of critical and auto-critical agency.

Secondly, the arts practice often structurally expands to include exhibition and curation concerns. As visual pieces, essay films often reorganise a multiplicity of intersecting actualities through montage and aesthetic-rhetorical abstraction. Similarly, including the pieces in exhibitions curated by the authors themselves allows them to enter into a substantive relationship with other forms of visual and textual material – as if inserting a phrase in a larger paragraph or argument. Rather than observing a social or political reality in linear documentary fashion, the visual essay stylises a complex argument, which in turn is implicated in a larger exhibition and a thus discursive context. It is a constellation from which the artwork itself may no longer be separable.

Thirdly, such pieces tend to emerge in a specific professional and intellectual context marked by transnational networks of collaborators from different disciplines, universities, arts academies or collectives. For instance, *Projekt Migration*, in the framework of which Žilnik produced his *Fortress Europe*, was initiated by the German Federal Culture Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) and comprised sociologists, ethnographers, artists, curators, and migrant associations, and developed across a web platform, a conference, and a major publication. Similarly, the collective *Multiplicity*, consisting of architects, geographers, artists, urban planners, photographers, sociologists, and economists from across Europe, have produced a number of projects dealing with the changing spatial appearance of Europe (*Uncertain States of Europe*) or border regimes (*Solid Sea*). In the same way, Biemann's *Black Sea Files*, shown at exhibitions such as the cross-disciplinary *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* in the Kunstwerke Berlin (2006),³⁸ formed part of the larger multi-annual research project *Transcultural Geographies*. A pan-European platform for collaboration thus tends to surround the production and dissemination of such work, allowing for expansion and networking of individual initiatives.

Inhabiting simultaneously the roles of artist, theorist, curator, and international project manager, visual essayists thus both experience and promote significant shifts in the authorial stance and the mode of production of their work. This has implications also for the academic subject aiming to theorize and analyze these works. Any analysis needs to work on two simultaneous levels – the artistic and the theoretical, or, in other words, the production and the commentary. In order to avoid a commentary on a commentary, the researcher is thus forced to rethink his or her position even more carefully, interrogate the legitimacy of his or her critical and political position in relation to the subject(s) under discussion. This position destabilizes, and thus challenges, the position and methodology of the cultural theorist and his or her perspective on the contemporary modes of citizenship in Europe. It is in this sense, too, that a cultural agency may be said to arise, if tentatively, from the production, distribution and reception of visual essays on the expanding Europe's potentials and pitfalls.

38 The related *Zona B: In the Margins of Europe* (Fundació Tàpies, Barcelona 2007) also included a projection of *Contained Mobility*.

Conclusion

The self-reflexive and cross-disciplinary character of visual-essayistic production raises a number of issues, which are worth recapitulating. Firstly, the involvement is one of conscious intervention into a system of knowledge generation regarding the maintenance and illegal crossing of the EU's external borders; an intervention characterized by a critical stance, not only towards the production of knowledge, but also its conventional mediatisation. Secondly, therefore, such visual productions often deal explicitly with the problematic negotiation of subjects in a political-juridical nexus, which by definition lacks any representation. Thematizing precisely the absolute nakedness of humanity in the gap between a universal human rights regime and a territorially inscribed enforcement of them, the essayistic content and stylistic form of such cultural productions bring to the fore the constitutive discrepancies that are at the heart, if invisibly so, of Europe's liberal democracies. Thirdly, it is due to a specific focus on biographical narrative, filtered through modified filmic genres and textual-visual abstraction that the pieces claim to represent these issues without falling into the trap of exemplarity. Finally, and precisely through the modes of production, presentation and theorizing which they experience and pilot, video essays like those we have discussed may be said to represent a form of visual and rhetorical agency relevant to current cultural and political changes.

That these visual essayistic practices are hosted by galleries or conference centres, places of cultural privilege inaccessible to the subject(s) of the work, is in this case symptomatic. While they aim for integration into a greater canon of expository and academic practice, driving a renewed political concern into the heart of cultural transmission and analysis (a concern, which is raised by the public funding of these initiatives), there remains a query regarding the limits of, or rather the responsibility for, being involved in speaking for and representing the absent other. Clearly, however, these productions, emerging as they do from transnational collaborations between researchers and universities, artists and artist networks, NGOs and publicly funded cooperative projects, provide a critical perspective on the changes and implications of an enlarging Europe, which otherwise often go unnoticed.

EXTRADISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS: TOWARDS A NEW CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONS

Brian Holmes

What is the logic, the need or the desire that pushes more and more artists to work outside the limits of their own discipline, defined by the notions of free reflexivity and pure aesthetics, incarnated by the gallery-magazine-museum circuit, and haunted by the memory of the normative genres, painting and sculpture?

Pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video each marked a rupture of the disciplinary frame, already in the 1960-70s. But one could argue that these dramatized outbursts merely *imported* themes, media or expressive techniques back into what Yves Klein had termed the “specialized” ambiance of the gallery or the museum, qualified by the primacy of the aesthetic and managed by the functionaries of art. Exactly such arguments were launched by Robert Smithson in his text on cultural confinement in 1972, then restated by Brian O’Doherty in his theses on the ideology of the white cube.¹ They still have a lot of validity. Yet now we are confronted with a new series of outbursts, under such names as net.art, bio art, visual geography, space art and database art – to which one could add an archi-art, or art of architecture, which curiously enough has never been baptized as such, as well as a machine art that reaches all the way back to 1920s constructivism, or even a “finance art” whose birth was announced in the Casa Encendida of Madrid in 2006.

The heterogeneous character of the list immediately suggests its application to all the domains where theory and practice meet. In the artistic forms that result, one will always find remains of the old modernist tropism whereby art designates itself first of all, drawing the attention back to its own operations of expression, representation, metaphorization or deconstruction. Independently of whatever “subject” it treats, art

1 Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement” (1972), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976/1986).

tends to make this self-reflexivity its distinctive or identifying trait, even its *raison d'être*, in a gesture whose philosophical legitimacy was established by Kant. But in the kind of work I want to discuss, there is something more at stake.

We can approach it through the word that the Nettime project used to define its collective ambitions. For the artists, theorists, media activists and programmers who inhabited that mailing list – one of the important vectors of net.art in the late 1990s – it was a matter of proposing an “immanent critique” of the Internet, that is, of the techno-scientific infrastructure then in the course of construction. This critique was to be carried out inside the network itself, using its languages and its technical tools and focusing on its characteristic objects, with the goal of influencing or even of directly shaping its development – but without refusing the possibilities of distribution outside this circuit.² What’s sketched out is a two-way movement, which consists in occupying a field with a potential for shaking up society (telematics) and then radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change in the discipline of art (considered too formalist and narcissistic to escape its own charmed circle), in the discipline of cultural critique (considered too academic and historicist to confront the current transformations) and even in the “discipline” – if you can call it that – of leftist activism (considered too doctrinaire, too ideological to seize the occasions of the present).

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extradisciplinary investigations.

The concept was forged in an attempt to go beyond a kind of double aimlessness that affects contemporary signifying practices, even a double drift, but without the revolutionary qualities that the Situationists were looking for. I’m thinking first of the inflation of interdisciplinary discourses on the academic and cultural circuits: a virtuoso combinatory system that feeds the symbolic mill of cognitive capital, acting as a kind of supplement to the endless pinwheels of finance itself (the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a specialist of these combinatories). Second is the state of indiscipline that is an unsought effect of the anti-authoritarian revolts of the 1960s, where the subject simply gives into the aesthetic solicitations of the market (in the neopop vein, indiscipline means endlessly repeating and remixing the flux of prefabricated commercial images). Though they aren’t the same, interdisciplinarity and indiscipline have become the two most common excuses for the neutralization of significant inquiry.³ But there is no reason to accept them.

The extradisciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography, urbanism, psychiatry, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc., to bring forth on those terrains the “free play of the faculties”

2 See the introduction to the anthology *ReadMe!* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999). One of the best examples of immanent critique is the project “Name Space” by Paul Garrin, which aimed to rework the domain name system (DNS) which constitutes the web as a navigable space; cf. 224-29.

3 Cf. Brian Holmes, “L’extradisciplinaire,” in Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé (eds.), *Traversées*, (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2001).

and the intersubjective experimentation that are characteristic of modern art, but also to try to identify, inside those same domains, the spectacular or instrumental uses so often made of the subversive liberty of aesthetic play – as the architect Eyal Weizman does in exemplary fashion, when he investigates the appropriation by the Israeli and American military of what were initially conceived as subversive architectural strategies. Weizman challenges the military on its own terrain, with his maps of security infrastructures in Israel; but what he brings back are elements for a critical examination of what used to be his exclusive discipline.⁴ This complex movement, which never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either, can provide a new departure point for what used to be called *institutional critique*.

Histories in the Present

What has been established, retrospectively, as the “first generation” of institutional critique includes figures like Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. They examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of breaking out. They had a strong relation to the anti-institutional revolts of the 1960s and 70s, and to the accompanying philosophical critiques.⁵ The best way to take their specific focus on the museum is not as a self-assigned limit or a fetishization of the institution, but instead as part of a materialist praxis, lucidly aware of its context, but with wider transformatory intentions. To find out where their story leads, however, we have to look at the writing of Benjamin Buchloh and see how he framed the emergence of institutional critique.

In a text entitled “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” Buchloh quotes two key propositions by Lawrence Weiner. The first is *A Square Removed from a Rug in Use*, and the second, *A 36”x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (both 1968). In each it is a matter of taking the most self-referential and tautological form possible – the square, whose sides each repeat and reiterate the others – and inserting it in an environment marked by the determinisms of the social world. As Buchloh writes: “Both interventions – while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry... – inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institutions and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed.... On the one hand, it dissipates the expectation of encountering the work of art only in a ‘specialized’ or ‘qualified’ location.... On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from their institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings...”⁶

Weiner’s propositions are clearly a version of immanent critique, operating flush with the discursive and material structures of the art institutions; but they are cast as a purely logical deduction from minimal and conceptual premises. They just as

4 Eyal Weizman, “Walking through Walls,” at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.

5 Cf. Stefan Nowotny, “Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique,” http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/nowotny/en/#_ftn6.

6 Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990).

clearly prefigure the symbolic activism of Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" works, like *Splitting* (1973) or *Window Blow-Out* (1976), which confronted the gallery space with urban inequality and racial discrimination. From that departure point, a history of artistic critique could have led to contemporary forms of activism and technopolitical research, via the mobilization of artists around the AIDS epidemic in late 1980s. But the most widespread versions of 60s and 70s cultural history never took that turn. According to the subtitle of Buchloh's famous text, the teleological movement of late-modernist art in the 1970s was heading "From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." This would mean a strictly Frankfortian vision of the museum as an idealizing Enlightenment institution, damaged by the bureaucratic state and the market spectacle.

Other histories could be written. At stake here is a tense double-bind between the desire to transform the specialized "cell" of the modernist gallery into a mobile potential of living knowledge that can reach out into the world, and the counter-realization that everything about this specialized aesthetic space is a trap, that it has been instituted as a form of enclosure. That tension produced the incisive interventions of Michal Asher, the sledgehammer denunciations of Hans Haacke, the paradoxical displacements of Robert Smithson, or the melancholic humor and poetic fantasy of Marcel Broodthaers, whose hidden mainspring was a youthful engagement with revolutionary surrealism. If we want to transform that initial tension, the first thing is never to reduce the diversity and complexity of artists who never voluntarily joined into a movement. Another reduction would arise from an obsessive focus on a specific site of the work's presentation, the museum, whether it is mourned as a fading relic of the "bourgeois public sphere," or exalted with a fetishizing discourse of "site specificity." Exactly these two pitfalls lay in wait for the discourse of institutional critique, when it took explicit form in the United States in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was the period of the so-called "second generation." Among the names most often cited are Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser. They pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the Other like an object to be shown in a vitrine. But they added a subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography, which allowed them to recast external power hierarchies as ambivalences within the self, opening up a conflicted sensibility to the coexistence of multiple modes and vectors of representation. There is a compelling negotiation here, particularly in the work of Renee Green, between specialized discourse analysis and embodied experimentation with the human sensorium. Yet most of this work was also carried out in the form of meta-reflections on the limits of the artistic practices themselves (mock museum displays or scripted video performances), staged within institutions that were ever-more blatantly corporate – to the point where it became increasingly hard to shield the critical investigations from their own accusations, and their own often devastating conclusions.

This situation of a critical process taking itself for its object recently led Andrea Fraser to consider the artistic institution as an unsurpassable, all-defining frame,

sustained through its own inwardly directed critique.⁷ Bourdieu's deterministic analysis of the closure of the socio-professional fields, mingled with a deep confusion between Weber's iron cage and Foucault's desire "to get free of oneself," is internalized here in a governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation.⁸ Unfortunately, it all adds very little to Broodthaers' lucid testament, formulated on a single page in 1975.⁹ For Broodthaers, the only alternative to a guilty conscience was self-imposed blindness – not exactly a solution! Yet Fraser accepts it, by posing her argument as an attempt to "defend the very institution for which the institution of the avant-garde's 'self-criticism' had created the potential: the institution of critique."

Without any antagonistic or even agonistic relation to the status quo, and above all, without any aim to change it, what's defended becomes little more than a masochistic variation on the self-serving "institutional theory of art" promoted by Danto, Dickie and their followers (a theory of mutual and circular recognition among members of an object-oriented milieu, misleadingly called a "world"). The loop is looped, and what had been a large-scale, complex, searching and transformational project of 60s and 70s art seems to reach a dead end, with institutional consequences of complacency, immobility, loss of autonomy, capitulation before various forms of instrumentalization...

Phase Change

The end may be logical, but some desire to go much further. The first thing is to redefine the means, the media and the aims of a possible third phase of institutional critique. The notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorize the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere.¹⁰ These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. They are based instead on a circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions – social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities – which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution.

The projects tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks. Their inventors, who came of age in the universe of cognitive capitalism, are drawn toward complex social functions which they seize upon in all their technical detail, and in full awareness that the second nature of the world is now shaped by technology and organizational form. In almost every case it is a political engagement that gives them the desire to pursue their

7 "Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc.... if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered world,' or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves." Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique," in John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2006).

8 Cf. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en>.

9 Marcel Broodthaers, "To be bien pensant... or not to be. To be blind." (1975), in *October* 42, "Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs" (Fall 1987).

10 Cf. Félix Guattari, *Psychanalyse et transversalité: Essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003 (1972)).

exacting investigations beyond the limits of an artistic or academic discipline. But their analytic processes are at the same time expressive, and for them, every complex machine is awash in affect and subjectivity. It is when these subjective and analytic sides mesh closely together, in the new productive and political contexts of communicational labor (and not just in meta-reflections staged uniquely for the museum), that one can speak of a “third phase” of institutional critique – or better, of a “phase change” in what was formerly known as the public sphere, a change which has extensively transformed the contexts and modes of cultural and intellectual production in the twenty-first century.

An issue of *Multitudes*, co-edited with the *Transform* web-journal, gives examples of this approach.¹¹ The aim is to sketch the problematic field of an exploratory practice that is not new, but is definitely rising in urgency. Rather than offering a curatorial recipe, we wanted to cast new light on the old problems of the closure of specialized disciplines, the intellectual and affective paralysis to which it gives rise, and the alienation of any capacity for democratic decision-making that inevitably follows, particularly in a highly complex technological society. The forms of expression, public intervention and critical reflexivity that have been developed in response to such conditions can be characterized as extradisciplinary – but without fetishizing the word at the expense of the horizon it seeks to indicate.

