



Imre Szeman

Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann

Even more so than that first significant moment of the video age—the brutal footage of the Los Angeles Police Department’s attack on the prostrate body of Rodney King—the antiglobalization protests have marked the first sustained use of new digital technologies (audio and visual) to document the contemporary uses of power and the resistances to it. Digital video in particular has played an essential role in all of the protests that have taken place beginning with the WTO protests in Seattle. On the one hand, the widespread presence of cheap, high-quality visual recording devices has made it possible for groups and individuals involved in the protests to present a very different version of events than that presented by the mainstream media, and to present it to larger and more diverse audiences than has typically been the case with the indie print media. During the WTO protests in Seattle, for example, the Independent Media Center provided their own daily coverage of the events as they unfolded to a global audience—something that was in the past imaginable only for large scale, corporate broadcasters. (These daily shows have been compiled in the video, *Showdown in Seattle: Five Days that Shook the World*.) In the A16 events in Washington, an independent media clearinghouse was established to log footage shot not only by established media collectives like Paper Tiger TV, but by amateur videographers who managed to capture some of the more shocking examples of police provocation and violence. Video footage of each of the protests abound.

In addition to making possible the creation of counternarratives, the ubiquity of recording devices present at the antiglobalization protests suggest that the protests themselves may have a different function than one might first imagine. There is a way in which it almost seems as if these events are being staged in order to be recorded. Of course, this has always been one of the aims of

mass protest. What makes the antiglobalization protests different is that these protests aren't being staged primarily for the mass media, but for the protestors to record themselves. One can see how these videos can act as pedagogic extensions of the street actions: They can be shown to those "back home" who couldn't make it to the demonstrations, to interested communities and individuals, and so on. As Nick Dyer-Witheford has insightfully pointed out, "the classic formulation that sees action on the streets, as more real than its symbolic form is wrong; in this case, it is the street action that is symbolic."¹ Which is not to suggest that street action is less effective than "real" politics, but rather to draw attention to the new, still confusing circumstances in which politics takes place today.

In the midst of this flurry of video images, the artist and video maker Ursula Biemann has been using video (and other visual technologies) to interrogate the politics and geographies of globalization in a rather different way. Her involvement in a variety of artistic and curatorial projects since the mid-1980s in Europe and North America dealing with gender relations in the media, economy and the new geographical spaces of the globe, have resulted recently in the production of three videos that open up startling new perspectives on globalization: *performing the border* (1999), *Writing Desire* (2000) and *Remote Sensing* (2001). Alongside *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces* (2000),² her recent book of video scripts, postproduction documents, interviews, and articles, Biemann's recent work constitutes one of the most sustained and thorough investigations of the complex intersection of new technologies, gender, the body, and labor in the context of the numerous border zones generated by the rapacious economy of global neoliberalism. Just as significantly, Biemann's work explores the spaces and functions of visibility itself in relationship to globalization. The register of the visual is the cultural register of globalization *par excellence*. As a result, it is no simple matter to construct visual documents either of the "realities" of globalization or the realities represented by those counter-movements that collectively make up the antiglobalization movement. The singular feat of Biemann's video work is to have combined a supple, theoretically sophisticated examination of the politics of visibility with an equally sophisticated exploration of the politics of contemporary reality, especially as inflected through an all-too-often forgotten category of globalization: gender.

This interview was conducted ten days after the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Though we did not deal with this event directly (in part, out of a desire to avoid

repeating the mass media's tendency towards immediate analyses of extremely complicated events that will look much different after even a short period of time has elapsed), in the context of the way in which the bombings unfolded on television screens across the world, Biemann's discussion of the stakes of contemporary visual representation and its importance to our understanding of globalization seems more vital than ever.

Ursula Biemann is a graduate of the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Museums Independent Study Program, and also studied art and critical theory in Mexico. She has taught in Geneva and Zurich, and is currently associated with the Institute of Theory in Arts and Design of HGKZ in Zurich.

