EMBEDDED FIELDWORK AND GLOBAL OIL CIRCULATION: BLACK SEA FILES

Where coverage is the keyword for hegemonic media – that totalizing view intended to visually capture the whole space associated with the represented event – positionality is the fundamental assumption of recent artistic documentary work. The radically incomplete, and radically inconclusive, structures deployed by artists conspire against iconic and discursive fixity. Their partial views are offered in confrontation with more totalizing perspectives, and transitional identities are treated with extreme caution. Paradoxically enough, transitional states of affair – situations in which people suffer or go through personal episodes – throw subjects into very vulnerable positions. While they are often used as permanent icons of disaster in the landscape of the mass media, in Ursula Biemann's videos, they do not surrender to a general scheme that confirms our prejudices. Instead, people become fragments of a local intelligence, as partial as their voices are.
Carles Guerra

While most of my previous video essays have been concerned with globalization processes in broad extraterritorial zones and along borders, with *Black Sea Files* I turned my attention to a specific transnational infrastructure: the Baku-Tblissi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Passing through the Southern Caucasus and Turkey, the recently-built pipeline pumps large quantities of new Caspian crude oil from Azerbaijan to the world market. In the mid 1990s, representation of the region changed from that of a politically unsettled and impoverished post-Soviet periphery, hosting a million displaced people, to a space where energy and capital flow at a rate that is remarkable even by global standards.

This giant project is the first manifestation of an ambitious European plan to not only cross the Caucasian corridor and access the Caspian oil reserves, but also to expand further into post-Cold War territories, particularly the landlocked Muslim states along the Southern rim of the former Soviet Republic. A veritable super-silk highway is the long-term vision behind this scheme, which will grow to encompass a fully-integrated transportation and communication corridor linking Europe with Central Asia. The overall focus of my two-year video exploration was the spatial and social transformations brought about by this gigantic infrastructure. During my fieldtrips in 2003 and 2004, the pipeline was still under construction, displaying the material efforts necessary to bury the conduit underground and make it forever invisible.

International media coverage of the Caucasus features images of political elites signing contracts, rubbing new oil between their fingertips or cutting ribbons at inaugurations. My work does not prioritize such corporate images, which consolidate power into a master narrative, because they offer little insight into complex regional relations and local textures. My intension was to disperse the predominantly US-centric perspective of current oil discourses and present an alternative.

The pipeline is a geo-strategic project of considerable political impact, not only for the powerful players in the region but also for a great number of locals: farmers, oil workers, migrants, and prostitutes, for whom the meaning of their living space will be transformed. These are the subjects who populate the video files, turning the pipeline corridor into a complex human geography. This is not the top-down view corporate planners favor when they decide on the course of the pipeline trajectory, but an engagement with the people who relate to this piece of infrastructure. The closing of big deals on a macro level entails a million small contracts and negotiations on the ground. If we want to reformulate the cultural construction of oil, it is on these subjects that we need to concentrate. Particular attention is therefore given to those instances at which the power line is incomplete, ambiguous or interrupted by local actors.

Some of the files deal with corporate politics of land use, documenting encounters with some of the thousands of farmers who had to sell their land for the pipeline. In other files, I stray around the wasteland of abandoned oil extraction zones near Baku, or sit down for tea with Kurdish nomads who have set up their summer camp near the pipeline terminal on the Mediterranean coast. While the pipeline runs through the video like a central thread, it does not read like a linear narrative but visits secondary scenes, unfolds side events and roams around the lesser debris of history. The *Black Sea Files* are looking at Off-Broadway geopolitics.

I do not pretend to grasp the complexity of the region in its overall political and cultural dimension. Nonetheless, I attempt to shed light on a subjective, but interrelated, series of scenes and plots. Varying in scale, the files speak of grand ideas and sordid conspiracies, remote ordering systems and their prosaic local upshots; they detect plans within plans, seeking to understand their strategic purposes and operational failures, and the meaning they have in terms of human experience. It is the ensemble of the files that reveals their interconnectedness.

