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Biemann, Ursula, *Black Sea Files*, 2005, Mehrkanal-Videoinstallation, 43 Minuten, Privatbesitz

Documentation level

■■■■□

Name

Biemann, Ursula

Other version/s of name

Biemann, Ursula Gabrielle

Dates of birth and death

* 8.9.1955 Zürich

Municipality of origin (CH)

Zürich

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Videokünstlerin und Theoretikerin. Kuratorische Projekte als Teil der künstlerischen Praxis. Forschungsprojekte und publizistische Tätigkeit

Fields of activity

Film, Videoinstallation, Videokunst, Fotografie, Konzeptuelle Kunst, Elektronische Kunst, Installation

Lexicon article

Ursula Biemann grew up in Küsnacht near Zurich. Artistic training in Boston, Mexico and New York, including with art historian Benjamin Buchloh. 1986 Bachelor of Fine Arts at the School for Visual Arts, New York, 1988 Whitney Independent Study Program, New York. 1995–98 director and curator at Shedhalle Zurich. 2000–03 taught at Geneva School of Art, since 2002 research projects at the Institute for Critical Theory and Zurich University of the Arts. Publishes and writes books and critical texts on mobility, migration, feminism, ecology and the Anthropocene. Since 1998 Ursula Biemann's work had been shown regularly at international exhibitions, festivals and biennials. Her video projects were

picked up first by the international media art world and by activist and university communities. Shows in international museums followed before Swiss art institutions expressed an interest: in 2009 her first solo exhibition in Switzerland was held at the Helmhaus in Zurich. 2008 retrospective at Bildmuseet in Umea (Sweden), where Biemann was awarded an honorary doctorate. 2009 solo exhibition at Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, Lentos Kunstmuseum in Linz (2012) and the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin (2013). Various awards, including in 2002 the International Art and Media Award ZKM, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, and in 2009 Prix Meret Oppenheim.

Ursula Biemann's work falls into two inter-related categories and stages: her early work focuses on the themes gender, globalisation and mobility, her later work on natural resources, ecology and the climate. Whereas the videos she made during the earlier stage were primarily essayistic and documentary in style, the later ones are more critical and mythical. She combines subjective perception with theoretical and fictional aspects, using artistic technique to develop geopolitical discourse.

From 1988 to 1997 Ursula Biemann worked with photography and installation, applying methods drawn from the critique of representation, ethnography and globalisation. These projects were precursors for her subsequent focus on gender, borders and globalisation as she turned to video as a medium: in 1999 she produced her first video essay *Performing the Border*, based on a field study undertaken in Ciudad Juarez on the Mexican border; the work received international acclaim. The videos *Writing Desire* (2000), *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Europlex* (2003) followed. In these video essays, she turns her focus to the position of women, only allowing women to speak. *Performing the Border* distils the construction of national and personal boundaries in the context of free trade zones along the Mexican border. This work remains a milestone even today, for in an age marked by the digital desire for immaterialisation, it enquires into the materiality of bodies. Building on this theme, *Remote Sensing* traces the international routes that women in/voluntarily take in the global sex industry and outlines their options. Migratory movements, as the video demonstrates, follow previous histories and economies. They spread out in all directions, not only from east to west or from south to north, as usually suggested. During this period, Ursula Biemann evolved her essayistic style, combining artistic perception with geographic and cyber-feminist paradigms.

The focus in the video works *Contained Mobility* (2004), *X-Mission* (2009) and *Sahara Chronicle* (2006–09) is on migration, transnationalism and ex-territoriality, as part of the project she curated called *The Maghreb Connection* –

Movements of Life Across North Africa. By this point, there is a greater emphasis on counter-representations, notably of human traffickers. A Tuareg in *Sahara Chronicle* vividly describes how he leads refugees through the desert. Never recognised as a nation by their various rulers, the Tuareg have specialised in crossing the desert for centuries.

In 2005 Ursula Biemann discovered an interest in the issue of natural resources. This was a time when the theme was slowly finding recognition in art and culture. She initiated the research project *B-Zone-Becoming Europe and Beyond* and in her video *Black Sea Files* she investigated the impact of oil drilling in the Black Sea region. There are also sequences in *Sahara Chronicle* which show how areas where raw materials (uranium, iron, phosphate) are mined overlap with human mobility and create post/colonial situations. The resource question is further developed with reference to water in the video *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012) and oil in *Deep Weather* (2013) and *Forest Law* (2014). These studies of planetary resources guided Biemann towards ecology, the climate and the new materialities of the Anthropocene. In 2011 she joined other artists and theoreticians in founding the research and art platform *World of Matter*, and *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012) and *Deep Weather* (2015) were made in this context. They were later followed by *Subatlantic* (2015) and *Twenty One Percent* (2016).

The basis for all Ursula Biemann's work is the observation that a key role is played in our world by the (technologically aided) exploitation of bodies and resources, and this both frames and induces mobility. Hierarchical divides rooted in notions of the body and of nature result in global injustices. In *Forest Law* an indigenous activist campaigning for the rights of the original Amazon population explains that, for the people who live there, the rainforest is not something outside the body but part of it. His struggle for *indio* rights implies that international law must open up to a concept of physical existence that embraces non-human life forms.

These aspirations are not merely verbalised in talking-head interviews with local experts, but evoked by skilfully linking image and text, spoken language and sound. A voice-over often adds deeper reflection, and there is sometimes a mismatch between image and sound. The more recent videos display a fondness for a mythical voice – a voice that mysteriously refracts the specific space and time and hints at other contexts. This aesthetic interplay, always adopting new forms, impressively reveals perspectives that lie beyond verbal language.

Works: Fonds d'art contemporain de la Ville de Genève (FMAC); Metz, Fonds régional d'art contemporain (Frac), Lorraine; Paris, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou; Rennes, Fonds régional d'art contemporain (Frac), Bretagne; Sion, Musée d'Art du Valais; Vienna, Generali Foundation; Kunstsammlung der Stadt Zürich; Kunstsammlung Kanton Zürich.

Yvonne Volkart, 2010, updated 2016
Translation: Katherine Vanovitch

Selected bibliography

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Website

<http://www.geobodies.org>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4020535&lng=en>

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