



PERFORMING THE BORDER

A videotape by Ursula Biemann
1999, 42 minutes, Color, Video

A video essay set in the Mexican-U.S. border town of Ciudad Juarez, where U.S. multinational corporations assemble electronic and digital equipment just across from El Paso, Texas, this imaginative, experimental work investigates the growing feminization of the global economy and its impact on Mexican women living and working in the area. Looking at the border as both a discursive and material space, the video explores the sexualization of the border region through labor division, prostitution, the expression of female desires in the entertainment industry, and sexual violence in the public sphere. Candid interviews with Mexican women factory and sex workers, as well as activists and journalists, are combined with scripted voiceover analysis, screen text, scenes and sounds recorded on site, and found footage to give new insights into the gendered conditions inscribed by the high-tech industry at its low-wage end.

- Women in the Director's Chair Film and Video Festival
- Biennale of the Image in Movement , St. Gervais, Geneva - Palmeres Award
- Beijing + 5 Conference
- Documentary Video and Film Festival, Kassel Werkleitz Festival, Netherlands
Santa Cruz Documentary Film and Video Festival

"[This] video skillfully captures processes of exploitation in its gendered, sexualized, and racialized forms, together with a sophisticated epistemological interrogation about how knowledge of the "border" is produced, performed, and materialized."
Marjolein van der Veen, Wellesley College

"...both a criticism of pancapitalism and an attempt in a discursive way to establish what the possibilities are for individual female lives in this cyborg world of labour."
Yvonne Volkart, *n. paradoxa*

"To see this film is to see an outrageous scandal that has been swept aside; fortunately, now it is kept alive in this intriguing documentary."
Lourdes Portillo, Filmmaker

PERFORMING THE BORDER
Director's Bio

Ursula Biemann studied art and critical theory in Mexico and at the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Her art and curatorial work focuses on gender relations in economy, media and the urban space and on re-articulating postcolonial work relations and visual representations. Recent activities include collaborative art projects and publications with migrant women in Switzerland and Kultur, a two-year project on gender and urban politics in Istanbul. Involved since 1988 in work on the US-Mexico border, she produced a video essay *Performing the Border* in 1999 and is currently working on a book on postcolonial art practice.

War Zone: Bodies, Identities and Femininity in the global High-Tech Industry

Yvonne Volkart

*These notes are about the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's video essay **Performing the Border** (1999) which she presented in preview form at the **Second Cyberfeminist International** in Rotterdam, March 8-11, 1999.*

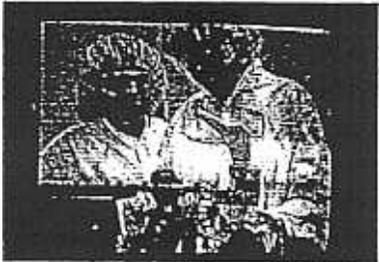
I have known Concha for more than five years. Due to the facilities she had in crossing and avoiding US border officials, Concha started to pass wet backs. Her strategies were multiple and variable.

This is one voice we hear in the video as we see a woman driving her car through the desert. When she became pregnant and was abandoned by her husband, Concha had to look for a new income. She started a service for pregnant women who wanted to give birth to their child in the USA, hoping to get a US-passport by these means. If you want to work in the Mexican border city Ciudad Juarez, it seems you have three possibilities as a woman: the maquiladora, the household and prostitution.

In her 40-minute-long videoessay *Performing the Border*, Zürich based artist Ursula Biemann takes Ciudad Juarez as an example to investigate what kind of bodies, identities and genders the global high-tech-industry produces at its low-end. She seems to begin at the same point which Donna Haraway in her *Manifesto for Cyborgs* identified too fatalistically as the role of Mexican women working in the chip-industry caught within a cyborg state of being. However it is not Donna Haraway who Biemann uses as a reference, but the Mexican border activist and artist Berta Jottar whose portrait and whose voice we hear at regular intervals in the video. Biemann also refers to the theorist Mark Seltzer, although his name is not

mentioned. Seltzer's ideas about the entanglement of Fordistic industrialisation and serial killing inspired Ursula Biemann's voiceover to offer further interpretations of the still unsolved brutal serial killings against women which take place continuously in this region.

Performing the Border is a polyvocal, visual heterogeneous dialogue, in which Biemann's video and film researches from 1998 and 1988, interviews with local women organisations, TV-clips of the representation of the border and of corporations like Philips and police documentaries of the serial killings are intrinsically interwoven. The video itself performs the pattern of performativity of borders, bodies and technologies on a structural level. The esthetics of the videoessay suggests unspokenly, that the border city Ciudad Juarez, beyond its signification as place of exploitation in the context of the new international labour division and high-technology, is also a metaphor for the signification of performativity in general (of bodies, genders, identities, nations and capital). This happens primarily by putting a constant set of movements, which are only interrupted sometimes by shots of sitting women who are either being interviewed by Biemann or waiting together in bars or on the streets for their clients. With the camera position facing outwards the video begins in a driving car filming the landscape, and it ends with dancing bodies and a strange electronic sound.