The video writes a fragmentary human geography through a rather heterogeneous collection of videographies made during three trips to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, with extensive text research, media clips and reflections being made in the aftermath. All this material needed to be organized, and I opted for files because they are an open structure, indicating progress, which tend to contain unique combinations of documents whose logic often lies entirely with the author. The project foregrounds the ordering system, and the ordering process itself, through the use of files as a metaphor for categorizing information.

In the case of transnational politics, data can come from geographically dispersed sources, linked only through a political relationship that is not always obvious for the uninitiated. The relations reveal themselves during the investigative process and through the figure of the researcher. While generally my practice can be understood as a cognitive method akin to those used by geologists, journalists and anthropologists, this was a very subjective way of organizing knowledge, which, in my view, is more closely related to secret intelligence than, say, anthropology, because of its inherently transnational procedure and the pursuit of hidden and restricted knowledge. With *Black Sea Files* I make a decisive attempt to insert myself into the range of investigative practices performed in these different spheres of knowledge.

Before I go on to discuss the content of some of these files in more detail, let me comment briefly on the form of presentation of this piece. *Black Sea Files* consists of ten synchronized double video files. In some of the files, the image on the left stands in contrast to the one on the right, as in File 0, where the empty plaza in front of the government palace in Baku is juxtaposed with the massive public demonstration which brought down the Georgian regime in the main square of Tbilisi. In many files, however, both videos

complement each other, saturating the short scenes with the particularities of local people while creating a dynamic view by mixing medium-range shots and close-ups. In the case of the Azeri farmers, Kasakh tailors and Kurdish farm hands, the doubling-up of synchronized images works in choreographic terms. In a region where verbal communication is at a minimum, gestures and abstract sounds become the main means of interpreting a situation.

At Kunst-Werke Berlin, where *Black Sea Files* was premiered in December 2005, the piece was installed on synchronized pairs of video monitors, lined up on a long black plinth which ran diagonally across the entire space. The file names and contents were posted on a dark purple wall, where the file structure and content was replicated typographically in the exhibition space. A separate video of Azeri oil workers was projected onto one of the walls, contributing to the sonic atmosphere of the installation, and, pasted onto another wall, was a large oil cartography, co-designed with an architecture bureau in Zurich. My decision to turn my video work into a large complex installation was a strategic one. I recognized that, although my video essays had been shown in a great variety of venues, they had not been taken too seriously by the art world. I felt that I could gain greater recognition in this context if my presentation was more sophisticated or simply took up more space. It seemed to me that the content of this video would justify a similarly geopolitical strategy of gaining more ground in the art world (see p. 106-107).

In the imaging of migration, one of the aesthetic strategies I have insisted on in the last few years is that migration should not be conceived of as a singular phenomenon but as one among many strands of interaction between regional and national spaces. *Black Sea Files* investigates the correlation between the flows of people and those of fossil resources, investments, information and images. Given the importance of energy in our society today, it is surprising how few cultural analyses are available on the subject, in comparison with research topics such as technology, virtuality or velocity. This lack of theoretical discourse makes it all the more difficult to discuss the circulation of oil in the context of a cultural-theoretical consideration of identity and migration, which meant I had to do a great deal of ground work.
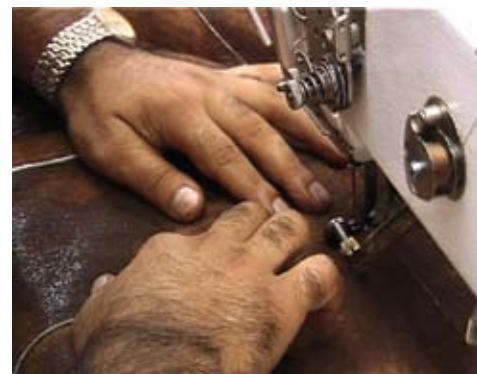
The first task was to draw spatial connections and to find coincidences between the flow of persons and resources. One particularly striking site for this confluence is Istanbul. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the importance of the Turkish Straits has greatly increased, as large parts of the vast oil reserves of the Caspian region must be transported on tankers across the Black Sea to reach external markets. The Bosphorus, connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, is among the world's busiest and most dangerous waterways, cutting through the mega city of twelve million people. The strait's capacity for large oil tankers is practically saturated, hence the necessity to build the BTC pipeline.