On considering the work, and particularly the articles dealing with technopolitical issues, some will probably wonder if it might not have been interesting to evoke the name of Bruno Latour. His ambition is that of “making things public,” or more precisely, elucidating the specific encounters between complex technical objects and specific processes of decision-making (whether these are *de jure* or *de facto* political). For that, he says, one must proceed in the form of “proofs,” established as rigorously as possible, but at the same time necessarily “messy,” like the things of the world themselves.¹²

There is something interesting in Latour’s proving machine (even if it does tend, unmistakably, toward the academic productivism of “interdisciplinarity”). A concern for how things are shaped in the present, and a desire for constructive interference in the processes and decisions that shape them, is characteristic of those who no longer dream of an absolute outside and a total, year-zero revolution. However, it’s enough to consider the artists whom we invited to the *Multitudes* issue in order to see the differences. Hard as one may try, the 1750 km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline cannot be reduced to the “proof” of anything, even if Ursula Biemann did compress it into the ten distinct sections of the *Black Sea Files*. Traversing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey before it debouches in the Mediterranean, the BTC pipeline forms the object of political decisions even while it sprawls beyond reason and imagination, engaging the whole planet in the geopolitical and ecological uncertainty of the present. The video



Black Sea Files

11 See “Extradisciplinaire”, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.

12 Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2005).

makes certain aspects of the pipeline system public, by seizing the brief moment of its visibility during the construction process, before the whole thing was buried underground. But above all, it provides a first approach to the human geography of such a massive infrastructural project, whose status as a technological artifact and an economic resource cannot and should not be separated from an awareness of the people whose environments and lives it traverses.

Biemann's video was carried out within the framework of Transcultural Geographies, a collaborative research group formed in 2002 at her initiative. It included two other researchers: Lisa Parks, a specialist in media history and usage, who would study the destruction of the former Yugoslav telephone system during the wars of the 1990s and its replacement by transnational cell-phone services; and Angela Melitopoulos, a video-maker who undertook to film the present reality and historical memory of the integrated road, rail, airport and telecommunications network extending from Salzburg to Thessaloniki under the name "Corridor X." Melitopoulos in her turn assembled the Timescapes group to work on different aspects of this immense corridor-planning project, including the VideA collective from Ankara, the filmmaker Freddy Vianellis from Athens, the artist Dragana Zarevac from Belgrade, and the German video-maker Hito Steyerl. Ginette Verstraete, a professor of contemporary intellectual history, accompanied the Transcultural Geographies project from the start, along with numerous other theorists and artists who contributed their ideas, images and texts by participating in one of the four project seminars held in Amsterdam, Ljubljana, Istanbul and Zurich. This research project gave rise to a precise and poetic exhibition, *The B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, curated by Anselm Franke at the Kunst-Werke in Berlin.¹³ The exhibition can be counted among the deepest and richest extradisciplinary projects as yet completed, though it is certainly not the only one.

The Pan-European Transport and Communication Corridor running through the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, filmed by the participants of the Timescapes



Timescapes: Angela Melitopoulos, Hito Steyerl, Angela Melitopoulos

group, results from a complex infrastructure-planning process carried out at the transnational level. This is a highly specialized and disciplined endeavor, at the cutting edge of contemporary technology, organized and managed by means of sophisticated private-public partnerships. Yet such precisely designed economic projects are at once inextricable from the conflicted memories of their historical precedents (the Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway and the Yugoslav Highway of Brotherhood and Unity), and immediately delivered over to the multiplicity of their uses, which include the staging of massive, self-organized protests in conscious resistance to the instrumentalization of daily life by the corridor-planning process. Human beings do not necessarily

¹³ For documentation of the works and all aspects of the project, see Anselm Franke (editor and curator), *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Berlin/Barcelona: Kunst-Werke/Actar, 2005). The exhibition was shown at the Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Dec. 15, 2005 – Feb. 26, 2006, and then again under a different form at the Tapiès Foundation in Barcelona, March 9 – May 6, 2007.

want to be the living “proof” of an economic thesis, carried out from above with powerful and sophisticated instruments – including media devices that distort the images of those human beings, and seek to manipulate their most intimate affects. An anonymous protester’s insistent sign, brandished in the face of the TV cameras at the demonstrations surrounding the 2003 EU summit in Thessaloniki, offers this analysis of the televised spectacle: ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS UNINTENTIONAL.

Art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets. But in the same movement, the streets have taken up their place in our critiques, and their energy has cracked open the modernist cube. In the philosophical essays that we included in the *Multitudes* project, *institution* and *constitution* always rhyme with *destitution*. The specific focus on extradisciplinary artistic practices does not mean radical politics has been forgotten, far from it. Today more than ever, any constructive investigation has to raise the standards of resistance.

POLITICAL TYPOGRAPHIES¹

Jean-Pierre Rehm

Let us leave aside questions of “content” for the moment. Not that such questions are not important: quite the contrary. But Ursula Biemann and Angela Melitopoulos create works – films, videos, files: projects, as we will be inclined to call them – with entirely explicit narratives. In fact, these are works driven principally by the very process of making explicit. (And “driven”, I insist, must be understood in this context as literally as possible, so great is the degree to which these works are manifestly a matter of mechanics, cogs and speed, the unleashing of time and space, of mobility, of automobiles and auto-mobility, whether experienced or invented.) Indeed, it is this explicitness, this certainty of the subject to be exposed, unfolded, repeated, illuminated, which provides these projects with their frame – their format. And what format is that? The one known, in the list of genres, as documentary cinema. And here is an initial paradox: their “undercover mission”, to borrow an expression used by the narrator in *Black Sea Files*, affords them in the first place less a focus than a form – not to say a uniform, in this case quite a civilian one, that of a secret agent hiding in plain daylight. Their films are thus in dialogue with a history of the documentary genre. Now, what are the rules of this genre, rules ordinarily so globally integrated, that would make the genre seem to these two artists the most appropriate form in which to carry out their investigations, to bring to light the truth, to respond to injustice? Because after all, to put it as concisely as possible, that is the spirit of all of these works, their most radical and most obvious starting point: a politics of justice. Without considering origins, a lengthy and complex undertaking impractical within the present

¹ This is a shortened version of the essay “Printed Voices”, by Jean-Pierre Rehm, published in *Tipografias políticas/Political Typographies* (Fundació Antoni Tàpies: Barcelona, 2007).

scope, and thus restricting our study to only the most widespread rhetoric – and our television screens as well as, although fewer in number, our cinemas² have more than familiarized us with it – what is this rhetoric telling us?

In reality there are two versions, ostensibly contradictory. The first tells us that the end justifies the means. For this version, all that counts is truth, and the label of “truth” is claimed successively for information, denunciation, laying bare, bringing to light, no matter the kind of striptease practiced or the crudity of the lighting. Its watchword is justice, which gets right to the point and snaps its fingers at art, authorizing the interchangeability of images and sounds, of framing, editing, and mixing – rhetoric updated to contemporary taste with the help of a recycled, breathless militancy, using methods borrowed from the reality show. It goes without saying that this “dust of images”, as Debord contemptuously calls it, in the service of an alleged clean-up is nothing other than one more piece of merchandise, groaning under a surplus ballast of pretty lightweight right-thinking ideology. And although it proclaims its most cherished demands and legitimizations at the top of its lungs, it never manages to touch its audience, no matter what it may say about itself (because otherwise some effect would inevitably be seen), much less its presumed targets.

The second version is more attached to nuances and aims to achieve a balance between cinema and its causes: a legitimate end demands appropriate means. But such an end, as well as its means, will remain a known quantity in this second version, ultimately always recognized. It has appropriated the world and its conflicts in advance, made them its “subjects”, as the professional jargon would have it, and it remains

2 And this too, if one was obliged to take the frames into consideration, would no doubt provide ample material for reflection, from the point of view of a museum exhibition as is here the case. To put it succinctly, how does one get from the television to the museum in the fewest steps possible? How does the television format, which has now clearly usurped the documentary form from its former domain in the cinema, get transposed into the art exhibition, still a symbolically and practically privileged site? It is well known that many works of art from the 1990s, and many still to this day, are structured around a “relationship with film”, which is to say, around the last form still capable of generating mythologies. What is more, they have essentially deployed categories inherited from the historical painting, such as narrative, character, actor: the ultimate configuration midway between the epic and the novel. At the same time, when it has entered into the world of art, television has been considered primarily for its Pop qualities, whether as a new and ambiguous sculptural form (Nam Jun Paik, Vostell, etc.), or as the possibility of a flattened stream of undifferentiated images (Warhol, etc.). Allowing the documentary format, which has been baptized, if not ultimately adopted, by television as its own child, to escape its unequivocal definition by ennobling itself in contact with artistic institutions (such as Catherine David’s *Dokumenta X* in 1997, which was sufficiently polemical in its advertisement of the anniversary) rather than by “going big” in cinemas raises more than simply technical questions. The size of the image, the indication (or lack of indication) of the end or the beginning of viewings, the spectator’s position a priori within the architecture of these places and their identification, all these have yet to be considered. Leaving aside the details once more, one of the matters at stake no doubt appears paradoxical: that a “minor” form, to borrow a Deleuzian category, insists on claiming that it is precisely that. In other words, that its entrance into the museum is neither a beatification nor an over-exposure but rather, in the elastic, plastic sense of the term, an extension and an enlargement. Such a logic cannot be induced, no matter how indirect the manner, from that of the ready-made (in its most reductionist interpretation: migration transfigures the migrating object), but instead and inversely obeys Paul Celan’s celebrated instruction to “take art with you, and enlarge it”. This migratory transition from a mass cultural space to Free Zones transforms these places and their objects alike. They effect a completely pragmatic oscillation from zones of sanctification to spheres of protection, and change into theaters of asylum. The “spectators” will have ample time to see for themselves just how closely linked this is with the subject of these various films.

familiar with its own tools as well. The twin keys to its method are putting a useful limit on the complexity of the issues broached, on the one hand, and advancing into a domesticated territory among images and sounds, on the other. Thus, for example, it knows how a body or a landscape appears within it, whatever they may be, and its framing and editing will distribute their components equitably, in identically smooth and insignificant parts. Furthermore, it knows how to connect two shots, and nothing, or almost nothing, will jar, or alienate, or exhibit an affinity with anything else.

Similarly, it also knows perfectly, indeed exemplarily, what it means to speak. And in any case, its interlocutors' framing and soundtrack will be infinitely repeatable. Because for this version, what is always at stake is the proof that being and word coincide. It needs to show that, while a word is perhaps nothing more than a residue amid alienation, this residue nevertheless remains inalienable. And that this coincidence in extremis between bodies and words is the confirmation that these speaking beings are free. This insistence on the synchronic fulfills a demand which is, one might say, very precise; it is supposed to reassure us at least of the fact that some harmony, a minimum of integrity, does exist. And what is that? The fact that the individual shares in belonging to itself. As a consequence, such delicate questions as those pertaining to translation, dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, and the sound level of voices are of course treated as trivial or excessively subtle. The whole range of kinds of silence – because that is what these various techniques for restoring or recording voices are for, that and nothing else, a way to represent silences – are eventually secondary. Or, to put it even more plainly, they offer the possibility of withdrawing what is portrayed into the very interior of the portrait itself, which makes necessary an entirely different way of conceiving of that celebrated “freedom of speech”, the enjoyment of which becomes less that of “expressing oneself” than of imprinting oneself, even if it means doing it in relief.

It is obvious that one could carry on indefinitely, given the infinite length of the list of technical decisions involved in the actual making of a film. At stake in this second version of the official documentary is the fact that the promise of the production of meaning is always made for what is filmed, which the film strives to accommodate as well as it can, without ever actually allowing the work of the film to be the echo of a disturbance, of a risk that could introduce a fatal gamble into conclusions made in advance.³

Why are these two versions not simply two variations of one single project? Because both of them, the one chilly with violent utilitarianism despite its naivety, the other polite, unarmed, benevolent, and yet just as authoritarian (and that is why the claim of authorship, a terribly impoverished notion in this case, is so often heard), rely on the same business. And what might that be? To put it brutally, it is a definition of human beings and of the world that claims to know their measure so as to enclose them within the limits of reason and familiarity. A definition, as we know, which has been justly criticized as humanistic. The charge sheet could be further expanded, out of loyalty to Pasolini's favorite anathemas, because such an ambition offers humanity nothing more than a reduced horizon, shrunk down to the only status known and assumed by the planetary petty bourgeoisie, that of owner of the universe, master of themselves.

3 As I have tried to do elsewhere, one could indicate the way a similar tempered staging obeys the violence of the trial principle. The distribution of roles, the assignment of places in front of the camera, the regulated order of the editing, the absolute necessity of synchronizing sound and image, all this – and all of it always without exception as an ensemble – leads ineluctably to a verdict, albeit unspoken, but already pronounced from on high.

And this is quite clearly the problem. Because what Angela Melitopoulos and Ursula Biemann have both decided to explore arises precisely out of immoderation, out of the unknown, or, to use a less sentimental and more rigorous term, out of an expropriation, an expropriation of beings, to begin (or to end) with; but also of things, of places and of functions, of countries and of laws, as well as, finally, of our opportunities for seeing them. At least these two artists have opted to take this circumstance for what it is, as the strict point of departure for their works. Neo-capitalism and its flows, geopolitics, exiles, deportations, poverty, alienated bodies, new landscapes, the illegibility or invisibility of financial interests and properly issued policies: all of this and more, for all that it adds up to as a whole (and whether it adds up to any whole at all is the question), cannot be so easily summed up, analysed, in a word: resolved.

Not that this means retreating to the ivory tower or into some dubious ambiguity, out of sheer laziness or aesthetic squeamishness. Once again, the narrator of *Black Sea Files* explains pacifically: “This is not an aesthetic project.” Nor does it mean giving up on the resolute quest for reason, convinced by the evidence of pseudo-mysteries, as Brecht demanded. On the contrary, the scrupulous patience of their maneuvers is token enough. The fact that we are required to acknowledge that a heretofore unseen complexity, or equally a more ancient complexity, is at work (as in *Passing Drama*, Angela Melitopoulos’s beautiful 1999 film⁴) demands that we take this complexity seriously as it wends its way, in all of its ramifications, its contradictions, in the intransigent reality which is precisely what renders its expulsive power effective. And that it bears its contradiction in the very heart of that which it claims to be embracing.

This is why the documentary frame here becomes the site of a twist. The temperance of the documentary is precisely what their respective works abuse, and against which, eventually, they rise up. But theirs is a tranquil revolution, since both treat the “documentary format” as a distant quotation, and use it with the ironic affection reserved for crumbling certitudes.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, it remains to say how this is done. An example will help make their methods clear, even if there is no doubt (and the critical project should not delude itself) that this example was intended to serve as a citation. Its manifest poetic charm, which it shares with the entire oeuvre, and its emphatically programmatic character make it seem to have been perforated around the edges to make it easier to cut out. It appears, furthermore, neither as an introduction nor as a conclusion, but in the midst of the images, even if one might attempt to say that it is still not particularly fortuitously placed. No matter how incongruous or futile they may seem in view of the intimidating issues, it is effects like these, tiny digressions from the tone of light irony, that begin to derail the plodding machine of belief. The extract in question, from file 4 of *Black Sea Files*, has already been referred to twice.

The sequence begins in a manner that could not be more conventional. A commentator speaks off camera in the same voice used throughout the entire work, in all the files as in the rest of the films. Her voice is the very embodiment of the neutrality,

4 This film, which is not included in this exhibition, is a quest for three-dimensionality, for the three-dimensionality of bodies, both those that are absent and merely evoked, and those that are present to our eyes, covered by the unflagging flatness of the surface of images. And it ends by granting to these very same flat images the favour of play within a three-dimensional space. Saving the landscape, understood in its generic sense, is what is essentially at stake here. There is here a great affinity with her project in *Timescapes*: to make not only mouths speak, but eyes and ears as well, in a utopia of the surface.

level-headedness, and rigor born of that anonymity purported to screen the guarantee of her objectivity. Speaking with particularly regular English diction – an attentive listener will however notice a foreign accent – this voice of impartial reason situates the shots and action visible on two adjacent screens. Close-ups and group shots are distributed on both the left and the right sides. And the narrative? By order of the Turkish government, with the aid of vicious armed police officers, Kurdish exiles are expelled from the paper recycling plants that had been providing them with an income. In return, the Kurds set fire to piles of paper, which release a thick black cloud of smoke. These are images of a civil war, waged by a small population, certainly, but whose visual brutality renders them instantly allegorical. Although the commentary does not mention it, the scandal here arises from the doubling of the scandal. Rellegated to the margins, these emigrants now find themselves expelled even from those margins. And then the commentator’s voice ceases. It is replaced, on the left-hand screen, by a Kurd standing directly in front of the camera and urgently shouting his explanation of the violence. In his eyes, it represents a retaliation on the part of the government in Ankara for their having voted “wrong”. There follows a threat, uttered before he runs off.