All video stills above and right from
Ursula Biemann *Performing the Borders*
Courtesy of Artist
n.paradoxa vol.4 1999

In between, there are the movements of the masses of women streaming in the pure and clean maquiladoras, of the bus rides there in the morning, of the cars and horsemen in the desert, of the excavating of the corpses, of the flickering images on TV, of the virtual pictures of the detonations of the mine fields on the US side and of the drive along the borderfence, 5000 miles long. There are the movements of a floating rubber dinghy, of white dressed women working in pure white working places, of the woman washing the laundry by hand, of a girl walking down the street. She is still a little girl. Can she find a way to steer her through these cultural ruptures? asks the voiceover. The movements of the camera, of the montages, of the people, imitate the rhythm of the assembly line, of the flow of the financial capital from the north, of the production of female bodies (as the compliant workforce), of the streaming of female desire as it is articulated in the love songs heard in the morning bus rides.

More than 20 years ago the first of the US-high-tech-corporations settled in this region. On the screen is written: *The maquiladora is a laboratory of deregulation*, and the voiceover comments: *Within (a) short (time), a new technological culture of repetition, registration and controlling was introduced in the desert city.* Control is an important issue in the video in terms of the regulation and use of female bodies in the production process, in the sex industry, and as victims of murder. However Ursula Biemann does not show the actual technologies of repression nor does she even try to be authentic and convey the intimacy of these women's lives, she lets her interview partners narrate some of their concerns about their individual ways of existence. The productive force of control is expressed by the mention of the regulation of their labor and leisure rhythms, and by creating parallels between these women's lives and the increasing militarisation and mediarisation trough in which the geographical border itself is re-marked again and again. This equation happens from the very beginning of the tape. While we hear Jottar's sentences about the materialisation and naturalisation of the actual US border politics, we see an infrared image of the border and a man on observation duty controlling by surveillance through his binoculars. In a way the border is always represented as this wound that has to be healed, that has to be closed, that has to be protected from contamination and from disease. [...] It's like a surgical place. Jottar's words regarding geographical landmarks remind us of the discourses of the body, the idea of the body as a battlefield, of open and closed bodies, and of the female body which is traditionally represented as a wound.

Gender Matters for the Global Capital says a running text in the video. Biemann reveals life on the border as a set of total sexualisations. An older interviewed woman who some time ago had to prostitute herself to support the family of her ill brother and who in the meantime is involved in AIDS-prevention, calls the actual closed border "the war". This war dried off the money flowing from the north and cancelled the basis of existence for older women like her. She shows her baby and narrates how she got it: It is a "present" of a young prostitute who is HIV-positive and a heroin addict. Nothing is natural in Ciudad Juarez, everything is under the dictate of the pancapitalistic machine. Here, the woman is permanently reinstalled as mute working and sex object,



although there are striking shifts in traditional patriarchal patterns (women are now the consumers who the local entertainment industry aims at, and women are the main earners in their families). However, beauty competitions organised by maquiladoras and advertisements of international corporations in which pretty young girls are explicitly looked for, help to renew patriarchal structures under the sign of global capitalism. In *Performing the Border* none of the many girls filmed talks about her situation. It is only the older women, the journalists, the members of women organisations, the activists, the mothers of the missing girls or the fired trade unionist who dare to talk into the camera: The maquiladora is a strategic point in the national economy of the Mexican state.

Since 1994 more than 140 women have been killed and buried in the desert. Many girls are missing, many remain unidentified. Sometimes they only find parts of clothing or single limbs or parts of the body, sometimes the clothing has been changed. The pattern of the murders remains always the same: strangled, stabbed, decapitated, raped. We learn that the nameless murdered women are catalogued by the kind of wounds which led to their deaths. And furthermore: The compulsive, repetitive violence of serial killing does not exist without an extreme entanglement between eroticized violence and mass technologies of registration, identification, reduplication and simulation. [...] Serial killing is a form of public violence proper to a machine culture. A woman who struggles for these murders to be solved (and the murderers caught), comments that not all murders are serial killings. Some men take advantage of the dominant serial killing role model and kill the lover who doesn't suit them anymore.

The economic war which dominates this region, is made over the bodies of poor women from the south and can therefore be endlessly naturalised and renewed. The new international labor division is structured as a 'technology of gender' (Teresa de Lauretis). It's for the permanent re-construction of gender difference, for the consolidation of power, subjectivity and identity in a scared world of cyborgs. Voiceover: The serial killer fails to distinguish himself from others and this lack of self-difference, of self-distinction, is immediately translated into violence along the line of sexual difference, the one fundamental difference he recognises. Loosing the boundaries between the self and others, he is perpetually in search of a border. *Performing the Border* refers to the opening up and closing of bodies in the endless cycle of actual high-tech-control-technology, where they are consumed, produced and fixed as female. We believe technology is good when it's shared for the benefit of all, states the journalist Isabel Velazquez, Everything should be shared, there is a social price that's not being shared and there is a wealth that's not being shared. It's not enough to pay minimum wage, it's not enough to give breakfast to your workers. It's not enough.

