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Voice in Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border*

The now infamous statement: 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented' has quite understandably plagued Karl Marx due to its inference for colonial paternalism.¹ The central position of the camera lens within the politics of representation debates for the last forty or so years has faced the problematics of such a claim, which was by then, and certainly now, free-floating and removed from its wider context of Marx's 1852 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Nonetheless such a sentiment requires, now as then, persistent confrontation. Jean-Luc Godard famously critiqued the idea of 'giving a voice to the people.' In simply turning the camera on the subject, he argued, we do not automatically avoid the codes and established systems of representation that enable the viewer to *view* how they have been conditioned to *see*. There is, in addition, an uncritical treatment of the role of the 'giver,' typically (and historically) the Western man who bestows the gift of speech. Chris Marker, however, notes that this notion of 'giving the people a voice' cannot be avoided entirely. Marker asserted that he wished 'to give the power of speech to people who don't have it, and,

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when it's possible, to help them find their own means of expression.² For Marker, such concerns are born of his involvement with political filmmaking and the business of images. Of course, Marker did not lay claim to solving this concern of speaking for an other. In order to confront such an impasse, others, such as Norman Bryson, have acknowledged the *gaze*, or *le regard*, as a challenge to *look back*. Under this agreement, which has its grounding in Eastern philosophical traditions, there is a refusal to conceive of subject and object as distinct static entities.³ That said, the manner in which vision and the gaze are constructed in relation to power and powerlessness cannot be ignored. So, we might then ask what it means to speak for oneself and for (as well as *to*) one another at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Performing the Border (1999) by artist Ursula Biemann examines the young, largely female workforce who produce high-end technological products for many US-owned global transnationals in de-regulated assembly-line plants south of the Mexico-US border. Export Processing Zones (EPZ) quickly mushroomed along cross border areas in fairly recent history due to borders opening up to free-trade circulation (the North American Free Trade Agreement was implemented in 1994). Alongside garment production, workers employed in the maquiladoras, or the 'golden mills' as they are often referred to, process and assemble constituent parts for consumer electronics that are finished and sold in the US. This 'Twin Factory' system became a lucrative way to secure cheap labour while maximising profit margins. In addition to low-cost staff expenditure, maquiladoras can

be completely foreign-owned, resulting in exemption from tax payments to the Mexican government.

The video-essay format employed by Biemann reinstates the authorial voice, yet in a manner that is at a slight remove from what we associate with the standard documentary mode. Biemann's authorial voice attempts to transgress a number of developments in the deployment of voice in non-fiction film and video: firstly, the monolithic presence of the voice in more established documentary modes; secondly, its dissolution and imposed obscurity in *cinéma vérité*-style work; and thirdly, its fracturing and multiplication through the political praxis of many feminist and postcolonial concerns, inciting the crucial demands made for uncritical conceptions of 'truth' and objectivity.

It is perhaps useful to note the historical lineage in which this formative work of Biemann's might be best placed. Termed by Biemann herself as a 'video-essay,' she writes that 'the idea was not so much to document the reality of a border town,' rather, '*Performing the Border* is put together in a way that slowly but steadily unravels the many layers of global processes that are inscribed in [such a] place.'⁴ In Biemann's own writing on her work, there is refuge sought in the 'genre' of the essay, despite much of her work appealing to a more 'conservative' understanding of the documentary. While the work can stand accused of many of the problems associated with the documentary, I would like to consider in what ways *Performing the Border* might address interlocking forms of oppression through specific formal devices that are produced in dialogue with earlier debates around the politics of representation.⁵

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By the 1990s, keeping in mind *Performing the Border* was made in 1999, postmodern critique was seen by many as having hardened into an opposite doxa, namely that social knowledge was irrecoverable (by lens-based media) and that realism was a defunct project.⁶ Allan Sekula's assessment was that in place of the 'myth' of photographic truth, a new dogma was in place: that an image tells us nothing reliable at all.⁷ This is a good position from which to approach *Performing the Border*. This is because the video asks us to calibrate the compulsion to document a vastly reordered, post-1989 world in light of a deeply problematic history that has seen the photomechanical, and now the digital image, play a significant role in both colonial violence and in the thawing of the centre/margin axiom (as the camera is viewed as an 'emancipatory' tool for raising consciousness). That is, 'documentation' as a tool to determine another's subjectivity and a space from which to claim one's own.

