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DISPARITIES OF FLATNESS

Andrew Pendakis

Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field—Ursula Biemann Video Works, 1998–2008 edited by Ursula Biemann and Jan-Erik Lundstrom. Bildmuseet, Sweden: Umeå University; Bristol, UK: Arnolfini, 2008. Pp. 208. € 29.90.

When entering the harbor, the voyager leaves the exceptional condition of the boundless sea—this traversable space of maritime immensity—to come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the trans-local state of not being of this place—nor of any other really—but of existing in a condition of permanent not-belonging, a juridical nonexistence. He comes to signify the itinerant body, bound to string along a chain of territories, never reaching a final destination.

—Ursula Biemann

Ursula Biemann's artistic practice occurs in long videographic loops around one of the central paradoxes of contemporary capitalist globalization: namely, that on a planet increasingly folded by novel contiguities and closenesses, precocious new abutments and weird optical crossovers and lags, there is a simultaneous, continuous, and frenetic impulse to hedges, borders, moats, and walls. In a world the secret telos of which is the universal propinquity of things, Biemann's "video essays" arrive to finger the impasses, the jammed-up and airless places, where the flows slow to reckon with or evade the circumspection of a state or boss. And what she inevitably finds are pools of desirous human labor, abstract from the angle of the

factory or satellite, indefatigably concrete when seen from the slant of a Thai stripper smoking between clients in Berlin. Fleeing the tedious, violent, or unlivable personal contexts of structurally blighted locales, locked out of affluence or jurisprudence by the stupid dice of birth and the dementia of uneven economic development, these migrants contest the right of nativity to script their destinies and leave through a pained door to riskily reshuffle the possible.

But what distinguishes Biemann's work is her attentiveness to the limits that mark from within this frisson of quitting the intolerable. Not only is there never a question of banally counterposing a possessed desire to the brutal contingency of codes and rules, there is never an instant when the drive to flight can be said to exhaust the shape of freedom. Refusing to conflate the latter with the nomad expansivity of the new beginning, she documents the conditions of a present in which the systematicity of relations and the intimate order of pleasures operate in a space coeval with that of determinate technologies, milieus, images, and investments. Unequally globalized informational networks soaked in opacities, as well as greedy showings; a modular container afloat in the hold of a ship on the ocean (its objects accompanied by a migrant guest); the export processing zone and its utter subordination of material space to the requirements of "stringless" production:

desire and necessity, rupture and limit, are here so wholly confounded, that the partition invested in drawing from this imbroglio a happy subjectivity of finding will be sorely disappointed.

The world, for Ursula Biemann, is relentlessly flat, which is not to say equal or morose. Hers is a rigorously horizontal imaginary, one that places the option of a subject at the meticulous intersection of precise finitudes, a topography dramatically overlaid by territorial and geophysical limits that are themselves myriadly rent by digital simultaneities, transnational imaginations, and hierarchical, technologized modes of vision. For Biemann, the passage between a situation and its outside, though always singular, fragile, and unrepeatable, never arrives at the border of the desert infinitely open. The paths, instead, are "serialized"; one *is* where others have *been* and will be again. Perhaps there will be an escape, but nothing guarantees against one's happiness arriving at the checkpoint of a brothel or city the impasses of which may echo (39). Pipelines, oceans, and highways—to say nothing of an omnipresent apparatus of borders—role over the horizon of Biemann's films in continual insistence on this unrepresentable contiguity and interdependence of global space. Though there is something relentless in this flatness, Biemann's filmic essays are never photographs of the crushed or dead, never victimologies, but rather snapshots from the

athleticism and cunning of those still alive in the “cracks of capitalist reality” (42).

Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field is divided structurally into two sections. The first chronicles eight of Biemann’s videos in short pieces authored by the artist herself. Because Biemann’s videos are a good distance from conventional documentary, it would be easy to imagine a diaristic solution that simply substitutes the strong presence of sites and ethnographic anecdote for the difficult labor of translating codes of vision and formal gestures into the planar time of writing.

