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PERFORMING THE BORDER

Ursula Biemann

Over the last few years I have recognized a growing need in cultural practice to locate questions of gender and other categories of identity, such as ethnicity and nationality, within the context of the wider transformations of the public sphere, particularly the urban reality. The question that interests me here is how prevailing representations relate to the material reality of a specific site, i.e. how the border as a metaphor for various kinds of marginalizations becomes materialized not only in architectural and structural measures but also in the corporate and social regulations of gender. The video essay "Performing the border" examines the U.S.–Mexico border as a gendered space, focusing on the circulation of female bodies in the transnational zone and on the regulation of gender relations in representation, in the public sphere, the entertainment and sex industry, and in the reproductive politics of the maquila. The video also looks at the simultaneity of the post–fordist forms of production and the sexual violence that is taking place in the bordertown Ciudad Juarez.

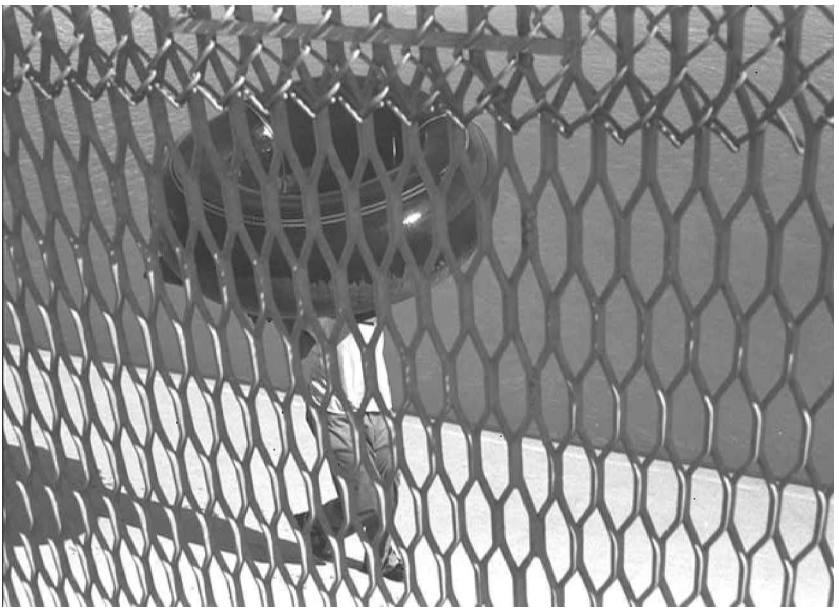
Driving along the border on the Mexican side, I was filming the woman behind the wheel and thus became myself a part of the road narrative that speaks throughout the video about the border as a perfomative place. A place that is constituted discursively through the representation of the two nations and materially through the installation of a transnational, corporate space in which different national discourses are both materialized.

In the border zone, everyone is being transformed into transnational subjects, and ethnic people articulate this discourse. Only bodies that allow themselves to be marked, to be exchanged, to be turned into a commodity, and to be recycled will be granted the visa for mobility in the transnational space. This is the most vulnerable, penetrable site, the place where anxieties about national identity concentrate. It is here, that all disease, illegality, contamination, and poverty come from, as we hear Bertha Jottars voice while driving through the desert: "The border is always represented as a wound, that needs to be healed, that needs to be cleaned, that needs to protected..."

SHIFTING PARADIGMS – SLIDING SPACES
SOFT MONIES – HARD REALITIES
CIRCULATING GOODS – PASSING PEOPLE

The representations of transnational subjects produced by global capitalism differ greatly. While discourses about residents of technology–consuming societies tend to efface specificities related to identity in favor of transnational mobililty, those on the producing end become over–determined by gendered, sexualized, racialized, and nationalized representations. These figures become the articulators of the border, that fragile line marking the fringe of the national body.

There is nothing natural about the transnational zone and there may be nothing real about it either. It is an entirely simulated place with simulated politics, a zone from which the idea of public has been thoroughly eradicated.



Bertha Jottar: “You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this 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, right? It’s just an imaginary line, a river or it’s just a wall...

... The question is how are you crossing? Are you crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a U.S. passport, jumping, as a tourist, as a migrant, as a middleclass woman, as a domestica. There are all these different ways of crossing and that’s the way the border gets rearticulated through the power relationships that the crossing produces. Because it’s not just this happy crossing."

