

# Representations of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez in *Performing the Border*

An Interview with Ursula Biemann

Alice Driver

Swiss filmmaker, curator, and cultural theorist Ursula Biemann's 1999 video essay *Performing the Border* was the first documentary to address femicide in Ciudad Juárez (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The video essay focuses on the geographical space of the border and provides an introduction to several issues traditionally related to femicide—NAFTA, maquiladoras, and the sex trade. It is divided into four distinct parts—"The Plant," "The Settlement," "Sex Work," and "The Killings"—that demonstrate how femicide is tied to the specific environment of the border. In each part Biemann explores how geography, technology, and globalization intersect in the borderlands to promote a culture of disposability. The video essay, much like the borderland itself, is a meeting of two distinct spaces or genres—the video and the essay—which are transformed by the writer-director into a hybrid work.

In the essay Biemann wrote about her film, "Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies, and Technology" (2001), she emphasizes the connections between technology and the border: "The technologies of border and labor control installed in Juárez make the relations between vision, vigilance, power, and bodies violently obvious" (105). Biemann narrates the video essay, and she interviews activists, journalists, and NGO workers living and working on the border. Her main focus is the geographical landscape of the border, however, and she includes maps of the area, panoramas of the border space, and a view from her car as she drives along the border. As the director noted in an essay on *Performing the Border*, "My



Figure 1. Frame from Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border*, 2009.

work investigates global structural concerns, not those of subjectivity formation” (Biemann and Lundström 2008). The film dissects global structures that contribute to economic and physical violence against women rather than seeking to humanize victims and explore personal tragedies as many other documentaries have done.

I first met Biemann at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar in 2008, where she was screening *Sahara Chronicle* (2006) and *Black Sea Files* (2005), but it wasn't until 2009 that I began to work with *Performing the Border* as part of a larger project looking at representations of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. This interview took place on July 25, 2010, via Skype; Biemann was at her home in Switzerland (fig. 2).

---

ALICE DRIVER is a postdoctoral fellow at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where she conducts research on femicide and the representation of violence in Mexico in literature, film, and cultural studies at the Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte. Her book proposal, “More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico,” was recently accepted by the University of Arizona Press. She can be reached at [alicer.driver@gmail.com](mailto:alicer.driver@gmail.com).

Figure 2. Ursula Biemann, 2012.  
Photograph by Ursula Haene.



AD: Were you aware of femicide before you went to Ciudad Juárez?

UB: The killings were not the reason I went to Ciudad Juárez. I had a long-term interest in working with women on the border and labor issues in the transnational context before I started to make *Performing the Border*. While I was doing research and preparing for my trip, I discovered more and more information related to the killings. When I was in Ciudad Juárez interviewing NGO women, people mentioned the killings to me. They all started to speak about the killings, and it became evident that it was a major concern among populations working with the female labor community.

AD: I know that femicide wasn't your primary focus. Your film contextualizes a lot of different issues. When *Performing the Border* came out, femicide was just coming to people's attention.

UB: Femicide entered the public consciousness in a more precise way. I interviewed many women, but they had already been interviewed by Japanese TV and by the *Washington Post*, so they were used to responding to the same questions to the press. To try to overcome that kind of standardized way of speaking about things, I had to spend more time with them. The first half hour they gave me their wrap, and then I said, "Hey, now we can really sit down and talk about what you want to say in this video. What is

it that needs to be done?" I've seen on CNN, for instance, how they have dealt with the killings. They drag the mother of a missing girl in front of a camera until she cries, and that is that. I don't think that is, politically speaking, taking us anywhere.

I think it is important to understand the border condition, the labor condition, and the gendered construction of the border before you understand the real nature of the killings. It shows that there is a strong denial about what is going on at the border, and I think the killings are a form of expression of a pathological situation. This is what I learned from working with the material for a whole year, and my strategy in dealing with the killings grew out of that. Femicide is not something I knew about before going there.

