



*COUNTER GEOGRAPHIES. AN ARTISTIC PRACTISE.
INTERVIEW WITH URSULA BIEMANN - ARTIST, THEORIST
AND CURATOR - ON HER STUDIES ON MIGRATION,
MOBILITY AND GENDER IDENTITY¹*

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Resumen:

En los primeros escritos y en los trabajos de videos experimentales la artista suiza Ursula Biemann³ investiga en torno a temas como la movilidad, las tecnologías y la identidad. En la siguiente entrevista se quiere destacar su trabajo como teórica, curadora y artista, comprometida con temas como las migraciones, la división del trabajo, la violencia sexual, trabajo realizado con el fin de documentar cuestiones de género en distintas zonas de las periferia mundiales. Sus videos ensayos documentan la feminización de la economía global, poniendo énfasis en las actividades que se realizan en estas zonas transnacionales, explicando de este modo las dinámicas de propagación de estos espacios.

¹ Archive research in collaboration with Alice Buoli and Iliara Picilli. All images are still from Ursula Biemann's videos.

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³ Ursula Biemann (born 1955, Zurich, Switzerland) is an artist, writer, and video essayist. Biemann's pluralistic practice spans a range of media including experimental video, interview, text, photography, cartography and materials, which converge in highly formalized spatial installations. Her work also adopts the form of publications, lectures, and curatorial as well as collaborative research projects. Her earlier writing and experimental video work focused on the gendered dimension of migration. She also made space and mobility her prime category in the curatorial projects "Geography and the Politics of Mobility", "The Maghreb Connection", and the widely exhibited art and research project "Sahara Chronicle" on clandestine migration networks. Actually, her artistic practice is strongly research oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates climate change and the ecologies of oil and water.

Palabras Clave: migraciones, identidad de género, video ensayos, fronteras internacionales, zonas transnacionales.

Abstract:

In the earlier writing and experimental video work the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann investigates issues on mobility, technology and identity. This interview want to highlight her work as theorist, curator and artist, especially around questions surrounding migrations and topics such as divisions of labour, sexual violence in order to document the gendered conditions in different world periphery's zones. Her video essays survey the feminization of the global economy, and by focusing on the activities that occur at the periphery of these transnational zones, demonstrating the ways in which these spaces are enacted.

Keywords: migrations, gender identity, video essays, international borders, transnational zones.

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How did you come across the border as a subject for your work?