Next, the images of the Kurdish defeat return to the two screens, accompanied by the off-camera voice, which no longer situates and describes facts, but instead permits itself to provide a brief explanation linking this sequence to the rest of the files pertaining specifically to oil. “For them,” observes the voice, “paper is as valuable as oil is to others.” One might think that this excursus on the Kurds in file 4, justified as part of the initial project, is a “self-contained moment”. On the contrary: the digression suddenly takes on extra weight, becomes a gripping analogy, which serves as a transition to a situation as yet unseen in the preceding *Files*. For the first time, the two screens seem to be disconnected, each showing a site without any immediately obvious relation to the other. On the left there is a camera angle new to the project, a plunging view from above characteristic of an anti-naturalist vision that reveals, at a slightly oblique angle, part of a domestic interior. A woman’s head can be made out, her elbows on a table. Earphones on her head, she is facing three things: a microphone on a stand, a notebook (or a reading book, perhaps), and an ordinary tape recorder. Everything suggests that she is recording herself as she reads aloud from the text in front of her. But although the spectators see her working the buttons of the tape recorder now and then, and bending over the text and the microphone in turn, the overhead position of the camera prevents them seeing her lips move. It makes it still less possible to tell whether this image is in fact the source of the off-camera voice the spectators have now heard taking up its calm delivery once again.

But this is not simply a new space that appears here, intimate, with no geographic situation provided in contrast with the images in all of the other files. For if the images on the right in parallel projection continue to show shots of the Kurds being expelled, they now seem to match the commentator’s remarks, as if to illustrate them. Because the commentary has also changed in character. From having been a



Black Sea Files

description it has now become a meta-critique, analysing the conditions and reasons for the images shown thus far, and which continue to be shown. “What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go into the trenches?” asks the voice, and it goes on, objectifying at one and the same time the person who has created the images and the fatal moment of testimony: “How did it get to the point where *she* [my emphasis] stands at the front, next to the journalists, *at the very moment* [my emphasis] of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask? What kind of artistic practice does such a video document? That of an embedded artist immersed in a sort of human confusion and confrontation? How to resist making an image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol?” It is important to note that, precisely as the voice rejects the possibility of producing that instantaneous totality desired both by historical painting and by a journalism eager for legends, the image on the left changes. The camera axis has been modified, causing a jump cut. The female figure now turns her back to the camera. She has removed her headphones and is now contemplating the images on the narrow viewfinder of a handheld camera, images we cannot make out. The gesture is quite clear, all the more so for its accompaniment, on the right-hand screen, by a group of journalists, blinded as much by the smoke as by the cameras they bear on their shoulders.

Nevertheless, this critical feedback of the image, which turns against its own power to seek some sort of virginity in its newly rediscovered impotence, is certainly nothing new. Other celebrated artists (Resnais, Marker, Rouch, Godard, Farocki, Bittomsky, Kramer, to name but a few) have established its pedigree, at times at the risk of an almost Orphic emphasis. This is why the apparatus as we have briefly described it is so deliberately stressed: it is a displacement within a displacement, a quotation within a quotation. Not that the scruples expressed are not “authentic” – although they do shift the weight of the question onto the fraudulent game of authenticity, of “live” transmission. Not that similar questions do not run throughout all of the two artists’ films and projects, and affect the attitude of their entire oeuvre. All this is certainly true. The gist of the gesture here bears on something else, something infinitely more discreet: its placement within the succession of sequences. What is that placement? That which is offered by scenes of a sort of auto-da-fé. For what burns in this fourth file is obviously the place, the elements of the life or survival of a population ever more without hearth or home. And it is of course also the ancient signs, the black clouds of its indignation and the flames of its revolt. But what is consumed here is also, quite modestly (and this is said, shown, and analysed) – paper.

After a moment of silence, the voice declares: “Is an image made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives?” An examination of this kind, a fictional self-criticism placed at this point in the film’s progress, will not be satisfied with firing up old debates gone cold, poking at false oppositions between experience and knowledge, between action and reflection, between the immediate and the delayed, between the ordeal of risk and the comfort of study. It is not a matter, in short, of putting the opposition of image and text into perspective, but rather of overturning the opposition. Biemann and Melitopoulos both, each discreetly scandalous in her own way, propose that there is no opposition between image and text. One is the other, and vice versa. Let us be clear: this does not in any way amount to the primacy of the voice, as described above, as a sign of generic appropriation in the second version of the documentary format. It signifies first and foremost that image and text are similarly divided. That neither image nor text enjoys any integrity. Because one might say that the lesson of this Turkish sequence, at once so skillfully and so simply

organized, is this: the image of the burned paper must not be transcended, must not be forgotten (in the sense of losing one's head). To remain faithful to those who have been forgotten and on whose behalf it is testifying, it must be burned a second time. And how? By the analysis that extracts it, and refuses to make an image of this fire. How? By substituting another text, paper entirely new, reborn out of its ashes: a written text, displayed and spoken – without any simultaneity. And then shown again, because these are sentences that move past at great speed on the two screens which end the sequence just as the music swells, sentences that are virtually illegible because the joy that sustains the music carries them by *faster than the images*.

So it should now be all the more clear why the technique of the split screen is so recurrent in the work of Melitopoulos and Biemann. One could of course attempt to derive this use of the diptych from ancient pictorial practices – and one would not necessarily be wrong. One might also attempt a history of its use in cinema. Apart from the triple projection in Gance's *Napoléon* in 1926 (which Jean Vigo annihilated at one savage stroke, calling it “three times the size, three times the idiocy”), the split screen appears as a formal innovation in Hollywood when its scripts succumb to paranoid tendencies (*The Thomas Crown Affair* by Norman Jewison, significantly made in 1968, and then, later, virtually the signature of another great obsessional, in the work of Brian De Palma). It is easy to grasp what this technique serves to convey: a fantasy of control, an intensified return of the mark of Cain – everyone is guilty, and thus deserving of systematic surveyance. There is always another image, decrees the split screen, always an other of the image.

The horizon of guilt and the related horizon of generalized control are no strangers to the effect produced by the films presented here: the guilt of the incriminated, and, as we have just seen, to some extent the guilt of the secret agents and their files of images as well. Sticking to this proposition, however, would only translate and commend the vertigo of a fateful loop (as exemplified in the flat virtuosity of *Time Code* by Mike Figgis) against which the work of Biemann and Melitopoulos rebels, to say the least. What seems to interest them most in the split-screen technique, more than any paranoid symptom, is its manifest schizophrenia. *Contained Mobility* might be the singular illustration of this, given that it relates the schizophrenia at once geographic, linguistic and administrative to which an individual is *compelled*: imprisoned outside, incarcerated outside itself. To put it less clinically, what the image loses in the split-screen treatment is its solidity, its integrity, the illusion of its contemporaneity with itself.

What is the benefit of this? It allows voices to slide themselves in among the images. Unless the story has to be told the other way: that it is the meager power of the voices that has come to tear the theater curtain, that has forced itself in to divide the images, to peel them off, not at the point of editing between separate shots, but on the screen itself, *in view*. That the text, resonating through the voices, should come to make itself *visible* in the image itself, thus recalling their shared solidarity, their shared incandescent ability. This is why the use of subtitles, their very play of typographic size, speed, appearance and disappearance, is not in fact playful but, rather, driven by necessity. A necessity whose paradox arises from its manifestly playful manner, unattributable, always in flagrante delicto as it *performs the border*, to cite the title of a 1999 film.

So what trial have we actually experienced here? That of privileging particular printing systems over expressive resources. That of making visible the body of the text, a body buried under images, masked behind voiceless words, topographies turned typographies: that is the program sketched here, generously.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF VISION: THEORY OF IMAGES – IMAGES OF THEORY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF URSULA BIEMANN'S VIDEO WORK FOR A THEORY OF CULTURE

Jörg Huber

On August 2, 2007, a mini-submarine carrying Russian parliamentarians reached the North Pole and “raised” a Russian flag made of titanium at a depth of 4,261 meters below the surface of the ocean. The image of this symbolic gesture was distributed and shown around the world. The territorial claim it implies is part of a dispute pitting top politicians from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States, Canada, and Denmark against each other on the melting ice of the North Pole, arguing over their respective rights to waters still partly frozen. Global warming is opening up new prospects for transportation (an ice-free Northwest Passage) and the exploitation of natural resources (such as oil and gas). The dispute concerns waterways, and thus the international Law of the Sea Convention; at the same time, it is a *de facto* dispute over land, including the enormous underwater mountain range known as the Lomonosov Ridge.

On September 26, 2007, thousands of monks, students, members of opposition parties, and sympathizers took to the streets in Burma to protest the military junta and to call for freedom and democracy. While the military responded with ruthless brutality, the international political response was discreet and reserved. No one had any desire to jeopardize economic interests by taking a position. The black market and the traffic in human beings make a “peaceful border” vital to Thailand’s economy; meanwhile, India and China, two other neighbors of Burma, are interested in Burmese oil and gas reserves (which are also of some interest to Thailand as well), and China’s quest for access to the Bay of Bengal is a thorn in India’s side. What actually happened in Rangoon and other cities during those days in September is difficult to say, since information was compromised, internet connections closed, and images scarcely available. One image, however, did make it out of the country and was shown around the world: that of the execution of Japanese video journalist Kenji Nagai.

On October 6 the rightwing nationalist Swiss People's Party (SVP) planned to hold a propaganda event in Bern in the run-up to the national elections. An alliance of more than 50 organizations calling itself Black Sheep obstructed the march, and things escalated: there were skirmishes with police, property damage, and rioting. In an unusual move, the international media reported on Swiss domestic politics, focusing particularly on growing hostility to foreigners in Switzerland. The government was disturbed by the potential damage to the Swiss image, and had Presence Switzerland, its PR agency, implement counter-strategies. Founded in the late 1990s, the agency was originally intended as a response to Switzerland's diminished reputation in the wake of revelations of its connections with Nazi Germany. When conflicts become visible, they place "image" in danger. The product of branding known as "Switzerland" found itself struggling to gain control of the collective imagination in an era of geographic reconfiguration and increasing migration.

At the Interface of Occurrence and Imagination

This list of sites could be continued with a host of other examples. At the interface of actual occurrences and imagination, politics and the political are often grounded in territories and geography, in and by means of which they are bound up with economic factors, and effectively balance social relations. It is frequently difficult to interrogate these inflections so as to discern how they actually function, what is cause and what is effect. Political theory must therefore always also be a theory of geopolitics. Particularly at present, such a theory must take into account the fact that every political and social situation draws its form and significance from its global integration as well as from its local and regional particularities. This sort of geopolitical conditioning of social situations poses a challenge to cultural theory, not least because it presents problems of representation, and thus raises the question of how each situation is to be observed, described, and understood. This is a matter of media communication and representation, a question of sights and insights. Michel Foucault has taught us that the visibility of a given epoch constitutes a cultural apparatus with its own political causes and effects. What and how we are able to see today is an effect of power relations. The organization of vision and knowledge is contingent upon the organization of ways of living, and often arises as a specific practice of spatialization. As a strategy of a political culture it effectively shapes culture as conventionally understood. Furthermore, it is rooted in material practice, in institutions, places, machines, and equipment. A critique of political culture by way of an analysis of geopolitical relations, then, can be elaborated within the framework of a theory of aesthetics, as an aesthetic practice itself. As a critique of the dominant means of representation and interpretation, it focuses on the information industry. It insists upon the distinction between "information" and critical "knowledge", and thus upon the significance of aesthetic experience. It will not restrict itself to analyses of contingencies developed in language, but will instead open itself within, and into, work with images that can be pursued as an artistic practice, as the deconstruction and defiance of prevailing methods – with the very same media and different processes and intentions.

At the Institute for Theory (*ith*) we are at work on a theory of culture centered on questions of an aesthetic theory. At stake is the meaning of perception and aesthetic experience in the investigation and production of realities: aesthetic practice as an ensemble of specific ways of generating knowledge, and the peculiarity of the senses in

the production of significance. That is to say, what is at stake is also a critique of the prevailing practices of representation as well as the modes of organizing their logic of argumentation – a critique, in other words, that does not seek to trump or to know better, that not only fields other arguments but in fact draws a bead on the fielding of arguments in general. In the context of a critique of rationalism and hermeneutics, we inquire into the meaning of non-comprehension as comprehension suspended, and thus into other means of comprehension; into the potential relevance of contingency as a figure for a third option between necessity and chance; into the role of the imaginary in the construction of individual and collective identities; and into transgressions facilitated by the aesthetic experience of a critical practice.¹ These are questions that cannot be treated with the usual utensils of scientific rationalism, but require new and idiosyncratic procedures and the use of a variety of media that would cast doubt on the customary borders drawn between the disciplines and the genres of academic and cultural practice. These questions amount to a scrutiny of the self-understanding of the agent as author of an instance of criticism.

Work on a theory of culture that focuses on the political is based on four assumptions: that the given conditions of media information are not sufficient to afford a critical analysis and representation of relations; that the crucial aspects of mediation – think: a critique of representation – are often overlooked by the academic study of political realities; that the established definitions and distinctions of the cognitive terrain prevent artistic and academic work from effectively interacting; and that the significance of the (self-)positioning of the participants is elided, along with their subjective empirical context. So it is not surprising that a theory of culture which claims to contribute to a critique of political culture as aesthetic theory often elicits a feeling of alienation, just as an artistic practice that manifests and profiles itself in this same theoretical context continues to trigger alienation. It is against this backdrop that the work of Ursula Biemann has enjoyed such significance these past few years, for us as well, since that work is constantly trying its hand at practicing such a theory of culture, and thus at producing and conveying key experiences. In what follows I would like to discuss some of the aspects of Biemann’s work that make it interesting and necessary for the elaboration of theory.

Geographic and Historical Positionality, and the Aesthetic Situation

One of the fundamental problems in the conception and realization of any theory or theoretical research project arises because of the question of the particular “disposition” and assessment of its inception. Whence, *from where*, is one to set out? How does one select the point of departure, and how does one position oneself there? Ursula Biemann begins with two complementary orientations. She selects a region, a place, a topographical context: a geography of (geo)political interest – border areas and transit routes as transitional zones and passages for economic projects, for tourism, the black market, migration, the traffic in women. At the same time, she selects an occurrence of historical significance, a moment of the transformation of a certain geography. Examples include the area between Azerbaijan and the Mediterranean as the corridor for a planned pipeline that will alter landscapes, force people to move, and destroy traditions (*Black Sea Files*); the Sahara as a space of various kinds of crossings and

¹ See also the T:G series, “Kultur Nicht Verstehen” (2005), “Ästhetik der Kritik” (2006), “Kontingenz-Gestalten” (2007), all published by *ith*.

that is, his or her own positioning, the possibilities of a first-person narrative in the perception and recognition of others in their otherness, as well as the opportunities afforded by others in their articulation.