Certainly, her films are spatially “anchored”—that is, bound to a site or to a set of sites, whether it be the Mexican border or a Saharan migratory route—but this binding—at least theoretically amenable to conversion into communicable “situations”—is continually breaking down under the pressure of an intermediality and formal complexity that places the limits of representation directly onto the surface of the films themselves. Biemann’s written pieces extract intelligently from a speed of cuts, zooming in on and unpeeling thicker segments with an eye to the difference made by merely reading. This deftness between media is in part explained by the nature of her visual practice itself: Biemann’s films add to the topographical flatness described above one equally operative in the domain of form itself. Their surfaces

thicken outward like overburdened corkboard; masses of text, graphics, scientific data, maps, and documents, as well as countless stills from satellites and surveillance cameras, compromise the sovereignty of the image with a thousand begging annotations. The collection—richly filled out with shots from Biemann’s oeuvre—does a nice job of foregrounding this supremely *adhesive* method. About *Writing Desire* (2000), a video essay on the gendered technologization and transnationalization of the erotic, Biemann suggests that her task was to build into the depth perception of cinema something like the flat interface of a computer monitor. Adding to this impression is her frequent usage of simulations. Writing about *Contained Mobility* (2004), a film based around a migrant’s permanent exemption from representation, she states that all of the video’s images are eminently artificial: “a simulated seascape, a visual rendering of digital data, a webcam set up for a staged scene” (59).

This prohibition on transparency should not be confused with the predictable contortions of the inef-fable, an ontologized and convenient unrepresentability. Rather, there is a way in which Biemann can be said to enframe a realist gesture under the determinate conditions of world-systemic capitalist spectacle. Refusing a dutiful invitation to the funeral of wholeness, she digs around the place it was last seen with an energy that looks

suspiciously like logic (but also thinking doubt). That her discontinuities are means and not ends, or, rather, means in the absence of ends, becomes clear only as an effect of the consistency of her objects. She does not begin just anywhere on the surface of the socius, opening her lens onto a flow mistaken for being itself: on the contrary, she begins—to repeat Jacques Rancière’s well-known formulation—at the part that simply doesn’t fit, orbiting its context to find the secret principle of its belonging to existence and to history. The Mexican assembly-line operator who returns home through the desert to a silence she resents; the Russian mail-order bride whose postcommunism incites a cheeky will to flight; a Tau-reg migrant bent on Paris or London: this is an obstinate, charting oscillation, a practice of bristling fragments that takes as the outer limit of its hope a better way of doing justice and an end to inequality.

The second section of the monograph consists of essays written by cultural theorists and art critics. A number focus explicitly on Biemann; others deal more generally with the epistemological coordinates of post-modern documentarity and possible destinies of the “video essay.” Angela Dimitrakaki’s piece attempts to link—via Antonio Negri—Biemann’s heterodox realism to a materialist feminism revived by real subsumption and its disabling of clean beyonds. Uta Staiger’s

excellent contribution frames Biemann’s practice as singularly sensitized to a global order characterized by what she calls a “citizenship gap”—the grim and sliding disjunction between universally established human rights and their territorial abridgments at the hands of states. Brian Holmes interestingly details the contours of what he calls the “extra-disciplinary” nature of Biemann’s production: a method distinguished from the “aimlessness” and “indiscipline” of interdisciplinarity—a kind of unrigorous subjective decrepitude—by a linked, militant practice that draws the space of art directly into the knowledge corridors of finance or psychiatry, for example, but also the political practices of social movements and other organized networks.

There are a number of missteps: a few essays inhabit lugubriously the windless odors of our old friend the “victim/agent binary” (138). These paralyzed and hieratic repetitions assume as their ethical ideal the passive silence of an interminably listening ear. Against such conveniences, Hegel operated his binaries in the direction of a continually refreshed and purposive lucidity—a dimension added to opposition that binds the negative to a new agental simplicity never confusable with undifferentiated immediacy. Another occasional error arises from a conflation of epistemological representationalism and political authoritarianism. Jean-Pierre Rehm’s identification

of the conventional documentary with the shrunken horizons of a “planetary petty bourgeoisie” are nearly risible, missing in their insistence on the governmentality of truth and the gentle diffuseness of form a categorical stability as inflexible as realism itself. But these are small squabbles in a collection that nicely showcases Biemann’s singular brand of videographic political economy.

—McMaster University