

***Mission Reports. Artistic Practice in the Field: Video Works 1998-2008, Ursula Biemann***

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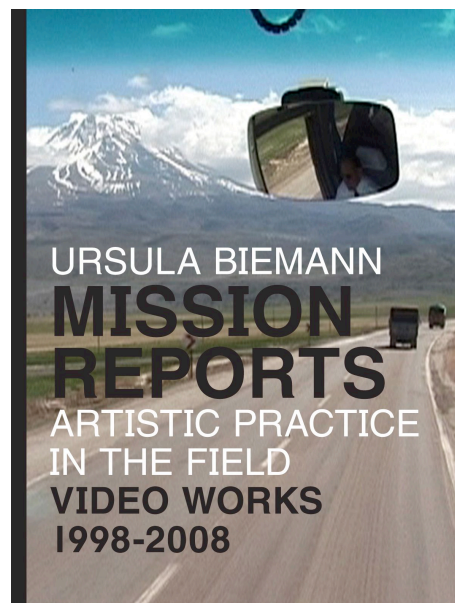
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The neoliberal dream of unrestricted movement of capital and labour power is paradoxically its own nightmare. This nightmare is often played out in spaces such as border zones and refugee camps. These are the spaces explored by the artist Ursula Biemann. The materiality of the relations of power are made manifest and become acutely visible through border controls and immigration restrictions. Neoliberalism could be said to be one of the most 'successful' dominant rationalities of governments in world history. This is not to say that it does not meet with resistance continuously, the unevenness of its development presents itself world over; this becomes Biemann's point of departure. *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, video works 1998-2008* is successful in expanding the

ways in which Biemann's video essay practice explores the transformative moments in basic social processes, which systematically separate people from their previous way of living, aligning them to a life which is more attuned with the necessities and reproductions of capitalism. In all of Biemann's works— whether it be investigating the ways in which border economies work, or the movement of women for the global sex trade— one witnesses the ways in which the body acts as both a conduit for the accumulation strategies of capital and importantly, as a site of resistance.

*Mission Reports* perfectly mimics Biemann's video essay practice in that it acts not as an overarching concluding text on her work, but more as an open ended process that ceases to occupy a totalizing singular theory, although it is extensive it maintains and encourages a consistently open dialogue. The seven contributors' essays stem clearly from their own theoretical interests and have not been specifically commissioned for the book to act purely as commentary. The video essayistic practice



(which, for Biemann, has much of its roots in Chris Marker's film essays of the 1980s) is not about documenting realities but about producing, organizing and performing complexities and the book charts this endeavour. The video essay allows one to observe images and texts in a non-linear way, layering and manipulating images and soundscapes, enabling one to see that subjectivities *cannot* be understood in isolation from systematically organized totalities. This format in Biemann's work is deployed to address recent economic transformations in the geographies of global capital, exploring issues such as migration, the 'feminisation' of labour, the transit of commodities, inter-communal conflict, and the implications of neoliberal policies.

The video essay is often seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective from the perspective of documentary filmmaking and, from that of video art, as overtly political.<sup>1</sup> In Biemann's work the fragmentation of form, the use of explicit post-production techniques, and the ways in which the framing and editing of the material is handled give her work a marked epistemological stance. This stance is concerned with mapping the distinctiveness of subjects' positions, drawing our attention to both the disparity and commonality between them, exploring the tensions between 'reality' and 'representation', and negotiating 'truth claims' in a nuanced and dialectical manner. Significantly, Biemann's work attempts to exceed the critical paradigm provided by Jean-Luc Godard's argument in favour of exploring 'the politics of representation' without returning to 'the representation of politics'.

Biemann's practice has required access to many contested transnational territories across the globe. Examining the effects of globalisation on both a macro and micro level has resulted in a remarkable body of highly researched works which are thankfully now assembled in *Mission Reports*; this is a book that reflects precisely that which is of paramount importance to Biemann's practice: research and collaboration.<sup>2</sup> She has worked with anthropologists, NGO members, artists, architects and cultural theorists. Her videography consists of, to date, eight video essays, four one-channel works: *Performing the Border*, *Writing Desire*, *Remote Sensing*, *Europlex* and four multi channel works: *Contained Mobility*, *Black Sea Files*, *Sahara Chronicles* and *X-Mission*. The book has a dense, yet precise introductory essay by Biemann on her practice. In addition to this each video essay project is accompanied by a short text, offering theoretical insights, peppered with a few brief anecdotes of Biemann's interactions and relationships with the people she films. Biemann states that 'this kind of self-reflexive writing has been generally helpful in situating my work within the intellectual and interpretive context in which I think it is best understood'.<sup>3</sup>

