

HELMHAUS ZÜRICH

Ursula Biemann Videogeographies

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Ursula Biemann's investigative video essays address issues of mobility and migration. She regularly leaves her home in Zurich to explore disputed territories around the globe, and constructs complex human geographies, complete with side-effects and undocumented movements. Zurich's Helmhaus is hosting two shows simultaneously: Biemann's "Videogeographies" and Hannes Rickli's "Videograms".

Although the people of Palestine are virtually ubiquitous in the media, we scarcely ever read a statement made by the refugees themselves. When was the last time anyone heard about the composition of a refugee camp? Has a camera-wielding journalist ever braved the narrow lanes of such a settlement? What does it look like there? How does a refugee's social life function, how do refugees share their views with each other? And what do lawyers, historians and anthropologists have to say about the topic?

Although the subject of migration of Africans to Europe is virtually ubiquitous in the media, we scarcely ever read a statement made by the migrants themselves. When was the last time anyone heard about the way they organize themselves in transit from one place to another? Has a reporter ever sat among them, in a truck overflowing with baggage and passengers, as they set out on their perilous journey? What do uranium extraction and Europe's fishing industry have to do with migration? And what might human smugglers, police officers and Red Cross workers have to say on the subject?

These are just two of the constellations of issues Ursula Biemann addresses in her videos. *Sahara Chronicle*, her study of transit migration to Europe, draws its considerable power as a work of art by offering a view from the inside, at eye level with the people involved, all the while remaining entirely objective and eschewing all melodrama. Migration is not presented for the sadistic delectation of the observer as a doomed enterprise, but rather as an everyday historical practice conditioned by cultural and economic forces and operating in accordance with the logistics of a niche economy. Biemann's images of the preparation for a great and life-changing journey are thus astonishingly sovereign, exuding a calm that renders them all the more striking.

Biemann's four video installations at the Helmhaus are on a continuum with the four early single-channel videos available for individual viewing on a monitor, rigorously addressing as they do her constant subjects of mobility, borders and migration. Biemann investigates global migration waves in the age of worldwide information systems, and has developed her own aesthetic idiom for the study of disputed territories, from the geography of Caspian oil to

transit migration in the Sahara, from Mexico's border with the United States to the traffic in women in Southeast Asia and refugee camps in the Middle East.

Her video essays are conceived spatially as dictated by the specifics of their geographic subject. *Europlex* (2003), her video meditation on circuitous border-crossing, calls for a different formal structure than does *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-2008), which concerns clandestine, rhizome-like transit migration; at the Helmhaus, the latter is visible at individual video stations and in projections in the exhibition rooms only in the form of documented nodal points and border-crossings. *Black Sea Files* (2005), the fruit of her comprehensive research into the Caspian oil pipeline, is presented as a linear installation on ten synchronized monitors, while *Contained Mobility* (2004) uses a spare double projection to juxtapose the technological iconography of post-9/11 checks on mobility with a staging of the life of a refugee in a container. *X-Mission* (2008), finally, Biemann's latest work, superimposes the varieties of discourse produced by a range of experts regarding the "zone of exception" that is the refugee camp.

By her own account, Biemann's video essays owe their unique status to their union of the macro-level of distanced reflexion on geopolitical contexts with the micro-politics of each individual fighting for his or her life in the face of global upheaval. While abroad doing research, Biemann considers herself an "embedded artist", and assembles her material from field work, video footage shot in situ, interviews with experts, archival documents, virtual sources of information and theoretical texts. Her videos deploy a non-linear, manifold narrative structure and gentle subjective voice-overs to construct a complex human geography of global mobility, with all of its side-effects and undocumented movements.

The video work of Ursula Biemann, who was born in 1955 and lives in Zurich, has been shown at art museums and exhibition spaces worldwide, at film festivals and universities as well as at activist events. She has contributed to biennials in Istanbul, Liverpool, Shanghai, Gwangju, Sharjah, Thessaloniki, San Diego and Seville. Trained as an artist in Boston, Mexico and New York (where she was a participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program), Biemann now supplements her main artistic work with forays into theory and curatorship, initiates collaborative research projects and has edited numerous publications. She does research at the Institute for Theory at the Zurich University of the Arts and, in 2008, during a retrospective show at the Bildmuseet in Umeå, Sweden, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in humanities by Umeå University.

In Switzerland, however, where she served from 1995 to 1998 as a curator at Zurich's Shedhalle, Biemann has not yet received due attention. "Videogeographies" at Zurich's Helmhaus is Biemann's first solo exhibition at a Swiss art institution.