Performing the Border reflects the point of view of a European artist. It is both a criticism of pancapitalism and an attempt in a discursive way to establish what the possibilities are for individual female lives in this cyborg world of labour.

Yvonne Volkart is a critic/curator and lecturer of new media based in Zurich.

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Ursula Biemann

Performing the Border

If cyberfeminism focuses on women and technology, if it's located at the interface between inside and outside cyberspace, examines our relation to bio-technology, new media and other forms of communication, without losing sight of the relations of power and production, well, if this is cyberfeminism, it is the lens through which we need to look at a site like the US-Mexican border. Because this is where the feminization of global economy and the digital industry is particularly striking.

In artificial post-urban industrial parks which stretch over large desert areas, the US corporations assemble their electronic equipment for the communications industry... you know, the capital intensive operations remain in the North, the labor intensive operations are located South of the border. For a number of reasons, the assembly plants drew mainly young women into their labor force. Every day hundreds of women arrive in Ciudad Juarez, which is right across the Rio Grande from El Paso Texas. These women make up the large majority of the population of the border town. They have created new living spaces, enjoy their own entertainment culture. They have changed social structures and gender relations. They are the producers of the machines that enable cyberspace. They are the new members subscribed to transnational citizenship that will afford mobility and the freedom to consume, not for themselves, but for millions of others North of the border.

In the 10 years since my first visit to Juarez in 1988, my personal outlook has changed and the discourse has changed as well, I mean both the feminist and the post-colonial discourse of cultural production. In recent years, we have come to recognize a need to combine identity politics with the context of wider transformations of the public sphere, particularly the urban reality. It has become vital to scan the economic, industrial, and increasingly the virtual realities for discursive genderspecific constructions. Moreover, the entanglement between the female body and technology and image production has produced the rich theoretical debate and artistic work of cyberfeminism in which I have become increasingly involved.

In the following, I want to discuss the sexualisation of the border and the discursive as well as existential aspects that determine the lives of the border women. I will focus on the way gender relations are being regulated in this zone created by the outsourced digital industry, on the job, in the sex work, and the public sphere where sexual violence has persisted for five years. In the discussion of the serial killings, the key border issues of identity, sexualisation, accelerated industrialization, and the particular tech-

nologies associated with the maquiladora industry, converge violently. There is no reason to naturalize the border, it is a place constructed through the power relations between the two nations, through gender relations and the management of these gender relations by means of time management, control over body and reproduction, work regulations, and fear.

La Frontera

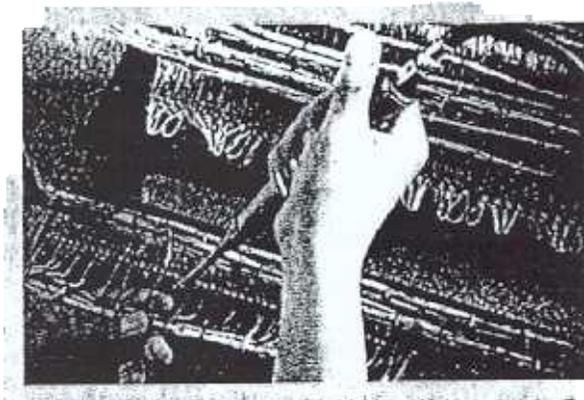
A lot is to be said about the border itself and about crossing the border. It is a very heterogeneous space. The question is: are you crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, are you jumping or passing with a US passport, as a tourist, a middle class woman or a domestica, a maid. As Berta Jottar says in the video, the border gets constantly rearticulated through the different ways of crossing and through the power relations that the crossing produces.(1) It is also determined by the relationship of power between the two nation states and the representation they generate about it. The US representation constructs the border as a site of contamination through AIDS, delinquency, poverty and illegality. Since NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the US media complement this image with a happy neighbor mentality of good business partners and the free travelling of goods. Goods may travel freely but the people are kept from passing. In the Mexican representation of the border, on the other hand, is is the site of drugs, crime and prostitution, things getting out of control. It is no coincidence that parallel to NAFTA, we register the military enforcement of the border through the installation of lights, the mining of the US borderland, a tripled border control, helicopter patrols, INS officers, drug enforcement officers and the military presence.

The representation of the crossing bodies is gendered. The media focuses on the representation of the illegal working class male who takes away jobs. Berta Jottar explains that women, in the particular the female maquiladora workers, are not a part of this representation at all, they only appear when they cross the border to give birth on the US side and want to benefit from health care and natal care, that she is not represented as productive, only as reproductive and dependent. So Berta looks at the discursive representational space and at the material space which is constituted through the crossing and the halting of people, as performative. Hence the title of the video.