IMRE SZEMAN: Could you tell me briefly about the various video projects that you've undertaken over the past several years, especially those that deal explicitly with globalization?

URSULA BIEMANN: Most everything I have done in the past 15 years has to do with globalization but it was only in the summer of 1998 that I began to use video as an artistic medium, on a trip to the U.S.-Mexico Border. It's an area I have investigated since the '80s, when I first visited the border town Ciudad Juarez and brought back piles of black and white photographs and some 16 mm film footage about the working conditions of Mexican women in the Free Trade Zone along the border. In the decade between my first and last trip many things had changed. The Free Trade Zone had changed with the signing of NAFTA, the discourse on how we speak about the border had changed, and I had changed, too, since I had done a number of other projects in the meantime that had to do with outsourced labor, gender, and migration. To mention just one of these, I had curated a two-year-long project called *Kültür* with women artists and sociologists in Istanbul about women who work in the textile industry for the European market, their marginalization on the periphery of the Turkish metropolis and their appropriation and use of the urban space. So I returned to Mexico with a more global understanding of the processes that I was to investigate on site. The idea was not so much to document the reality of a border town: *performing the border* is put together in a way that slowly but steadily unravels the many layers of global processes that are inscribed in this place.

In both cases, my focus was on the gendered aspect of the international division of labor and on the ways this particular border is performed. One of the most striking things was cer-

tainly the growing prostitution scene and other indications that the border was a highly sexualized region. This insight prompted me to pursue the entanglement between globalized production processes and the sexualization of female labor for a next video project. The worldwide trafficking of women into sex work became the subject matter for *Remote Sensing*, my latest video, which has just been released. On the way to making *Remote Sensing* I produced another, shorter video, *Writing Desire*, which covers that part of the trafficking and trading of women that makes use of electronic communication tools, email, and the Internet. This particularly concerns the booming bride market but also other forms of uncommercial romantic and erotic communications.

SZEMAN: What your work draws attention to in the specific sites of Turkey and Mexico is replicated almost everywhere on the globe: It constitutes a more general, global division of labor by gender. The majority of the new Free Trade Zones set up in countries from Jamaica to China are populated mainly by women, who are preferred especially in technological manufacturing over male employees. Yet in discussions of global labor, gender often seems to drop out of the equation. Why do you think this is? What do we miss about globalization if we don't see the role of gender within it?

BIEMANN: I'm afraid we get not only an incomplete but also a quite distorted picture if we dismiss gender as a determining factor in all this. From the very beginning, the establishment of the Free Trade Zone along the entire 3,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border has been based on the plan to draw on a very young female labor force, even though the Mexican government agreed to this contract believing that it would resolve the high male unemployment in the border region due to the sudden cancellation of the *Brasero* program, which had regulated the border passage of Mexican field workers for the U.S. agriculture up to that date. From the settlement of the first *maquiladora*,³ gender has been a major employment criteria for assembly workers in the industrial parks. Why this is so has been widely discussed: nimble fingers make for better and faster precision work in electronic assemblage operations; adolescent girls have no experience in the public sphere and are thus less likely to organize into unions; young girls can be paid much lower wages because they count as secondary income to a household; and they are generally the most vulnerable segment of the population because they have the least autonomy within their families but high responsibilities towards their family members.



Still from *Remote Sensing* (2001). (Image courtesy of Ursula Biemann; reprinted with permission.)

The industrial complexes have relied on all these factors and on patriarchal family structures in the region, which have the effect of pressuring daughters to comply with any working conditions because they bring home the only income to a family in which father, uncles, and brothers are unemployed.

Even though the male share of employees has increased in recent years, the great majority of the population of Ciudad Juárez is female—there are large desert areas where only women live. Adolescent girls and young women have moved into these vast areas on the edge of the city to set up a shack right on the desert sand because there is no housing made available for workers. They build their own houses with wood and cardboard scraps from the factories. A different type of society is forming in these areas that hardly operates according to the regular social norms as we know them, and we have little idea of how they will develop in the future. With the reversal of income pattern, great changes have occurred within gender relations and other social arrangements.