Angela Dimitrakaki's essay, which opens the 'The Video Essay & Real-World Politics' section of the book, is an important and insightful piece of writing in terms of providing both an introduction and critical framework to Biemann's work. (As an aside, the use of 'Real-World Politics' as a chapter heading seems slightly off kilter with the theoretical and political tone of the book in that it pertains to the existence of something 'real' that the video essay is separate from and must relate to). Dimitrakaki succinctly writes that, '[Ursula's work] inflects quantitative data with qualitative meaning'. To expand, on watching *Europlex* (made in collaboration with the visual anthropologist Angela Sanders) generic transnational company names flash across the women workers' faces; the homogeneous names blur into one. The image cuts to a head and shoulders shot of two young women workers. In contrast to other parts of the film, the women are more than aware that they are being filmed, they smile and laugh at the camera; directing their gaze directly at the viewer. These human bodies, this direct eye contact, gives weight and meaning to the abstract global company

names and unfathomable data that moves across their image. The fictitious capital generated and circling these transnational corporations finds its anchor, its materiality— its very locality in this image, these faces and these bodies.

For Dimitrakaki, Biemann's work operates within a materialist-feminist framework, and enables a practice that is successful in cutting through the current problematic tendencies of contemporary art, making manifest the debates between documentation and reality and between art and documentation. Dimitrakaki explores the ways in which Biemann attempts to do something with the moving image that popular culture does not. I may be inclined to push this assertion further, adding that Biemann's work also attempts something the genre of video art cannot or will not do, in fear perhaps, of contamination with the popular, or in fear of moving away from the primary importance paid to the notion of the 'aesthetic' in art making (to recall Brian Holmes).

Whilst Dimitrakaki discerns how to read Biemann's work within the existing landscape of contemporary art, Wendy S. Hesford positions Biemann's work in direct opposition to government campaign videos on anti-trafficking and the global sex trade. Hesford writes that the narratives of victimization shown throughout government campaign videos 're-victimise and [...] support repressive cultural and political agendas'. She asserts that Biemann's works *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire* do not ignore the 'complications of transnationality', writing that they give new insights to the victim/agent binary. (Arguably, perhaps Biemann's work highlights the acute problems surrounding the use of binaries in any instance). Hesford examines the desire for women to be depicted as passive and naïve contrasting this with Biemann's need to show how, increasingly people must learn to live between the fissures of our nation-states. Hesford gives fascinating insight into how important the narratives of victimisation are to legal and cultural representations of human rights violations, particularly with women and girls. It would seem that Biemann, for Hesford, engenders alternative forms of representation that are exempt from the controls of the government and its media.

The book and Biemann's work deals directly with the problematics of reductive approaches of the media. As documentary filmmaking is so often governed by state-controlled media this raises significant questions about representing 'reality'. This problem is the central concern for the cinema and art critic Jean-Pierre Rehm in his contribution 'Political Typographies'. Rehm discusses the dialogue the video essay has with the history of the documentary examining how Biemann calls the sensationalist image into question (discussing, specifically File 4 in *Black Sea Files*, which films the evacuation of a Kurdish community in Ankara, Turkey). Elsewhere in the book, Biemann explains how important it is for her work to steer clear of making these types of images— that is, one frame and one headline to construct a 'truth' telling *the* story. Biemann states rather, that 'art can provide an in-depth view of the complex circumstances of the human condition' enabling the potential for a form of 'sustainable representation'.

Biemann's text on her video essay *Contained Mobility* clearly delineates the importance she pays to the notion of agency within her work when she writes of the film's protagonist, Anatol K. Zimmermann slipping off screen and out of sight of both government surveillance equipment and her own camera. This shot, she seems to suggest, goes part way in visualising the ingenuity needed for living and existing between nation-states, the 'statelessness' of Anatol and the potential power that may come with such a position. It is here, amongst many other places in the book that Giorgio Agamben's concept of *bare life* is used to examine the life of the migrant

subject. Uta Staiger's essay deploys Agamben, to a point, when examining Biemann's work as visualizing the citizenship gap. However, Staiger (justifiably so) is critical of the limits of Agamben's thesis, stating that it is in danger of becoming a 'romanticised teleology investing messianic potential in the people most deprived of rights today'. Conversely, T.J. Demos' 'Sahara Chronicle: Video's Migrant Geography'<sup>4</sup> does not acknowledge the limitations of Agamben's concept when exploring the status of the migrant and/or refugee. Demos, sees Agamben as developing a purely positive notion for 'statelessness', which he links or likens rather, to Biemann's work.