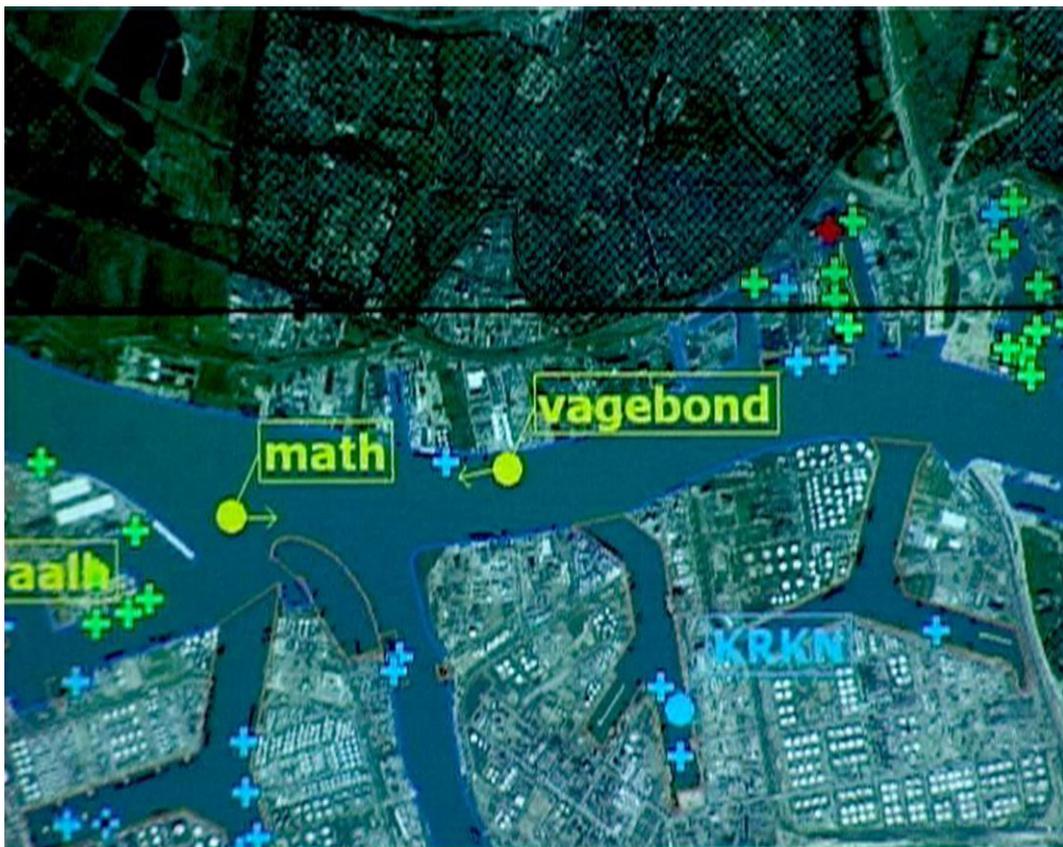
I got interested in the border from the very beginning of my art practice, when I came out of art school in New York. I decided to do a research on the international labour division of women in the global production. I assumed that the US-Mexican border would be a site where these new conditions would be very visible. As a visual producer you have to go where things are actually represented in the space so you can film them. It was my first visit to the border in 1989.



© Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999.

What were the artistic and theoretical impulses that had led you to work on the themes of your research?

I was working as a conceptual artist using photography and text, but I realised that video was a much better medium for complex issues such as globalisation processes. It allows you to include many different layers of meaning, using text and voice-over and interview with real people, images and sound. Once I have decided to use video, I made practically no evolution in technical term. I didn't feel I had to use a bigger camera or high-definition or take a whole team with me on site. I work on my own with my little Sony camera, I can move through spaces where camera teams couldn't go. Also, I don't have to do much fundraising, because I do low budget projects. I'm very comfortable with this flexibility.



© Ursula Biemann, *Contained Mobility*, 2004.

What do you think is the best approach to the border? When you are working in a border zone, what is your method of research and action? What are your points of reference when you are on the field?

I continue to be interested in two key issues: one is a spatial concern, i.e. how does a border materialize; and the other is an economic issue, how does a border economy constitute itself? Usually it is a place of migration. People create economies by crossing through or they actually move to the border to work in the industries and thus