Then there is another side to gender and free trade. Large-scale prostitution activities have settled around Free Trade

Zones all over the world. We could simply explain this by assuming that wherever new money is generated, there will always be prostitution. But with *performing the border*, I'm trying to take the argument somewhere else. The fact that women don't make enough money by working full time at the maquiladoras forces many of them to earn a supplementary income on weekends through prostitution. In the trade you would call it pimping, only here it is on a corporate level since transnationals benefit directly from getting labor for pocket money by making women dependent on commodifying their bodies. The interpenetration of the industrial market and the sexual market is not an interesting side effect, it is a structural part of global capitalism. One of the most striking, and maybe most disturbing, insights I gained on the border is that international labor in the South is not only feminized but also sexualized. The female workers are literally interpellated in their sexuality. For many women, this is the beginning of a long and sensitive negotiation of survival.

If you don't understand all these entanglements between the sexual and the economic and the circumstances that have led to the fact that migration today is not just feminized (i.e., that an ever greater share of migrants are female), but that these women are addressed in their sexuality, you don't really get the depth of the problem at hand.

Sometimes, as an artist or video maker, it is a good idea to turn the questions around and look at an image or a site and try to interpret from there, rather than trying to apply all the structural knowledge we can gather. This seemed to be useful for this complex site, because the border, and the U.S.-Mexico border in particular, is not only a material manifestation, it is also a metaphor for a number of fundamental divisions and differentiations in our self-understanding as subjects. And in all this global expansion, the definitions of what constitutes and delineates us are more urgently claimed than ever. Yet, on the border, these definitions are subjected to change and to crisis. The border can be read as a metaphor of the artificial division 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, between masculinity and femininity, and all these concepts are somehow in a state of transformation. It's through the continuous performance of these distinctions that a border like this one gets materialized and reinforced. From a theoretical perspective and as someone involved in symbolic production,

this vision of the border, revealing its deeper psycho-social meaning, explains the significance of gender as a dividing category, yet from another, if radically different, angle.

SZEMAN: Your work also insists on the physical reality of the new global order, a materiality that is also still too often passed over in discussions that focus on the spectrality of new communications technologies, the disembodied circulation of finance capital, and so on. You've written that capitalism hinges on the displacement of bodies "across topographies from one cultural arrangement to another, from one spatial organization to another, from one abandoned economy to a place of greater accumulation." This reminds me of the work of the photographer Allan Sekula, whose work on the global shipping industry has similarly insisted on the fact that "a society of accelerated flows is also in certain key aspects a society of deliberately slow movement."⁴ In what ways does it remain essential to understand the role of the body in globalization?

BIEMANN: That is a central question today: how can we represent economic processes that are mostly invisible and abstract, now that there are no more spectacular steel works or mechanic processes to be documented? How do you represent electronic communication or financial capital? You quote a sentence from *Remote Sensing* where I'm trying to grapple with the fact that local stagnating economies don't generate enough growth—they need constant expansion and movement. Economies need the movement of bodies across borders to produce a surplus: stagnant bodies don't produce economic growth any longer. The flow of capital in one direction is intrinsically linked with the flow of people in the other. And if financial operations are so tightly linked with the movement of people in the reverse, or almost every, direction, maybe we shouldn't separate these two discussions; we certainly shouldn't separate them within representation. I believe migrant women ultimately benefit from an association of their trajectories with certain high-end images of technology, mobility, and abstract operations.

