

On Absence and Saturation in Chantal Akerman's *De l'autre côté (From the Other Side)*

A group of men and women sit around the restaurant table. All but one avoid the camera's gaze. (Fig. 1). The camera, set to include the group within the frame, records the central figure as he steadily unfolds a piece of paper and reads a statement on behalf of the group. The reading is marked by a steely resilience, a sense of the unjust and a plea for fairness. Incongruously, over the reader's right shoulder stands an artificial tree, dressed in tired-looking Christmas decorations. Its presence fixes us in a moment, a specific time of year, but as the film unfolds we realise that this particular occurrence is not unusual. The experience of migration is as old as it is new, as unique as it is general. Chantal Akerman has stated that finding this group of people – abandoned by the smugglers they had paid for their safe crossing – happened by chance, and that only when she (and her film crew) were asked by the people themselves, did they set the camera rolling.<sup>1</sup>

*From the Other Side*, 2000, focuses on the Mexico-USA borderlands, primarily the people in the towns of Agua Prieta, Mexico and Douglas, Arizona. The use of 'from' and 'other' in the title of the work marks an imbalance in power, a master geography and subject. The film forms part of a cycle of 'nonfiction' films: *From the East (D'Est)*, 1993; *South (Sud)*, 1999; and *Over there (La-Bas)*, 2006; all singular directives preoccupied with displacement and borders, not solely at the geopolitical but also psychic and cultural levels. Even within this tetralogy, *From the Other Side*

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<sup>1</sup> Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 117.

has been one of Akerman's lesser-known and discussed works.<sup>2</sup> The sequence of images and narrative is largely synchronous; a platform is provided from which the interviewees speak, accounts are gathered from both sides of the border, and the musical score works affectively, as we might expect, to cue emotional response from the viewer. The recognition of the camera as a tool to communicate and bear witness – or as Ariella Azoulay might have it: the camera's latent 'civil contract' – is expanded by Akerman, in part, through her inclusion of the epistolary form.<sup>3</sup> The letter (with which I opened) is read aloud by the 'illegals' and intended to be heard beyond the frame, and beyond the locale. We, as viewer, are presented with a document that registers a demand on the spectator. While this notion of demand complicates the assumption that the filmed subject is forever cast as object by the filmic lens, as we shall see, such a notion has been problematized as yet another burden carried by those filmed.

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<sup>2</sup> One could cite a number of reasons for this, such as its relation to reportage. The lack of an in-depth analysis might also be the result of the film's release after two significant book-length studies on Akerman, Margulies (1996) and *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (ed.) Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (1999). However, since her death in 2015, conferences such as 'After Chantal: an international conference' held at the University of Westminster in 2016 and, for example, journal special issues, such as *Film Quarterly*, Fall 2016, Volume 70, Number 1, have begun to widen the scope to a certain degree.

<sup>3</sup> Azoulay's argument is formulated on an understanding of the photograph as being constructed through a tripartite (and fundamentally equal) relation between the subject, photographer and viewer. For example, if the photographed subject solicits the attention of the photographer (and thus viewer) his or her gaze deserves to be met. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

*From the Other Side* was first exhibited as a video installation in *Documenta 11*, curated by Okwui Enwezor.<sup>4</sup> The latter exhibition is often credited as playing a significant role in crystallising (and validating) a turn to the documentary mode within artist's film and video.<sup>5</sup> The expansion (into 3 parts) of Ackerman's film for *Documenta 11*, – which included 18 video monitors, two projection screens, and a live feed to the Mexican border – was written about in many of the reviews of the exhibition and deployed by Jacques Rancière to illustrate what he calls 'the paradox of political art.' For Rancière, *From the Other Side* is political only because it successfully operates within the aesthetic regime and not within that of the 'sensible'; that is what is already known ('seeable', 'sayable') and where we might expect a standard documentary to ordinarily exist.<sup>6</sup>

My reading of Akerman's *From the Other Side* offers a different emphasis to that which has tended to dominate scholarship on Akerman's varied body of work, which

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<sup>4</sup> The film was shot in both 16mm and video and transferred to DVD. The film, made in 2000 was titled *De l'autre côté (From the Other Side)*. The video installation, shown in 2002 is titled *From the Other Side*. For ease I will refer to the English translation when discussing both the film and its installation but note the two years in between the making of the film and video installation.