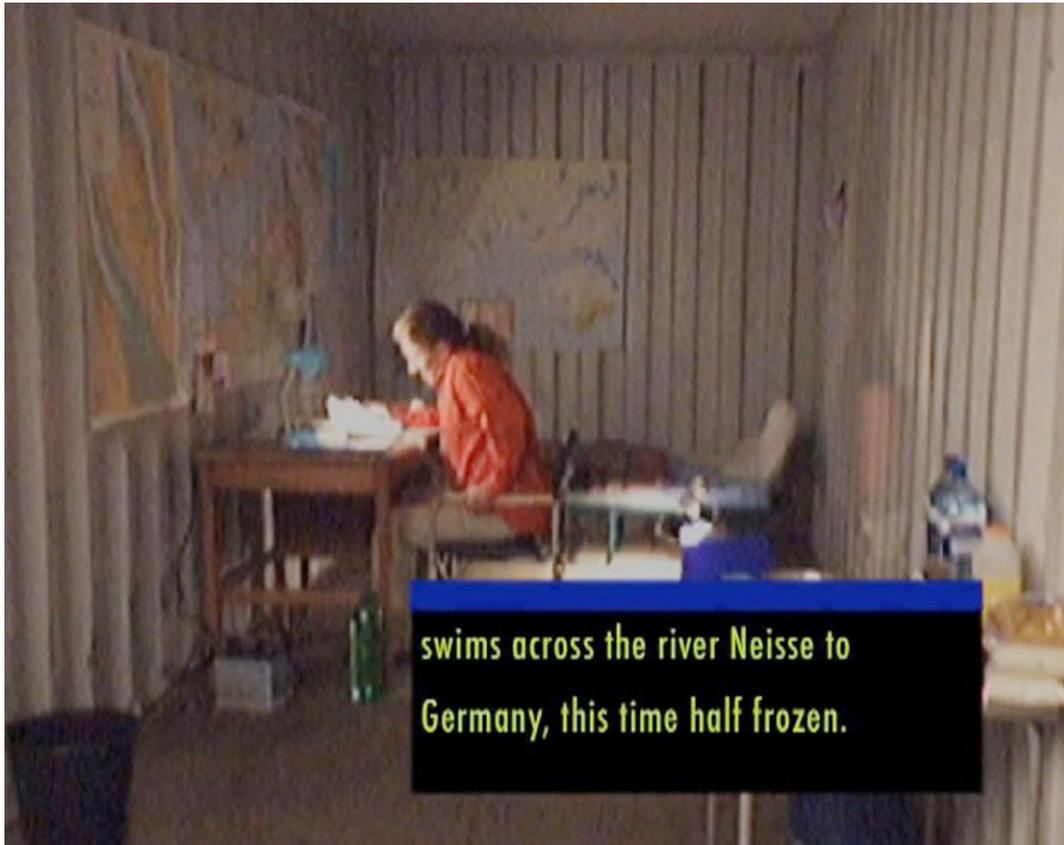
participate in creating an economic place under special conditions. Every border has its very own character. Ceuta is radically different from the US-Mexican border. Before I go on location, I make contacts with NGOs who work on these specific issues. They are experts and have themselves produced a lot of knowledge about the border conditions. Also they have good contacts for sites or people you'd like to visit. I work very closely with NGOs. I'm less interested in the official discourse. I prefer to work on the counter movements and learn how migrants organize themselves.



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Does a border identity exist? And if so, do you think that the crossing of the border can change this identity?

There is a real place around borders where real people live, those people have already negotiated their own border identity and have come to live in this kind of dialogical way. A border culture usually inhabits an extended zone. And then there is the border as a site for the projection of national identity. The whole anxiety about national identity is projected onto the border which then turns into a site that needs extra surveillance because it starts to have this super-imposed meaning. We have to distinguish between the discursive border and the material border. In Mexico I didn't really see a clash between those two because there are so many Latin and Mexican-Americans who live on both sides. I'm not sure I would look at it as a class of two identities, I don't like this idea too much. That it is a place of drama I would agree to, because it is a place that is so incredibly sensitive and vulnerable that particularly tough things, such as the serial killings, happen in this kind of theatrical way.



© Ursula Biemann, *Contained Mobility*, 2004.

Is it possible to act on the frontier? What type of interventions are possible on the border: action research, activity plan, theoretical research, editorial project, or sensitisation program?

For my part, I have decided to work on the symbolic level of meaning production rather than direct interventions in the social sphere. I leave those up to the NGOs because they are well organized and have a strong local presence. One issue they work on is the lack of security. One of the problems is that women, and young women in particular, are exposed to violence in the US-Mexican border areas, for instance. They try to improve the security of these huge desert slums, where women live in self-made shacks. In these post-urban zones there are no proper streets, no street lighting and no public transportation. Women have to walk endlessly through the dark neighbourhoods before they even get to a bus. These are the conditions, which make it very dangerous for young women to use the public sphere. Theoretically, you could plan concrete interventions to improve their situation. But the point is that globalisation creates these spaces by specifically going to areas where cheap labour is available without having to provide social securities. They can exploit labour to a maximum for the export of goods to the global market. In fact, these neighbourhoods without infrastructure are a structural part of capitalism. As soon as you begin to improve the situation and people start labour organizations and kindergartens, the corporations will move to another place. So, it is short-sighted to think that you can move in, improve the situation and then people will be happier under globalisation.