Migration has always been associated with the movement of bodies, only in representations, particularly here in Europe, migrant women are so often depicted in images of need, poverty, and helplessness, placed in humanitarian and development discourses, or in scenarios of exploitation. I'm a bit tired of images of women caught inside poorly furnished refugee centers or carrying bundles of luggage on their backs. Beside the fact that many of them use the same state-of-the-art tech-



Still from *performing the border* (1999). (Image courtesy of Ursula Biemann; reprinted with permission.)

nologies of transportation and communication as high-tech businessmen do, in order to get to where they are now, we also have to acknowledge that these moving female bodies have increasingly become the vehicle for economic growth in their home country. Entire national economies depend on the remittances of female domestic and sex workers. *Remote Sensing* focuses on the trafficking of women into sex work, one of the most extreme forms of subjugation and exploitation, if you will, but I saw this also as a great challenge to find a range of different images of female bodies on the move. I'm tracing the routes of women in the global flow of information and capital, because I see a need to find new images for migrating women. At the same time, there is no point in generating positive, happy images of women without elaborating with precision on the various structural reasons for their condition. To expand the space in which we write the feminine and the way we imagine femininity culturally, and to locate it in the grey zone—the border areas of negotiation—is what I'm trying to do with this new video as well.

To take up your quote on Allan Sekula, the situation on the U.S.-Mexican border made me think a lot about different speeds. The Maquila workers produce electronic and digital

equipment for the market in the advanced world. All these technologies are meant to accelerate our lives and make it more efficient. But we have to recognize that the time savings in the advanced world are paid for by the excruciating time investment made by the workers who produce the instruments. To illustrate the schedule of a worker: Before dawn, she leaves the settlement at the periphery which has neither street lights nor public transportation, walks close to an hour to the bus station in the city center, and takes a one-hour bus ride out to the Maquila at the other end of town to make the morning shift at six o'clock. She spends nine hours at the plant and goes back home the same way. In his essay "Going at Different Speeds," Andrew Ross identifies speed differentials and relative time scarcity as the basic principles for uneven development in the world economy. "Beyond a critical speed," he quotes Ivan Illich, "no one can save time without forcing another to lose it."⁵

I believe the Zapatistas have understood this principle in depth when they announce their motto of "taking the slowest paths," meaning that every decision should be agreed on by every member of the community even if it takes a long time to come to a decision this way: The slowness resists the kind of acceleration which isn't paying off for everyone.

These workers don't just pay with their time. There is another, more disturbing side to this contract. A good part of the equipment produced in the maquiladoras are optical technologies: medical and cyber optics, surveillance instruments, x-ray satellite technologies, micro- and telescoping, audio-visual media, identification, scanning, digitizing, controlling, and simulating electronics. They all improve our optical range from entering the tiniest particles to peaking into deep space. One of the major hiring criteria is excellent eyesight in order to be able to perform precision tasks. Experience shows that the average young woman's eyesight is sharp enough for about eight years, then she will have to be replaced by a fresh young worker. This means that her organic vision is consumed in the making of the visualization technologies on which our society relies. These female bodies need to be continuously recycled. So I think these are all good reasons to see the body as an entity that should not be dismissed in representation of a networked and hypermobile society, even if we have managed to place these processes somewhat out of sight.

SZEMAN: Your work focuses not only on the production of the new global geographies of gender but also on the creation of various counter-geographies. In *performing the border*, you not

only show the terrors of the border zone but some of its (perhaps surprising) possibilities as well. You also interview female activists and critics who are working to change the circumstances of female labor. *Writing Desire* and *Remote Sensing* similarly look at the problems and possibilities of technology for contemporary gender and sexuality. On the one hand, the Internet has enabled an enormous global trade in women through (for example) the bride market; on the other, it has allowed for experimentation with new identities and desires. What are the politics of these counter-geographies? Are they always circumscribed by dominant geographies?

BIEMANN: You're right: Through all this work I have done in locations that are particularly affected by globalization I have become something of a geographer. In the last years, I have clearly moved my focus from the representation of gender and ethnicity as my prime subject of investigation, towards the question of how identity is performed, how it operates, how it inscribes itself in the social and material fabric, particularly the urban fabric, and how these geographies form, in their turn, the subjectivities who inhabit them. So space and location have become important, not only in the discussion of gender, because it permits us to articulate the relations between subject, belonging, boundaries, transgressions, and place. We could say I shifted my interest from a concern with identity connected to a body with a history, to the moving, migrating body with a gender and a geography. It's a major shift.