The continuing diasporic movement of women in transnational space attests to their flexibility, resilience, and endurance. They are often still very young – 13–, 14–, 15–year–olds – when they leave their families and travel long distances to work on the border. They come from towns like Zacatecas, Durango, Torreon, on the arid central plateau and move to the Rio Grande. They are the hope of those left behind. Often they come in small groups: three or four girls of the same age and from the same town. Upon their arrival they won't find accommodations because municipal investments are only made for the transnationals, not for the people who work for them. So they go to the edge of the settlements, which spread far out into the Sierra, choose a vacant spot, and build a shack right into the desert sand. To do this they use leftovers from the maquiladoras. Pallets will serve as walls, chemical containers become water tanks. Here are vast stretches of land where mainly women live.

More than twenty years ago, the U.S. industry started to install their cheap–labor assembly plants called maquiladoras, the Golden Mills, south of the border. In the matter of a few years, they attracted thou-

THERE IS LITTLE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE SIERRA AND THE AREA THEY CALL URBAN

sands of new workers into the zone, making the borderline into borderland, a cultural corridor, an uncharted territory, inhabited by millions of people who vacillate between rural and urban, between a world of street vendors, streets of sand, and the production of high–tech equipment for the information industry. Within a short time, a new technological culture of repetition, registration and controlling was introduced in the desert city.

In artificial post–urban industrial parks that stretch over large desert areas, U.S. corporations assemble their electronic equipment for the communications industry, mainly by women. Every day hundreds of women arrive in Ciudad Juarez on the Rio Grande. These women make up the majority of the population of the border town. They have created new living spaces and consume their own entertainment culture. They have changed social structures and gender relations and in doing so they are rewriting the texts of their bodies and their society. These women are the ones who produce the instruments that enable the kind of cyberspace that affords mobility and the freedom to consume, a freedom not enjoyed by themselves but by millions of others north of the border. Their own mobility remains confined to the limits of the ”free zone” of post–fordist manufacturing.

GENDER MATTERS TO CAPITAL

In the electronically networked maquila system every individual is identified and profiled. Time, productivity, and the body of the female worker are strictly controlled by white male managers. The body control goes as far as to require a monthly cycle check to ensure the worker is not pregnant. Forced birth control and pregnancy tests are the order of the day and, needless to say, pregnancy means immediate dismissal. The reproductive functions of these bodies becomes strictly controlled from the moment they are determined to be productive. The speedy industrialization has imposed rather violent transformations between contradictory registers of public and private spaces, between work and plant, on the one hand, and home and family, on the other, or more generally between the economic and the sexual.

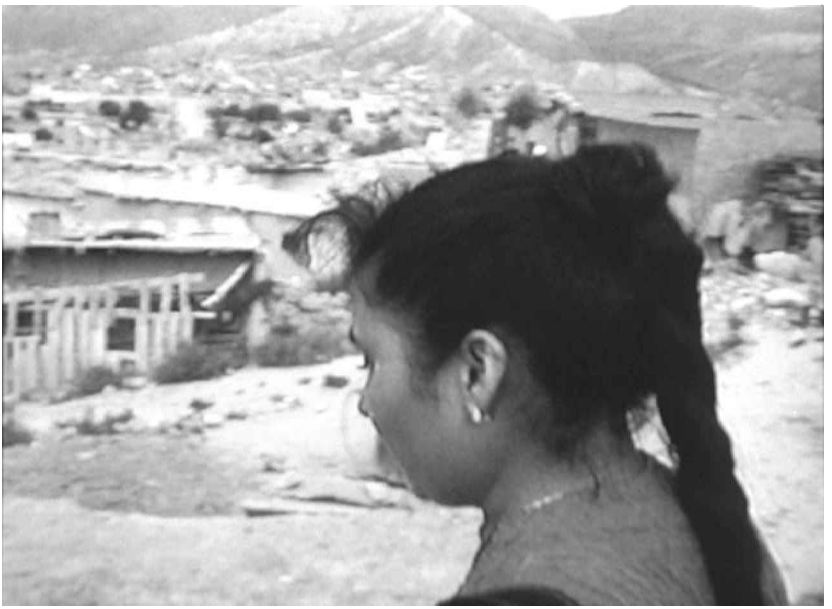
In the corporate language, any activity and any person can be thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly. The body of the worker gets technologized and fragmented in a post–human terminology that fragments and dehumanizes her body and turns it into a disposable, exchangeable, and marketable component. The colonial slave has been transformed into a post–fordist robot.