Some older feminists, one of whom I interviewed in my video, represent the killings as simply violence of men against women. That was their whole bottom line thought, that theoretically that was an uninteresting position. The act of violence of men against women seems a very old type of feminism.

AD: When you started the project what practical and theoretical goals did you have? I read an interview you did with Imre Szeman in which you talked about the importance of theoretical goals, goals that move beyond simply making an activist film.<sup>2</sup> What were your aims when you started the project?

UB: I knew what I did not want, but I had never made a film, so I had to experiment. *Performing the Border* was a laboratory to find out what kind of films I wanted to make. I didn't have a model. There was not one single film that I felt was a model for me. I had been going to the Whitney's Independent Study Program, a highly theorized kind of theory-driven Marxist program, so I knew the kind of topics I was interested in: labor and the international labor division. I had seen interesting examples in galleries of women artists who started to work conceptually with texts and photographs. Those examples inspired me, and I thought, "Maybe I could include text and theoretical reflection in a documentary and make something new and different."

AD: Is that why you choose the video essay format? Did you feel that it allowed you more freedom than a traditional documentary?

UB: Video essay was not a term; it was not something that existed. Swiss art critic Yvonne Volkart started to use the term *video essay* to describe my film years later. When I started to research the essay as a film form I

thought, “Yes, this is something I can work with.” The essay didn’t exist, and I had no clue what I was doing. I also knew that there were gender issues that had to do with the international labor division, and I had the feeling that the violence against women was not a coincidence. Five years after making *Performing the Border* I edited *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* because more and more people started to notice the way I work and see that it was a new tendency.<sup>3</sup>

AD: *Performing the Border* was the first film you made?

UB: I had never made a video, and I had never taken a video class in my life. I learned from a friend from New York, an Iranian video maker, that you simply take the camera in your hand and start making films. I had taken some photographs on the border ten years before, when I went there for the first time. I was making a book of my artwork, and I thought the Mexican border was an important topic, but I didn’t have really good material. I thought, “I should return to Ciudad Juárez with a video camera and start filming.” I went, and I realized, “Oh my God, this is much more complex. Now I have to do interviews and add sound and text.” It took a long time. It took a whole year before I had anything to show.

AD: How did video artist Berta Jottar become involved in the documentary?

UB: Berta Jottar, who studied performance in New York City, was invited to come to Zurich to speak, and when I saw that I told them that she could stay at my home. I was interested in getting to know her. She spoke interestingly about the border in theoretical ways, and I asked her if I could do an interview. That was almost at the end of the process of making *Performing the Border*. I used her interview in the documentary, and it allowed me to understand the simultaneous production of gender and border that was happening in Ciudad Juárez. Those are things that fascinated me because I hadn’t read *The Cyborg Manifesto*, or Irit Rogoff’s *Geography’s Visual Culture*.<sup>4</sup> That came later. I didn’t know any of these things. I was just inching my way along into territories I didn’t know.

AD: In thinking about the connection among technology and robotics and people working in maquiladoras, the film suggests that a serial killer committed the murders. At that time, it was one of the possible explanations for what was happening. Have you kept up with the issue or changed your thoughts?

UB: All I wanted to do was speculate. I'm not an investigative police researcher. I thought, "Whatever I say is going to be dated." I was more interested in the possibility of these connections being fruitful for a discussion. I do think it has to do with a deep-set pathology that is happening on the border. It has to do with the impact of the maquiladora industry on a completely desert, rural environment. What is supposed to have happened at this point? What is the present state of knowledge?

AD: Violence has continually escalated and impunity is the norm. I went to the June 22, 2010, hearing held by the Commission on Femicide in Mexico City, and it was hard to believe that politicians and officials there were still saying, "We're working to resolve this. We're hoping to have a crime lab in place in the next year. We almost have enough resources to investigate this."<sup>5</sup> It had been such a long time that to hear them say those words was frightening.