Such a premise could be described as an aesthetic situation, and the protagonists of the project as aestheticians, analogous to cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme's sketch: "In the majority of situations, indeed, perhaps in all situations, social meaning emerges in aesthetic appearance, and then only insofar as the latter encodes the former. One can only remove social meaning from the aesthetic at the cost of embalming it as mere information. That would be sociology. Aestheticians, on the contrary, are vivisectionists. This makes them shady characters, but it is also their trump card. They are always concerned with specific cases, they linger over them; and yet they are never entirely *there*. They are necessarily present, and yet peculiarly removed from the present. They are closer to phenomena than scientists are, which is why all of their discoveries bear the marks of their subjectivity (which they do not deny, but reflect)."⁴ Sensory skill and reflection are here interconnected. The specific case sensitizes the protagonist to the performativities of a sensory event, one that is constituted in part by a given situation: actions, gestures, affects and emotions, colors and scents, sounds and noises, people, animals, landscapes, things, atmospheres. An occurrence that happens unexpectedly, that cannot be calculated or completely understood, something that befalls one, like a visitation, often overwhelming – if one allows oneself to be exposed to it: off-road geographies, *jungles* rather than the pre-ordained order of things, *terrain vague* – as Anselm Franke puts it in his preface to *B-Zone*⁵; an occurrence that concerns embodied, affective experience, and thus makes an affective experience possible – in moments of perception, often not capable of verbal representation, but which open a space for images. Work with photography and video/film is committed to the goal of not dismissing the occurrence of an aesthetic situation as simply "pre-rational" and "subjective". On the contrary, the goal is to give the aesthetic situation the space needed for precisely such an occurrence, along with the attendant affective experience.

Aesthetic Experience as Open-ended Cognition

Images exist in a realm beyond prescribed logics and arise out of an attention that is often not focused, but rather floating, open, passive. This opening up to experience corresponds to a receptivity that allows (aesthetic) experience to be an occurrence as well: the occurrence and the admission of the other, who also continually withdraws and resists control in his or her very otherness; the production of a familiarity that does not eliminate alienation, but instead preserves it intact. Aesthetic experience and sensory perception generate a temporary, necessarily open-ended cognition, one which tolerates the polyphony of various manifestations and representations and operates with images that, as spaces of suggestion and uncertainty, of appearance and vanishing, of threshold and transition, *place* the seal of approval on this epistemology of experience/occurrence. This "attitude" corresponds to the situation at the outset, which under the gaze and the sensibility of the protagonist turns out to be a situation and a space of movements, of transitions, of the temporary and uncertain.

4 Hartmut Böhme, "Einführung in die Ästhetik," in *Paragrana* vol. 4, no. 1 (Berlin, 1995), 243.

5 Anselm Franke, "Introduction", in *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Barcelona/Berlin: Actar/Kunst-Werke, 2005), 6.

“The charting of space coincides with the charting of knowledge about a subject that is dynamic and fluid. The geographies that are generated in the process, and I mean both the migratory and videographic ones, are likewise spaces of fluidity, relationality and multiplicity.”⁶ Biemann insists on the significance of this multi-layeredness: the kaleidoscope of relations, conversations, statements, impressions, perceptions, in which and out of which the construction of an authorial position must proceed; the significance of the poly-perspectivism, too, that combines various ways of observing (one’s own position as well as that of the others, and their mutual contingency), conversations and interviews, materials found or derived from questioning, analyses of historical and simulated situations, and the theoretical reflection that is the premise for political critique). It is clear that positionality is not determined this way in isolation, but rather in a mood of egalitarian impartiality as regards the others who are doing the same, who are also en route and on site, and who also manifest and inscribe themselves in the situation and in the geography. Depending on the particular situation, these may be tourists, media workers, members of the military, terrorists, resistance fighters, employees of international enterprises, humanitarian personnel, migrants, nomads, residents, or natives. Böhme notes the opportunity afforded by the fact that the aesthetic does not require stable order and clear relations, and stresses the similarity of this opportunity to that enjoyed by the traveler. At the same time, this does not mean giving oneself over to the affective event and losing oneself in it, the way the traveler can lose sight of herself and the others as she passes by. Aesthetic experience demands the connection of sensory cognition and reflection of positionality. “The analysis of complex aesthetic situations shows”, Böhme writes, “that the aesthetic phenomenon is constituted in the first place in a fluid and integrative process of perception and reflections, of knowing and remembering, of imagination and association, of sensed atmospheres and analytic insights, of projective relinquishments and introjective internalizations.”⁷ It is important that the work performed by the theory of culture, and the artistic practice as one of its possible processes, neither install any hierarchies nor practice any censorship during these proceedings – which describes the premise for what Biemann calls the dynamics of her work, consisting as it does in the development of a counter-geography, against the master narrative, the prevailing order and perspective. This counter-geography occurs as a reconfiguration in the field of representation, and faces the challenge of organizing the material.

Biemann’s work moves on these two levels of a critical encounter with the media: on the one hand by working with images that provide the space for the abovementioned dimensions of sensory experience, not utterly subordinated to an intentionalist logic; and on the other hand by working with images (and texts) that reveal and reflect the specific aesthetics and the epistemological quality of images and visualities. One could describe this doubleness as a feature of essay-writing,⁸ since the material is at one and the same time present in an unmediated way and, on a second level, adduced for observation and reflected upon. That said, they should not be understood as mutually opposing levels. Intentionality and non-intentionality intersect chiastically, manifesting their mutual surplus and respective specific latencies. This practice of mutual exposure by means of wholehearted deployment makes possible an actual and effective counter-position to the way in which the official business of politics and eco-

6 Biemann, “Agadez Chronicle,” 47.

7 Böhme, 246.

8 *Ursula Biemann (ed.), Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zürich/Vienna: Edition Voldemeer/Springer-Verlag, 2003).

nomics, the academy, and of the media goes about dealing with and representing geopolitics. The officially communicated reality is always given the appearance of a smooth surface; contradictions and paradoxes are either elided or factored in as the necessary evil of a “difficult” time. It appears to be autonomous, and is taken for granted. Occurrence is fragmented, singular processes are stylized as “events” – *facts* and *events* in place of what is actually going on. Peering behind these scenes calls for other measures and procedures, other ways of seeing, and other fields of vision. A counter-geography demands other regimes of vision. Accordingly, Biemann selects various research and “recording” procedures, as well as various medialities and forms/strategies of presentation. A video, for instance, can be sub-divided into “logs”, “files”, or chapters. And it can be presented in different venues and in a variety of contexts: together with books, in exhibitions, as an element in an installation, projected on the wall or on multiple screens, and so forth. As for context, that may be provided by an art exhibition, an academic symposium, a university classroom situation, or an intervention in a public space. Here too, the possibilities are open-ended, to be discovered and/or invented over and over again in relation to the particularities of each piece.

Images of various kinds and origins are used in the various videos, including footage or photographs created by Biemann herself, staged and coincidental pictures, found material from a range of sources, video, photography, and graphic work of all kinds. The images are then arranged in a montage within the discursive context of the work, so that their various aesthetic and media qualities as well as the traces of their origin and use are made plain. Discursive montages of contrasts alternate with the simultaneous presence of various images by way of screen-splitting; images also appear in their absence, in cases where they could not be produced, or their production was prohibited, or they were confiscated, and they are confronted with and accompanied by language and text: commentary, statements, stories, analyses, statistics. By way of such inter-media associations and overlaps, various ways of reading, as well as the interests correlated with them, are highlighted and exposed.



Remote Sensing, Contained Mobility, X-Mission

Generating Illegibility

The crucial point is that, in the course of these processes, text and image serve not only to render situations and occurrences – the world – legible, but also to make each other, and thus the world, illegible. While the information society believes and claims that everything – the world – is legible, and is thus available and capable of being appropriated, the counter-position insists upon the illegibility of the world as it continually flares up, upon its recurrent non-availability, that is, on a representational form that recognizes the radical alienation of the foreign in the familiar. Legibility always pretends that everything is clear, decipherable, something to be apprehended – ultimately a gesture of disempowerment; while illegibility insists on astonishment, alienation, on the recognition that the world is constantly withdrawn and unavailable. This does not mean that one does not seek knowledge, and must for instance analyse

the political circumstances; it means, rather, that aperçus are always only provisional, discursive, situative, and not – as the official opinion and the view from on high would have it – definitive and final. Illegibility is produced in use: for example, by means of abduction (assumptions, sketches, trials), in the simultaneity of various images (screen splitting), in the use of poetic images, in the significance of moods, in the experience of not being able to say something, in stammering – procedures condemned by hardcore journalism, for instance.

This simultaneity and equivalence of appropriation and withdrawal corresponds to a form of indifference of art, as recognized by Jacques Rancière as the sign of precisely that sort of art which is said to be *engagé*, an art of (political) commitment. “A critical art must in its way be an art of indifference, an art that determines the point at which knowledge and ignorance, activity and passivity are equivalent.”⁹ Such an artistic practice reacts to situations and occurrences that are ambiguous, and produces an intermediate level between theoretical discourse, academic field work, and artistic production. Such work cannot be resolved, in the name of achieving certainty and orientation, in a direction that promises formalized knowledge. At the same time, it does not mean, as is often claimed, that this involves mixing media and genres and methods at will. Inter- or trans-disciplinarity means that theoretical reflection, scientific observation, and aesthetic artistic practice must be distinguished, and that each of those activities demands its own specific kind of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they must be brought into relation in a new way in each separate project, mediated by the principal actors and/or the professionals participating in the project, as well as those to whom the project is addressed. In this sense, a work such as Biemann develops and exhibits is also the practice of visual and media criticism as well as an element of a critical discourse about the relationship of theory, art, and politics. This is the point at which her artistic practice dovetails with the practice of a theory of culture, in making a claim on criticism that depends on the question of how criticism can occur. In conclusion I would like to formulate five theses.

1. As a process and a measure, criticism should not be understood from the certainty of distance, but rather from involvement in a situation; not as a process of clarification, but rather of opening, of interruption, of bewilderment.
2. Criticism does not solve crises, it provokes them (with an eye perhaps to eventually finding a way out of them).
3. What criticism “is” arises out of a relation to what occasions it, that is, to the experience that motivates the critic.
4. Criticism that wishes to prove it is critical must examine its possibilities, the sense of possibility as well as the possibilities of the subject of critique.
5. Criticism as an occurrence essentially has something to do with perception, sensibility, configuration, mediality – with aesthetics.

This apparatus points to the site of criticism, which is no longer (institutionally and methodically) determined, but can arise anywhere and in a variety of constellations, and can be determined anew at any time by a variety of agents. Ursula Biemann’s aesthetic-artistic practice, as a theory-practice, is in this sense a form of criticism.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, “Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien,” in Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen* (b books Verlag: Berlin 2006), 87.

SAHARA CHRONICLE: VIDEO'S MIGRANT GEOGRAPHY

T.J. Demos

In “Oujda Frontierland”, one of twelve videos that comprise *Sahara Chronicle* 2006–07, we follow a group of Moroccan police patrolling their country’s western border with Algeria as they check desert locations known for migrant activity. These guards are in charge of stemming the tide of sub-Saharan Africans coming north with the intention of finding a better life in Morocco or further on in Europe. This time, the guards come across nothing in particular, even though they are aware that migrants are always in their midst, hiding and waiting for the right moment to cross the border. In the course of conducting their operations, a sand storm rises, bringing with it the loss of geographical markers and spatial orientation. A visual blindness ensues that is at once reflective of Saharan weather conditions and allegorical in that it symbolizes the struggle between mobility and the politics of containment that is Ursula Biemann’s object of inquiry. As the camera’s perception of the desert is denied, the storm dramatizes the breakdown of the advanced technologies of surveillance and the Moroccan police’s inability to maintain its country’s national integrity. What happens to the concept of a geographical border when the land itself moves? Containment becomes an impossible task, and the contours of the nation as a locus of economic, linguistic, and legal identity begin to blur. In its place a vague terrain emerges that is the space of the migrant.

It is this migrant geography – composed of shifting terrains, fluid borders, and mobile passages – that *Sahara Chronicle* reveals via a sequence of twelve short videos, each between three and thirteen minutes in length. The project represents a further step in Biemann’s quasi-ethnographic video-based practice, which, drawing on exten-



Sahara Chronicle

sive fieldwork, investigative research, and on-site interviews, has examined several different but structurally related border-zone geographies to date. *Performing the Border* (1999), considers the exploitation of female labor in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez. *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Writing Desire* (2002) both investigate the post-Cold War's marketplace of desire surrounding the transnational sexual commodification of women over the Internet. *Europlex* (2003), examines the informal practices of domestic labor and smuggling activities that occur over the Moroccan-Spanish border. *Black Sea Files* (2005), explores the Caspian multinational oil industry and its political and social effects on the surrounding Caucasus area. What joins these projects in defining a consistent practice is the rigorous and varied approach to documenting real conditions in transitional social-economic areas, and a complex relation to representation that exceeds the protocols of traditional documentary conventions.



Sahara Chronicle

These two tendencies equally mark *Sahara Chronicle*. Over the course of the seventy-six minute video – although it is typically displayed as simultaneously playing component sections – we follow Biemann’s camera as it offers diverse accounts of the experienced conditions of migration. We see footage of the transit business in Agadez, Niger, where migrants purchase tickets for their overland journeys north, eventually setting out into the desert on trucks overloaded with bags that will take them to Algeria or Libya (Desert Truck Terminal). We watch shots of the cargo trains that carry iron ore to Western Mauritania’s coast, which serves as a vector of passage to Spain’s Canary Islands (Iron Ore Train). We also view aerial footage of precarious desert camps surrounded by sand dunes, where travelers lay low before making their border crossings (Architectures of Mobility). To tell these stories, Biemann deploys a diversity of representational strategies and presents a variety of perspectives, including interviews conducted by the artist with transportation providers in Agadez (Desert Truck Terminal); footage that simulates the imagery of surveillance aircraft equipped with night-vision and thermal cameras, which track movement near the Libyan-Niger border (“Desert Radio Drone”); and documentation of a prison in Laayoune, Morocco where unsuccessful migrants end up before being bussed off to their countries of origin empty-handed, only to start the journey anew (Deportation Prison Laayoune). In this last passage we hear the personal stories told by several migrants, all young men who were intercepted in the Sahara: one from Senegal saved his money for three years to come up with the four hundred Euros needed for travel expenses, only to lose it in his failed attempt to get to Morocco; another left Niger because he couldn’t find a job and thus felt socially excluded, unable to marry; a man from Nigeria claims Moroccans typically rob immigrants, treating them as if they aren’t human beings. These are no doubt typical stories, picked out seemingly randomly from the crowd of men in this camp, one of many such places found increasingly across North Africa and Southern Europe. Yet while their tales may be heart-wrenching, *Sahara Chronicle* is far from pessimistic: in fact the video remains ever hopeful in its attempts to offer a positive account of migration that extends a sense of organization, determination, and agency to its subjects.

As Biemann makes clear, *Sahara Chronicle* is motivated by the desire to challenge the representational conditions of clandestine migration. As is common knowledge, over the last decade thousands of migrants have died of exposure in the desert or have drowned in the Mediterranean, all because they have sought to challenge increasingly restrictive African and European travel regulations, which help to maintain a global system of economic and political inequality. Belying the neo-liberal rhetoric of globalization that continues to vaunt the liberties of personal freedom, the reality of inequality could not be greater than when the mass media advertises cheap travel and simultaneously runs stories about the tragic fate of refugees trying unsuccessfully to gain passage to Europe. For Biemann, the goal is not so much to supplement or correct the mass media's conventional picture by providing her own claim to "truth," but rather to intervene in prevailing perceptions of the situation of migration, as she writes: "to present an empowered vision of organized migration in which geopolitics is not strictly reserved to powerful nations who wish to dominate a region for its resources, but instead is a strategy that can equally apply to a large movement of exiles or work migrants who target another territory for more economic plenitude." For her, this is a way "to turn a stigma into an enabling force" – even while she remains quite realistic about the political effectiveness of her individual practice.¹

As if by necessity, Biemann's work emerges out of a critical relationship to mass media reportage, which, as she explains, either fails completely to cover Saharan migration or when it does tends to reduce it to sensationalist images corresponding to an easily consumable repertoire of stories.² Going beyond these reductive approaches, Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle* acts as a "diagram" of the geopolitical reality of North African migration – that is, a function that joins different regimes of signs into a heterogeneous assemblage: *Sahara Chronicle* links everyday life with colonial history, legal structures with economic facts, the politics of containment with the will toward mobility.³ Yet without over-arching narrative or authoritative voice-over, the video distinguishes itself from the rhetoric of authority and the claims of truthfulness that characterize official and media-based representations, even if in some ways *Sahara Chronicle* bears comparison to the mixed-media platforms of television news broadcasts, such as Al Jazeera, and the heterogeneous structure of the multiple-imaged web page. The piece's installation extends this experimental mode of address, showing its video sections according to a variable configuration, split between projections and monitors (for instance in recent shows at Arnolfini in Bristol or Bildmuseet in Umeå, Biemann has projected some of the videos and played others on monitors). By looping sections of variable length that play simultaneously, the diagram of connections is always shifting, promoting a continually renewed set of narrative directions that is

1 Ursula Biemann, "Agadez Chronicle: Post-Colonial Politics of Space and Mobility in the Sahara," in *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), 67. The Maghreb Connection represented a collaborative art and visual research project on North African migration, including an exhibition of videos at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo and the *Centre d'Art Contemporain Geneva*, which Biemann organized.