La Colonia

Typically, young women, and I mean 13, 14, 15 year old, leave their family to travel long distances to work on the border. Leaving behind the towns of Zacatecas, Durango, Torreon on the arid central plateau, to move up to the Rio Grande. They are the hope of those they left behind. Often they come in small groups of 3 or 4 girls of the same age and the same town. Upon their arrival, they will find no accommodation, for the city doesn't provide any. Municipal investments are only made for the transnationals, not for the people who work for them. So they go to the edge of town which spreads way into the Sierra, they choose a vacant spot and build a shack right into the desert sand. From scraps of the maquiladoras. The pallets will make the walls, the chemical containers the water tank etc. There are large areas like this where mainly women live, streets of sand, no street lights, no public transportation, no security. There seems to be little demarcation between the sierra and the area they call urban. It's considered urban though, a forgotten area, development doesn't get here. For many, living in the city still means a rural lifestyle. Some people call this procedure „invasion“ because the migrants take a piece of land and settle down, waiting for more official papers for their houses. It's an irregular but inevitable way to obtain housing.



La Maquiladora

Since the seventies, the US has installed an export processing zone for its assembly operations in the border belt. Within short, the maquiladoras--the Golden Mills--introduced a new technological culture of repetition, registration and controlling to this desert city. It is a synthetic zone from which life emerges, nevertheless, an alien way of life: corporate culture in the morning, kneading el maíz at night, the rhythms of the barren highland give way to optimized production modes. Life on the border teaches you to cope with contradictions, to operate in a pluralistic mode because flexibility is a matter of survival when you are among the extras on the set of corporate culture.

PTH/SMT Board Level Assembly
Mil-Spec and Avionics
Plast Injection Molding
Electrostatic Powder Coating
Ionic Contamination Testing
Systems-Integration
Electromechanical
Harness Assemblies
Cyber Optics

Assembly lines represent the ultimate fragmentation of labor into its smallest possible particles. Assembly work in the chip industry is repetitive, tedious work, pulling out semi-conductors in endless sequence. Strapped to the worker's wrist is a pink curled cable with an electromagnetic discharge needle, linking the female body to the workbench. They keep the device around their arm on weekends of fear to forget to bring it on Monday morning. The workers are organized into self-surveying teams that don't allow slow-downs or breaks, the system flows forever onward. Forced birth control and pregnancy tests are on the daily agenda, pregnant women get fired immediately. The constant chemical exposure are a serious health hazard, strict surveillance and restrictions to use the bathroom cause chronic bladder infections. Children are left to themselves because there are no day nurseries. I think we are all aware of these conditions.

Time management has always been a very efficient means of control: Walk one hour to the bus at 4:30 am, take a one hour bus ride to the maquila, spend 9 hours on the assem-



bly line, same way back. No time to live, no time to think, no time to organize. The excruciating time investment of these women benefits the technology that accelerates our lives in the North, they pay with their time for our heightened efficiency.

Labor organization is strictly prohibited. Factories establish black lists with names of people who are „enemies“ of the maquila, computer networks interconnect the entire industrial zone, if a factory fires you, there is no chance to get work anywhere else. Black lists of this sort are prohibited by law. A unionist told me that they got fired for wanting a cafeteria because their factory was located outside the industrial park and there was no place for lunch for several hundred workers. We are not even talking about forming a union, about wage policies, health hazards or human rights. Women are afraid to lose their jobs for the slightest disobedience and never find another one again. The maquiladora program is a strategic point in the economy for the Mexican government, they look well after the maquilas' interests.



We can assume that the US militarisation is not merely keeping illegals from crossing the border it is also to protect the gigantic US industrial investment on Mexican territory. In the face of serious transnational interests, local labor organizations are no longer adequate. Guillermina Villalva Valdez, a leading labor activist and academic, who was extremely supportive during my first visit to Juarez, has died in a plane crash on her way to Texas in 1996, together with 4 other key figures of the labor movement. The small plane exploded in mid air, due to a bomb presumably.

Maquiladoras have served as a laboratory for deregulation. The main incentives for the transnationals to move to the border are the wages paid in local currency and tax exemption. However, the wages are not sufficient to subsist, not for one young person, let alone for the rest of the family who often depends on it. A maquila woman earns US\$ 50 a week while the living expenses are only half of what they are in the US. These are the conditions under which digital technology is being produced in the name of progress for the information society. As always, progress is not being shared with those who produce it.