This bottleneck of global oil circulation is also the site of the highest concentration of human migration in the region. Turkey is considered to be one of the main transit countries in the modern world for irregular migration. Tens of thousands of migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Moldova, and Russia arrive in Turkey every year, two thirds of them passing through Istanbul. The liberalization of post-socialist countries had a particularly noticeable impact on female mobility and marketability, and the Black Sea basin is known as a major trading place for women. Female migrants, trafficked from the former Soviet republics to Turkey, frequently use the route through Azerbaijan, which has become another regular transit country for illegal migration. In Azerbaijan, the massive oil-field revenues do not easily filter down to ordinary citizens; young women have to look for opportunities abroad, and they use the same westbound route as the oil.

As important as the connections between oil money and sexualized female labor migration are, they are often difficult to establish conceptually because these issues are discussed in very different cognitive fields. In the visual world of video space, and particularly in the practice of the video essay, there is a chance of bringing them together. Certain events in the *Black Sea Files*, like the scene I am about to describe, involving Russian and Azeri prostitutes, may indeed seem unrelated or coincidental. During fieldwork, however, the essayist is not always in the "signifying mode," hot on the tracks of her research topic. The situation sometimes requires a spontaneous decision to pursue a narrative thread that was unplanned.

When I arrived in Trabzon towards the end of my research trip through the Caucasus, I was already aware of the booming sex industry in the region, but it was not my explicit intention to tie it into my video project. I had taken a bus across the Turkish border from the Georgian port of Batumi and planned to have a couple of relaxing days in this lively old trading city. After taking a bath at the ancient hamam and watching a Lara Croft movie at the only cinema, I took a stroll down to the port. Behind the covered Russian market, where cheap plastic articles, textiles, and electronics are for sale, the filthy street was lined with brothels, hotels and bars, crowded with women from Russia, the Ukraine, and the Caucasus Republics. Even though this was supposed to be my time off, I made contact with people working in this milieu the very same day. In a local hotel room, I subsequently filmed an encounter with three young prostitutes – two from Moscow and one from Baku, Azerbaijan, who had recently arrived in Trabzon – in the presence of their pimps, an agent who introduced me to these shady characters, and a translator, all of whom remained behind the camera.

The disproportionate male presence in the room made a candid conversation impossible; in terms of factual information, the encounter would prove to be entirely useless. In addition, simultaneous trans-

lation was so minimal and fragmentary that my only option was to provoke a situation in which the prostitutes and pimps would start acting out their relations in front of the camera rather than narrating them to me. When a more thorough translation of the taped conversation took place several months later, during the editing process, it revealed that the prostitutes had been misinformed about my project – they were not told that I was working on a video about resources and migration, but assumed instead that I was making a "home movie." This made it seem that they were forced to speak with me – a strictly unacceptable condition according to documentary ethics. Yet, the fact that we were both misinformed, and that entering their power terms was the only way of revealing the coercive character of the situation, made it a very valuable document for me.

While waiting to begin the interview, I filmed the nervous way in which the three women moved around the room – getting up, sitting down again, reclining, hiding behind each other, constantly reshuffling their positions on the queen-size bed in an effort to place themselves in the best, or possibly the least, favorable posture in front of the camera. For the longest time, they rearranged their bodies in ever new positions, gradually becoming conscious of the humorous manner in which they were simultaneously hindering my task as a camerawoman and undermining the pimps' authority. It is this awkward choreography that tells us more convincingly than any verbal statement about the women's discomfort with their labor and with exposing themselves in this intimate, transitory space determined by capitalist relations. With their pointless moving around the room, they were able to appropriate the space in an anti-productive, playful, and resistant way.

