

Performing Borders

The Transnational Video

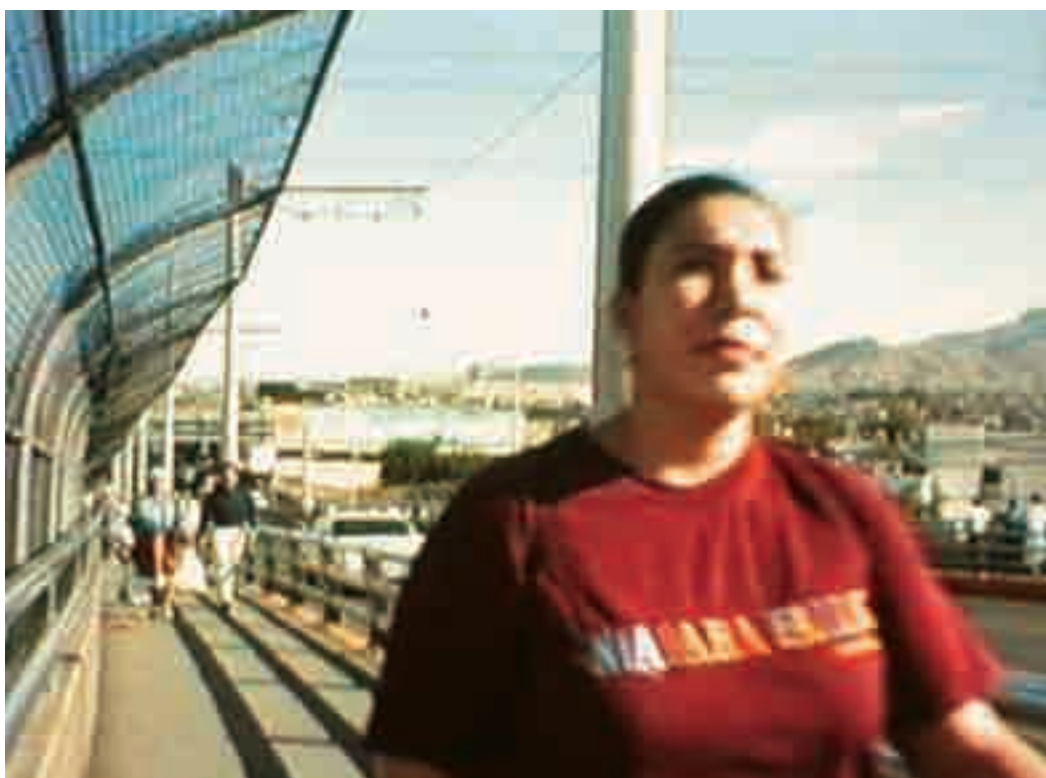
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Performing the Border is a video essay that describes a particular place, a desert city on the U.S.-Mexican border. Juarez City is located in a Free Trade Zone that has been installed along the entire frontier for assembly operations of the U.S. industry. There are hundreds of sterile plants in this town where Mexican women solder the chips for our digital culture. It is a transnational zone that has turned the Mexican rural living condition into a hi-tech slum life for millions.

In this type of zone, the colonial slave has been transformed into a post-Fordist robot, cranking out chips in a steady flow. We are aware that transnationalism has created particular conditions under which production for the global market takes place. Among those conditions is the fact that women workers have to build their own shacks into the desert sand when they move to work on the border, that the young female workforce is gradually replaced when their eyesight is consumed from doing the precision work, and that many women workers prostitute themselves on weekends because their wage is not enough to survive, not even in the slum. Transnationalism is a very gendered condition. But this is not what this paper is about.

Instead I want to focus on the notion of the “zone” in transnationalism and how this zone corresponds to the kind of places or non-places created in essays. I would like to relate the transnational characteristics of this video genre to the Free Trade Zone and propose a metaphorical and a material reading of the term “transnational.”

Not unlike transnationalism, the essay practices dislocation, it moves across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic. In the essay, it is the voice-over narration that ties the pieces together in a string of reflections that follow a subjective logic. The narration in the essay, the authorial voice, is clearly situated in that it acknowledges a very personal view, a female migrant position, a white workers position, a queer black position etc., and this distinguishes it from a documentarian voice or a scientific voice. The narration is situated in terms of identification but isn't located in a geographic sense. It's the translocal voice of a mobile, traveling subject that doesn't belong to the place it describes but knows enough about it to unravel its layers of meaning. But the mere gathering of information and facts is hardly of interest, for the essay doesn't believe in the representability of truth. The essayist's intention lies much rather in a reflection on the world and the social order, and it does so by arranging the material into a particular field of connections. In other words, the essayist's approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.