Has your vision of the border experienced an evolution or a change?

In my first video *Performing the border*, I started to engage with theories of performativity and the possibility of applying concepts of the social construction of gender to a reading of the border. It turned into an analysis of how the border is constituted through the movement of people, rather than taking it as an absolute geographic entity such as a static borderline separating two spaces. This was conceptually very interesting to me, but in terms of video making, it is only in the later video *Europlex that* these ideas materialized in images like the smuggler's hill.

Another project, *Contained Mobility* is about mobility in the post-socialist era. A Belorussian biologist started to enter Europe by crossing just about every border, developing all kinds of technologies and strategies to undermine authorities. Migration has entered a new phase, it is no longer the kind of movement that we knew, where people would move from one country to another, settle down, find work, build communities and then have all the identity problems that we have much spoken about in the 1990s. This is not the way it works anymore. We now have an image of continuously moving on, never really arriving at a destination, migration has become a much more undefined, flexible and more precarious project. I constantly develop my video work on migration further and look at new aspects of migration as they started to emerge in the last decade. In my latest project on the Sahara, it became clear that with the fortification of the European border, the border control is transferred down to the Maghreb countries. Our border has been displaced to the south. You have to look for it in the Sahel zone now. If you want to document the activities because they directly relate to the Schengen space. The border is moving, migration concepts are transforming and theoretical concepts are changing: we have to look at the border very differently.



© Ursula Biemann, *Performing the border*, 1999.

Referring to your idea of giving a different image of female work, do you think that during the last years something has changed in representation of women, in media or artistic products? Do you think that this image corresponds to the real condition of women?

One thing has to be clear. Gender is not a special area that you can turn to once you have understood the overall concept of globalisation. Gender is an integral and constitutive part of global capitalism. So if you don't look at gender, I'm afraid you get an incomplete and totally distorting view on what this global project is all about. Female work constitutes the lower strata of global labour everywhere. But my point has never been to simply produce a documentation of female labour and make voiceless women speak etc. Rather I try to combine the reality of women on site with an artificial theoretical construct of how gender and technology produce this specific kind of post-industrial, post-fordist space. It is combining a geopolitical macro-level with the micro-politics on the ground. My videos never give you a slice of life; they are about the border as an artificial construct.

In your videos *Performing the border* and *Europlex* it seems that women have very few chances in their lives on the border (become a *maquiladora* worker, or a “domestica”, a smuggler, a prostitute). Do you think they have no more alternatives? Who can act in this sense?

The fact that a woman could only have three choices – housemaid, *maquila* worker

or prostitute – is a very disturbing idea, particularly to a US audience who grew up with a notion of a free world where everyone can make it. But you have to understand that a city like Juarez used to be a small town of fifty thousand inhabitants. Now it is over two million, but the infrastructure has not increased. It's just a huge dysfunctional place. Apart from the production plants, there simply are no jobs.



© Ursula Biemann, *Europlex*, 2003.

How does the presence of the borderline influence the everyday life of Moroccan women?

This is an interesting question. Anthropologists would probably approach it this way. I would turn the question around and look at the way women contribute to this border construct, rather than looking at the effect it has on their lives. It does have an effect, because Ceuta is a Spanish city within a Moroccan territory. So you have an economic difference between the inside and the outside of the enclave, which immediately produces an economy that benefits from that difference. One way this is performed is that domestic workers cross into the city and work in Spanish households. The economic difference is prone to be exploited by the Spanish citizens in the enclave. I try not to highlight the victimization and exploitation that may result from this difference. I prefer to explore the ways in which women, even under very difficult conditions, generate a livelihood by designing their own strategies of survival and develop new economies in the cracks of these transnational structures.



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More about the artist:
<http://www.geobodies.org>