Biemann's intention as an author is clear: the video works to inform and reveal much of what we expect a standard documentary to do. It also, however, works to deal with the question and function of images towards the tail-end of the twentieth century. By examining their performative function, their activity, and their circuits of distribution—how the images perform and for whom—both mimics and intensifies the constructed space of the Mexico-US borderscape. Much like the appropriated images that work to define the *maquila* workers themselves, Biemann's deployment of voice provides a kind of overarching account. For the most part, the generated knowledge is assimilated and ordered, which,

at first glance, works as a more commercial documentary might—representing clarity from a position of opacity.⁸ Of course, this occurs through non-verbal as much as verbal address. So let us consider, more generally, some ways in which the voice works: it can operate as the photo caption does, in an explanatory fashion, serving to make the meaning of the image clear, either through a ‘voice off,’ ‘voice-over’ or through inter-titles. It can translate an overt and specific ideological message: the voice here can incite through propagandist intentions. It can also be a pedagogic tool.⁹ In *Performing the Border* Biemann’s voice is honed through a delivery of statements such as ‘gender matters to capital,’ ‘disposable bodies,’ ‘passing people,’ or through the chapters that make up the video: *The Plant/Le Maquila*, *The Settlement/la colonia*, *Sex Work/trabajo sexual* and *The Killing/los Asesinos*. Such statements can be seen as being close to the much-criticised ‘voice of God,’ a disembodied narrative that appears to ‘tell the truth.’ Often the address of the white Western male, this type of command over the filmed material has typically afforded no space for alternative approaches, purporting to transcribe history with a capital ‘H.’ It stands accused of defining, limiting, and obliterating complexities. In short, it can shut down the processes of subjectivation. That said, Biemann’s authorial voice can also help us in grounding the *text* within the *context*, drawing attention to the institutional frameworks that determine which particular images are generated, guiding us to consider how meaning is etched through particular historical and social markers. The continuity and assimilation, or discontinuity and disjuncture, that voice can offer also helps us imagine how

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such images can be cut loose, enabling them to be thought anew, despite retaining their ideological scars.

Along with her own voice, the artist assembles an all-female 'cast' of interviewees. *Performing the Border* collects images through the stories told by the recordings of standardised 'talking heads.' The 'talking head' device is more often than not used to provide a platform from which the subject can speak for herself.¹⁰ When Biemann uses the 'talking head' device it is almost always, save two exceptions, the case of accounts told by others, not by the *maquila* workers in question. It is rare, therefore, for the subjects of the work to speak about their own personal experiences. Most often, the *maquila* girls and young women exist instead as mediated images: as official, slick, company-produced images [Fig. 1] or through the clandestine, slightly grainy footage of Biemann's handheld video camera, often taken at night or filmed in difficult conditions. Such visuals serve particularly well in centering Biemann's *interpretation* of what her interviewed subjects have said. Further, her interpretive framework is not obscured—it guides and punctuates the video text, often in a coercive fashion. The work moves through the differing and interrelated places that the women workers of the *maquiladoras* inhabit but it cannot record the space of work 'proper' (inside the factories themselves). In its inability to gain access to the central space of *maquila* workers, it manages to avoid relying heavily on individual accounts and alternatively traces the overlapping circles that produce and contest such a space, articulated in the 'chapters' that segment the video.

Writing in 2008, art historian Angela Dimitrakaki

claimed that Biemann's work offers an approach towards a materialist feminism for the twenty-first century. The formation, and use, of what Dimitrakaki calls the 'non-autobiographical 'I' departs from early feminist use of the camera to solicit a voice—that in gaining emancipation through language, social, political and economic egalitarianism would follow suit.¹¹ Literary and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis notes the prominence of feminist psychoanalysis in film theory since the late 1970s in the west. She states that women as real social beings are not the same as 'the Woman' (as sign), yet they are caught experientially and conceptually, between the two. This slippage between 'Woman' (in the singular) as representation and *women* as social beings and historical subjects is picked up through both image and voice in our apprehension of the *maquila* workers in *Performing the Border*. Such a slippage is articulated most forcefully through the apprehension of both company and press images of these young women, which come to stand for nationhood or sexualised object through Biemann's clandestine recordings—or through her interviews with sex workers and local activists along the border space. In one scene, Biemann records artist and activist, Berta Jorta, in an easily communicable 'talking-head' frame and then subsequently isolates Jorta's mouth and amplifies her speech. Here, Biemann uses post-production tools to slow the voice and we are drawn, as viewers, to the separate yet reciprocal relationship of image to text as each register is set at a slight remove from the other.