Biemann's *Black Sea Files* is the seamless continuation of a show at Zurich's Helmhaus in the spring of this year, "Travelling through the Eye of History", by local photographer Daniel Schwartz, that was seen by thousands of visitors. Biemann's research took her beyond Central Asia to an oil pipeline intended to link the Caspian Sea with the Mediterranean. In Biemann's account, however, the typical journalistic focus on the role played by big money in the oil industry and on its technological refinements is supplemented by the testimony of simple people immediately afflicted by the phenomenon, including those obliged by political and economic interests to relinquish their land for the pipeline, or women from former socialist republics who have migrated to take part in the sex industry booming in and around the construction zone.

In *Contained Mobility* a Belarusian biologist appears to stow away in a container, although the piece does not ultimately make clear what is fact and what is fiction, which images come from surveillance cameras and which are simply manipulated visual material. The juxtaposition evokes the unrelenting tension between the migrant's unquenchable thirst for self-determination and the dirigiste policies of state and business interests in the issue of mobility.

For Biemann, art teaches us to understand the world, albeit less in the spirit of discovery than motivated by the project of organizing existant knowledge into an aesthetic complex, which in turn may elicit new semantic contexts of its own. Thus her work is not so much documentation of reality as it is organization of complexity. Biemann's video essays marry the eyewitness's subjective perception with the tenets of academic theory arising out of a wide range of disciplines. She joins the positions of the historian, the political scientist, the geographer, the sociologist, the ethnographer and the anthropologist, as well as that of the feminist theorist and the student of post-colonial studies, with her own onsite empirical findings, her observations made beyond the glare of the headlines.

By splicing academic theory with artistic practice, Biemann has created her own interdisciplinary genre. In her oeuvre, sense perception and theoretical reflexion round each other out; according to Jörg Huber, Head of the Institute for Theory at the Zurich University of the Arts, in "Getting to the Bottom of Vision: Theory of Images – Images of Theory. The Significance of Ursula Biemann's Video Work for a Theory of Culture", Biemann works in "an intermediate level between theoretical discourse, academic field work, and artistic production". (Jörg Huber's essay is one of seven theoretical interventions in *Mission Reports. Artistic Practice in the Field. Video Works 1998-2008*, a recent monograph from Cornerhouse Publications in Manchester.)

By thus interweaving theory and practice, social science and art, Biemann's video essays constitute autonomous examples of sensory theory *and* critical art. Her formulation, reclassification and reorganization of complex human geographies, as mentioned above, mean that Biemann's work does not follow straight linear narrative routes to simple epistemological conclusions. On the contrary, it trains us to be aware of contradictions, of complex contingencies, of the unrest immanent in our cosmologies. As Huber puts it, "This does not mean that one does not seek knowledge, and must for instance analyse the political circumstances; it means, rather, that aperçus are always only provisional, discursive, situative, and not – as the official opinion and the view from on high would have it – definitive and final."

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While Ursula Biemann organizes sources of knowledge – both existing and deliberately created by herself – to form polyphonic aesthetic montages, Zurich-based artist Hannes Rickli, whose works are being shown in a parallel exhibition at the Helmhaus, transfers audiovisual material from natural science research to the artistic arena. Where Biemann combines expert knowledge with her own personal impressions, Rickli uses material left over from scientific research in an artistic environment. Both artists add value by collating scientific and theoretical material and transposing it into the artistic arena. By appropriating from research and science, they investigate the production of knowledge – and, in so doing, create new knowledge of their own that extends beyond science: art lays bare its own activity in a constant spirit of self-reflection, thereby opening it up for discussion. Both artists thus sensualize theoretical material and contribute to a productive, cross-disciplinary process of theory construction.

The medium of video is the perfect channel for demonstrating the eventfulness of socio-political occurrences and scientific research. Ursula Biemann's work reveals the extent to which the information presented to us every day as a master narrative via media such as CNN is in fact a construct; she shows us how selective and interpreted, how fluid and fleeting it really is. Biemann heightens our awareness of the repressed subsidiary strands of information, of conflicts and contradictions. Instead of taking mainstream information at face value, she examines packages of data from every angle, looks at what lies behind them, how they came into being, and what they are hiding. In this sense, her work is critical – constructively critical – as the distance between her attitude and the object of her criticism generates new information. For Biemann, the medium of video opens up ways of revealing the constructed nature of information – and of transparently communicating new, nuanced, polyphonic information. Biemann's video explorations are devoted to counter-geographies created by concealed operating systems, innovative practices of resistance, and migratory self-determination. By entering zones that are off limits, secret pathways, clandestine and virtual territories, the videos render visible a subversive geographical practice, thereby examining the extent to which artists can take their place in these symbolic and material spaces.

Hannes Rickli, for his part, sheds new light on the stability of scientific results. He shows the steps in the process of discovery and illuminates the wealth of material on which they are based – and, in interviews, critically examines the motivations of their authors. For Hannes Rickli, then, science is a fragile construct that begins by groping in the dark, is guided by individuals, and yet is consciously dependent upon coincidences. Rickli's view of science, too, is critical in the best sense of the word – constructively critical, because releasing scientific images in an artistic space opens up new ways of reading them.