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# INTERVIEW WITH BERTHA JOTTAR

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 many people who want to cross it and on those who live in the area.**

Yes, we can think about the border in two ways. Either as a place of limitation and boundary – this is always the case when the border is produced by the nation state, it has to be a place of limitation to prevent trespassing – or as a place of crossing in relation to a populated geographical location. But either way, you need the crossing for the border to become real otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about it; it's a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people because without the crossing there is no border, right? It's just an imaginary line, a river or just a wall. In the case of the U.S.-Mexican border you need the repetitive crossing of bodies to produce the discursive space of the nation state and also to produce a real type of place: a border.

The border is a highly performative place.

But the border is very heterogeneous and in our artwork 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, a middle-class woman, a domestic worker? There are all these different ways of crossing. And it's through the power relationships produced through the crossing that the border gets constantly rearticulated. It's not just a happy crossing. For local people who have been living in the region for generations the crossing becomes a cultural experience. People in the border region have a life. If we believe that practices in relation to a space reconfigure that space, the U.S.-Mexican border is certainly a good example. 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 which 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.

In Ciudad Juarez you have to cross over a bridge. That is a very different experience from passing a building or going from one side of a wall to the other, like in Tijuana, where doors open or close depending

on the crosser's legal status. The way you cross, or the knowledge of "how to cross" produces very different psychological effects. It's import to think about the border as an extremely heterogeneous but artificial place with real consequences.

### Can you think of an example of the culture of resistance?

In the worst case, you can think about the U.S.-Mexican border as a site of crisis. It is a place between life and death, regeneration and repression, a site where the body disappears through the border crossing, something that itself is already a performative act. So this performance – this repetition and reiteration of crossing – can be considered an act of resistance to this 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, etc. If the border is a site of national containment materialized through this "undocumented" body, illegal crossing produces a crisis, but the crossing body becomes a politicized body, liminal, barely perceptible to the law.

That's why artists and activists pay very close attention to the crossing body, the migrant who may or may not reach the other side and whose chances of succeeding depend on luck and knowledge. You need knowledge too, that's a fact. Many people get ripped off because they don't know how to find the right person to get them across. Before the wall was erected, people crossed by themselves out of experience, they didn't need anybody. Maybe it was just that you knew to look in the eyes of the INS officer if you were crossing in a car, but it was still a particular knowledge you acquired after crossing many times. This is one of the conventions of "how to cross." The multiple physical and discursive disappearance of the crossing body has been one of the major motivating themes in border art and activism. Border art is a site-specific practice, and in dealing with the disappearance of the migrating crossing body it becomes consciously political and committed. This type of resistance has its history in Latin America's struggle against various and continuous forms of colonialism, which have created a context for the production of a tactical aesthetic 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 and call to battle: *Light Up The Border*. This event, 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 is 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 the "illegal aliens" crossing to the North. The performance/counter-demonstration consisted in the installation of hundreds of cardboard reflectors that demonstrators on foot on the South side used to bounce back the hateful light coming from the line of cars. As the car owners turned on their blinding 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 skinheads and police as well as other floodlights used by the law enforcement patrols. The whole thing became a very violent and tense set of relations, a series of unwanted and unreciprocated gazes, a long and moving line of reflections and refractions.

Through this spatial intervention of tactically casting and bouncing light back and forth, the undifferentiated, natural landscape became an artificially constructed site, not only a site of crisis but also one of a contestation to that crisis. Performance can serve as an arena for representing ideological conflict mimetically, but it is also a "real" arena in which that conflict can be fought out with real consequences.

The people who brought the portable reflectors eventually recycled them. Once the *Light Up the Border* activists found themselves pointing their 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.

**You lived in Tijuana just around the time of the North American Free Trade Agreement, how did it affect life on the border?**

I arrived in Tijuana in 1985, in a period when the Free Trade Agreement was being written. I experienced Tijuana and San Diego during that political transition. The FTA has been a training ground to learn what it means to merge countries and become a part of an irrevocable global world with free consumer borders, to learn what it means for a country to be traded according to a supply-and-demand logic and in terms of net value of production costs. Cost of labor in Mexico is still among the lowest in the world. The FTA wants to produce a border that is a place where goods travel happily and it pretends the access to goods is egalitarian. On the other hand it prevents the crossing of people. Goods cross, but the people who produce the goods aren't allowed to.