In my work, I believe I open up unmapped spaces. Border areas *per se* are difficult to map because they fall between two national systems and aren't recognized as a territory in their own right that operates not according to one of the two national rules but according to a third type of principle that has emerged from the negotiation between the two. This in itself is a counter-geography.

Of all the videos, *Remote Sensing* is maybe getting most explicit in the focus on these grey zones, the in-between areas. The title of the video sounds rather technical. It refers to the visualizing technologies and other geographic information systems that have been developed to scan the topography, to represent and interpret the Earth in the most accurate fashion. We could think of these technologies as the leading mainstream method of "reading" the Earth and give meaning to its geographies. The entire video is an effort to write counter-geographies into these digital, remote, and scientific scripts of the planet. Gender is one of the categories that notoriously falls

through the evaluation rosters. These technologies conceal the gendered meaning of the data they produce. What needs to be done, then, is to infuse the technological images with human specificities, with subjective interpretations, personal ambiguities, introduce illicit economies and other circuits of survival that people have developed outside and in the cracks of what's called the global economy. *Remote Sensing* enters in all these interesting spaces which hold great potential for subversion. I have roamed the net for all imaginable digital representations of the areas I have visited during the shoot for *Remote Sensing*, mainly South East Asia and Eastern Europe. I am using a great number of satellite images in this video, including images I have downloaded directly from the NASA homepage.

With digital editing tools you can rotate the satellite images and gradually increase them in size so that it looks as if the camera is spiraling from the orbit down onto the Earth, zooming into the many complex areas where trafficking activities take place: the semi-invisible networks of transportation, agencies, commissions, and bribes; of illegal female labor circuits, border transactions, and off-shore markets. The surface of the video breaks up into multiple screens where swirling satellite images, weather forecast animations, passing Mekong landscapes, and speaking NGO women all cohabit the same space. You can tell I have been reading a lot of feminist geography lately, but for the concept of counter-geography I have been most inspired by Saskia Sassen's writing on the shadow economies and revenue-making border circuits in which women have become key actors.⁶

The grey zone I'm opening up in *Remote Sensing* is the discursive space between "being forced" into prostitution which is the narrow definition of trafficking, and "choosing" to migrate into prostitution for lack of a better opportunity. From a human-rights point of view there is a decisive difference between the two that you might have to insist on if you intend to intervene at a legislative level. For a cultural producer, however, whose primary goal is not to change the world out there, but to change the discourse that we use to speak about the world out there, it is redundant to make such artificial distinctions since the cultural pressures, social obligations, and economic necessities that drive women into sex work are no less imperative. I want to elaborate on the space of negotiation in-between because that's where the complexity of our lives is located. I'm not trying to say there is no force or deception involved. Nor am I trying to embellish the hardship that bears

on these lives. But from conversations with women in the sex trade, I recognize that they suffer as much from the stigma that lies on prostitution as from doing the job itself. Distancing myself from visions of captivity, immobility, or deportation, I opted for images that show women traveling through space, actively traversing geographies. In *Remote Sensing*, migrant women appear in small x-ray portraits moving through blue tinted landscapes while green electronic travel schedules trace their routes across the globe, from Lagos to Munich, from Moscow to Tel Aviv, from Salvador to California, from Thailand to Paris. Such images speak to me about migration in the age of digital images.

No doubt, technologies are being developed to enhance control over migration flows and border activities. On the Southern European border between Spain and Morocco they have recently changed their entire surveillance system from radar to satellite technologies, permanent helicopter patrols, and heat sensors. But at the same time, new technologies facilitate and increase migration opportunities for many. You mentioned the virtual bride market, which has experienced enormous growth since the use of the Internet. Women no longer have to travel to the West in the hope of finding a husband within the three months of their tourist visa. Migration is made easier with the use of email, enabling them to build up a relationship that will lead to an engagement and consequent invitation to the West. Electronic communication has quickly been discovered as a tool to build romantic and erotic relations. But while a seductive activity of writing is experienced by many in the Western world as playful and fun, many women in locations of weaker economies take a chance and address a white man as a way of getting out of poverty. In her writing, discourses of romantic desire intertwine with a desire for survival. It is not surprising that the Internet preys on this vulnerable set of motivations.

