

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.

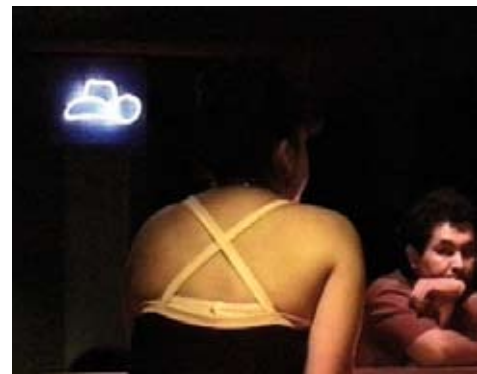
The reading I propose is not committed to documenting a slice of Mexican life. The voiceover argues and speculates, turning theoretical or poetic; the voice is always the same, but the text is patched together from many different sources. There is not, therefore, a consistent "I" from which the narrative 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.

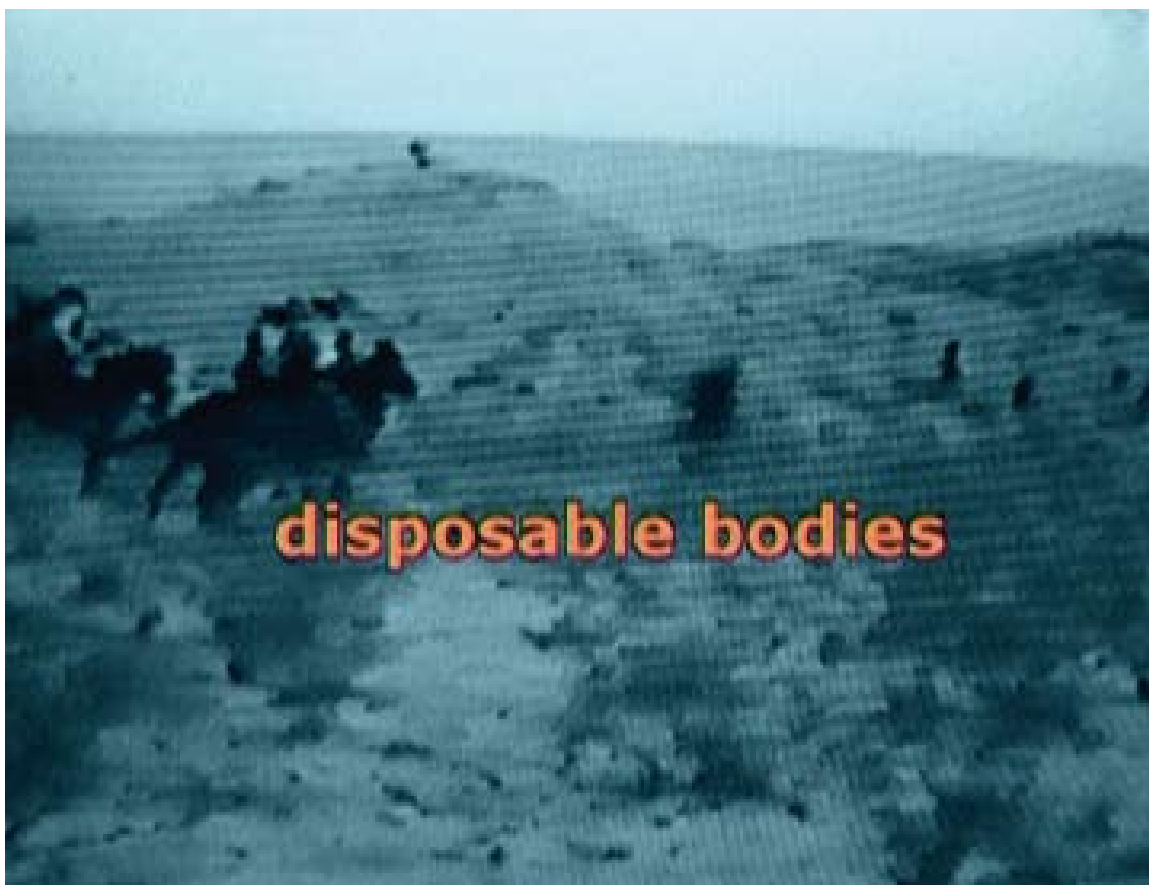
Amid this global expansion, definitions of what constitutes us as human subjects are claimed more urgently than ever. Yet, the drastic material manifestations at the US-Mexico border can easily blind us to the border's deeper metaphorical meaning and the fundamental differentiations in our self-understanding 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.