<sup>5</sup> Whilst *Documenta 11* marked a specific moment that generated a great deal of journalistic and scholarly debate around the 'documentary turn' it is also important to cast the net wider to a slightly earlier moment looking to both the 'traffic' between art and anthropology and the continued prevalence of 'moving-image' work in museums and galleries. First published in an edited volume from 1995 which sought to explore the evolving interest between the two disciplines of art and anthropology, Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' held a critical position which warned against a too easy wedding of the pair, particularly in the light of new gallery outreach programmes which under the guise of reshaping art education, sought to reposition the artist in relation to his or hers 'non-conventional' public (a caution that also has relevance for debates around 'relational aesthetics' within the same time period).

<sup>6</sup> For Rancière, artworks produce 'effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination'. What others term political art remains stuck on the level of the mimetic for Rancière. Whilst I place *Akerman's From the Other Side* in closer alliance with an expanded sense of the documentary, the very characteristics that the documentary is said to have – say one of causal explanations – set it firmly apart from the category of art (or the aesthetic regime). Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, (London: Continuum, 2010) p. 149-51.

has rather been approached through a (feminist) psychoanalytical framework.<sup>7</sup> Positioning *From the Other Side* within the context of critical realist and postcolonial art historical debates offers insights to the current articulation of a ‘documentary turn’ within the field of contemporary art; a ‘turn’ argued by some scholars as imbricated with the ‘migrant image’.<sup>8</sup> For TJ Demos, the regimes of visibility or rather invisibility require new forms of representation. Demos calls for new forms for those without official political representation or for those forced to circumnavigate accepted and authorised routes and methods. As such, questions around race, the ‘other’ and representation, notions that have otherwise had a problematic relationship with the histories of the document and its power/knowledge relation, can be reopened.<sup>9</sup> Despite the decade or so that separates our contemporary moment from Akerman’s film, a visceral charge is felt between what Akerman terms the ‘antechamber’ of *Agua Prieta* and our present day waiting or ‘processing’ zones. For it is Lampedusa, Italy, the Greek islands of Lesbos, Kos, Chios and Samos, or even the ‘jungle’ as it became known at Calais, France, that make up the in-between geopolitics of our most recent devastating migration crises.

Much has been written on the importance, complexity and prevalence of borders in Akerman’s body of work.<sup>10</sup> I do not wish to underplay Akerman’s own clear

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of this please see the discussion beginning on page 9 under the subheading ‘Absence’.

<sup>8</sup> T.J Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crises*, (Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> With regards to questions of race I do not wish to ignore Akerman’s formative experiences and Jewish heritage, aspects that Margaret Olin claims are not acknowledged by feminist scholars of Akerman’s work. See Olin, ‘Graven Images on Video: The Second Commandment and Jewish Identity’, *Discourse*, 22.1, pp. 7-30, p. 8. However, Ivone Margulies’s discussion of Jewish identity and voice in Akerman’s work belies Olin’s contention. See Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Duke University Press: 1996), pp. 192-203.

<sup>10</sup> For example: Scot MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (University of California, 2005). Sam Adams, ‘Chantal Akerman’, <http://www.avclub.com/article/chantal-akerman-37600> 2010

acknowledgment that, for her, borders – where one is marked out, held in, kept out – are evocative of the camps endured by her family in Nazi Germany (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> At night, cast in floodlights, the Mexico-USA borderlands recall such internment. During daylight hours the border fence, a repeat shot throughout *From the Other Side*, imparts a kind of stoic silence. These reoccurring shots of nothingness, or rather nothing in particular, suggest how the filmmaker herself might speak, when words fail.