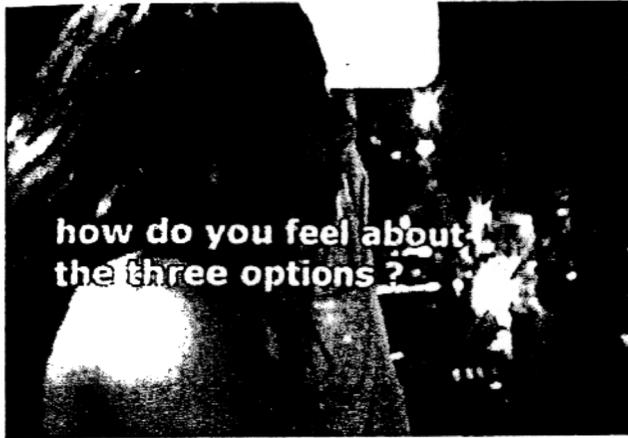
Sexualising the Territory

The insufficient salary forces many women to have a supplementary income on weekends from prostitution. But now, with the radical closure of the border and the military enforcement of it, there are a lot less US customers coming and less Mexicans who cross the border for work and come back to spend their dollars in Juarez. Competition has grown between professional prostitutes and the younger, often adolescent maquila workers who prostitute on weekends, but still need the insufficient factory wage for their children's security.

Thousands of assembly jobs have been brought to this desert city and women are the ones who get them. Often they are the only earning family member. These changes in the income pattern had an impact on family structures and on the way women relate to men, since these relations are greatly determined by economics. They have gained greater autonomy over their lives. You cannot tell a girl or a woman who earns her money, that she cannot go and dance in the many nocturnal centers that have emerged since the maquila industry. There are several hundreds bars and dance saloons in Juarez. On Friday and Saturday at 4 PM, after the women leave the

morning shift, they are open for business.

Relationship patterns are being remapped quite drastically. 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 and male dance contests where women cheer their sex-appeal. On a more subtle level, the music lyrics on the dance floor are often explicitly addressing female sexual desires.



The border is a highly gendered region

Structurally speaking, there are three options young women have in Juarez: either she becomes a maquila worker, if she is not accepted at the factory because of a lack of education, she can become a „domestica” and work as a maid in a private house, and if she can't produce a recommendation for such a position, she has only one more option, prostitution. I can't help noticing that these are all very service oriented occupations. But the rule in Juarez is that, against Mexican tradition, young women are, to a great extent, economically autonomous and this shift is being inscribed in the social relations on a deeper level.

International labor in the South is not only feminized. Economic power relations along the line of gender difference are spelled out in sexual terms in more than one way. On the job, male supervisors are known to abuse their position to harass women workers. The corporations organize beauty contests to put the female workers in competition to each other. The low wages force women into prostitution. And there is a rampant sexual violence against women in the public sphere. On the other hand, there is a certain reversal of income pattern that empowers women in their personal relationships, enables their overt expression of sexual desire and affords the satisfaction of these desires by economic means rather than by other, more traditional services in the area of domestic and emotional reproduction through the caretaking of home and children. It's a highly ambiguous and precarious situation for young women.

Serial Killing

The serial killings are somewhat related to this phenomenon. Since 1995, close to 160 women have been killed in a similar pattern: Tortured, raped, stabbed or strangled and thrown into the desert. The type of women is always the same: poor, slender maquila women, rarely students, with long dark hair. Often they have just moved to the city and nobody claims them: 50 women are lying in the morgue unidentified.

Some small women organizations have been formed as a result. Most of them interpret it as violence against women, as a revenge of men against women who took their jobs and have started to talk back at them, go to dance halls and challenge gender roles. A punishment. And the fact that the police didn't bother to investigate the crimes is just another sign of male consent to this scenario. So feminists and human rights advocates took it onto themselves to investigate the cases and establish a list of disappeared women to prove that the cases are too similar to possibly be individual crimes of passion. These groups recognize, however, that some cases are ordinary domestic violence disguised as one of the serial kills, cases of imitation. They also understand that extreme poverty, lack of education, and economic subjugation are all preparing the ground for a criminal to come to the city and commit crimes. The US criminologist Robert Kessler who was invited to analyse the case in Juarez during my visit, would also mention drug traffic, gangs, migration, quick money and prostitution as further conditions for these crimes, similar to any major metropolis in the States.

But Juarez is, apart from the widely spread out migration settlements, a small border town and serial killing is not an ordinary crime of passion. Plus, the murders in Juarez is the largest case of serial killings known just about anywhere in the world. Generic explanations just seemed too easy. During my research on serial killings, I came across a recently published cultural study by Marc Seltzer who makes connections between sexual violence and mass technologies proper to a machine culture. Eventhough he never mentions this unresolved case, the similarities of his analysis to Juarez interested me, particularly his mention of technologies of identification, registration and simulation which correspond to the particular psychological disposition of serial killers. According to his extensive research of analysed cases of serial sexual violence, a common psychological denominator seems to be the undoing of identity to the point of becoming a non-person, the desire to blend into his social and physical environment, to fuse with the mass. He tends to simulate and copy others, he experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of



numbers, of simulation and likeness. He fails to distinguish himself from others and this lack of self-distinction, of self-difference, is immediately translated into violence along the line of sexual difference, the one fundamental difference he recognizes. I found this notion of exchangeability confirmed in a number of stories I was being told in Juarez about murdered women who were found wearing the clothes of other women who had disappeared. In several instances he exchanged the clothes of the corpses, somehow confusing the marks of recognition and identification.