This is the topic of *Writing Desire*—in short, an attempt to combine the various writing positions without wanting to highlight a binary contrast between those female subjects in the advanced societies who practice a self reflexive, postmodern discourse of desire and sexuality out of fun, and those who struggle for survival and offer their emotional, sexual, and caregiving services to get out of the slums. The video doesn't strive to polarize the positions in this way and I guess that's where I want to open up space in between. *Writing Desire* offers a third position in the person of the virtual artist Maris Bustamante, based in Mexico City, who was tired of the local machismo and recently found an American husband via the



Still from *Writing Desire* (2000). (Image courtesy of Ursula Biemann; reprinted with permission.)

Internet. For her, this was a way to formulate and live a more emancipated relationship. As a fifty-year-old feminist, mother, widow, university professor, and radical of her own will, as Maris describes herself, she met a U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant on the net. Trying to escape the local machismo, she found a representative of the most macho enterprise on this planet . . . and married him. These stories are full of contradictions which I find very productive. Of course we could see the virtual bride market as the despicable commodification of female bodies that it is, but we shouldn't imagine these women as more victim than we are when we chose to buy a hamburger. So here, counter-geographies means to recognize agency and resistance where everything seemed already mapped out by the powerful players.

Likewise in *performing the border*, there is a factor of unpredictability, some twist or turn that had not been planned. The transnational corporations hired young women because they are most docile and easiest to capitalize upon. But in Juarez today, the shift of buying power to young women is obvious. In the dance halls, entertainment mainly caters to female customers with male strip shows and male dance con-

tests where women cheer in appreciation of men's sex appeal. Songs are dedicated to the girls from Torreon or from Durango, who make up the majority of maquila workers, the song lyrics often refer to female sexual desires; and the entire entertainment machine is aligned to their pleasure. The shift in the income pattern has empowered women in their personal relationships. It has enabled their overt expression of sexual desires and affords the satisfaction of these desires by economic means rather than by the more traditional ones, namely, in the domestic setting through emotional or reproductive pathways. The video images of the dancing women are tinted blue as if to open up a different visual space not merely defined by material circumstances but by the emotional and imaginary world of women who want to be in command of their bodies and their sexuality.

SZEMAN: Is your own work a form of counter-geography? Naively, I remember feeling that one of the most powerful aspects of *performing the border* was simply the ability to see images of the places and spaces of the Mexican factory zone. The maquiladoras are frequently in the news; it means something different, however, to be able to conceptualize them visually.

BIEMANN: I'm glad to hear that the images in *performing the border* succeeded somehow in doing what they intended: to localize and to embody utterly invisible, abstract, and disembodied economic operations. It has become increasingly difficult to make this kind of video because the assembly plants forbid any camera to enter. Some video makers from California told me that they refrained from making a film about the maquiladoras because they won't let you in. Simply not doing it cannot be the solution. We have to find ways of representing it all the same by finding information on the web, by interviewing workers, copying and commenting on news material, grasping images on passage, and constructing some complex whole that will communicate the situation, which isn't mainly material anyway.

There are good documentary videos that trace the trajectory from the order of a client in the West to the various locations of partial productions scattered over the globe, starting with, say, the textile fibers to the making of the fabric and the manufacturing of the garment including the transportation, storage, and middlemen in between until the finished item hits the stores and reaches the end consumers in North America. At the end of the video you think you understand the com-

plexity of transnational production today as a linear and logical procedure. But I wouldn't call this counter-geography, even if it may be critical of the waste of time and energy spent in useless shipping trajectories or the dismal wage that workers earn in Pakistan. I think of counter-geography also as an act of recontextualizing much belabored discourses and using a networked, spatial way of drawing information together.