2 Biemann also explains that "I do see the necessity to liberate the trans-Saharan migration from its hypnotizing media mantra of captured boat people or victims of a grim trafficking business. The media seem to surrender to every temptation of reducing reality and condensing it into a symbol, thrusting the whole issue into discursive disrepair." "Agadez Chronicle," 45.

3 I borrow the concept of the diagram from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion of it in *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 145-46.

at once transformative of conventions and generative of new possibilities. Spatialized and dispersed, *Sahara Chronicle* defines a heterogeneous space, allowing the viewer to enter at any point and create his or her own linkages between the diverse elements.

In so doing, *Sahara Chronicle* forms an unexpected space where the stratifications of digital video translate the heterogeneous geopolitical space of the Sahara. This correspondence is far from an unwitting coincidence, as, for Biemann, geography designates “a signifying system that allows us to grasp the relations between subject, movement and space,”⁴ a definition that also characterizes her video-essay. Nor is this relationship between video and geography a simple mimicry; Biemann’s video disconnects from the conventional system of reporting in which the sign forms reality’s substitute, which is the presumption of media’s “truth” telling. Conversely, for Biemann, the event of the sand storm dramatizes how *Sahara Chronicle* confronts the opacity of the desert and its inhabitants, visualizing reality’s resistance to representation. The tumultuous weather not only derails the border guards, but also Biemann’s own camera, and in this seemingly insignificant but telling detail we witness as well a confrontation with the limits of the documentary approach. In its place, *Sahara Chronicle* re-invents the relation between video’s politics of representation and its space of reception, one that differs radically from conventional media images of migration. While *Sahara Chronicle*’s heterogeneous and spatialized structure mirrors the fluidity and infinite complexity of its subject, it moves beyond the simple equivalence between sign and image. Here the goal is not the truthful depiction of an already existing subject, but rather the construction of a system of possibility that remains open, realizable in a multiplicity of ways by the viewer. In this way, *Sahara Chronicle* generates a transformative experience by extending the dislocating forces of migration into a mode of reception that shifts perspectives and thereby creates its political effect.

Biemann’s chosen term for her work is the “video essay,” which suggests a category that joins images and writing, but also, more complexly, images as a form of writing and writing a mode of images. As a result, the image is denaturalized as much as language is materialized, both requiring a subtle and considered approach. The essay form emphasizes video’s discursive condition, one that is composite and that overcomes positing the image as either documentary or aesthetic. Rather, it’s indissolubly both, which is clear in those passages in *Sahara Chronicle* that provide information but also offer allegorical interpretations, as well as in shots that join to express the video’s development over time, placing documentary elements into subjectively organized passages. As such, Biemann’s work advances a new kind of video practice, which, emerging over the last fifteen years or so, shares certain of its concerns with the work of likeminded practitioners of the video-essay, including Harun Farocki, Amar Kanwar, Hito Steyerl, and the Otolith Group.⁵ What marks this development is the tendency to link documentary functions to imaginative scenarios, in order to both retain video’s representational relation to social reality and nuance its meanings via carefully

4 Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, “Introduction,” *The Maghreb Connection*, 7.

5 Also relevant are the critical mapping practices of Bureau d’étude, Frontera Sur RRV, Macrolab, Multiplicity, and Raqs Media Collective, which were included in *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, an exhibition Biemann organized for Vienna’s Generali Foundation in 2003, including an eponymous catalogue. See Biemann (ed.), *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* (Köln: Generali Foundation, Wien: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003).

elaborated constructions.⁶ What results is a new mode of address that replaces the stultifying conventions of truth-telling with the transformative capacity of representation to shift perspectives and invite collaborative and creative interpretation.

While it's true that within this grouping of artists Biemann's project may stand the closest to an activist modeling of video, equally evident is that her work resists adopting the claims of transparency, objectivity, and truth that have marked socially-engaged documentary practice. Rather, as her careful and theorized use of the term video-essay makes apparent, Biemann takes her video's representations to be heterogeneous and internally divided, unfolding according to spatially and temporally determined montage: the video-essay is "dissociative, multi-perspective and hypertextual in the structuring of images and sounds," she explains.⁷ Her highly mediated videos follow suit and are thus characterized by texts streaming over images sourced from a variety of origins, including maps, appropriated footage from official sources, and her own raw live-action recordings. Her video-essays thereby pull apart the ostensible naturalness of the image, refusing any assumption of its bearing a direct or transparent connection to reality, and likewise, any presumption of its possessing an immanent meaning.

In this regard, Biemann's model of the video-essay is not unlike the more established one of the film-essay, even while the two forms must also be differentiated, for the use of digital technology recalibrates film's relation to representation. While the film-essay's heterogeneous structure emphasizes representational mediation over the direct transcription of reality, the video-essay might be thought to banish the real even further from its images, especially when it comes to animation and special effects constructed fully by computerized technology. As has often been remarked, recent video signals a crisis of the real because it severs analogue photography's indexical relation between sign and referent by translating the image into digital code, thus preparing it for easy future processing. Yet this does not mean that digital video is condemned to mere artifice. Predictions of the eclipse of reality by simulation – as in Baudrillard's famous remarks about the death of the real – are doubtlessly overstated, for digital video continues to offer automatic recordings of the visual field, forming images capable still of functioning as evidence in legal contexts, documents in historical archives, or actionable data in military reconnaissance. Indeed, *Sahara Chronicle* includes aerial footage of the Sahara that is similar to that used by the Libyan military precisely in this way. Creating "dissociative, multi-perspectival and hypertextual" videos, Biemann has nevertheless exploited digital technology. Working in the digital format since *Performing the Border* (recorded in hi8 video), she employs numerous digital postproduction procedures – such as her use of split screen displays and composite images, subtitling, and stop-action and slow-motion functions - which hybridize her videos, including *Sahara Chronicle*, by situating documentary footage

6 There is a growing literature in this area. Exemplary contributions include: David Joselit, "Inside the Light Cube: Pierre Huyghe's *Streamside Day Follies* and the Rise of Video Projection," *Artforum* (March 2004); and Tom McDonough, "No Ghost," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 107-130. I have also written on this issue in several essays, including "Life Full of Holes," *Grey Room*, no. 24 (Fall 2006), 72-88, "Openings: The Otolith Group," *Artforum* (September 2006), 360-62, and "Out of Beirut," *Artforum* (October 2006), 234-38.

7 Ursula Biemann, "The Video Essay in the Digital Age," in Biemann, ed., *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zürich: Institute for Theory of Art and Design, 2003), 9. An extension of this hybridity is the multidisciplinary nature of Biemann's engagement, as she sees the video-essay's "strength" as lying "in the quality of the mediator and communicator between differential cultural spaces."

in highly artificial digital environments. Yet Biemann's reliance on documentary elements and strategies – including the use of a hand-held camera that mimics everyday perception, the integration of unprocessed live-action imagery of real people and places, and captions that pin visual images to specific geographical and historical locations – clearly serves to maintain the connection of her videos to the ground of social reality. In fact, the clear division between digital video and film may be a false one (as is evident in Biemann's case), since montage and processing strategies have frequently rendered film an artificial construction in the past, particularly in avant-garde practice. To view the video-essay as newly artificial presupposes – falsely – that the real was once, un-problematically, available to film.⁸

Rather than reinforcing a rupture between different technological platforms, whether between film and video, or electronic and digital video, Biemann's use of the video-essay defines a line of continuity with the essay film. It is thus not surprising that she references Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, 1983, as an important precedent for her work. Marker's film-essays, including *Grin Without a Cat*, 1977, similarly assemble a mixed array of documentary imagery and places them in relation to highly poetic, subjective, and analytical voice-overs. These techniques prefigure Biemann's own work, even if her video-essays exchange Marker's meditative, elegiac style for more of an activist engagement.⁹ The film-essay similarly constitutes a hybrid form, mixing writing and images, and frequently fiction and documentary elements. As Nora Alter points out in her study of Marker's work, the term "film essay" was used first in 1940 by Hans Richter in a short text "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film," in which Richter wrote about how this new form allows one to make "problems, thoughts, even ideas" perceptible in a way that conventional film could not. André Bazin also employed the term, using it later in relation to Marker's work to identify its composite filmic mode that is simultaneously historical and political, documentary and poetic. For Alter, the film-essay is inherently diverse in its discursive positioning, potentially combining autobiography, history, social commentary, critical exegesis, epistolary form, anecdotal digression, and self-reflexive elements.¹⁰

But one can go even further than this analysis, which separates the film-essay from film proper. As Jacques Rancière argues, the film-essay makes apparent the very condition of film, as it brings out film's fundamental dual tendency: to capture luminous traces of matter in movement, and to arrange those elements into a sequence over time. This unification of a machine account of the visual world with its subjective arrangement results in "documentary fiction," which, however, does not mean the end result is purely imaginary. Rather, Rancière retrieves the old Latin meaning of fiction – *ingere* – meaning "to forge" rather than "to feign," in order to reclaim fiction's original productive function. Accordingly, fiction aligns with documentation, which comes close to describing the character of the film-essay: "Fiction means using the means of art to construct a 'system' of represented actions, assembled forms, and in-

8 Cf. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (London: MIT, 2002), 307-08: "The mutability of digital data impairs the value of cinema recordings as documents of reality. In retrospect, we can see that twentieth-century cinema's regime of visual realism, the result of automatically recording of visual reality [based on live-action footage], was only an exception, an isolated accident in the history of visual representation, which has always involved, and now again involves, the manual construction of images."

9 Biemann indicates her debt to Marker's "post-structuralist cinematographic practice" in her introductory essay in *Stuff It*, 8.

10 Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 17-20.

ternally coherent signs,” writes Rancière.¹¹ Similarly for Biemann, “the essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.”¹² Rather than pursuing “the representability of truth,” “[t]he essayist intention lies much rather in a reflection on the world and the social order,” Biemann notes, “and it does so by arranging the material into a particular field of connections.” By emphasizing the subjective rendering of social reality, the video-essay thus proposes an “imaginary space,” an “artificial construct,” built on documentary elements, which approximates Rancière’s notion of “documentary fiction.”¹³ The result brings about a critical reversal of the conventional opposition between documentary and fictional film, as Rancière explains: “The real difference between them isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood.”¹⁴ But what would it mean to build a documentary practice that does not treat the real as a fact to be understood, but as an effect to be produced? It would mean that the documentary would “forge” new stories – Rancière calls them “film fables” – by reconstructing reality, directing its power of affect to alter perspectives, build memories, and create modes of identifications not experienced before in representation. It would mean defining documentary’s ambition as not only the representation but constitution of reality, inspiring belief in the world of its own constructions. This is, in my view, the ambitious achievement of Biemann’s video practice.

Toward its middle, *Sahara Chronicle* presents a video interview with a man identified as Adawa, an ex-rebel Tuareg based in Niger. Wearing indigo colored robes and mirrored sunglasses, he is portrayed sitting against red earthen walls, forming a striking image split between tradition and modernization as he relays stories about his people and their difficult geopolitical circumstances. The traditionally nomadic Tuareg, we learn, have historically lived without clear boundaries in the expansive Sahara region, which came to be divided by European colonial powers during the late nineteenth century into the nations of Chad, Niger, Libya, Algeria, and Mali.¹⁵ To this day, however, there is virtually no organization between those countries – at least when it comes to the Tuareg – and none of the countries have consequently integrated the Tuareg into its national fold, explains Adawa in French, whose account is supplemented with additional information that scrolls intermittently across the screen during the interview. Although the Tuareg are nominally recognized by Niger, they accrue none of the rights or benefits of citizenship from that country or from any of the surrounding ones. This political disenfranchisement culminated in



Sahara Chronicle

- 11 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 158.
- 12 Biemann, “Performing Borders: The Transnational Video,” in *Stuff It*, 83.
- 13 Ibid., 83 and 85.
- 14 Rancière, 158.
- 15 This was decided at the infamous Berlin Conference in 1884, as Biemann notes in “Agadez Chronicle,” 49. In this essay, she also provides further details on the Tuareg, which informs my account presented here.

a violent rebellion against the Nigerien authorities during the early 1990s, when the Tuareg revolted because they found themselves excluded from the labor force at the major uranium mine in Arlit. Developed by the French when valuable deposits were discovered near Agadez in the early 1960s, Arlit's mine was soon staffed by managers and engineers brought from Europe and miners from southern Niger. The Tuareg, however, received no job opportunities, even though they had long considered Arlit part of their territory. When the rebellion came to an end in 1994, owing partly to the crash of uranium prices when formerly Soviet Russia dumped its reserves on the world market, the Tuareg re-channeled their energies into the development of a semi-clandestine transportation system catering to West African migrants traveling north to Algeria and Libya. With intimate knowledge of the merciless terrain of the Sahara and given their multilingual ability, the Tuareg soon became key players in the transnational migration industry, carrying Sub-Saharan travelers in four-wheel-drive vehicles over the desert to Niger's northern borders. The Tuareg do so at the risk of arrest by various state authorities for assisting with the transportation of undocumented persons, and even death owing to the nature of their clandestine and dangerous activities. They consequently consider themselves to be engaged in "a continuing rebellion" with the nations that surround them, as Adawa explains: "It's as if we live outside of law, always."

To live outside the law, always. Adawa's conclusion identifies the Saharan terrain as a legal void wherein national sovereignty (in this case, of several countries at once) denies political rights to inhabitants, which corresponds to what Giorgio Agamben terms a zone of bare life. Not only does this definition characterize the status of the Tuareg, deprived of the rights of citizenship by the state, but also that of migrants who have traded national identity for stateless status (and oftentimes they destroy their identification papers to avoid the forced repatriation to their country of origin). It is fitting that the locus of statelessness is the desert, as the vast Sahara – a migrant land as much as a land of migrants – represents a smooth space that geologically defies borders as much as national inscription. For Agamben, the designation of such a territory performs a "dislocating localization," where the "political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space."¹⁶ Instead space becomes indeterminate, a partitioning carved out of national space where political existence is withdrawn from life, isolating *zoe* (biological life) from *bios* (qualified life, as by political and national identity). In fact Biemann's practice focuses repeatedly on such spaces, and her own Foucauldian conceptualization of these "heterotopic" terrains – "where civil realities and national regulations are largely suspended in favor of a special corporate arrangement" – correlates with Agamben's theorization of the "state of exception" in which the exemption from legal recognition becomes the norm, one exploited by the state or by its corporate proxies, whether within a specific delimited area, such as the camp or prison, or as a generalized condition.¹⁷

There are in fact certain benefits for North African states to maintain such states of exception, as pointed out in the *Sahara Chronicle*. The incentive to preserve the instability of the Tuareg, for instance, is twofold: they are kept active with their trans-

16 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

17 Biemann, "Performing Borders," 85. Biemann's reference here is to Michel Foucault's discussion of heterotopias in his essay "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* (Spring 1986). Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

portation operations, which serves to minimize their desire for rebellion; and they are consigned to the edges of legality, where their potential criminal status grants the state a convenient reason to arrest them at any point should the need present itself. Far from opposed by North African states, then, migration appears to be tacitly tolerated by the governing regimes and even strategically managed at the national levels. Because the European Union promises aid to African countries that demonstrate the ability and political commitment to control their own borders, migration is used as a bargaining chip by African nations to exact further resources from the EU in terms of funding for internal security, military provisions, and border protection.¹⁸ The result is that the cynical politics of migration tend to reinforce the repressive character of those African countries' governments, which, in bringing about further misery and oppression to their peoples, fuels the desire for emigration in turn.