This very quality makes the audio-visual essay a suitable genre for my investigation of a subject matter like globalization. In this debate, many issues relating to economy, identity, spatiality, technology and politics converge and are placed in a complicated relationship to one another. The attempt to draw these layers together leads inevitably to the creation of an imaginary space, a sort of theoretical platform on which these reflections can take place and be in dialogue with each other. In every work, essayists install this kind of space. We can think of it as an imaginary topography, on which all kinds of thoughts and events taking place in various sites and non-sites experience a spatial order.

Performing the Border addresses questions of international labor division, migration and the sexualization of female bodies in the global economy; it traces the spatial inscription of gender relations into a post-industrial setting; it discusses the connection between the racialized body and high technology; it reveals the urban pathology in the public sphere and describes the construction of borders both in a metaphorical and a material sense. All these relations that characterize the underlying order of this border town speak about global forces that are much bigger than the place itself. This lousy little border town is the unassuming non-place across which many multidirectional strings of meaning can be narrated. Some of the relations are more visible than others. In fact, many processes are increasingly abstract and unrepresentable and couldn't be captured by documentary practices alone. I'm particularly interested in the spatial idea of this field of connections and associations created in the artistic form of the essay, which extends the meaning of a particular place beyond its documentable reality, and to think about the politics of this videographic space. In *Performing the Border*, the essayist geography and the transnational geography converge. And they both become apparent as artificial constructs.

The export processing zone is a well defined zone that doesn't operate according to the ordinary social rules, it's a place in a state of emergency, a non-place where civil realities and national regulations are largely suspended in favor of a special corporate arrangement. Foucault calls such formations heterotopias — other spaces that are located outside of the ordinary social regulations, in deviation from the norm.¹ At the same time, heterotopias represent a counter position in that they reflect and comment precisely on how the normative society functions. Psychiatric clinics, prisons, military schools, brothels and colonies are extreme types of heterotopias. In any case, heterotopias are particularly telling sites, and unlike Utopias, which are essentially unreal, these are real, effective spaces. We can think of the Free Trade Zones as being heterotopian.

What characterizes the logic of transnationalism? The concept is usually associated with displaced labor, global media networks, liberated markets, footloose capital and, let's say, an ambiguous relation to borders. Borders are simultaneously transcended and reinforced, and digital technology

plays a central role in both dispersing globally and protecting the national definitions of territory. The positive image is the idea that along with this dispersal goes a state of being adrift, in flux and utterly mobile. We seem to be able to be in several places at the same time. It is no longer the image of the traveler who strolls through the world but a multi-present subject connected to various professional and personal sites in time. This prompts us to reconsider the meaning of place and location. Essayist audiovisual practice has long been experimenting with imagining topographies that connect simultaneous but disparate events in various geo-social places. It has anticipated the state of adriftness, it has anticipated the virtual space.

But with all this hype about mobility, it could be interesting to look at the role of the body in the transnational zone as well as in the essayist space. In the documentary tradition, reality is attached to a body, the camera focuses on the experiencing body, the social actor, and in that sense it is a historical body. In fiction, on the other hand, the body represents a narrated figure, it is a narrated body. But in the essay, the bodies are not instrumentalized in either way, they do not have to perform representative functions. On the contrary, in their self-reflexive way, the essayist bodies contribute to constructing other things. In this event, they construct borders. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gets constituted, as Bertha Jottar says. And because these particular bodies that cross the border are racialized and gendered, nationalized and economic, the border becomes not a neutral construct in the process but one that is marked by these very relations. In *Performing the Border*, then, the body doesn't become the carrier of narration or history, but actively constructs borders, traces geographies and performs transnational principles. It is always doing something extra to what it is saying.

So if we can say that the concept of the transnational is actually an interesting one that has brought positive qualities to the lifestyle of many here in the advanced world, we also have to recognize that this immaterial condition is powered by the labor of actual people who happen to be located South of the border. When the general trend is to represent globalization in images of free and enhanced mobility of people, this video is an attempt to embody and localize the virtual and digital culture in a particular transnational site. It is not the jet-setting, palm-using business elite nor the skateboarding 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 running water or electricity at night. This image stands in a reversed analogy and in a critical dialogue with those other, more glamorous images that circulate in magazines.