SZEMAN: Your work is characterized by a very careful and sophisticated engagement with visual form. In other words, you're interested in doing more than creating a typical documentary that bears witness to the intersection of globalization and gender. In what ways can attention to form produce an effective intervention in social and cultural circumstances, especially with respect to the investigation of gender?

BIEMANN: *performing the border* is sometimes mistaken for a documentary because of the many talking heads that I use, but I consider my videos to be essays. They are explicitly subjective in their approach—for example, only women speak—are highly theoretical, and move back and forth between various discursive levels of lived experience, researched information, personal associations and theoretical speculations. Often-times, just when you thought you were getting a document, you realize that the narration isn't congruent with the image. When the former prostitute, Juana, is speaking about young girls entering the sex trade in Juarez, instead of seeing prostitutes on street corners you see a Chola, a kind of a Hip Hop girl dashing through the night and over to a group of young dykes. I'm not in search of reality but interested in the generation of a completely artificial construct. Practically all footage is scraped of its original sound—no Mexican music, no diesel traffic. It's a synthetic area and this needs to be experienced through the elaboration and layering of images and the electronic sound underlying them.

The video images are manipulated in a number of ways. There is police footage tinted in yellow and night scenes dipped into indigo. Slow motion is used throughout the video to overemphasize the representation on a symbolic level but also insert quiet moments to question the image itself, to absorb the gestures and the gestalt of the bodies. Ultimately, these means are implemented as critical tools to sever the image from its signified and to bring the mode from a documentary transparency to the critical reflection. This is what differentiates my aesthetic approach from, say, a street activist video from an antiglobalization demonstration.

In *Writing Desire* I go a step further. This short, energetic (music) video is my first attempt at exploring the possibilities of designing a compressed, dense and multilayered type of space of the world wide web in the video format. Highly fragmented and apparently disjointed, it breaks the linearity of video viewing by simulating the interactive web character of on-line activities in a number of forms. Graphics and writing as well as selection processes on the screen suggest a viewing situation associated with the computer monitor rather than televisual or cinematic viewing. Loosely associated clips don't provide the viewer with rational explanations in a documentary or linear manner. Meaning has to be extracted and combined individually by the viewer. Knowledge is produced in a way we learned from computers and the Internet in particular. "I thought of making a video so I could speak with you" says a silent text on the screen, addressing the relationship between these two media who represent and constitute us differently.

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 emerged was: How can a video, rather



Still from *Remote Sensing* (2001). (Image courtesy of Ursula Biemann; reprinted with permission.)

than simply arguing against 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 the mediation between the two, as an effective intervention in the performative practice of representation.

The struggle to give form always brings us up against the limits of our imagination, but when it comes to the feminine, the cultural imaginary gets really simplistic. Engaging in and displacing the narrow boundaries that limit our imagination means to re-signify the feminine within sexual difference, and that's a political project in itself. The process of re-signification, as I see my video practice, takes place between the images and our lives, somewhere between the limitations of representation and the political struggle of activists, or more profanely, our daily existential struggles. I see the terrain of symbolic production as a performative one. My videos tackle topics which are typically associated with a documentary practice—topics over which feminists have articulated clear positions in the past decades—only to break open speculative spaces by making unusual associations and juxtapositions which defy causal explanations or the simple affirmation of facts. The process from the imaginary to representation is not a smooth, linear one. How can you document this process? You cannot. All you can do is perform it.

SZEMAN: In *Remote Sensing*, you explore the intersection of technology and gender in era of globalization. The official rhetorics of the age link technology to progress in a way that suggests that everything is getting better. But as you show, technology is also linked to accelerating degrees of subjugation, especially for women outside the West. In what ways is technology essential to the global trade of female bodies?