By creating a representational analogue for this geopolitical space, *Sahara Chronicle* exposes and thus contests its lawlessness, for it is precisely through representation and discourse that the strategic invisibility of North African migration must be challenged. In doing so, the video answers a longstanding imperative to develop new ways of charting the nebulous geographies of globalization under advanced capitalism, as made most forcefully by Fredric Jameson in the mid 1980s. According to Jameson's now classic analysis, advanced capitalism introduced broad shifts in cultural conditions, including the commercial image's severing of signs from references and the mediatized disconnection from historical consciousness. By producing a generalized "schizophrenic" experience that renders consumers affectless and socially atomized, deprived of the ability to locate themselves in either space or time, the system thus disables critical challenge and maximizes its own efficiency. Indeed, Jameson argued that the technological advances of globalization left us unable to situate ourselves within its new simulacral reality: the "faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism."¹⁹ The proposed response to this situation – the need for which, if anything, only has intensified today – was the call for a new form of "cognitive mapping," which could "enable a situational representation on the part of the subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality, which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."²⁰

Biemann's mapping project resonates with this mapping imperative insofar as it provides a system of representation that charts the territories of global capitalism, particularly the visual regimes of its security systems and border zones. Rather than focusing solely on the virtual worlds of new media to which Jameson refers, *Sahara Chronicle* maps the informal social organizations in the under-developed world, spaces of exemption from national and economic regulation, which nonetheless connect with and support the more visible, media-focused areas of globalization in the West. The video-essay does not merely represent that geography, but, as Biemann notes, also proposes a structural correlation to it. As Biemann claims, "the transnational video explores the parallels between the transnational spaces of the global economy and

18 See Ali Bensaâd, "The Militarization of Migration Frontiers in the Mediterranean," in *The Maghreb Connection*, 16-17.

19 Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 37.

20 *Ibid.*, 51.

the structures of essayist mental space.”²¹ The same can be said of *Sahara Chronicle*, which diagrams globalization’s states of exception. As such Biemann’s video offers an “organization of complexities” that partly mirrors the Sahara’s own. Information flows over geographical space, and images are fractured and doubled within the single video image or between monitors and projectors, paralleling the fragmentary and transitional experiences of Saharan everyday life. The video, moreover, reflects a multiplicity of perspectives, from individual migrants to official spokespersons of local industries, from documentary footage of clandestine transit operations to military reconnaissance from drone aircraft tracking illegal migration. These elements link the conflicting pressures that define the Sahara as a contested area between official containment and human passage, between informal economies and military enforcement. Local practices are thereby joined to global geopolitical networks via the contiguity of image sequences and the montage of image-text combinations. *Sahara Chronicle* thus enables what Jameson terms a “situational representation on the part of the subject” to the economic and social-political conditions of North African migration.

Without such an intervention, the danger is that the present regime of media and official representations will only continue uncontested, which commonly reduces migrants to the status of scapegoats for national(ist) agendas in Europe and Africa, feeding the cycle of intensified security measures and xenophobic policies that answer the media’s production of fear. The image of migration as lawless and criminal, and threatening to European stability, is crucial to that exploitation. It is this perspective that the mass media commonly emphasizes in its sensationalized accounts of migration, even when it reports on European abuses of and reactionary responses to African immigrants.²² Why is it common to read of sunken boats, drowned migrants, and brutal responses to foreigners, but to hear virtually nothing in the mainstream media of the local and global conditions that drive people to make the perilous voyage to Europe in the first place? Faced with an apparent complicity between media, government policy, and the military, *Sahara Chronicle* challenges that system by inventing a new mode of representation that gives expression to the migrants’ own contestation of their disempowered status. This perspective is largely presented from “below” official and media narratives by migrants, whom Biemann allows to speak for themselves, by revealing the highly organized network of transportation, economic conditions, and politics that sustains migration. Through her video-essays’ organizational power, Biemann contests the perception of migration’s lawlessness and the victimized status of migrants.

As a result, *Sahara Chronicle* brings out the positive potential of statelessness, as advanced as well in Agamben’s own theory. Although the migrant signifies a powerless condition of life stripped of rights by the state, exposing it to unmediated violence, for Agamben it also comes – somewhat unexpectedly – to suggest a new

21 Biemann, “The Video Essay in the Digital Age,” 10. Also see Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, “Introduction,” *The Maghreb Connection*, 47: “When it comes to representation of migration, digital and material landscapes have to be thought together. In this combined symbolic practice, the charting of space coincides with the charting of knowledge about a subject that is dynamic and fluid. The geographies that are generated in the process, and I mean both the migratory and videographic ones, are likewise spaces of fluidity, relationality and multiplicity.”

22 See Mehdi Alioua, “Silence! People Are Dying on the Southern Borders of Europe,” in *The Maghreb Connection*, 99. Also, see Étienne Balibar, who warns of a coming European Apartheid if the trend is not stopped, in *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. J. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

potential political engagement, one capable of remaking the world from a position outside of national identity.²³ Indeed, even as the figure of bare life is exposed to the unconditional threat of death, no life is more political than this, as Agamben points out in *Homo Sacer*. The stateless condition of bare life thus suggests radical uncertainty and political ambivalence. On the one hand, it represents a defenseless position: “nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power.”²⁴ But on the other, it contains the seeds of radical transformation: “This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own zoe.”²⁵ In other words, Agamben insists that bare life become the site of struggle between sovereign rule and autonomous resistance, implying that at the very moment when biological fact and political command seem mutually exclusive, bare life must defy the reduction of life to its mere fact of existence. In a similar way, migration must become a site of empowerment, a source of freedom and the basis of choice, going beyond our concepts of exclusive citizenship and sovereign national territory, proposing a potential new horizon of political engagement founded upon the individual’s rights and liberties. While for Agamben this theoretical outline proposes a potential politics, it is a theory that *Sahara Chronicle* attempts to realize.

Biemann’s use of associative montage in the *Sahara Chronicle* is a key element in this regard, for it allows viewers to connect the precarious situation of the Tuareg, as seen through Adawa’s eyes, for example, to related conditions across the Sahara region, which may in turn be linked to Europe’s economy and politics. As a result, we are presented with the perception of a global network that provides explanation and historical contextualization for the causes of North African migration. The interview with Adawa, for instance, connects to shots of the uranium mine in Arlit that depict laboring miners, drilling machines, and mining tunnels. Taken with a hand-held camera, the passage relays the spontaneity and immediacy of an embodied perception, which extends a visceral account of current mining conditions to Adawa’s narrative. The section on the uranium mine may then join with coverage of the iron ore terminal in Mauritania, which includes footage of a railway line operated by the Mauritanian Mining Company. Connecting the inland mining town of Zouerate to the coastal port of Nouadhibou, the cargo train doubles as a furtive transportation system that shuttles migrants to the coast, from where they seek passage to the Canary Islands. At the same time, individual elements of this diagram are deepened by researched and informed presentations. At one point, *Sahara Chronicle* includes an interview with Sid’Ahmed Ould Abeid, president of the Fisheries Federation in Nouadhibou, who speaks of the over-fishing of octopus off Mauritania’s coast. Even though state law requires fishing boats to offload yields on Mauritania’s mainland, Europeans fail to do so and operate with impunity, explains Abeid. Adding insult to injury, the European Union demands ever more fishing contracts, which suggests the continuation of a longstanding colonial paradigm according to which goodwill rhetoric masks the reality

23 See also Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” (1993), in *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 16: “the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today – at least until the process of dissolution of the nation-state and of its sovereignty has achieved full completion – the forms and limits of a coming political community.”

24 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

25 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

of the expropriation of natural resources. As Abeid points out logically, if the EU were to invest in local African industries – as it has promised to do on record – then the influx of capital would lead to an increase in employment opportunities in Mauritania, bringing a higher standard of living, helping to eliminate poverty and disorder, and lessening the stimulus for emigration. Rather than supporting the intensification of economic inequality and the protection of its own borders, the EU could stimulate African economies, cultivating local businesses and promoting a sustainable way of life. Instead, it propels the very cycle of migration it is otherwise intent on stopping, thus renewing the demand for migration that, bringing us full circle, drives the Tuareg transportation system.

In this way, *Sahara Chronicle* builds its argument through a web of connections, bringing documentary footage into contact with syntactical arrangements, organizing complexities so that a substantive picture of migration is established. Yet while it provides a transformative map of this North African zone of migration, *Sahara Chronicle* resists the foundationalist elements of Jameson's argument, for whom the map of the future, neither mimetic nor analogical, will offer a "representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real condition of existence," which will coordinate existential experience with the un-lived, abstract processes of geographical totality.²⁶ While the map that is *Sahara Chronicle* fulfills certain elements of this description, it resists Jameson's conceptualization, which disregards the implications of its own psychoanalytic reference – namely that for Lacan, "the real" is precisely what defies symbolization, rendering any representation of totality impossible. The danger in positioning the real as a fact to be represented, to return once again to Rancière's position, is the reification of representation as 'truth,' bringing about the attendant problems of rendering language authoritarian, assuming meaning to be immanent to signs, and situating the viewer as a passive recipient of information. Repositioning the video-essay as a reinvented mapping project, *Sahara Chronicle* avoids these assumptions by opening up a state of uncertainty between the real and the artificial, between the objective documentary and the fictional construct, which extends an interpretive and emancipating agency to the viewer.

This is, in my view, where *Sahara Chronicle* unleashes its political force: Biemann's mapping project is ultimately no mere mimicry of geographical relationships, but rather represents the creation of a video-essay that generates a transformative power, one that dissolves borders rather than recreating them. In other words, this mode of representation is performative, invoking Biemann's earlier *Performing the Border*, which destabilized borders by locating them within the institutional, legal, and everyday practices that grant them their force, but also invites their transgression. As in the definition of geography advanced in *The Maghreb Connection*, the video-essay also becomes performative in that it models "an affective, imaginary and symbolic cartography," which is "intended to contribute to the emergence of a transnational consciousness and in this way to help empower political participation..."²⁷ In other words, it's not about presenting the Real as fact, or viewing it as an already existing reality that simply lacks representation – which would risk reifying borders as well – but instead treating the real as an effect to be produced, an effect that transforms migration into an empowered form of life. As the sociologist Mehdi Alioua asks in his own study of North African migration, "How to rethink migration as freedom?"

26 Jameson, 51.

27 Biemann and Holmes, "Introduction," *The Maghreb Connection*, 8.

How to recognize that it is a fundamental choice? How to go beyond our concepts of exclusive citizenship and sovereign national territory, in order to recognize the preeminence of the individual's rights and liberties?"²⁸ These are poignant questions, and ones that guide the direction and form of Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle*, wherein migrants are shown as definers of their own destiny, existing outside of the nation's attempts at controlling them. According to their geography of resistance, migrants chart their course defiantly through the state's space, rendering its borders porous, positioning themselves as rebels against the sovereignty that otherwise excludes them.

28 Alioua, "Silence! People Are Dying on the Southern Borders of Europe," 105.

BIOGRAPHY

1955 born in Zurich, Switzerland
1981 Museum School of Fine Arts, Boston
1983 Instituto de Bellas Artes, Mexico
1986 Bachelor of Fine Arts with honors
School of Visual Arts, New York
1988 Whitney Independent Study
Program, New York
1991 returns to Zurich where she now lives
1995–1998 curator at the Shedhalle Zurich
2000–2003 lecturer at CCC
Geneva University of Art and Design
2002–Researcher at the Institute for
Theory, ZHdK, Zurich
2008 Dr. h.c. Umeå University, Sweden

<http://www.geobodies.org>

VIDEOGRAPHY

Performing the Border
43 min. 1999

Writing Desire
25 min. 2000

Remote Sensing
53 min. 2001

Europlex
20 min. 2003

Contained Mobility
2-channel video installation, 20 min. 2004

Black Sea Files
multi-channel video installation 43 min. 2005

Sahara Chronicle
video collection, 78 min. 2006–2007

X-Mission
35 min. 2008

AWARDS

Prix Palmarès 1999 Biennial of the Moving
Image St. Gervais, Geneva/CH;

International Art and Media Award 2002,
ZKM Center for Art and Media
Karlsruhe/DE;

Viper International Video and Media Art
Festival 2004, Basel/CH

SCREENINGS AND EXHIBITIONS

PERFORMING THE BORDER**1999**

Depot, Vienna/AT
Video/cultures, Zentrum für Kunst und
Medien ZKM, Karlsruhe/DE
L'adieu au siècle, La Comédie, Genève/CH
Globalisation Institute, McMaster
University, Toronto/CA
Biennial of the Moving Image St. Gervais,
Geneva/CH
Dokfilm- und Videofestival, Kassel/DE
Shedhalle, Zurich/CH
Nations, Pollinations, Dislocations:
Changing Imaginary, Vancouver/CA
Studio One, Clocktower, New York/US

2000

Marxism 2000, University Amherst/US
Cinematik Cultural Center, Tijuana/MX
4. Werkleitz Festival/DE
Pacific Film Archives, San Francisco/US
Women in the Director's Chair, Chicago/US
Chicago Film Institute/US
Seoul International Labor Film and Video
Festival/KR
Mead Festival, Sta Cruz, New Mexico/US
One World Festival/CA
Latin American Film Festival, London/GB
Feminale, Cologne/DE
Manifesta 3, Ljubljana/SI
inSite, Los Angeles/US
Annual American Studies Conference,
Detroit/US
L.A. Freewave, Los Angeles/US
Kunstraum Lüneburg/DE
Biennial, Havana/CU

2001

Oldenburger Filmtage, Oldenburg/DE
Passenger – im Anblick der Grenze,
Hartware, Dortmund/DE
Antagonisms, Museum of Contemporary Art
MACBA, Barcelona/ES
Moderna Museet, Stockholm/SE
Video Adventures, MacDonald Stewart Art
Centre, Guelph Ontario/CA
LUX, London/GB
Filmtage, Bremen/DE

2002

Documentary Processes, MACBA,
Barcelona/ES
Work and Non-work, INIVA, London/GB
Kunstverein Cologne/DE
Mostra Films Dones, Barcelona/ES
Experimenter le Réel, Centre d'Art
Contemporain, Albi-Toulouse/FR
Centre Pompidou, Paris/FR
Sexwork, Moderna Museet, Stockholm,
Borås, and Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

Kunstmuseum, Bonn/DE
Pacific Film Archives, San Francisco/US
Sexwork, Ground Zero V-Tape, Toronto/CA
Documentary Fortnight, Museum of Modern Art, New York/US
Alien2, Swiss Institute, New York/US
Kunststalle Basel/CH
Ursula Biemann, Govett-Brewster National Art Gallery, New Plymouth/NZ
White Chapel Gallery, London/GB
Filmfestival, Warsaw/PL

2003

Urban Diaries, Arco, Centro de Arte Contemporanea, Madrid/ES
Festival of Cinema and Woman, Pamplona/ES
Strangers to Ourselves, Hastings Museum, Hastings/GB
Seoul Human Rights Film Festival/KR
Eclectic Tech Carnival, Athens/GR
White Chapel Gallery, London/GB
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/US
A-Side, New Chastle/GB
Goethe Institute, Tel Aviv/IL
Anti-racism Festival, Athens/GB

2004

Architecture and Filmfestival, Berlin/DE
Moving Landscapes, Filmmuseum, Vienna/AT
Tate Modern, London/GB
Globale, Cordoba/AR
Centre Pompidou, Paris/FR
Townhouse Gallery, Cairo/EG

2005

Globale 05, Berlin/DE
Whitechapel Gallery, London/GB
Geobodies. A question of borders, Brandeis University Gallery, Boston/US

2007

TEK Festival, Rome/IT
Migratory Aesthetics, Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, Murcia/ES
Trading and Using Bodies, Overgaden, Copenhagen/DK
Borders, Casa Encendida, Madrid/ES
Images and Views of the Alternative Cinema, Nicosia/CY
FID Festival International Documentaire, Marseille/FR
Face to Face, Casa de Cultura de España, Miami/US
Border Festival Bergamo/IT
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