UB: When I was there—it was in 1998—I attended a similar meeting, and they had just hired a Spanish investigator who was going to make a huge difference in the whole case. They had also invited Robert Kessler, an expert on serial killers from the US. I base my knowledge of serial killing on *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* by Mark Seltzer.<sup>6</sup> I thought it was a very interesting parallel. I could see many similar conditions happening on the border.

AD: When you were making the film did you think you could produce change on the border?

UB: I had no aspiration to change the conditions on the border. I was interested in gender studies and feminist art practice back then. I noticed that with the direction gender studies programs had taken at US universities, many young gender studies students had become depoliticized. I thought that by making an older labor issue more attractive for young gender studies students who are interested in contemporary gender theories of performativity and technology, I could make this topic interesting for young people. It's true—many young scholars took it up.

AD: Did you screen *Performing the Border* in Ciudad Juárez?

UB: Yes. All the NGO women in the video also got a copy of the film. They used it extensively, and some of them also teach in Austin, Texas, and at other universities. I also went to screen it in Tijuana. I'm not specifically

interested in what the NGO women say about it. They know what's going on and are very articulate about it. I think they should do what they want with it.

I'm interested in screening it everywhere. In Europe we have a border which was being reinforced dramatically in the east and the south as a result of the Schengen Agreement, and this discussion started to pick up in the early 2000. When this film came out I could show the border in Mexico and ask, "Do we want such a border? Is that what we want here?" Now *Performing the Border* is being shown in Jerusalem as part of a collection at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.<sup>7</sup> I think that it continues to have a timeless way of being able to trigger a border debate.

AD: Did you put your video into dialogue with your other work? Has it been shown on its own?

UB: It never shows on its own because it's always part of an exhibition on a particular topic. I'm not an artist who likes to have solo shows. My work is usually contextualized by an exhibition. *Performing the Border* was my blockbuster. No other video of mine has ever shown as much. After that, I made *Writing Desire* and *Remote Sensing*, which are about human trafficking. These three videos were often shown together.

AD: Did you have problems with the police while you were filming *Performing the Border*?

UB: I did things undercover. As you could see, they wouldn't let me in the factories, but I knew that I would never get in. Some guy said, "There is no point in making the video if you can't get in." You don't need to be able to have standardized images of women on the factory floor in order to speak about a topic. The police then were still quiet, and they were willing to let me look at footage. I gave video footage to Lourdes Portillo. She went to the border much later, and the police weren't willing to give her that footage anymore so she called me up. I gave her the footage, but I don't know if I should have done it because I think she uses it in such a prominent way in *Señorita Extraviada*.

Isabel Velasquez, one of a group of journalists who I interviewed in *Performing the Border*, speaks eloquently about how it is not enough to just give maquiladora workers breakfast. She is part of a group of journalists who work on both sides of the border on activist projects. They noticed that journalists didn't cover certain events simply because they involved

young women and didn't seem significant. In their research the journalists got into some dangerous territory. At one point, maybe a year after we met for our interview, they sent me the script of a whole book as a second copy. In case something happened to them there would at least be one copy in a safe place.

AD: Does the performative nature of the border and the constant flux of people make it a site where it is difficult to maintain the memory of victims of feminicide? Were you thinking about memory while working on your film?

UB: Many girls come from Michoacán or southern Mexico, and when they are killed their parents don't even find out. In the desert neighborhoods of Ciudad Juárez there is no way of keeping track of them. As I say, they are easy prey. I think people in Ciudad Juárez do have memory, and they speak about it nonstop.

AD: How do you represent horror without reproducing it? How do you represent prostitution without relying on stereotypical images?

UB: In *Performing the Border* I conducted one interview with Juana Azua, a former middle-aged prostitute, and I like her because she is a surprising image of a prostitute. She speaks openly and factually about it. I conducted a long interview with her about prostitution because I wanted to include it in *Performing the Border*. At that time she had already started to work for a local NGO. A lot of NGO women who work against trafficking are former prostitutes. She speaks not so much from the position of prostitute as from someone who has done it. Her testimony is already a little bit remote.

AD: In the section of the documentary about the killings you include a list of women killed. Did the list include all the women who had been killed up to that point?