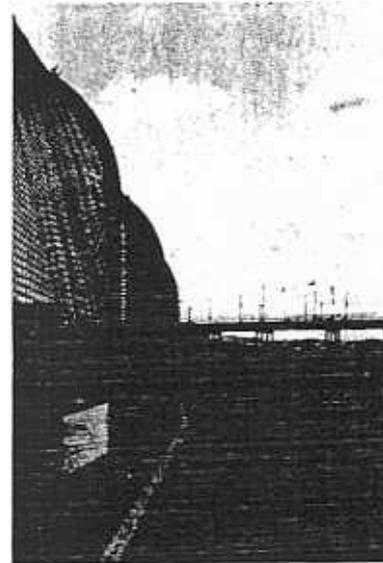
Of course one could argue that there are practical considerations like the great number of young women in the border town who make for an easy prey, that would attract a killer. But the possibility that the serial crimes reflect and reproduce the border conditions installed by the maquiladoras with their repetitive mode of producing for the simulated and mediated existences of digital culture, is worth considering. In addition, the border site is surveyed by the technology of electronic border control, of registration and identification and digital fingerprints. Even if we can't prove a causal relation, we cannot deny the simultaneity of these embodiments. When we look at the crimes in discursive terms, as I suggest here, and understand them as an urban pathology brought by a highly accelerated industrialization and modernization, rather than accusing an individual psychopath, we start to recognize the implication of the post-industrial world in the deeply disturbing changes that are taking place on the border and the impact they have on the lives of Mexican women.

There is another psychological configuration that brings the serial killer in connection with this particular site. Losing the boundaries between the self and others, he is perpetually in search of some border. He is attracted by the actual border of his country precisely because it signifies the boundary of a larger entity of belonging, the nation. There is more than one reported case where this occurred. 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 public and private.

What is at issue with sexual violence is always the public/private. The official discourse runs along the lines of accusing the victim of provoking violence and thus transferring a public phenomenon into the personal sphere. When showing the crime in the evening news, it would not be surprising to see the body of the victim, a portrait of the victim when she was alive, the name of the family members and all kinds of personal information. The factory

would never be named where she worked. The industry doesn't want to be associated with the crimes even though many of the victims worked for Philips, for instance. On the juridical level she has no rights and on the representational level she is has no rights.

The border is an issue of representation, but at the moment of performance, the reality is that it's young Mexican women who assemble the digital technology, that their time and their body, down to the monthly cycle, are strictly controlled by the white male management, that in this economy, prostitution is a necessity for many, and that sexual violence characterizes the public sphere. The video <performing the border> is an attempt to bring together the border as a discursive, representational space and as a material space which is constituted through the performance of gender and the management of these gender relations.



[All images are screen-shots from the video <performing the border> by Ursula Biemann © 1999, 42']

(1) Berta Jottar is a Mexican artist and academic who lives in New York. She was involved in the Border Art Workshop in Tijuana, made a video entitled *Border Swing* and presently works on Cuban Rumba in New York.

(2) Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers - Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (Routledge, 1998)

MOVIES

strike by clerical and service employees at Yale. Dawn weaves competing voices into a richly textured advocacy video that urges the university to widen its sense of responsibility; she also knows how to capture the dynamics of struggle through intercutting (winning) movements, often of marchers and speakers. Eve-Laurie Moros and Linzy Ervery's *Alack in Thailand* points out that workers in Thai export industries are denied health and safety protections and are often displaced by child labor. They could take a lesson from Dana: their tape, mostly a tedious recitation of sobering facts, hectors rather than involves the viewer. Mironika Khusid's lighthearted *Valley of the Boys* makes the serious point that Silicon Valley's adolescent male culture, with workplaces full of Nerf guns and unicycle riding, alienates women just as the software industry needs them most: because they're supposedly good at relationships, they design excellent user-friendly software, something the boys obviously have trouble with. (FC) (UNITE, 7:00)

Skin Deep
Reena Mohan's video about attitudes toward female beauty in urban middle-class India is about as chic as its title. Interviews with six women of varying ages have been fictionalized to protect the original women's identities, though a few actual men testify (sign painters explain how they use rough brush strokes for males to enhance their machismo and softer ones for women). A few of the cultural differences are intriguing—married women in India are more elaborately attired, for example—but otherwise this is all very familiar: darker skin tones are less attractive; women in advertising look "perfect"; fat women are treated poorly. Mohan does little more than aim her camera at the subjects and intercut advertisements, failing to convey cinematically the very real issues of identity and self-image at stake here. (FC) (WIDC Theater, 8:30)