BIEMANN: *Remote Sensing* is an attempt to visualize the multi-layered meaning of geography where the sexualization of women in global capitalism is linked to the implementation of new technologies, often in contradicting ways. As I mentioned above, the Internet facilitates the migration flow, particularly via the bride market and sex tourism, while the border reinforcement technologies, on the other hand, hinder and push

female migration into the illegal sector. The European visa politics are quite explicit in their practice of channeling migrant women directly into the sex industry without giving them any future option to switch to another trade. Technologies of marginalization and control always affect women, and particularly economically disadvantaged women, in their sexuality because powerful players like states, scientific complexes, and military institutions tend to create a sexuality that eroticizes hierarchies. So the effect of technology is deeply contradictory and so is my use of technologies in relation to gender and migration in my videos, whereby I'm always particularly interested in addressing optical and visualizing technologies, since this is the field of my artistic intervention. The abstract digital recordings produced by the many image satellites currently in orbit have an impact on how we imagine the Earth and how we relate to its population. Through this lens, the world is viewed as graspable, controllable, and easy to categorize. What I propose in *Remote Sensing* is that satellite visions of globality are producing a sexual economy in which it has become thinkable to reorganize women geographically on a global scale. These images do not merely document a given situation, they are actively constituting it too.

While I critique the technological images and their binary and mutually exclusive categories of interpretation, I'm simultaneously using these very images to enhance the representation of female migration and bring it into this age of visual language. Contextualizing their movement in a discourse of space technology and the most sophisticated optical instruments currently in use, naturally associates them with progress.

SZEMAN: What projects are you working on now?

BIEMANN: I should mention that many of my projects are collaborative in nature, not in every phase of the production, but they come into existence in dialog with others. For instance, I traveled to Southeast Asia for *Remote Sensing* in company of Simin Farkhondeh, a video maker and labor activist from New York, who is in the process of editing a video with footage she shot during our trip, tying in many of the same interviews I have used in my version. She will take a different approach to the question of global sex work, probably more labor oriented, and we will articulate the two productions together. I like to see my work as an open formulation.

The idea for the next project emerges from an ongoing email exchange with Lisa Parks from the film department at U.C.

Santa Barbara, who has published extensively on satellite images and the orbital gaze, proposing new readings of media appearances of satellite images, for instance, in connection with the mass graves in Srebrenica. We are planning a collaborative research project on the use of technologies with regards to migration and refugee flows. The purpose is to look at the role and social meaning of new geographic technologies, particularly in the field of producing and disseminating visualizations (infrared, roentgen, photo sensing, etc.), implemented for representing, tracking, sensing, recording, surveilling, and channeling migration flows both from a satellite as well as an earthly perspective. It will probably involve more large scale motion studies—studies of migration and immigration in different parts of the world, in particular border zones, and areas that have changed dramatically because of globalization. One of the objectives could be to relate individual survival strategies to the formation of larger patterns of movement that become recognizable through image technologies of remote gazers and path tracers. We don't know yet the form this project will take. Probably it will entail a web interface, GPS to trace migration movements, and video.

Ursula Biemann's videos are available in North America from Women Make Movies (www.wmm.com). *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces, Postproduction Documents, 1988–2000* is distributed by Autonomedia (www.autonomedia.org).

Notes

1. Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Global Body, Global Brain/Global Factory, Global War: Revolt of the Value-Subjects." Unpublished manuscript.
2. Ursula Biemann, "Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces" (New York: Autonomedia, 2000).
3. The term "maquiladora" originates from the word "maquila," which was an agriculture arrangement in which a portion of the harvest could be kept by the farmer. A maquiladora facility is "twined" with a facility in the U.S., and is permitted to import materials for processing and manufacturing without tariff, with the condition that it is exported to the twin U.S. facility. Maquiladoras now represent the leading source of foreign exchange in Mexico.
4. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1991): 50.
5. Andrew Ross, "Going at Different Speeds." In *ReadMe! ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, ed. Josephine Bosme (New York: Autonomedia, 1999), 174.
6. See Saskia Sassen, "Women's Burden: Counter-geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival," *Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 2 (2000): 503–524. This text is based on the author's larger multiyear project on "Governance and Accountability in the Global Economy."