The pre-NAFTA period saw a very different kind of representation of the border, not only from the point of view of the U.S. – after all it's a double-sided discourse. In Mexico City the discourse of the border was one of corruption, prostitution, and drug dealing. On the other side, the U.S. representation of the border was either of a war zone or a no-man's-land.

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

The U.S. representation of the border and of 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 an illegal alien, is portrayed as reproductive in numbers but not in profit. All you ever hear is how many illegal aliens were captured per week. The other day I heard in the news that before the steel wall, 50% of the crossers passed through Tijuana. Now, in January 2000, only 18 people were caught. The point of this message was that the surveillance mechanisms are working well now and that the area is no longer a chaos.

The presence of the migrant is understood as 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 the 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 of-

ganized. 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 their jobs because they are more susceptible to be fired or deported. According to Protestant logic, one should protect the undocumented more than any documented worker. Undocumented workers are never represented for what they produce but for what they consume.

These dominant narratives also imply a particular understanding of the Latino family. As much as extended families have been fundamental in the survival and culture retention of the Latino/a communities in the U.S., this notion has to be revised due to its various layers of erasures. First, it assumes that all Latino families in the U.S. are immigrants and that all working class immigrants are males whose common motivation is to sustain their families back in Mexico or elsewhere. This traditional crossing narrative assumes two types of males: those who cross to work, the *pollos*, and those who facilitate the crossing, the *coyotes*. This scenario of who crosses and who stays erases the crossing of women workers and their participation in the active labor and economic force. The female workers disappear, the wives who migrate along with their husband disappear, and the women who migrate to the maquiladora cities Ciudad Juarez or Tijuana but don't cross to the U.S. also disappear. Female workers at the maquiladoras (sweatshops) are not even part of the narrative of border crossing. Not only their labor is effaced, their bodies too. So in this unequal economy of crossing, the female body disappears more than once. In the official discourse, if females enter the U.S. arena of border representations, they don't enter it as productive workers but as surrogate charges of the State, "to give birth" and "to take prenatal care and health care from the welfare system." The position of women is complicated because they don't exist as individuals just like the males don't exist as citizens. They are thoroughly kept outside the State apparatus and enter the legal and civil structure only when they get deported. The male migrant population is feminized and the female subjects, who are the most fragile ones in this crossing economy, are entirely effaced. The border is a highly gendered region.

#### Is it this concern with disappearance that motivated you to make *Border Swings*?

Exactly. Every time I crossed the border north I always wondered how many layers of invisibility women bear. In *Border Swings/Vaivenes Fronterizos (BS/VF)* I took this a few steps, or "leaps," further. I used the discursively disappearing, crossing female body to imply alternative discourses which not only considered the discursive disappearing of female crossers but their physical, material as well as their artistic production too. It is just a trailer, an introduction, but it is very ambitious in the questions it brings up. I was interested in the border art movement current at that time and how women, like men, used public space and popular culture in their artistic production. Border art is vibrant and self critical because to live on the border doesn't mean to relate to the U.S. but also to Mexico City's dysfunction and corruption. It's not only who gets to cross north, but also whose work and what type of art does or does not enter into the U.S. representational space of border art. Interestingly, after the establishment of the binational biennial INSITE, this question has still remained relevant. Another leap I intended to make with *BS/VF* was to reclaim and recycle the savviness of Mexican popular culture, particularly wrestling films. *El Santo en la Frontera del Horror* is a film in which El Santo arrives in Ciudad Juarez for a wrestling match and gets caught in the investigation of undocumented males who keep disappearing. Through the wrestling plot he discovers that the migrants ended up in the hands of a gringo scientist

who kidnapped them in order to sell them to U.S. surgical companies for their body parts! This horror story of literal body parts and capitalist exchange is not only metaphorical but unfortunately and frighteningly real, too. Probably the most shocking story I've heard about females crossing is one related by Reverend Flor Rigoni, director of the Casa del Inmigrante in Tijuana. In 1986 he told me about a case where a breast was discovered in Canyon Zapata, a place known as the Soccer Field, you know Mexican humor. It is a semi-vacant hilly stretch of land, located in a Tijuana neighborhood called Independencia. It is known as a place where undocumented people cross north, the pollos. *Border Swings/Vaivenes Fronterizos* opens with someone describing the discovery of this breast.