It is not unusual to see young maquila women moving through their desert neighborhoods wearing the little flesh–tone prostheses that pro-

tect them from the excessive electromagnetic charges that run through their bodies during assembly and testing. They are electromagnetic discharge needles, and the workers wear them strapped to their wrists. Attached to them are pink curled cables that link the female body to the workbench. The maquila women keep the devices around their arms on weekends for fear of forgetting them on Monday morning.

Even the most sophisticated technologies of surveillance have fissures and leaks, and there are holes in the border fence and trails that lead through the desert valley. It is here at night that other women help pregnant women across the border. The former know how to avoid snakebites and dehydration and charge little to bring the latter safely to a U.S. hospital. In the new transnational space we will be looking for these road narratives. Transgressive trajectories express alternative desires. And even though in number and agency these nomadic transgressive subjectivities are modest, I believe, philosophically speaking, it is important to theorize them.

"I have known Concha for about five years," says Angela Escajeda while we drive out to the settlement on the periphery, "from when she used to live here in a house made from leftover materials from



the maquiladora. At some point she found herself abandoned by her husband and realized that there was no chance for a pregnant woman to find work in Juarez. So Concha met someone, I don't know whether it was good or bad for her, who told her that she could sell cigarettes in the U.S. What Concha did was she would cross to the other side where she would sell her cigarettes cheaper because she didn't pay taxes, then she would buy her merchandise over there, bring it back here, take off the taxes and put it back into circulation there. Later on, based on her facility to cross and avoid the U.S. immigration officers Concha passed as a wetback. Her strategies have been multiple and variable in all her trajectories of crossing to the U.S. Concha was also confronted with the Mexican militarization of the border in 1994, when Sylvestre Reyes closed the border to the U.S., and the attitude towards people crossing was getting more and more aggressive. Concha managed to pass undercover, and at one moment in her life, without thinking about it, she started to lead people across. Her fame grew to the point where people from Central America, all the way down to Nicaragua, came to find her. She would bring them into the U.S. and charge only a small amount compared to others. Concha also often helps pregnant women who want to give birth across the border because they want to have American children. Their thinking is that they can use them one day to obtain papers and benefit from the services over

there. Concha runs a 'service for pregnant women' that leaves them at the public hospital in El Paso."

Concha's narrative of transgression is a radical contradiction to the docile, knowable, manageable kinds of bodies usually presented in advertisements. Tracing new paths that blur with the first winds, she crosses the border, moving in and out of legality. Hers is not a one–time crossing with the aim of becoming someone else on the other side. Rather, she is a subject in transit, moving through the transnational zone while finding ever–new strategies to get around the prevailing power structures on her clandestine trajectory. As the passer between cultural locations the new subject is the mediator and constant translator of different sedimentations, registers of speech, and cultural codes. When I passed by what used to be Concha's house, she had already packed up and gone. She left no forwarding address. She is not addressable in the ordinary sense by the system of citizen control. She is profoundly subversive through the fleeting, utterly mobile and transitory nature of her activity and through the dis–identification with and disloyalty to any national program. With Concha's help the pregnant, maternal body, which is ordinarily the object of great biotechnological interest and reproductive control, becomes the site of transgression. She transfers these bodies from the transnational zone,

where social services are denied to them by U.S. corporate employers, to a new national space, which is ironically dominated by the same corporations but where they can still collect the benefits due to them.

Juana Azua: I actually came to Ciudad Juarez to prostitute myself. In Torreon I didn't want to because during all this time I kept it a secret from my family. A brother of mine had an accident, before that I had good work. I started at age 31, I didn't prostitute myself young. So my brother had an accident and this brother had 7 children. I came to prostitute myself to continue his treatment at the hospital and to help him a bit with the children. The money I made I toke with me and spent it over there. I sometimes came out of the room vomiting, I was nauseated. But it was work that I chose because I needed money.