UB: Three months before I left Ciudad Juárez I started to track the murders. It's interesting because the audience relates strongly to the list even though it's just a list of words. To them it is very real. They imagine it, and it takes place in their own minds. There is no need to show it graphically. I had much more graphic images in the footage that the police sent me. How much of that do you want to show? I don't want to show girls with their heads chopped off.

AD: It gave me a good idea of the anonymous nature of what was occurring because you listed a description of the violence written on the bodies of victims, but sometimes there was no name, signaling the inadequacy of police and forensic investigations.

UB: There is a repetitiveness of certain types of injuries and then the always-gendered relationship that is happening between the killer and the killed. When you start to look at all this footage, as a filmmaker, you start an inner dialogue with the killer. “Why did you do that?” It is very weird. You start to acquaint yourself and get into a different mode of thinking. It’s not the same thinking as that of the mother who lost the daughter, which is a traumatizing experience. I didn’t ever enter into that traumatized mode of thinking.

AD: This is what makes your film different from most of the films produced about the issue. Other films rely on interviews with the mothers in various emotional states.

UB: I have an interview with one mother that shows how disorienting and bizarre it is to experience the loss of a daughter to violence. The mother kept talking about her daughter’s red sweater all the time. It is like someone traumatized, who fixates on details that seem to prove something. I don’t like the idea of addressing the audience on this emotional level.

AD: At the Flaherty Seminar in 2008 I saw your *Sahara Chronicle* and *Black Sea Files*. It was after seeing those films and meeting you that I watched *Remote Sensing* and *Performing the Border*. Your films are generally emotionally neutral and fact oriented. However, some of the other films shown at Flaherty that year did address the audience on an emotional level.

UB: I noticed that kind of emotional filmmaking at the Flaherty Seminar with the film *The Betrayal* by Ellen Kuras about the Laotian Thavisouk Phrasavath. The film was made in a cathartic way, and it was a very sentimental story.<sup>8</sup> The audience was all extremely touched by the film, but it did not trigger a discussion at all. We were not able to speak about anything. This is exactly what I mean. You are still in a postcolonial relationship between a white theorist filmmaker going to Mexico to document a poverty-stricken region. You are engaged in that kind of a relationship. I wanted to address people in Ciudad Juárez as speaking subjects who are knowledgeable about their condition and able to explain their condition to us.

AD: One of the most memorable scenes for me in *Performing the Border* is one in which young women are participating in a beauty contest and dancing, and you see them become mechanized as you repeat the scene several times.

UB: I repeat that one dancing moment. It is something that I invented while editing. Things happen while you're editing that you don't want, and you think, "Hey, this might actually be a good idea." It's all about the dancing female mechanized bodies that eventually become numbers.

AD: It also ties in with scenes shot in a bar where women are dancing. You get a sense of the freedom women have gained through economic independence, but, at the same time, that freedom is tied to things that don't bring them any freedom at all. It is a dichotomy.

UB: Yes, it is still happening within the capitalist logic in which they operate as low-paid labor. Still, there is something that they get from being a little more independent in a very traditional society. There is an empowering moment when the women are dancing.

AD: You have continued to work with the issue of globalization. Has any of your work taken you back to the US-Mexico border?

UB: No. I think that, as a site where a certain population can be interpreted in a global way, I've done what I wanted to do there. For me, gender is not such an important category of analysis anymore.

AD: You only interview women in *Performing the Border*. Could you discuss that choice?

UB: One reason is that I ended up meeting a lot more women. The workers in maquiladoras are, to a great extent, women, and women also staff the NGOs that deal with women's issues. From what I could see in Ciudad Juárez, guys just hang out being jobless. I don't think they are important players in the global scenario. It is young girls who are the important actors. Why should I interview the bus drivers? During screenings people always notice that I don't interview men. They think that there is something wrong with the film. I think it is interesting to make a statement about something being gendered by excluding male voices.

AD: What projects are you working on currently?