**You talked about the border as an imaginary line. What did it mean to you, during the time you lived in Tijuana, to cross north?**

To cross the border north is not only to trespass by crossing the artificial national boundary. Crossing through Tijuana means to cross north for at least three hours, the time it takes to arrive in Los Angeles. The border region, then, is a large territory that encompasses various cities between San Ysidro and L.A. This territory is the arena for social and political mobilizations. Chicanos, who historically have been marked as immigrants, despite their presence in the U.S. for many generations, have incorporated the human rights of the undocumented into their struggle for full citizenship. This important alliance is relevant, as it expands the rights and practices of citizenship.

There are Chicano organizations that have been working with Mexican workers since the twenties, and the participation of women in this movement has been fundamental. Their roles range from being union leaders, such as Dolores Huerta, to serving the double function as workers and mothers in helping to maintain the strikes as long as necessary. Just recently, in New York City, undocumented Latino workers unionized against their Korean boss who hired them for \$2 per hour, 12 hours a day, seven days a week. This case is really important in that it conflates human and civil rights and labor rights regardless of the workers' legal status. Prejudiced practices, like the ones denying citizenship to U.S.-born kids of undocumented people, are being contested through the everyday social and political mobilizations of documented and undocumented migrants and natives. For me, to cross north meant learning that every time you crossed implicated the practice of a double consciousness. You cross from where to become what? I learned that identity is not given nor stable, rather it's a series of identifications and the undoing of these identifications that have real political consequences according to what side of the border you are on. Once you cross, you become - whether you want to or not - responsible for what's in front and what's behind you. You cross the border, but the border, recalling Gloria Anzaldua, crosses you too.

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

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From Matamoros to Tijuana, the historical realities vary a great deal. 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. It's not that the

is for their body parts! This horror metaphorical but unfortunately and about females crossing is one relationship. In 1986 he told me about a woman as the Soccer Field, you know Tijuana neighborhood called Indecent cross north, the pollos. *Border* discovery of this breast.

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maquiladoras are the result of a border condition. The border is constituted by the power relationship between the two nations and this relationship gets materialized in maquiladoras and in the bars for U.S. tourists and for the migrant workers on their way north. This has to be clear; otherwise the border gets naturalized as this place of excess, a place of prostitution and corruption.

### **That needs to be controlled?**

Yes. Simultaneously with the good-neighbor gestures extended by the FTA you have the militarization of the border. While on the level of representation the message is that the North and the South get along, the reality is that we have to build a stronger wall, we have to put up brighter lights, and we have to double the number of INS officers in addition to drug enforcement officers and the military personnel. You have this discursive representational space and you have this material space, which again is constituted through the crossing of people and the halting of these people. It's a very contradictory space.

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 a little war. When the Gulf War was over, former President Bush announced nationally that his next war was against drugs. Guess where! I'm quite interested in the idea of recycling and the border is a good storage place for recycling. How do you recycle a war mentality and the materials of war? When the contra affair ended in Central America, the military personnel got transported to the border. 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. It is a highly gendered place.