It is this unspectacular and unassuming form of resistance – discovered through a process of minute observation – which I have often chosen as my object of representation. This is not because it has any real power to change economic relations, but because – in representation – the momentary, but highly symbolic, agency of women hardly ever comes into view. In the end, hard facts always tend towards a discourse of exploitation, rarely revealing strategies of mobility, slyness, and inventiveness, which are ultimately required in these geographies of survival.

There is another section I want to comment on briefly – File Four, in which I raise a number of questions concerning the status of images, the gathering of visual data, the capture of events and my own role as an embedded artist. On a spring morning in 2005, I filmed the Turkish police evicting a thousand Kurds from the vast recycling area on the periphery of Ankara that was the existential basis for an entire community. The massive attack of armed forces came out of the blue: in no time at all, the area was turned into a war zone filled with smoke, screams and teargas. Recyclers desperately tried to salvage mattresses and huge bags of other precious recycling materi-

als. Others set stacks of paper, cardboard and PET bottles on fire rather than leaving them for the enemy. Several bulldozers razed their shacks to the ground and tankers rolled over the debris, spraying water in all directions, to try to keep the crowd in check.

These were difficult filming conditions and the dramatic video material was no less difficult to insert in a piece that was otherwise a quietly-paced encounter with places and people. The scene is not in the immediate proximity of BTC construction sites, but it is not entirely unrelated to the pipeline project since the trajectory had to circumvent Kurdish areas for fear of sabotage and the eviction in Ankara could be interpreted as a signal from the authorities to keep a rebellious community on track. For my part, I was most concerned with the risk of turning the scene of desperation into a media spectacle. This prompted me to introduce a strong reflexive element by showing web cam images of myself sitting at a desk viewing film footage and speaking into the microphone. My voiceover questions the role of the embedded artist and the value of images produced under dangerous conditions. I am not normally in favour of the kind of self-indulgent artistic practice that making a personal appearance in my video would suggest but, in this instance, there was a need to counterbalance the drama of the scene.

The glimpse into my work environment, where the video material is viewed, manipulated and given meaning, is one way of breaking up the immediate thrill that dramatic images can produce. It is an expression of my vacillation between the urgency of documenting conspicuous injustice, inherent in the violent act of eviction, and the reluctance to represent human crisis as a spectacle. Ultimately, spectacle is produced through editing and commentary as much as in framing decisions. So, File Four is a record of people's displacement, their urban struggle and their loss of land; but, at the same time, it is a reflection on the practice of, and conditions for, image-making in the drama of a moment at which a thousand citizens lose their existence before our eyes.

The images of the battle on the recycling fields of Ankara have another vital function in the video; they stand for the countless violations accompanying the construction and maintenance of the oil facilities which neither I, nor anyone else, was able to document. It is as if the violence of the Ankara footage performs an emotional transfer onto those peaceful images of the pipeline, lying innocuously in the grass, waiting to be buried, which alone do not adequately represent the pipeline project.

A massive foreign incision in a fragile region in historical transition is bound to trigger psychic dynamics, provoke social reconfigurations, reshuffle economic privileges, reconnect old ethnic ties and create new affiliations across the board. It is the tireless representation of these micro-political adjustments that can begin to bring the meaning of these fundamental geopolitical transformations to light.

What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go to the trenches? How did it get to the point where she stands at the front next to the journalists at the very moment of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask. What kind of artistic practice does such video footage document? That of an embedded artist immersed in the surge of human confrontation and confusion? How to resist making the ultimate image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol? Is an image made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives? Is better knowledge that which is produced at great risk? It sounds odd, but it's risky to simply record a pipeline. Oil companies run a severe image regime. During construction image-making is prohibited, later it will be invisible anyway. What is the meaning of this tube in the hidden corporate imaginary of this space? What function does it have in their own secret ordering system of the Caucasus?
Voice-over file 4

NEXTCAC   COMEX   NYNEX   NASDAC
29499   40022   454218   56604   23!
122   45218   56604   23598   45