In order to critically assess this ‘documentary turn’ I have chosen to deploy two motivating terms, that of ‘absence’ and that of ‘saturation’, principally in relation to *From the Other Side*, but also to exert pressure on two supplementary works: *Performing the Border* (1999) by Ursula Biemann, and *Nervus Rerum* (2008) by The Otolith Group. The first of my two motivating terms, ‘absence’, dominates a good deal of significant and important scholarship on Akerman, but, as stated, primarily through a psychoanalytical feminist framework. Such a framework is often unquestionably incorporated into standard commentary on Akerman’s work as we shall come to see. By exploring questions raised by tendencies present in the two secondary videos, I aim to move between these two (seemingly) polarised motivating terms which attempt formal strategies for representing, and speaking for, an other.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘My fixation with borders comes from the camps’, Chantal Akerman, ‘No idolatry and losing everything that made you a slave: Chantal Akerman’ an interview with Élisabeth Lebovici, <http://mousse magazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/> accessed 12.04.15.

## Once more on ethnography and the document

Akerman has stated that the impetus to travel to the border derived from reading a newspaper article about American citizens taking cases of ‘illegal’ migration into their own hands (Fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> While Akerman’s questioning is direct, interviewees reveal concerns with heritage and race that cast a longer shadow on the colonial encounter between Latin America and Western Europe, thus complicating divisions of oppressor and victim. For those interviewed, details become important, stories told need lengthy explanations, caveats and corrections. Pauses, repetition and circuitous, meandering speech patterns complicate such questions as we are confronted with a range of entangled registers that form Akerman’s portrait of such a place.

Building on observations by Ivone Marguiles regarding Akerman’s earlier work, Marion Schmid has labelled *From the Other Side* ‘experimental ethnography’. Schmid uses this description in a fairly cursory way, however, for our purposes and within the context of this article, it is useful to elaborate on this categorisation.<sup>13</sup> Writing within a year of Marguiles’ important study but from within the discipline of art history, Hal Foster argued that there had been a significant rise in artists who had sought to import (and critique) the ethnographic method in their practices. Such a concern, he argued, was tied to a pursuit for a closer account of ‘truthfulness’, or

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<sup>12</sup> Chantal Akerman, ‘The Other Side’, *Documenta 11\_Platform 5*: Exhibition catalogue, (Hatje Cantz Publishers), p. 546.

<sup>13</sup> Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, (2010), p. 99. For Marguiles, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996), p. 194.

‘realness’.<sup>14</sup> This claim for a renegotiation and expansion of a social scientific discipline (anthropology) by artists leads to Foster’s claim that such focus on ‘the other’ enforced a preoccupation with difference which all too often ended in re-enforcing sameness. That is, in the process of reflexivity a self-fashioning of the ‘other’ takes place.<sup>15</sup>

While the traffic between ethnography and contemporary art may have gained much visibility in the late 1990s and into the 2000s it is worth reminding ourselves just how outmoded the documentary – often regarded as the handmaiden of ethnographic studies – had become in the two preceding decades.<sup>16</sup> The five minute dialogue for Penny Dedman’s *Documentary Rape* from 1980, for example, begins with a demand made that one of the production crew ‘find a black, Jewish, lesbian, anarchist to present – I have an English video crew coming in to town – and you know what they’re like’.<sup>17</sup> Implicit here is the vociferous demand for the ‘other’ (or for difference) as bound to the documentary form. The historical appropriation of the camera and the document by colonial administrations, for example, has resulted in it being ascribed an official position. History is recorded by documents. And I need not

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<sup>14</sup> Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ in G.E Marcus, and F.R Myers.,(eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (University of California Press: 1995), pp. 302-309.