Biemann is faced with generating strategies for speaking about things that are purposefully hidden by

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dominant power relations. There is little direct address or appeal to the young women to *be vocal*. We must assume then that her strategy is not to provide these women with a platform from which they might speak. In Juarez, where expectations based on gender, race and class codify the young women's every action in the most violent of ways, Biemann turns to the women that work and live alongside the *maquila* workers to *present* this very particular place. In doing so, a discourse emerges 'around' the *maquila* workers, inevitably creating a space at the centre where absent voices match the image Biemann cannot capture—factory work as directly experienced by the women. Of course, company management would not grant permission for filming that they cannot control. In such a place, where the smooth running of the factories is a necessity for the Mexican government and transnational relations, the women's bodies as *producing* and *produced* by their image is highly administered. As she avoids soliciting personal experiences, Biemann speaks to a totality while accounting for how, and in what ways, such a macro-politics becomes painfully inscribed on the body—whether through routine pregnancy tests and contraceptive control administered monthly by management, or via the cables which attach the women's bodies to their work benches. Biemann mimics how these 'subjects' are over-determined by capitalist modes of production and reproduction on a global scale, which disrupts (with severe, violent effects) local or national patriarchy. The intensification that *Performing the Border* produces creates homologies, noting how and why the images of the women are tightly woven into the social, economic and political fabric of Juarez.



Fig.1 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999 (film stills). Courtesy of the artist.

Here, the city and its ills leave imprints on the bodies of the young women that act as the major forces in the construction and operation of such a place.

I'd like to pause on one particular section of *Performing the Border* that demonstrates this homology. Biemann reappropriates footage of a group of young women dancing in a crowd of people to the entertainment provided by the recruitment initiatives of incoming foreign investment [Fig. 2]. Biemann hones in on one particular woman and replaces the original music with an electronic soundtrack that imitates the rhythms of the young woman's moving body. In addition, the five or so seconds of dancing is set on a loop. The original organic movement is therefore transformed into a mechanised and

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Fig.2 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999 (film stills). Courtesy of the artist.

fragmented action that echoes the uniformity performed daily on the factory assembly line. Less successful is Biemann's need to offer an explanation, delivered via onscreen text that asserts the role that gender is made to play in capitalist expansion. On closer inspection, the reappropriated image is taken from a television shown in the background of another shot in which the only worker to divulge a personal experience is recorded. Here the vitality seen in the corporeal movements of the dancing young woman (prior to Biemann's manipulation of the image) flickers innocuously in the background while the dismissed *maquila* worker talks about the all-too-human need for subsistence.

Making clear, rather than dismissing, the array of

images (which are produced from a variety of spheres and institutions) that work to determine the *maquila* employees, alerts the viewer to two important aspects. First, how thoroughly over-determined such a geopolitical space and its inhabitants are. Second, the sovereignty of the image in late capitalism: to ignore its power (and its prominent role in journalism and advertising for example) is to risk ignoring how subjectivities are formed and retained. In her discussion of the notorious ‘femicides,’ the journalist and activist Isabel Velazquez argues that the ‘girl’s image is used after her death’ to infer certain deviances that inscribe blame at the site of the singular (gendered) body. Velazquez stresses: ‘it is as if she has no rights, even if she is dead, she should have rights, her image is her right.’¹² [Fig. 3] It is this tense relation between complete claims (over-determination) and gaping absence that persistently arise through *Performing the Border*, but that perhaps should not seek to be resolved. First, because it speaks of this contradiction between Woman as sign in the singular, and women as social beings and historical subjects in the plural. Second, because of the acute contradictions that women are forced to embody at the level of hard labour at this stage of high-finance capitalism. There is a double bind of recognition and capture articulated in the video. As the story of Concha¹³ shows, the women must find other ways to survive and gather self-determination along the fissures where a cacophony of images and voices clash relentlessly against one another.

Biemann doesn’t obscure the camera in the video diegesis—handheld camera work is unsteady and the