2008

Peripheral Look and Collective Body, Museion, Bozen/Bolzano
The Imaginary Line, Buffalo Arts Studio, Buffalo, NY/US

WRITING DESIRE

2000

Tenacity, Swiss Institute, New York/US
Cinematik Cultural Center, Tijuana, MX

2001

Docfilm und Video Festival Kassel/DE
home at work, interfiction, Kassel/DE
Framing Globality, Stuttgarter Filmwinter/DE
Gouvernementality, Alte Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover/DE
Open Space International Women's University, Hannover/DE

2002

Pacific Film Archives, San Francisco/US
Sexwork, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Borås, Umeå/SE
I-N-K, Copenhagen/DK
Body as Byte, Neues Kunstmuseum, Luzern/CH
Ursula Biemann, Govett-Brewster National Art Gallery, New Plymouth/NZ
Argos Filmfestival, Brussels/BE
Women in Cinema Festival, Seattle/US
Video Festival Dallas/US
V-Tape, Toronto/CA
Women in the Director's Chair, Chigago/US
Videosex Festival, Zurich/CH
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid/ES
Sexwork, Ground Zero V-Tape, Toronto/CA
Get that Ballance, Kampnagel, Hamburg/DE
Index, Stockholm/SE
All is Fair in Love and War, Homeport, Rotterdam/NL
Sex: Vom Wissen und Wünschen, Hygienemuseum, Dresden/DE

2003

White Chapel Gallery, London/GB
Women make Movies – Pop unlimited?, Werkstatt München/DE
Postvérité, Centro Párraga, Murcia/ES
Strangers to Ourselves, Hastings Museum, Hastings/GB
Swiss Video Lounge, Center for the Moving Image St-Gervais, Geneva/CH
The arts and politics of e-democracy, Platoniq, MACBA, Barcelona/ES
Looking at Us - Women's Desire, Deputación de Granada/ES

2004

Globalia, Frauenmuseum, Bonn/DE
Swiss Video Lounge, Museum for Contemporary Art, Vilnius/LT
Der Videoessay, ZKM, Karlsruhe/DE

2005

Carcel de Amor, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporaneo, Alvara/ES
Instituto Andaluz de la Mujer, Malaga/ES; Centro de Arte Caja de Burgos/ES; Centro Párraga, Murcia/ES; Filmoteca Canaria, Tenerife de

Gran Canaria/ES; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid/ES
Geobodies - A question of borders, Brandeis University Gallery, Boston/US

2006

Carcel de Amor, Caixaforum, Barcelona/ES; Fundacion Luis Seoane, Vigo/ES

2007

TEK Festival, Rome/IT
Trading and Using Bodies, Overgaden, Copenhagen/DK
Neweconomies, Artists Space, New York/GB
Images and Views of the Alternative Cinema, Nicosia/CY
FID Festival International Documentaire, Marseille/FR
There is Always a Machine Between Us, SF Cameraworks, San Francisco/GB
Ecole Normale Supérieure, Lyon/FR
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

REMOTE SENSING

2001

The Seoul Festival/KR
Women in Cinema Festival, Seattle/US
Kasseler Video and Filmfestival/DE
Solothurner Filmtage/CH
Dallas Film Festival/US
Feminale, Cologn/DE
Women in the Director's Chair, Chicago/US

2002

Sexwork, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Borås, Umeå/SE
Es ist schwer das Reale zu berühren, Kunstverein, Munich/DE
Lines of Mobility, Kunstverein Nürnberg/DE
Pacific Film Archives, San Francisco/US
Sexwork, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/US
Mostra Films Dones, Barcelona/ES
Videocash, Landesgalerie, Linz/AT
Filmpodium, Biel/CH
Frauenfilmtage, Vienna/AT
Women's Film Festival, Zaragoza/ES
B-Movie, Munich/DE
Ursula Biemann, Govett-Brewster National Art Gallery, New Plymouth/NZ
d-vision, Vienna/AT
Missing Link, Utrecht/NL
Sexwork, Ground Zero V-Tape, Toronto/CA
Exchange and Transform, Kunstverein Munich/DE
Centre Pompidou, Paris/FR
Cyberferm Spirit, Haus für Medienkunst, Oldenburg/DE

2003

Geography and the Politics of Mobility, Generali Foundation, Vienna/AU

Female Geographies, ACF, London/GB
Swiss Video Lounge, St Gervais, Geneva/CH
Galerie für Landschaftskunst,
Hamburg/DE
Field Work, Victoria Miro Gallery,
London/GB
Xerox, Public, Paris/FR
Women's Film Festival of Zaragoza/ES
Strangers to Ourselves, Hastings Museum,
Hastings/GB
White Chapel Gallery, London/GB
Überlebensstrategien für Untrainierte,
Kunst- u. Medienzentrum Adlershof,
Berlin/GB
Amnesty International, Berlin/GB

2004

So wie die Dinge liegen, Hartware,
Dortmund/DE
Utopia, White Chapel Gallery, London/GB
Multitude, Public, Paris/FR
Tourisms, Fundacio Antoni Tapies,
Barcelona/ES
Trading Places, Pumphouse, London/GB
Alien, w139, Amsterdam/NL
Es ist schwer das Reale zu berühren,
Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE
Der Videoessay, ZKM, Karlsruhe/DE

2005

Geobodies - A question of borders, Brandeis
University Gallery, Boston/US
*Work**, Galerie im Taxipalais, Innsbruck/AT
DMZ Demilitarized Zone, Panmunjong,
Seoul/KR
ACCEA, Yervan/AM
Whitechapel Gallery, London/GB
Sexarbeit, Arbeitsmuseum, Hamburg/DE

2006

Sexarbeit - Alltag Mythen Gewalt, NGBK,
Berlin/DE
*Work**, Lewis Glucksman Gallery,
University, Cork/IR
Trafficking, Museum of World Cultures,
Göteborg/SE
Sexwork, Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien,
Berlin/DE

2007

2Move Migratory Aesthetics, Espacio de
Arte, Visuales, Murcia/ES
2Move Migratory Aesthetics, Zuiderzee-
museum, Enkhuizen/NL
Trading and Using Bodies, Overgaden,
Copenhagen/DK
FID Festival International Documentaire,
Marseille/FR
Border Festival, Bergamo/IT
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

2008

2Move, Belfast Exposed, Belfast, Northern
Ireland
Ladysfest, Amsterdam/NL

EUROPLEX

2003

After the News/Despres de la noticia, CCCB,
Barcelona/ES
Geography and the Politics of Mobility,
Generali Foundation, Vienna/AT
Urban Diaries, ARCO Contemporary Art
Center, Madrid/ES
Museum of Modern Art, Buenos Aires/AR
OVNI, Barcelona/ES
Art and Politics of e-democracy, Platoniq,
MACBA, Barcelona/ES
Whitechapel Gallery, London/GB
Borders and Beyond, Townhouse Kairo/EG
Videoex festival, Zurich/CH
Call for Witness/ Appel à témoin,
Le Quartier, Quimper/FR
Drac Magic Mostra Films Intl Dones,
Barcelona/ES
Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse/FR
Femme Totale, Dortmund/DE
Cine y Casi Cine, Museo Nacional Centro de
Arte Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid/ES
Fondazione Sandretto de Rebaudengo,
Turino/IT
Swiss Video Lobby, Biennale de l'Image en
Mouvement, Geneva/CH
Viper media art festival, Basel/CH
Odeonia Intl Women Filmfestival,
Zaragoza/ES
Strangers to Ourselves, Hastings Museum,
Hastings/GB

2004

Coalesce: With all due intent, Model Arts,
Sligo/IR
borderphonics, MetalloMediaLab Paris/FR
Marco Museum, Vigo/ES
Aire Incondicional, Shedhalle, Zurich/CH
Ecobox, Paris/FR
Moving Landscape, Filmmuseum,
Vienna/AT

2005

Next Door, Barents Triennial: Border
Dialogues, Kirkenes/NO
FACT Art and Creative Technology,
Liverpool/GB
After the Fact, Berlin Photography Festival,
Berlin/DE
ACCEA, Yervan/AR
The need to document, Kunstmuseum
Baselland, Basel/CH
Re-Act, Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary
Art Center, Copenhagen/DK
Images Festival, Toronto/CA
Whitechapel Gallery, London/GB
Wonder Women, Frac Lorraine, Metz/FR
Ladyfest, Timisoara Romania/RO

2006

CAAC Andalusian Center for Contemporary
Art, Sevilla/ES
Centro Andaluz de Arte, Sevilla/ES
Ökonomien der Grenze, Kunstraum Lake-
side, Klagenfurt/AT

Unhomely, Biennial International de
Sevilla/ES
Border Zone, Fondazione Olivetti, Roma/IT
2007
TEK Festival, Rome/IT
FID Festival International Documentaire,
Marseille/FR
Face to Face, Casa de Cultura de España,
Miami/US
Europe en Devenir, Centre Culturel Suisse,
Paris/FR
Border Festival Bergamo/IT
Carte Blanche, Ecole Nationale des
Beaux-Art, Paris/FR
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE
frontières, St-Brieuc, Bretagne/FR

2008

Peripheral Look and Collective Body,
Museion, Bozen/Bolzano/IT
The Imaginary Line, Buffalo Arts Studio,
Buffalo, NY/US

CONTAINED MOBILITY

2004

International Art Biennial Liverpool/GB

2005

Images Festival, Toronto/CA
Pure Image, Centre for Contemporary Art,
Plovdiv/BG

2006

Viper media art festival, Basel/CH

2007

B-Zone, Fundacion Tapies, Barcelona/ES
FID Festival International Documentaire,
Marseille/FR
Europe en Devenir, Centre Culturel Suisse,
Paris/FR
Border Festival Bergamo/IT
Lines of Sight, Atlantic Center for
Contemporary Art, Las Palmas,
Gran Canarias/ES
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE
frontières, St-Brieuc, Bretagne/FR

2008

Steirischer Herbst, Graz/AU
Flaherty Filmseminar, Colgate
University, NY/US

2009

Ursula Biemann, Nikolaj Copenhagen
Contemporary Art/DK

BLACK SEA FILES**2005**

B-Zone, Kunstwerke Berlin/DE
Sharjah International Biennial/UAE
(Caspian Crude installation)

2006

The Unquiet World, ACCA Australian
Centre for Contemporary Art, Victoria/AU
Glanz und Globalisierung, Hartware/
Phoenix Halle, Dortmund/DE
World Unlimited, Museum of Modern Art,
Arnhem/NL
Duisburger Filmwoche/DE

2007

This place is my place – begehrte Orte,
Kunstverein Hamburg/DE
B-Zone, Fundacion Tapies, Barcelona/ES
Optimism in the Age of Global War, Istanbul
Biennial/TR
Biennial of Contemporary Art, Museum of
Modern Art, Moscow/RU
Art Goes Heiligendam, G8 Summit,
Rostock/DE
Ursula Biemann, Peacock Visual Arts,
Aberdeen, Scotland/GB
FID Festival International Documentaire,
Marseille/FR
Nachvollziehungsangebote, WUK,
Vienna/AT
Just Space(s), LACE, Los Angeles/US
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

2008

Eurasia. Geographic cross-overs in art,
MART Museum of Modern and
Contemporary Art in Trento and
Rovereto/IT
*Moralische Phantasien-Aktuelle Positionen
zur Klimaerwärmung*, Kunstmuseum
Thurgau/CH
Flaherty Filmseminar, Colgate Univer-
sity, NY/US
Ursula Biemann, VOID, Derry, Northern
Ireland

2009

Ursula Biemann, Nikolaj Copenhagen
Contemporary Art/DK

SAHARA CHRONICLE**2006**

Architecture, Art and Landscape Biennial,
Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Las Canarias/ES
The Maghreb Connection, Townhouse
Gallery, Cairo/EG

2007

The Maghreb Connection, Centre d'Art Con-
temporain, Geneve/CH

TEK Festival, Rome/IT
FID Festival International Documentaire,
Marseille/FR
Port City, Arnolfini, Bristol/GB and John
Hansard Gallery, Southampton/GB
Border Festival Bergamo/IT
Heterotopias: Society must be defended,
1st Thessaloniki Biennial of Contemporary
Art/GR
Ursula Biemann, Bildmuseet, Umeå/SE

2008

Flaherty Film Seminar, Colgate College,
NY/US
Translocalmotion, Shanghai Biennial/CN
The Maghreb Connection, Galerie des Beaux
Arts, Le Mans/FR
Land of Human Rights, rotor, Graz/AT
The Gates of the Mediterranean, Palazzo
Piozzo, Rivoli, Turin/IT
No Place – Like Home, Argos, Brussels/BE
Port City, A Foundation, Liverpool/GB
Glanz und Globalisierung, PROGR,
Bern/CH
Biennial of the Image, Chiasso/CH
Globale Filmfestival 08, Berlin/DE
Cinema Indeed, Itaú Cultural Institute,
São Paulo/BR
Monitoring, Kasseler Dokumentarfilm- und
Videofest, Fridericeanum, Kassel/DE

2009

The Greenroom, Bard College Gallery,
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY/US
Raw Material Company, Dakar/SN
Ursula Biemann, Nikolaj Copenhagen
Contemporary Art/DK

2010

Nomadismo y Movilidad, Bicentenario,
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes,
Santiago/CHI

X-MISSION**2008**

Annual Report, Gwangju Biennial/KR

2009

Ursula Biemann, Nikolaj Copenhagen Con-
temporary Art/DK

CURATORIAL PROJECTS

Aussendienst / Foreign Services – postcolonial positions

The exhibition addresses the role of the framing procedures in the construction of certain concepts of culture, drawing on the reference systems of anthropology, art and postcolonial criticism. Exhibition, lectures, film screenings and daily language workshops with foreign-language kids from integration classes. Shedhalle Zurich May, 1995.

Kültür – ein Gender Projekt aus Istanbul

Research and exhibition project with women artists and academics from Istanbul engaging in cultural analyses and art productions on the subject of urban space, export textile industry on the periphery and the position of women within these spatial relations. Research, field trips, workshops, videos, migration stories, media works. Shedhalle Zurich April 1996 and International Istanbul Biennial October, 1997.

Just Watch

Media and internet project which brought together world media producers and theorists to take a close look at the representation of women from the Global South in the electronic media (video, tv, internet) and to discuss current priorities and strategies in cultural articulation and self-representation. Symposium, one-week media workshop, video program, art projects and website. Shedhalle Zurich September, 1997.

Geographies of Survival

Video program on geography as a topographical history that describes the relationship between people and the places they are evicted from, occupy or temporarily curated for the Oberhausen Filmfestival which took place under the overarching topic of "Catastrophes". May, 2002.

Stuff It – the Video Essay in the Digital Age

International symposium on a video practice which is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political that situates itself in the context of new communications media and a postcolonial reality. Institute for Theory of Art and Design and the migros museum Zurich June, 2002.

Geography and the Politics of Mobility

Curatorial project about geography as a signifying practice. It looks at ways to organize and spatialize knowledge related to the movement of people, technologies, and capital. Artprojects by Makrolab, Raqs Media Collective, multiplicity, frontera sur rrtv, and bureau d'études as well as lectures by Irit Rogoff and Brian Holmes. Generali Foundation Vienna, January, 2003.

B-ZONE – Becoming Europe and Beyond

Territorial research and collaborative art project on what is to become a part of the European Union: the transitory geographies of Southeast Europe, the Balkans, Turkey reaching as far as the Caucasus.

Black Sea Files by Ursula Biemann, *Time-scapes* by Angela Melitopoulous with partners, *Postwar Footprints* by Lisa Parks. Initiated and developed by Ursula Biemann, funded by the German Bundeskulturstiftung, based at the Institute for Art and Design Theory, HGK Zurich. KW exhibition and catalogue produced and edited by Anselm Franke. Kunstwerke Berlin 2005 and Tapies Foundation Barcelona, 2006.