TUESDAY, MARCH 21
✓ **Old Borders, New Crossings**
Four videos that confront the question of cultural differences. Shot in Havana in 1998, *Little by Little* or *We Are All Gays* is a work of great visual intelligence and complexity. Apparently video maker Alice Carin is familiar with more formalist avant-garde travel films by Peter Kubelka and others; like Kubelka she often separates sound and image so that voices on the sound track come from different people than those shown, yet her tone, open, ultimately antiformalist manner establishes a genuine intimacy with her subjects. She has a wonderful eye for

specifics—the sensuality of bodies, the uniqueness of faces and locales—and the video seems to favor individual experience over theory, revolutionary or otherwise. In contrast, Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border* indulges in too much postmodern theory, showing anonymous Mexicans as a voice-over describes the U.S.-Mexico border as a "discursive representational space." Still, she offers some chilling details about the post-NAFTA economy: when a woman is murdered, the media embrace images of her face and sometimes her corpse but rarely name the company that employed her. Jessica Hope Woodworth's *Urge Song* offers interesting views of art and dance in post-socialist Mongolia but suffers from a tourist's passive and disengaged perspective. The sublimely witty short *At Your Service*, by Mexican video maker Ximena Cuevas, pokes fun at another kind of tourist consciousness, as a woman lolling by a pool is fed tropical fruit by an offshore servant. (FC) (WIDC Theater, 7:00)

The BLVD
Deborah Stratman's 1999 video documents the gritty world of urban drag racing on Chicago's west side. The dragsters work on their engines and give elaborate descriptions of their encounters with the police; these guys obviously love what they do, and judging from their actions and speech, they seem to have subverted their identities in their cars and races. Stratman's somewhat fragmented style communicates their lack of autonomy outside their world, and her garish colors capture the inner-city nighttime in which the races occur. But her editing never really conveys the sense of speed the races crave—the famous chicken run in Nicholas Ray's *Road Without a Name* does a much better job of that. (FC) On the same program, videos by Joyce Vencimiglia, Hye Jung Park, and J.T. Talagi. (WIDC Theater, 9:00)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22
All in the Family
Many of these films and videos about family life focus on motherhood. In *Cliff and Hazel*, Ann Fessler returns home for her mother's 80th birthday, documenting her sometimes absurd views (she thinks men are smarter than women because there are more men on *Jeopardy!*). Yet the camera work is nonjudgmental, and the video becomes a delicate dance in which the daughter presents her mother's foibles without severing their connection. In the lighthearted *That 5-Star Feeling* the mother of video maker Jan Boris lives only in five-star hotels and admits to being "superior" to others—and "modest, too." LeAnn Erickson recalls her late mother in *Horn, Minnie, Samah, Franca*, using fragmentary images such as a shadow on a wall to evoke the fragility of memory, though her video ultimately succumbs to sentimentality. Elizabeth Downer's *Horn* avoids this trap, portraying the forced adoptions of Native American children in close, abstracted, often poetic images—a ball balanced against the side of a car, a tepee skeleton against the sky—that give the film a grave beauty. (FC) On the same program, works by Katrina Schuman, Justice Gettenstein, Ivan E. Coyote, Eve Sandler, and Terra Poier. (WIDC Theater, 7:00)

This Dreaming Place
In *Prayers of Water*, Rian Brown documents her pregnancy and motherhood in Italy. Her sense of dislocation is evident in the unusual angles, but most compelling are her images, shot with a hand-held camera, of the baby in her arms: filmmakers often use the hand-held camera to express personal eyesight, but Brown's framing seems to respond as much to the infant. Tran T. Kim-Trang's *Ehlepais* is an often powerful account of hysterical blindness among Cambodian women who've survived the horrors of the Pol Pot time, their blindness one possible response to witnessing people being beaten to death. Flickering images are repeated, an effective device to suggest a crisis in seeing that unfortunately becomes too mechanical by the end. Laura Kissel's *Leaving Bristol* describes her family history in letters, hand-tape records, and family portraits, but repeated head-on images of her grandmother, whose memory is failing, seem insensitive, almost a violation. (FC) On the same program, Tsipori Bar-Yossef's *Peisimas*. (WIDC Theater, 9:00)

THURSDAY, MARCH 23
Nobody Knows My Name
Rachel Raimist's lively video about women in hip-hop—rappers, break-dancers, DJs, and one rapper's wife—gives a good sense of the obstacles they face in this sexist field. A shot of a male performer role-playing with a woman onstage illustrates how females are viewed, and a woman complains that they're more likely to be judged for their looks than their talent, but one guesses they've had uglier experiences that aren't being told. Raimist builds a decent sense of rhythm through camera movement and editing, and the tape suggests that these strong and independent women can make a place for themselves, though the sobering end titles suggest that none of their careers has taken off either. With *Medusa*, T-Love, Leches,

