

# REMOTE SENSING

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## PERFORMING THE BORDER

### Interview with Berta Jottar<sup>1</sup>

**Ursula Biemann:** How do you conceive of the border?

It's both an abstract concept, and yet it has a strong impact on the trajectories of those who cross it and those who live in the area.

**Berta Jottar:** We can think of the border in at least two basic ways. Either as a place of limitation and boundary, or as a place of crossing in relation to a populated geographical location. Either way, you need the crossing of the body for the border to become real. Otherwise you just have a discursive construction. There is nothing natural about it. It's a place that gets reconstituted and reproduced through the crossings of people because without the crossing there is no border, right? It's just an imaginary line, a river, a landscape or a wall. The border as a geographical, material and discursive space is a highly performative place.

In our art work, it has always been very important to point out the many different ways of crossing in the Tijuana/San Diego region. Are you crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a U.S. passport, with a visa, jumping, swimming, as a tourist, as a migrant, as a middle-class woman, as a domestic worker? There are all these different ways of crossing, and it's through the power relationships produced through the various crossings that the border gets constantly rearticulated. If we believe that practices of space reconfigure that space, the U.S.-Mexico border is certainly a good example.

In Ciudad Juarez you have to cross over a bridge. That is a very different experience from Tijuana, where doors open or close depending on the crosser's legal status. The way you cross, or the "how to cross" produces the psychology of the place. For instance, to cross you have to look straight to the eyes of the INS officers<sup>2</sup>, never turn away while answering a question. If they ask you your citizenship, always reply U.S., rather than United States. It's important to think about the border in terms of its creation of heterogeneous knowledges that not only allow you to cross, but to return too.

Tijuana is the border with the most human traffic in the world. Its crossings are not just a matter of prohibitions or allowances of the State; they also stand in relation to the cultural and political practices that develop at the moment of crossing and which claim the space towards the production of new rights. The border is a construction of State convenience, but it is highly contested by the diversity of its crossings and the culture of resistance against its prohibitions.

**UB:** Can you think of an example of the culture of resistance?

**BJ:** In the worst scenario, you can think about the U.S.-Mexico border as a site of crisis. It's a place between life and death, regeneration and repression, a site where the body disappears through its border crossings, something that itself is already a performative act. So this performativity – the materialization of the border via this repetition and reiteration of crossing – can be considered an act of resistance to the real and discursive disappearance of the body. The "undocumented" body is also a highly narrated one because it is constantly represented through various State and mass media discourses. It is pathologized, racialized, gendered, etc. If the border is a site of national containment materialized through this crossing body, illegal crossing produces crisis. The body becomes politicized, liminal, highly perceptible and vulnerable to U.S. law. The consistent invisibility of the undocumented body becomes a necessary condition to avoid deportation.

That's why artists and activists pay very close attention to the crossing body, the migrant whose chances to succeed are limited to luck and knowledge. These multiple disappearances have been the major motivating themes in border art and activism. Border art is a site-specific practice, and, in dealing with the disappearance of the crossing body, it becomes consciously political and committed. This type of resistance has its history in Latin America's struggle against various forms of colonialism and State oppression, which created a context for the production of tactical aesthetics of resistance.

I can give you the example of *A Border of Mirrors*. In 1990, a local coalition of artists and activists from various organizations produced a counter-demonstration to the xenophobic movement *Light Up The Border*. *Light Up The Border*, organized by San Diego's ex-mayor Roger Hedghcock and the Latina widow of an ex-INS officer, consisted of a line of parked cars near the San Diego border where the flux of undocumented workers used to be high. Given the flat and dry landscape, cars were able to line up on a long stretch, pointing their headlights South to illuminate and halt (real

and symbolically) the "illegal aliens" crossing to the North. The performance/counter-demonstration consisted of a line of demonstrators walking parallel to the cars holding up hundreds of cardboard reflectors to bounce back the hateful light. As the car owners turned on their lights, they became invisible, and the artists/activists held up the reflectors like shields against the glare. The performance was framed by dogs owned by skin heads and police as well as other floodlights used by the law enforcement patrols. The whole thing became a highly violent and reactive set of relations, a long and moving line of reflections and refractions. Through this spatial intervention, the undifferentiated, natural landscape became a site of crisis and contestation of that crisis. Performance can serve as an arena for representing ideological conflict mimetically, but it is also a "real" space in which conflict can be fought out to achieve real consequences. The people who brought the portable reflectors eventually recycled them. Once the *Light Up the Border* movement found itself pointing its lights toward an empty landscape, their own presence publicly vanished as their lights faded into the darkness of the night. The crossing body never materialized, what remained was the memory of a future, the crossing of the body undocumented.