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direct filming is exploratory in a manner that echoes a self-determination, particularly as the video camera lens works as an extension of her vision, zooming in and shifting focus when something grabs her attention. Without wishing to sweep aside the problematic tendencies that Biemann does not resolve in this formative work, the strength of *Performing the Border* enables you, as spectator, to not rest and 'settle in' to the 'subject matter' of the work precisely due to the jumpy camera work and stark technological juxtapositions. It is not a 'pleasure' to watch on the level of form or subject. Of course we should remain mindful of an uncritical acceptance that the unsteady hand denotes a closer account of the 'real' or singular truth while remaining open to what an embodied experience of lens-based work could offer at the turn of the millennium. For Allan Sekula, a 'critical representational art ... that points openly to the social world and to possibilities of social transformation' remains the only art worthy of an oppositional politics, as well as a necessary counter to a situation in which 'the old myth that photographs tell the truth has been replaced by the new myth that they lie.'¹⁴ In other words, to understand the play of signifiers as licensing absolute elasticity of signification is no less false than a belief in photography's total and transparent objectivity. The task is, rather, to insist on the historical, social and institutional inscription of photographic meaning, of the place of photographs within different discourses and image regimes; in short, to understand meaning as delimited within changeable and overlapping contexts. It is simply not an option, argues Hito Steyerl, to abandon truth; abandoning the lens-based image to the realm of simulacrum is simply unacceptable.¹⁵

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In our highly mediated world, the image thus must be understood as part of reality and not merely a copy of it.

A version of this paper was first given at *Polyvocal Subjects*, a screening and talks event programmed and organised by artist, Katherine MacBride for Transmission (Glasgow) at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, June 22, 2014. Thank-you is due to Katherine for the invitation to undertake this reading in relation to films by Manon de Boer and Emily Vey Duke/Cooper Battersby, not to mention the insights of my fellow speakers.

NOTES

- 1 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart. Karl Marx 1852,' Marxists Internet Archive, last accessed 18 May, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>
- 2 Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 111.
- 3 Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field' in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1988), 96.
- 4 Ursula Biemann, 'Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann' in *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 1–2, no. 24 (2002): 92.
- 5 Here I am thinking specifically of the 1930s and 1970s. Indeed, see curator and writer Jorge Ribalta's scholarship on worker-photography histories, modernism and documentary in the twentieth century.
- 6 For a discussion of this fate, see the introduction to John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 2–13.
- 7 Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),' *The Massachusetts Review* 4, no. 19 (Winter 1978): 859–883.
- 8 See art historian T.J. Demos on the political potential of opacity in his 'The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum*,' *October* 129 (2009): 113–128—a concept indebted to Édouard Glissant as expounded in his *The Philosophy of the Relation* (2009).
- 9 Indeed, to read Biemann's body of work through the writings and work of Harun Farocki, the question of a pedagogic function might present a fruitful project, especially if one looks to Jill Godmilow's 1998 film *What Farocki Taught* within the tenants of mastery and teaching.
- 10 Hito Steyerl invites a problematic to this question of political content and conventional form.

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For Steyerl's Godardian position contends with, and references the documentary *Showdown in Seattle* (1999): 'Their demands and positions are articulated across broad segments of the film—in the form of 'talking heads.' Because the form of the shots is the same, the positions are standardized and thus made comparable.' Hito Steyerl, 'The Articulation of Protest (2002),' European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, trans. Aileen Derieg, accessed 22 December 2009, <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en>. These concerns indicate that merely implanting 'radical' or 'political' subject matter cannot be enough if one is aiming to criticise the status quo. Whilst the importance of a 'politics of familiarity' should not be neglected, working in the exact mould of established film shots, framings, and interviewing techniques, runs the risk of reinforcing expected patterns of response from viewers. This tension articulates the problems faced by those wishing to make either political films, or films about political subject matter.

- 11 Angela Dimitrakaki, 'Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-First Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann,' *Oxford Art Journal* 2, no. 30 (2007): 205-232.
- 12 Isabel Velazquez, journalist and labour activist, speaking in *Performing the Border*, 1999, 41 mins.
- 13 *Performing the Border* devotes some time to the story of Concha, a woman who, after finding herself pregnant and abandoned by her husband in Juarez, is forced to become

resourceful finding work and making money. Concha, we are told via the journalist Angela Escajeda, 'runs a service' for getting pregnant women across the border to the US safely and undetected. This 'service' helps expectant mothers ensure 'a better life' for their unborn children. The freedom of movement offered by a US passport that comes with being born in a US hospital, is highly desirable. This hazardous journey, made particularly so after the intensification of the militarisation of the border in 1994, is also made with the hope that one day these children's dual citizenships can obtain the official papers required for their families to cross legally. Angela Escajeda cited in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: gender in transnational spaces postproduction documents 1988-2000* (2000), 88.

- 14 Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),' in Debra Risberg (ed.), *Allan Sekula: Dismal Science, Photo Works 1972-1996*, exhibition catalogue, (Illinois: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1999), 239.
- 15 Steyerl, 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth (2003),' European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, trans. Aileen Derieg, accessed 18 May, 2016, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>



Fig. 3 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999 (film stills). Courtesy of the artist.