<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ in G.E Marcus, and F.R Myers.,(eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (University of California Press: 1995)

<sup>16</sup> For the relation between anthropology and contemporary art see, for example, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (eds.), *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006); the influence of James Clifford’s work on culture and anthropology more broadly and more recently Anthony Downey, ‘An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer’, *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 5, 2009, pp. 593-603 and Mark Westmorland, ‘Ethnography + Art: Convergence or Collision’, *Ibraaz*, 2011, <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/11>

<sup>17</sup> Penny Dedman, *Documentary Rape*, (1980) VIDA Triple Vision Ignition Films.

labour the point that what gets written out, or indeed never written, ensures the messiness of power relations stands to attention in a profoundly disingenuous neat line. Thus, autobiographical narratives that might move generationally via song, poem or dance, gained importance in the feminist and post-colonial critique of the archive in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Rather than a repository of confirmation, an archive (compiled of officiated documents), as Stuart Hall theorised, is better understood as a malleable entity: one that is flexible, defiant and exists in spite of the violent external pressures which work to conceal it.<sup>19</sup>

The documentary project and its assumed implicit historical ties with paternalism, colonialism and universal truths was treated with deep suspicion from the late 1970s to mid 1990s. While the questioning of what the photographic image revealed was a crucial and necessary set of debates often led by postcolonial and/or postmodernist enquiry, a new status quo emerged in which an equally unhelpful tipping of the balance resulted in an uncritical acceptance that the camera image was unable to reveal any thing at all.<sup>20</sup> How then, and through what means, did a ‘documentary turn’ arise in the aftermath of this? In addition to Foster’s argument, which outlines the artist trespassing on the terrain of the anthropologist, we might also cite new communication and digital technologies as engendering preoccupations with documentation and questions of ‘realism’ and reality once again. Convincingly, the film historian Nora Alter and the curator Okwui Enwezor have both claimed that a reinvestment in the documentary takes place in moments of historical crisis and

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<sup>18</sup> For example, one need only look to the influence of Gayatri Spivak and in particular her ‘The Rani of Sirmur: And Essay in Reading the Archives’, *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1985, pp. 247-272.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Constituting an Archive’, *Third Text*, vol 15, issue 54, 2001, pp. 89-92.

<sup>20</sup> Allan Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)’, *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, (1978), pp. 859-883.

uncertainty, when, I would expand, a grasp on knowing is needed.<sup>21</sup> This type of ‘moving-image’ work has now firmly entered the space of the gallery. Indeed, the format of the documentary, whether film, video or digital file and its mediating apparatus – projection, television, purpose-build cinema – seems of lesser importance in dominant discussions. This is in contrast to the decades prior in which video entered the gallery space annexed to performance art, and the projected image through the genre of installation art.<sup>22</sup>

## Absence

Much important scholarship on Akerman’s work has produced detailed analysis on absence – what is not seen, or what cannot be spoken about –arguing how the political and ethical dimension of such analysis produces a specifically feminist aesthetics in which silence is reclaimed.<sup>23</sup> These important assessments of Akerman’s work (itself an immensely varied practice), have, to a degree set the terms of debate, impacting how Akerman’s work is subsequently approached and discussed in the gallery and art

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<sup>21</sup> Nora Alter, *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema 1967-2000* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 12-24. For Okwui Enwezor see ‘Documentary/Vérité: Biopolitics, Human Rights, and the Figure of “Truth” in Contemporary Art’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), pp. 81-85.

<sup>22</sup> Tamara Trodd, *Screen/Space: the projected image in contemporary art*, (Manchester University Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Whilst not aiming to be in any way exhaustive nor wishing to conflate important and diverse scholarship, for a broad placing of Akerman within a psychoanalytical framework see: Adrianna Cerne, ‘Writing in tongues: Chantal Akerman’s *News From Home*’, *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 32, no. 125-126, 2002, pp. 235-47; Joanne Morra, ‘Daughter’s Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol.6, no.1, 2007, pp. 91-108; Griselda Pollock, ‘Chantal Akerman: Moving Between Cinema and Installation’, *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*, (eds.) Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev, (London: I.B Tauris, 2014), pp. 227-46; Maureen Turin, ‘Personal pronouncements in *I...You...He...She* and *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*’ in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (ed.) Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, (Wiltshire, England: Flicks Books, 1999) pp. 9-26; Ruth Perlmutter, ‘Feminine Absence: A Political Aesthetic in Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai De Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 4, issue 2, 1979, pp. 125-133.

historical context.<sup>24</sup> Curator, Bruce Jenkins writes that the use of absence and silence in Akerman's work operate as alternative strategies for dealing with and recalling a 'lost past'.<sup>25</sup> In his analysis of both *D'Est* and *From the Other Side*, Jenkins cites the influence of the Second Commandment on Jewish identity, which forbids the making of any 'graven image' or image of 'likeness'. Margaret Olin cautions against this when she writes that the Commandment 'does not straightforwardly aim at any or all image making' citing that its 'true target is idolatry'.<sup>26</sup> Olin then adds greater complexity to Jenkins's unquestioned claim for absence in Akerman's work, however it remains a mode of representation determined (and possibly limited) by one's own biography.