Asia One, and DJ Symphony. (FC) (South Shore Cultural Center, 3:00)
✓ **Punitive Damage**
The Indonesian military's brutal 1991 crackdown on a student demonstration in East Timor claimed the lives of over 200 protesters. But instead of leveling a vague indictment against dictatorship, this 1999 documentary by New Zealand filmmaker Annie Goldson reconstructs an unusual lawsuit brought by the mother of one victim against an Indonesian general in a Boston court. Journalists and other eyewitnesses paint a horrific picture of ethnic persecution in a remote territory that was annexed from the Portuguese in 1975, yet the mother's case was actually based on an obscure U.S. antiquity statute that's since been used in other human rights suits. Goldson mines the courtroom drama for its utmost suspense, but it's the stoic mother's grief for her son that personifies this exercise of political intolerance. (TS) (Film Center, 6:00)
✓ **L'Chayim! Jewish Women on Love, Loss and Life**
The most impressive entry in this program is Shari Rochford's *Osan Anzac*, in which middle-aged Luna (Karen Lynn Gorney of *Saturday Night Live*) finally reconciles herself to the death of a daughter many years earlier. Framing this graceful if loopy story is the *mitzvah*, the purification ritual for females between puberty and menopause, which connects Luna with the girl who still lives in her imagination. Keiko Bai's Oscar-winning video documentary *The Periwinkle* offers an endearing look at elderly Manhattan singles who find friendship and therapy through a drama workshop. Perhaps only a young outsider like Ibi, a film student from Japan, could have elicited such candid and amusing remarks about sex, desire, and loneliness based on the seniors' laziest play, drawn from personal ads in a Jewish weekly. Some of the scenes are cloying or run too long, but the film is animated by the seniors' zest for life. In Lisa Kaufman's *Patching for Two* a widow who still sees and talks to her dead husband prepares for a vacation; it's conventional in tone and full of Jewish clichés, though the glossy cinematography makes it watchable. (TS) On the same program, Jenny Perlin's *Last Treasurer*. (WIDC Theater, 7:00)

✓ **Earth Kazooz New Animation**
A broad range of topics and styles distinguish this generally excellent package of animated shorts. Sheila Sofian's *Survivors* thoughtfully compiles intimate accounts from abused women; morphing from one stylized image to the next, the film shields the women's identities without the masking techniques that sometimes disrupt live-action documentaries of its kind. The paper-cutout principals of Lesley McCubbin and Hans Samuelson's *Man With Tin* are space aliens who wear loud ties and gobble up all the products that Starbucks culture can provide. *Paulina y el condor*, a fable about a peasant girl carried aloft by a condor, is retold by Bolivian animator Mariad Bartagan with cutout figures and watercolor landscapes. Anna Mialkinen's hand-drawn *In Between* riffs on bar codes, DNA, and global consumerism. *The Neighborhood Cat* by Chicago animator Sarah Jane Lapp borders on the abstract with a squiggly cool cat that dreads its owner. And Army Kravitz's *Rain* flashes abstract shapes while a hen's jubilant crier bursts through a primordial soup of noises on the sound track. (TS) On the same program, animations by Emily Breer, Mendich Holch, Maja Nagel, Allison McGrath, Janice Indorp, Wendy Tilby, and Amanda Forbes. (Film Center, 8:00)

Obscure Objects of Desire
A program of shorts on female sexuality. Lisa Clark's half-hour video documentary *Breast Implants, Fantasy and Fact* rails against the warped notions of perfection that have prompted many women to get implants. Her honorable intentions are dulled by the video's didactic format, which juxtaposes bitter testimonies from victims with clinical footage and the calm assurances of a plastic surgeon. In Rox Mortimer's droll, surreal, anticoincidental *Womanformer* a prima suburban housewife reveals her erotic attraction to women while a voice-over provides scientific commentary on what makes them tick. In *Blow Them Up* Laura Pusy and Kristy Guewan-Flanagan present an inflatable doll being filled in slow motion, apparently some sort of a statement about filmmaking and the pornographic imagination. Dino Cirullo and Jay Rosenblatt's one-minute *Drop* records the complicated steps taken by the filmmakers to shoot a drop of water falling from a faucet. Lisa Platt and Kelly Dohak open up a Pandora's box of pop cultural and Freudian references in their thought-provoking *Porn*, with two butch women going through a variety of handbags only to shove them into a closet in exasperation. In Sarah Shapiro's pointlessly campy *Jelly* two heavily made-up lesbians express their lust with jelly doughnuts, and in Miranda July's self-indulgent *The Anatomist* a woman babbles about spectatorship while watching her scantily clad self on television. (TS) (WIDC Theater, 9:00)

READER

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