There is some, albeit small, but important tension between the use of Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's bare life throughout the book. For instance, whilst noting that Biemann's earlier video essay, *Europlex* ruminates on Foucault's biopolitics, Staiger's essay implies that increasingly, for Biemann's work, it is more about visualising the political and legal dimension of 'the rights pertaining to the migrant in comparison to the citizen' and perhaps this goes part way in explaining the replacement of biopolitics with the concept of bare life throughout the book. However, Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France* c.1971-1984 reflect how relevant his research on the political and legal dimension of subjects' rights might be for exploring Biemann's work.<sup>5</sup> It seems to be considered that Agamben's concept of bare life is, to use Biemann's words, a 're-formulation, of Foucault's biopolitics'. This elaboration of the idea that Foucault and Agamben make comfortable bedfellows when discussing Biemann's work engenders a difficult reading.

To expand, Biemann states in the book that her work can be seen as working towards 'the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation', this suggests an 'outside' to relations of power. For me the nation state is best considered as a technology of government; it is a way of administering power. When one moves out of sight of the nation-state's metaphorical eye one is resisting power not moving 'outside' of its auspice. There is no outside to power, to suggest that there might be seems *ultimately* to recourse to a naturalized notion of life suggesting that there is something below that, which is constituted by power. This over reliance on the concept of bare life suggests a worrying return to a kind of 'neo-metaphysical idealist temptation' and implies that resistance to power/knowledge relations comes from an 'outside' of powers, forms of knowledge or history itself.<sup>6</sup>

Brian Holmes offers an exciting contribution to *Mission Reports* that positions itself within the history of the critiques of art institutional frameworks. He sketches out and discusses the first two phases of institutional critique, citing pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video as having ruptured periods of the cannon in art history (acerbically remarking, however, that 'these dramatized outbursts merely *imported* themes' back into the gallery which were not so exciting as one might have first thought). The bulk of his essay calls for the development and need for a new, third stage of institutional critique which has its roots in collaborative and networked projects. These projects, he states, should carry out investigations on 'terrains far away from art'. This is where he sees Biemann's practice operating. Most tellingly of all is his concluding point, which states that, 'today more than ever, any constructive investigation [art which forms this third phase of institutional critique] has to raise the standards of resistance'.

Lastly, Jörg Huber's essay (along with Holmes') is for me central to understanding Biemann's practice. Huber posits the video essay's strength in its ability to be lead by its subject, writing that it is not dependent on a specific discipline or particular institution. Through a Foucauldian lens he discusses the ways in which

the video essay is able to pull away from meta-narratives and examine specificity. Not unlike, Biemann, he sees material landscapes as ‘iconographic indices of the mind’ formed by multiple relations of power, stating that physical geographies must not be seen as passive, neutral spaces, but seen as places of extreme movement populated by sociological, political and economic relations of power working biopolitically.

Biemann is not afraid to address the difficulties in her work; she is interested in recording and documenting her struggles with the ethics of representing the absent other; of constructing an aesthetic from such personal struggles, and of facing her own limits in terms of comprehension and identification with the subjects she films. Importantly, Biemann’s practice allows said difficulties to come to the fore, or rather, insists that they do, demanding a dialogue between what is often considered irreconcilable. All the essays in the book, including Biemann’s commentaries and introductory essay stress the need for the visibility of construction, of artificiality, of production. Stressing that nothing should be seen as representing ‘reality’. When something is considered as ‘normal’, neutral or passive, action must then be taken. Biemann’s practice provides a platform for viewing art as resistance at a time when ever-expanding corporate mentalities are fast developing in the majority of art institutions, enforced through neoliberalism’s “creative industries”. It is important that Biemann’s video essays are read as working within the framework of a materialist or Marxist feminist practice and the attention her work is now receiving only suggests how needed and timely it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Biemann’s work has appeared in either installation or screening mode in a variety of places such as, festivals, art exhibitions, activist conferences, networks and educational settings. These works are, of course, always mediated by the institutions in which they are shown, which adds an interesting dimension to the ways in which one reads Biemann’s video essays, particularly when it becomes clear that her works never de-politicise the subject matter and do not pander to, or fit neatly with, the art institution.

<sup>2</sup> Biemann’s art practice between 1988 and 1999 is subject of the artist book, *Been there and back to nowhere – gender in transnational spaces*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Berlin: b\_books, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For me this is reminiscent of the artist Allan Sekula’s project *Fish Story* (1995).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting how useful it is to have an essay focus on one video essay in the book, Demos also devotes time to looking at the history of the film essay and subsequently the video essays’ lineage.

<sup>5</sup> Now collated and published by Palgrave Macmillan. The three volumes that are specifically pertinent to this point are: *Security, Territory & Population*, *The Birth of Biopolitics* and *Society Must be Defended*.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Revel, ‘The Materiality of the Immaterial: Foucault, against the Return of Idealisms and New Vitalisms’, *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 149, May/June 2008.