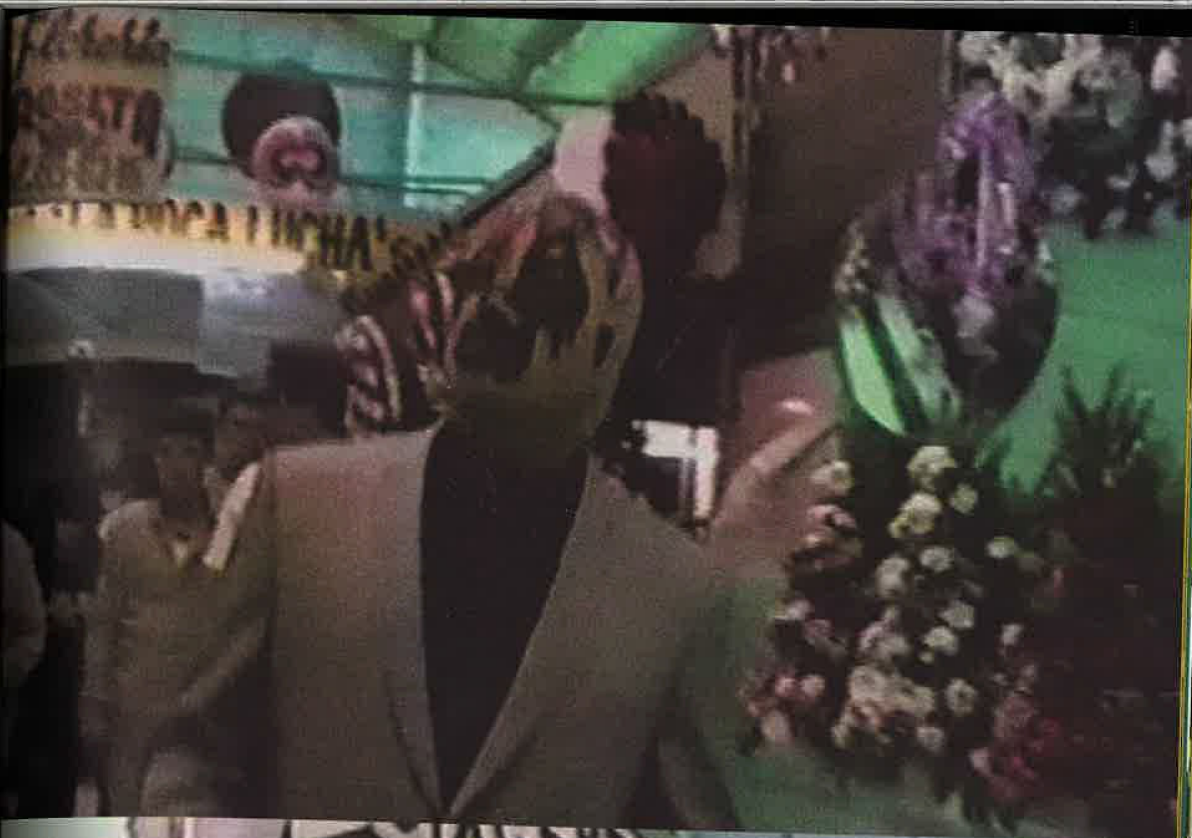
So there is a war against drugs and a war of the skinheads using paint bullet guns against undocumented workers and you have the floodlight on the border, people using this light for and against the crossings of migrant workers. It embodies the idea of a combat zone. This representation is so violent, not in essence but in the way it has been constructed. I don't even want to reinforce or repeat these images. In a way the border is always represented as a wound that has to be healed, that has to be closed, that has to be protected, from contamination and from disease. Where is AIDS coming from? From the border. Where is all this disease, poverty, and contamination coming from? From the border. So we have to heal this wound through various systems of militarization, purification, cleansing, it's a surgical place, like an operating room. Guillermo Gomez Peña made an interesting statement about artists using the border as a laboratory. What kind of laboratory? The State too has always used it as a laboratory because it perceives the border as a wound, as a penetrable site.

So it's a very complicated space of representation and one performance and that re-enforces and re-informs the border constantly, whereby there is always the unidirectional idea that everything goes from South to North. The crossing from the North to the South is discursively non-existent, unless it's from a tourist perspective and stems from the good-neighbor mentality: "let's go to Tijuana, eat burritos, take

our picture with the painted donkey, and just trash the city," because Tijuana has always been seen as the dump of the U.S. Fortunately, things move in both directions, and culture along the border has been very creative in assimilating and acculturating these movements. Recycling has become part of everyday life and landscape. It is a way of doing, using, and thinking about what is given to us, but with the critical difference being in the moment of montage. You should see how all the car and truck tires coming from the U.S. get recycled by stacking them into the hills to prevent the houses from sliding and collapsing. I just tell myself, if I can't beat them, I might as well use them, learn their language and use it to my advantage.

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CASE No. 1994

corpse found, breast only

DATE FOUND

Agosto