The Maghreb Connection – Movements of Life Across North Africa

Collaborative exhibition project on the systems and modalities of migratory movements which constitute the Maghreb and Mediterranean basin. Townhouse Gallery Cairo and Centre d'Art Contemporain Geneva, December 2006/February 2007. The project travelled to Arnolfini Bristol, John Hansen Gallery Southampton, A Foundation, Liverpool, rotor, Graz, Beaux-Arts le Mans/France a.o.

BOOKS BY THE ARTIST

Zwischenräume / Interespacios

Ursula Biemann ed. (Zurich and Dusseldorf: eFeF Verlag, 1993) German/Spanish. Photo-text book with contributions by Lyana Amaya, Santusa Herbas, Jacqueline Isler dos Santos, Monica Senn Zegarra, Angela Ceballos, Pierrette Malatesta with an introduction by Carmen Real, in collaboration with Femia, NGO for migrant women in Zurich.

Hors Sol - Reflexionen zur Ausstellungspraxis

Réflexions sur la pratique de l'exposition Ursula Biemann and Catherine Queloz, eds. (Geneva: Sous-sol Genève and Shedhalle Zurich, 1996) German/French. Texts by Judith Barry, Ursula Biemann, Beatrice von Bismarck, Andrea Fraser, Sylvia Kafhesy, Stephan Geene/Renate Lorenz, Catherine Queloz, Philip Ursprung.

Kültür – ein Gender-Projekt aus Istanbul – Kunst. Feminismus. Migration

Ursula Biemann ed. (Zurich; Shedhalle Verlag, 1997) German/Turkish. Documentation of a research and exhibition project with women artists and academics from Istanbul engaging in cultural analyses and art production on the correlation between urban center and periphery and the position of women within the social, cultural and economic tension. Texts by Ursula Biemann, Ayşe Durakbaşa, Ayla Yüce, Meral Özbek, Gülsün Karamustafa; chronology of the feminist movement in Istanbul.

Been there and back to nowhere – gender in transnational spaces, Ursula Biemann, post-production documents 1988-2000

(Berlin: b_books, 2000) German/English. Artist compilation of art and video projects, interviews, video-scripts, collective cultural productions and theoretical texts presenting artistic practice on gender and ethnicity in globalization processes with a focus on post-urban zones such as the US-Mexico border and Istanbul's periphery. With texts by Ursula Biemann, Afta Brah and Yvonne Volkart.

Geography and the Politics of Mobility

Ursula Biemann, ed. (Wien: Generali Foundation / Cologne: Walther König, 2003) English/German. The book documents projects of five international art collectives, which pursue questions of global migration, changing work environments, and worldwide information systems. They outline alternative models for a new geographic praxis. With bureau d'études, Frontera Sur RRTV, Macrolab, multiplicity and Raqs Media Collective. Texts by Ursula Biemann, Irit Rogoff, Brian Holmes, Lisa Parks.

Stuff It – The Video Essay in the Digital Age
 Ursula Biemann, ed. (Zurich: Voldemereer
 and Vienna: Springer Verlag 2003) English
 Collection of texts by video artists and cul-
 tural theorists illuminating the video es-
 say in its role as crossover and communica-
 tor between art, theory and critical practice
 in all its variations. With contributions by
 Nora Alter, Ursula Biemann, Christa
 Blümlinger, Steve Fagin, Harun Farocki,
 Jörg Huber, Angela Melitopoulos/Maurizio
 Lazzarato, Walid Ra'ad, Steve Reinke, Hito
 Steyerl, Tran T. Kim-Trang, Jan Verwoert,
 Rinaldo Walcott, Paul Willemsen and a
 video archive.

Dispersion. Kunstpraxis und ihre Vernetzung
 Ursula Biemann and Marion von Osten, eds.
 Olympe - feministische Arbeitshefte, Heft
 19, 2003
 Compilation of texts and projects by Yvonne
 Volkart, Raqs Media Collective, Kaucyila
 Brooke, Annette Schindler, Christina della
 Guistina/Sabina Baumann, Rachel Mader,
 Hedwig Saxenhuber.

B-Zone – Becoming Europe and Beyond
 Anselm Franke, ed. (Barcelona: Actar Pub-
 lishers/ Berlin: Kunstwerke, 2005) English.
 Book documenting a collaborative art and
 research project on transitory post-social-
 ist geographies initiated by Ursula Biemann
 and exhibited at Kunst Werke Berlin in De-
 cember 2005. Besides three major research
 essays by Ursula Biemann, Angela Melito-
 poulos and Lisa Parks, the publication in-
 cludes texts by James Marriott, Maurizio
 Lazzarato, Boris Despodov, Ulus Baker,
 Dick Hebdige and others.

Political Typographies
 (Barcelona: Antoni Tapies Foundation and
 Actar Publishers 2007) Spanish-English
 The publication complements the exhibition
Zona B: on the margins of Europe at Tapies
 Foundation Barcelona (March-April 2006).
 The book features new essays by the artists
 Angela Melitopoulos and Ursula Biemann
 and texts by Carles Guerra, Lisa Parks,
 Jean-Pierre Rehm, Vassilis Tsianos.

The Maghreb Connection
Movements of Life Across North Africa
 Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes eds.
 (Barcelona: Actar Publishers, 2006) Eng-
 lish/Arabic.
 With texts and art projects by Mehdi Ali-
 oua, Ali Bensaâd, Ursula Biemann, Charles
 Heller, Armin Linke, Keller Easterling, Yto
 Barrada, Observatorio Tecnológico del Es-
 trecho, Doa Aly, Hala Elkoussy, Raphael
 Cuomo and Maria Iorio, Florian Schneider
 and Michel Agier.

TEXTS BY THE ARTIST

1995

“Positionen zur postkolonialen Diskussion.
 Kunst, Kulturkontakt und Kulturkonflikt in
 der Shedhalle Zürich,” *MOMA*.

“I do not intend to speak about, just speak
 nearby, Die Filme von Trinh T. Minh-ha”,
Fabrikzeitung Zurich.

1996

“KunstproduzentInnen im Aussendienst,”
Hors Sol, see books by the artist, 23-34.

Interview in *Environ 27 ans ou un peu plus*,
 art et feminisms, Sous-sol Geneva, 6-14.

“Kültür: Modernisierung, Kunst und Gen-
 der in Istanbul”, *MOMA* 5.

“Free Zone Plan”, art ad in *geld.beat.sythetik*
 (Berlin/Amsterdam: ID-Archiv).

“Ethno-x-centric reflections on the national
 expo and the national museum,” exhibition
 cat. *Platzwechsel*, Kunsthalle Zurich, 50-59.

“Spaces In-between”, *Problématique*, Jour-
 nal of political studies IV, Toronto.

“Foreign Services”, *FAZ*.

“Postkoloniale Praxis”, *Zyma Art Today*,
 June.

1997

“Kunst.Feminismus.Migration” and “Kul-
 turelle Territorien, Orte der Identität” in
Kültür (see books by the artist) 5-11; 95-99.

“Fighting for representational space - wom-
 en in the media have to act”, *Zebra*, maga-
 zine for audiovisual activities, Copenhagen,
 December.

1998

“Gender ist das grosse Ding”, Interview mit
 Gayatri Ch. Spivak, *WoZ*, Januar.

1999

“Performing the Border”, *video cult/ures*,
multimediale installationene der 90er Jahre,
 Museum für Neue Kunst ZKM Karlsruhe
 and Dumont Cologne, 140-143.

“Performing the Border”, *ANYP* Nr. 9, Ber-
 lin and Munich.

“Performing the Border”, *next Cyberfeminist*
International, old boys network, September

“Performing the Border – die Grenze als
 Metapher für Differenz und Gewalt”, *iz3W*
 no. 241.

“Politik ist eine kulturelle Domäne”, inter-
 view by Sigrid Weber, *iz3W* no. 240

“Performing the Border”, photo-text piece in:
Migration findet statt, cfd-dossier, 2.

2000

“Performing the Border: Gender, bodies and
 technology at the cross-point of private de-
 sire and public space”, *ZED magazine*, Cen-
 ter for Design Studies, London.

Entretien avec Ursula Biemann, *Expériences*
du divers, Presses Université de Rennes.

2001

“Performing the Border: on Gender, Trans-
 national Bodies, and Technology”, *Global-
 ization on the Line: Gender, Nation, and*
Capital at U.S. Borders, ed. Claudia Sad-
 owsky, New York: Palgrave, 99-118.

“Performing the Border, On gender, trans-
 national bodies and technology”, in: *Dia-
 loge & Debatten*, Verlag für moderne Kunst
 Nürnberg.

“The City of Chips”, *Superumbau-Zeitung*
für den leidenschaftlichen Urbanisten

“Writing Desire”, *Feminist Media Studies*,
 Volume 1, Issue 2 July, 251-258.

“Female Geobodies Resignifying the eco-
 nomic within sexual difference”, *n.paradoxa*,
 July.

“Remotely Sensed. A topography of the glob-
 al sex trade”, *Feminist Review* 80, 180-193.

2002

“Been there and back to nowhere”, *Female*
Sequences, June, reprinted in *FRAZ*, Au-
 gust.

“Performing the Border”, *Rethinking Marx-
 ism, Journal of Economics*, Culture, Soci-
 ety, Fall issue, 29-48.

“Remote Sensing”, interview with Ursula
 Biemann by Imre Szeman, *Review of Educa-
 tion / Pedagogy / Cultural Studies*, 24.1/2

“Geographic Bodies”, *Remote Sensing –*
Laboratories of Art and Science, vice versa,
 Berlin.

“Das Begehren nach Eroberung”, *Im Hand-
 gepäck Rassismus – Beiträge zu Tourismus*
und Kultur, iz3W.

“Digitaler Versuch, das Reale zu berühren”,
 Ursula Biemann und Sören Grammel, *WOZ*,
 May 30.

“Writing Desire”, *Schweizer Kunst/Art Su-
 isse* curated by Annette Schindler, Art 1.02
 “Globale Geographien des Geschlechts”, in-
 terview mit Vina Yum, *Malmoe*, 02/01 Wien.

“Geografien des Überlebens”, festival cat. *Kurzfilmstage Oberhausen*.

“Geography and the politics of Mobility” in *Geography and the politics of Mobility* (see books by the artist).

2003

“The geographic act of performing borders”, festival cat., *Femme Totale*, Dortmund.

“Remote Sensing: routing female bodies in the age of geographic information systems”, Total, Netherland.

“Performing Border: The Transnational Video”, *Stuff it, Video Essay in the Digital Age*. (see books by the artist).

“Visuelle Geografien des Geschlechts”, *Dispersion - Kunstpraxis und ihre Vernetzung*, Olympe feministische Arbeitshefte Nr. 19. (books by the artist).

2004

“Videogeographien”, *Another art history is possible? - Globalisation and hierarchisation in art and science*, Deutscher Kunsthistorikerverband, Leipzig.

“Performing the border - sur le genre, les corps transnationaux et la technologie”, *Multitude* 15, 75-89.

“Remote Sensing - Visual Geographies of Gender”, *Tourisms*, Fundacio Tapies, Barcelona, 268-283.

“Ecrire une contre-géographie”, *Appel au Témoin*, Le Quartier, Quimper (French/English) 41-62.

“Writing Desire”, *Globalisation and hierarchisation in art and science*, Deutscher Kunsthistorikerverband, Leipzig, 122-126.

“The Clash of Sexuality and Technology on the Border – Speculation as an artistic method”, in *Olympe Feministische Arbeitshefte* 20.

“Caspian Crude”, *Tracer* exhibition cat., Tent/Witte de With, Rotterdam.

“Zeitzone – wie tägliche Migration einen Grenzraum verändert”, *iz3W*.

“On Smugglers, Pirates and Aroma Makers”, *Bare Acts - Sarai Reader 05*, Sarai Media Lab New Delhi.

2005

“Fields of High Productivity”, 3-page insert, *Lettres* Copenhagen, April.

“Logging the Spanish-Moroccan borderlands”, *Re-Act* Catalog, Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center

“Border Videographies”, *JGCinema*, web portal on Cinema e Globalizzazione, http://www.jgcinema.org/pages/view.php?cat=materiali&id=105&id_film=56&id_dossier=0

“Europlex”, *The Need To Document*, exhibition cat., Kunsthau Baselland.

“Videogeographien”, *Grenzbespielungen – visuelle Politik in der Übergangszone*, ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Walther König, 61-88. “Remotely Sensed: A Topography of the Global Sex Trade”, republished in *Feminist Review*, issue 80.

“Black Sea Files”, *B-Zone, Becoming Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anselm Franke, Actar Publishers, 16-95.

“Sahara Panels”, *After the Fact*, Berlin Photography Festival.

2006

“Black Sea Files”, *CIMAM publication 2006* “Grenzen videografieren”, *Moving Landscape | Landschaft im Film*, eds. Barbara Pichler, Andrea Pollach, Synema, 153-162.

“Agadez Chronicle”, *The Maghreb Connection, Movements of Life Across North Africa*, Actar Publishers 2006, 42-69. (see books by the artist).

“Agadez Chronicle”, *International Biennial on Art, Architecture and Landscape, Canaries*, 2006 (short version).

2007

“Forced Transit”, A Dialogue with Imre Szeman on Black Sea Files and Contained Mobility, *Political Typographies*, Tapies Foundation, 12-45. (see books by the artist).

“Black Sea Files”, video stills, *Multitude* 28, Spring.

“The Maghreb Connection”, *Liberazione*, Tek Festival Issue, May 3.

“Sahara Chronicle – Dispersing the viewpoint”, *Port City – on Mobility and Exchange*, exhibition cat., Arnolfini, Bristol, 26-43.

“Videographies of Navigating Geobodies”, *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, eds. Katarzyna Marciniak u.a., Palgrave, chapter 7.

“Remanier et dilater l'espace du feminine”, *2 ou 3 choses que j'ignore d'elles*, FRAC Metz.

“On Smugglers, Pirates and Aroma Makers”, *Economic Representations: Academic*

and Everyday, ed. David F. Ruccio, Routledge “Image sequence, Gender in Motion,” *Die Konstruktion von Geschlecht in Raum und Erzählung*, Campus Verlag.

“Ästhetik des Realen – Das erweiterte Handlungsfeld künstlerischer Praxis im globalisierten Kontext. Zwei Videoprojekte”, and “Exotik des Realen – Vom ambivalenten Bezug zur Wirklichkeit”, *Bekanntmachungen 20 Jahre Studiengang Bildende Kunst SBK Zürich*, 62-66; 157-162.

2008

Interview, *Networked Cultures*, eds. Peter Moertenboeck und Helge Mooshammer, NAiPublishers, Rotterdam.

“Performing the Border: genere, corpi transnazionali e tecnologia”, *Culture della differenza. Femminismo, visualità e studi postcoloniali*, ed. Federica Timeto, Utet Università, Torino.

“Sahara Chronicle, Le Porte del Mediterraneo, Regione Piemonte, Skira, 2008.

“Contained Mobility, Lineas de mira, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

“Mission Report, cat. Manifesta7.

“X-Mission”, cat. Gwangju Biennial. *The Shanghai Papers*, Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart.

Translocalmotion, Shanghai Biennial cat., Shanghai Art Museum.

2009

“Counter-Geographies in the Sahara”, volume on the intersection between Geography and Humanities, Association of American Geographers, Routledge.

Guest editor of a special issue of *ArteEast/ArteNews – Arts and Cultures of the middle East and its diasporas – around the research relative to X-Mission*.

REVIEWS
A SELECTION

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This first monograph of Ursula Biemann's practice provides an opportunity to look back at more than a decade of prolific video art production. Through a range of essays by cultural theorists, as well as texts by the artist herself, the book surveys Biemann's numerous collaborative art and visual research projects in contested trans-national territories of the world. From the beginning, Biemann sought to develop a unique aesthetic language with which to explore her concern with the idea of borders and the contemporary forms of migration that they produce. A focus common to all of her video essays is a critique of the visual technologies developed for the acceleration or control of global mobility, upsetting the prevailing representations so as to reveal a more complex, normally unseen, human geography of collateral effects and unrecorded movements on the ground.