There are a lot of young prostitutes, from other places but also from Juarez, a lot of girls from the maquila too. They come on weekends to prostitute themselves, the ones from the maquila and migrants. Some stay here, others come and go. But a lot of them are very young, girls of 14, 15 years old. They come to prostitute themselves and falsify their papers so they can enter a bar, because minors are not allowed, but they get in anyway. That's why there is very little money for adults like me because there is a lot of competi-

tion from young people. If I am 43 years old and ask for 50 pesos and another girl is 17 and charges 50 pesos, the man will go with the young one. They don't work every day because many people do sex work and join the maquila. There are many in the maquila who move over here and the other way around in search for a secure salary, as minimal it might be.

One of the most striking, and maybe most disturbing, insights I gained on the border is that international labor in the South is not only feminized but also sexualized. The female workers are literally interpellated in their sexuality. Structurally speaking, a young woman in Juarez has three options: either she becomes an assembly worker; if she is not accepted at the factory because of insufficient education, she can become a domestica and work as a maid in a private house; but if she can't produce a recommendation for such a position, her only option is prostitution.

Yet securing a factory job is not always the end of the story. Low salaries force many women to seek supplementary income from prostitution on weekends. Sexual and labor markets interpenetrate within this economic order. The $1 per hour wage of many maquiladoras means that pimping takes place on a corporate level. Not that transna-

tionals are creaming off the profits from prostitution, but they do benefit from getting labor for pocket money by making women dependent on commodifying their bodies. Prostitution is not just part and parcel of a tax–free consumer binge on the border; it is a structural part of global capitalism.

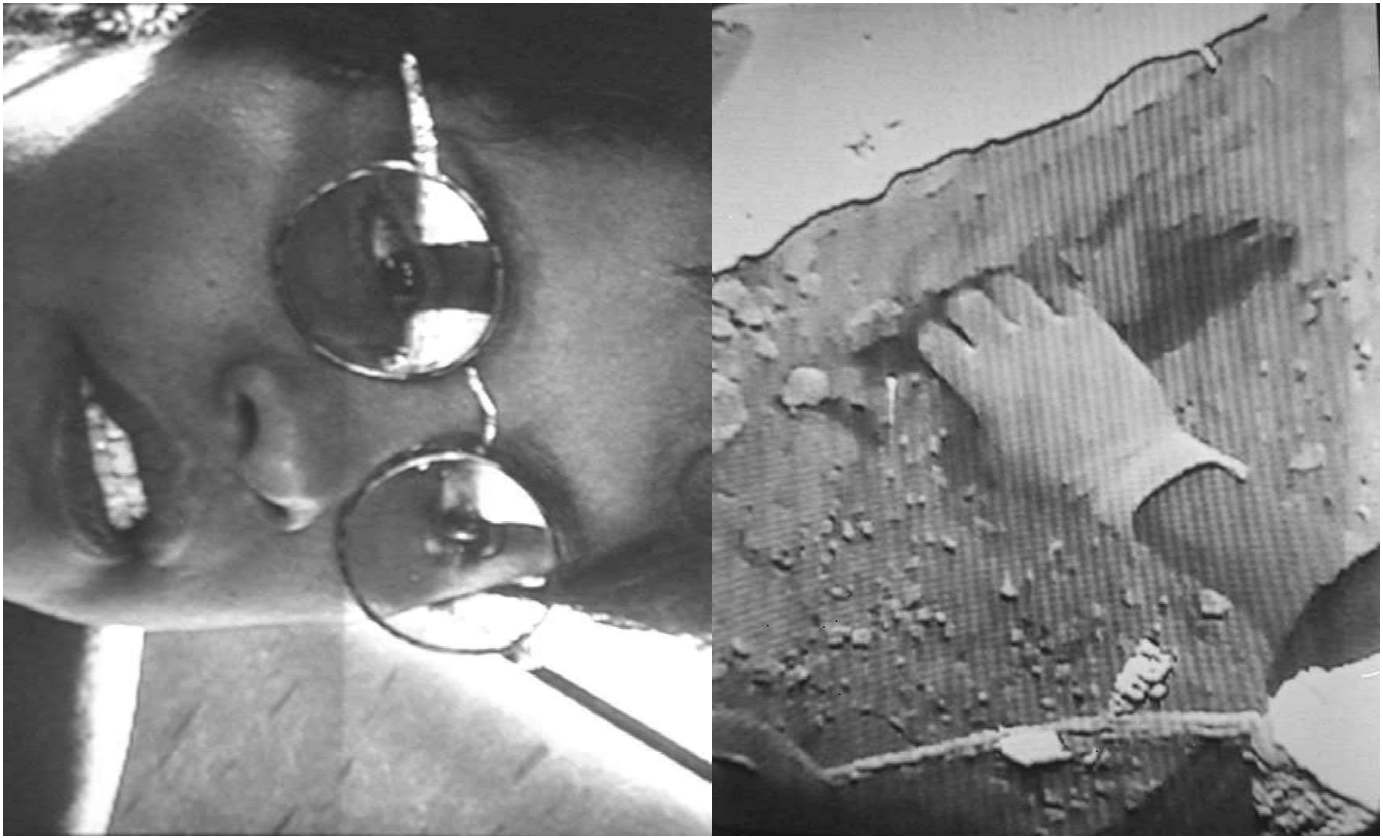
The border is a highly gendered region. Economic power relations along the line of gender difference are spelled out in sexual terms. Relationship patterns are being remapped quite drastically. There is a certain reversal of income pattern that empowers women. In the dance halls, the shift of buying power to young women is obvious. The entertainment is mainly catering to female customers with shows of male strippers where women cheer and rate their sex–appeal. Even the lyrics of the music are often explicitly addressing female sexual desires.