UB: Even though I went to Ciudad Juárez interested in making an ethnographic critique about gender and labor issues in a global context, I think that *Performing the Border* triggered a more spatial interest in the transformation of certain areas through the impact of globalized operations. I started making a whole series of videos on transnational zones, extraterritorial zones, and border areas. That brought me in contact with urbanists, architects, geographers, and people who think spatially. In my work, space became more of a category of analysis than gender. Then I made *Black Sea Files* and *Sahara Chronicle*.

I have started a new collaborative research project on resources called “Worlds of Matter” and the website for the project is <http://www.geobodies.org/curatorial-projects/world-of-matter>. It is about resource circulation, and I will be working on water. A description of my part of the project can be found at <http://www.geobodies.org/art-and-videos/egyptian-chemistry>. I will use the situation in Bangladesh as an example, but I think what is happening there implies so many things that are true for a lot of other places in the world.

## Notes

1. In the introduction to *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, editors Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (2010) discuss the terms *femicide* and *feminicide* and argue for the use of *feminicide*: “The concepts of *feminicide* and *femicide* are used interchangeably in the literature on gender-based violence and among the contributors to this volume. These are evolving concepts that, as noted in Bueno-Hansen’s chapter, are ‘still under construction.’ However, we will make a case for *feminicide* and, in the process, contribute some analytic tools for thinking about the concept in historical, theoretical, and political terms. In arguing for the use of the term *feminicide* over *femicide*, we draw from a feminist analytical perspective that interrupts essentialist notions of female identity that equate gender and biological sex and looks instead to the gendered nature of practices and behaviors, along with the performance of gender norms. As feminist thinkers have long contended, gender is a socially constructed category in which the performance of gender norms (rather than a natural biological essence) is what gives meaning to categories of the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine.’ Instead of a scenario in which gender and sex necessarily concur, the concept of *feminicide* allows us to map the power dynamics and relations of gender, sexuality, race, and class underlying violence and, in so doing, shift the analytic focus to how gender norms, inequities, and power relationships increase women’s vulnerabilities to violence” (3–4).

2. Biemann (2002).
3. Biemann (2003).
4. Haraway (1991); Rogoff (2000).

5. I would like to thank Patricia Ravelo, coordinator of the project “Protesta social y acciones colectivas en torno de la violencia sexual y de género” for inviting me to the June 22, 2010, meeting of the “Comisión especial para conocer y dar seguimiento puntual y exhaustivo a las acciones que han emprendido las autoridades competentes en relación a los feminicidios en México” in Mexico City, which provided much insight into the current state of investigation on femicide. At the meeting parliament member Teresa Guadalupe Reyes Sahagún asserted, “La sentencia del campo algodoner no es una sentencia a los asesinos de estas mujeres o de estas niñas: es una sentencia al Estado mexicano.”

6. Seltzer (1998).

7. *Selected Works from the Centre Pompidou New Media Collection*, a video exhibition curated by Christine Van Assche and Ghila Limon, opened at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art on November 27, 2010, and ran through January 22, 2011. The works of twenty video artists were shown.

8. Kuras and Phrasavath took twenty-three years to make *The Betrayal*, which tells the story of a family forced to flee Laos after the United States began to bomb the country during the Vietnam War.

## Filmography

- The Betrayal*. 2008. Directed by Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath. New York: The Cinema Guild.
- Black Sea Files*. 2005. Directed by Ursula Biemann. Halle an der Saale: German Federal Cultural Foundation.
- Performing the Border*. 1999. Directed by Ursula Biemann. Los Angeles: Women Make Movies.
- Remote Sensing*. 2001. Directed by Ursula Biemann. Los Angeles: Women Make Movies.
- Sahara Chronicle*. 2006. Directed by Ursula Biemann. Barcelona: Actar.
- Señorita Extraviada*. 2001. Directed by Lourdes Portillo. Los Angeles: Women Make Movies.
- Writing Desire*. 2000. Directed by Ursula Biemann. Los Angeles: Women Make Movies.