Even if this video is an attempt to bring in a complementary, missing information, it does not claim to enter the real, or to be more truthful than corporate representations. It opens up another artificial, discursive space that is equally disconnected from the real on both the visual and the sonic level. Slow motion, tinting, distortions and intense layering turn the images into discursive elements rather than the depiction of facts. But maybe more importantly, the original sound is deleted to a large extent, and replaced by an electronic sound carpet. The material space is thus technolo-





gized, dislocated, dematerialized and prepared for a different reading. The reading I propose isn't committed to documenting a slice of Mexican life, the voice-over argues and speculates, becomes theoretical or poetic. The voice is always the same, but the text is patched together from many different sources. It isn't a homogeneous voice that speaks as an "I." There is no particular subject behind the narration, even though this narration is highly subjective. It speaks from a particular position that I could describe as that of a feminist, white cultural producer who is in the process of moving from a Marxist to a post-colonial, post-Fordist, post-humanist place and trying to figure out how to transpose old labor questions into a contemporary aesthetic and theoretical discourse in a globalized context.

The performative aspect of the transnational space and of borderlands plays a central role in the video. Once we embrace the concept of performativity, we are tempted to apply it to most everything we previously conceived as stable and fixed. When we once thought of borders as unmovable political boundaries that will change their meaning only through pacts or military interventions, performativity allows us to envision them in a radically different way. The focus is shifted away from a fixation on the dividing forces of power towards the multiple and diverse social construction of space, a construction that takes place through the repetitive act of ordinary people as well as global players. This approach assumes a more complex and decentralized view of power. Apart from deconstructing efforts, it simultaneously grants the movement of people and the circulation of signs real effectiveness. The idea that borders are socially formed and performed is not only inspiring, it truly enhances the agency of artists, writers and video makers since it highlights their involvement in the symbolic production as a performative act of "doing border," if we wish to adapt Judith Butler's notion of "doing gender" to this geographic act.

One of the main questions I have pursued in my work during the last years, then, is how human trajectories and the traffic of signs and visual information form particular cultural and social landscapes and eventually inscribe themselves materially in the terrain. It is not by coincidence that *Performing the Border* opens with a shot from inside a car moving through the Mexican desert. In the off, border artist Bertha Jottar comments: "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 just a wall..." In this shot I was filming the woman driving the car and thus I became a part of the road narrative unfolding as Bertha speaks about the U.S.-Mexican border being a highly performative place.² It is a place that is constituted discursively through the representation of the two nations and materially through the installation of a transnational zone in which different national discourses get materialized in an ambivalent space at the fringe of two societies. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gains meaning. "They are crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a U.S. passport or jumping, as a tourist, a migrant, a middleclass woman or a domestica. There are all these different ways of crossing, and that's how the border gets rearticulated, through



the power relationships that the crossing produces. Because it's not just this happy crossing," Bertha comments over dreamlike, over exposed images of people in rubber boats floating across the Rio Bravo.

There is a particular figure roaming the border that stands for the artificial and pathological quality of transnational space, where the identities are collapsing: the Serial Killer. In the essay, this figure transports deeply metaphorical significations of the clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology, while being simultaneously a real existing fact. Since 1995, close to 350 women have been killed in Juarez according to a similar pattern.

According to Mark Seltzer's extensive research on serial sexual violence, a common psychological denominator of the killers lies in the undoing of identity to the point of becoming a non-person, the desire to blend into the social and physical environment.³ There is a strange permeability of bodies and the urban environment in Juarez, where the habitat blends into the natural surroundings and the constructed reality blurs with the sand roads. The crime often happens at dawn, when the distinction between night and day is unclear and the boundaries between the private houses, the unpaved streets, and the desert around it are undistinguishable. In the early morning hours, many women pass through these undefined spaces on their way to the maquiladoras, in transit between private and work space, between desert and urban. The blurring of all these nominal divisions of space finds violent expression in the translocal site of Ciudad Juarez.

We have to acknowledge that when we enter the realm of image production, we face a range of different problems than when we approach the same issues of gender and globalization from an activist perspective. The question that emerges is: How can a video, rather than simply arguing against global capitalism and affirming rigid gender identities, reflect and produce the expansion of the very space in which we write and speak of the feminine? There is a need to investigate the interplay between the symbolization of the feminine and the economic and material reality of women. I would locate my work as a video maker in that zone. Even if video as a medium promises to be of great use for activist work, I don't see its main purpose so much in catalyzing direct social change, nor would I reduce it to a mere contribution to an ongoing discourse. I see its primary potential in mediation between the two, as an effective intervention in the performative act of representation.

1 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986).

2 The complete script is published in Ursula Biemann, *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces* (Berlin: b_books, 2000).

3 Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).