SEXUALIZING THE TERRITORY

There is another, more violent aspect to the clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology in the U.S.–Mexican border zone that I want to turn to now. Since 1995, close to 300 women have been killed in Juarez and all 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. Many of them had just moved to the city, nobody knew them or claimed their bodies. Fifty women are still lying in the morgue, unidentified. Perversely, many bodies are found wearing clothes that belonged to other missing women, thus emphasizing in literal terms the exchangeability of the bodies.

In his recent cultural study on serial killers, Mark Seltzer draws a number of intriguing connections between sexual violence and mass technologies proper to a machine culture. He traces connections between this form of repetitive and compulsive violence to the styles of production and reproduction that make up machine culture and particularly relates technologies of identification, registration, and simulation to the psychological disposition of serial killers.

MERGING THE NATIONAL BODY WITH THE NATURAL BODY



Sexual offense and eroticized violence crosses the boundaries between the natural and the collective body, passing private desire to public spectacle. This transgression, so characteristic of the psychological configuration of the serial killer, is performed on a gendered and racialized body, and the border becomes the perfect stage for it. Losing the boundaries between the self and other, the serial killer is perpetually in search of a border. He is attracted to the border of his country, precisely because it signifies the boundary of a larger entity of belonging, the nation. Going to the border becomes the physical expression of his mental extremity, merging his physical body with the national body, confusing the inside and outside.

The border is a gigantic metaphor for the artificial division between these diverging concepts, as well as a site where the blurring of distinctions takes on violent forms. On the representational level, we have seen how the act of technologizing the female body simultaneously sets identity markers of nature, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. On the material level, this process is paralleled by the robotic, repetitive process of assembly work, the intimate implication of the body with these technological functions and the association of this process with the gendered, racialized body. The serial killer, in turn, translates the violence of this entanglement into urban pathology, publicly reproducing the repetitive,

disassembling, disidentifying performance on the body. What the industry constructs as consumable, disposable bodies is literally tossed into the desert nearby informal "garbage disposals." In his own morbid way, the serial killer does nothing more than to make literal and visible the prevailing discourse and to constitute the border in one more way.

Performing the Border, video–essay 43 min. © Ursula Biemann 1999, www.wmm.com. Script published in *been there and back to nowhere—Gender in transnational spaces*, b_books Berlin 2000 http://www.geobodies.org

Bertha Jottar is a Mexican video artist and writer in performance studies who lives in New York; Juana Azua, a former prostitute, works as health promoter for an AIDS prevention program of Sadec, Ciudad Juarez; Angela Escajeda works for the Center for Investigation and Solidarity in Ciudad Juarez.