**UB:** Has the U.S. discourse changed a lot since NAFTA?

**BJ:** The U.S. representation of the border and its southern neighbors is consistent in the way it narrates a tale of reproduction and consumption while denying the productive aspect. The migrant worker, described as the "illegal alien", is portrayed as reproductive in numbers but not in profit. Therefore "his" presence is understood as only consuming and taking from U.S. resources and jobs. This representation of the migrant's reproductivity doesn't take into consideration the national economic growth due to profits and tax incomes generated by immigrants. The migrant is considered a reproductive body rather than a productive subject, and this discursively places the male migrant in a feminized position. What is very ironic about this logic is the selectivity through which citizenship is organized. The Protestant ethic of "you are what you produce" does not apply to "illegal aliens", who, in fact, not only produce considerably, but also take better care of those jobs no one else would do because they are susceptible to being fired or deported. Undocumented workers are never represented for what they produce, but for what they supposedly "consume". This contradictory narrative situates males in two categories: those who cross to work, the "pollos", and those who facilitate the crossing, the "coyotes". This scenario erases the crossing of female workers and their participation in the economic force. The females who cross to work disappear, and those who migrate to the maquiladora cities like Ciudad Juarez or Tijuana also disappear as they are not even part of the narrative of border crossing. Not only is their labor effaced, but their bodies too. So in this unequal economy of crossing, the female disappears more than once. Their position is complicated since they don't exist as individuals, just like the males don't exist as citizens. They enter the legal apparatus only to get deported. In this economy of crossing, the male migrant

population is feminized, and the female subjects are entirely effaced. The border is a highly gendered region.

**UB:** I mainly know the situation in Ciudad Juarez, are there any major differences between the border towns?

**BJ:** From Matamoros to Tijuana, the historical realities vary a great deal. While Tijuana is a century old and the consequence of San Diego's navy formation, Nogales dates back to before the U.S. border was drawn. However, the imposition of the maquiladora industry in the various Mexican border cities happened fairly simultaneously as a structural consequence of U.S.-Mexico power relationships. A maquiladora settlement like the one in Mexico does not exist between the U.S. and Canada. So it's not that the maquiladoras are purely the result of a border condition. The border is constituted by the power relationships between the two nations, and these relationships materialize in the disparity of the maquiladoras and entertainment industry/economy. This has to be clear; otherwise the border gets naturalized as this place of excess, a place of prostitution and corruption.

**UB:** That needs to be controlled?

**BJ:** Yes. Simultaneous to the good-neighbor gestures extended via NAFTA, you have the militarization of the border. While on the level of representation, the message was that the North and the South were getting along, the reality was that the U.S. built a stronger wall, installed more powerful lighting systems and infrared surveillance, and doubled the number of INS officers working collaboration with existing drug enforcement officers and military personnel.

Essentially, the U.S. is always at war against somebody, so when there is no international war going on; they use the border because that's their "natural" place to rehearse or have their little wars. When the Contra Affair ended in Central America, the military personnel got transported to the U.S.- Mexico border to fight against illegal crossing. When the Gulf War was over, former President Bush announced that his next war was against drugs. Guess where! This brings me back to the idea of recycling, and the border is a good storage place for recycling a war mentality and the materials of/for it. It's not a coincidence that, after the Gulf War, the U.S. built a wall along the border's 2,500 miles with what they had used as landing tracks for their airplanes in Desert Storm! For the U.S., the border is a recycling territory where it can practice and rehearse its war mentality. The macho U.S. State culture is articulated through masculinized, high-tech war games performed at the border. This, again, is another aspect of the border as highly gendered place.

**notes**

- 1 Taped in Zurich in 1999, revised in 2002
- 2 Immigration and Naturalization Services
- 3 North American Free Trade Agreement (initiated in 1994)