In *From the Other Side* it is possible to identify a commitment to the empty and seemingly inert spaces that surround an event, as opposed to the task of imaging the event itself – the crossing. Although we will see how Akerman attends to this through methods that are, until this moment, quite unseen in her practice. Scholars have theorised that Akerman's use of silence and ambient sound 'draw the viewer into a subjective state of understanding'; noting the potential this has for exploring a feminist aesthetics that uses silence as material for a politics of resistance.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Margulies warns against easy assumptions that are made as an (inadvertent) effect of the dominance of psychoanalytical readings. Margulies, *Nothing Happens* (1996) see p. 6 and p. 217 respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Jenkins, 'Border Crossings: Two Installations by Chantal Akerman' (2007) pp. 80-9.

<sup>26</sup> Olin, 'Graven Images on Video: The Second Commandment and Jewish Identity', p. 10.

Olin argues that Akerman's transgressive act in *D'Est* in relation to the Second Commandment is what calls for the atonement signified by the cello playing the Kol Nidre melody that accompanies the artist's voice in the installation *Bordering on Fiction*.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (p. 8) and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (p. 37) in their separate chapters (ed.), *Identity and Memory: the Films of Chantal Akerman*, (1999).

Akerman's application of silence coupled with duration places a distinct type of attention on space, offering a degree of materiality perhaps not otherwise associated with this conception of absence. Her camera lingers on what appears to be nothing. Yet the extended duration of particular shots force us to focus on the details within the frame, to either become transfixed, meditative, or indeed wonder when it will cut to the next scene so we can grasp the unfolding narrative.<sup>28</sup> Occasionally the camera settles on signs that populate the desertscape, the violence and fear of the messages, for example, "Stop the Wave! Our Property and Environment is Being Trashed by Invaders" permeate otherwise silent scenes. In another scene, the amplified sound of the sand whipped by high winds batters a 'Dead End' sign. Many minutes are dedicated to observational accounts of children playing a game of football in the distance, or the border fence and its surroundings, as people, cars and animals shift in and out of the frame, either nonchalant or mildly aware of the camera's presence. For those that are selected as interviewees, perspectives and experiences are often carefully recounted. However, some look straight down the lens of the camera, saying nothing at all. These 'subjects' mirror the quiet images of the landscape during daylight hours, reminding us that they have stories that are not always to be revealed. The border fence appears to operate as much as a central protagonist as the people interviewed.

The re-occurrence of the shots of the border fence, in all its frailty and potency, can be imagined as a type of political filmmaking. These shots make a break with the otherwise fluid narrative in a manner that is comparable to the black, blank spacing used to break the assumed synchronicity between text and image. Margulies, in her

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<sup>28</sup> The use of long takes, the static camera, and explorations with temporality and the image in Akerman's body of work is indebted to not only Godard, but Andy Warhol and Michael Snow.

account of problematizing the worn out opposition of realism and modernism in Akerman's films, notes that her focus on materiality of both subject and form through strategies of de-familiarisation produces 'an anti-illusionist metacinema'.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, the reoccurring shots of the fence can be understood as 'instruments of referential focus' that re-inserts the indexical material (Fig. 5). The interplay of the observational tracking shots (a real, associated with the documentary) through formal means (the repetition of these types of shots) enforces a materiality of absence. One that does not necessarily avoid the 'event' – the perilous journey across the border – but rather serves to heighten the material reality of such a place. This in turn works to re-inscribe the enormity of the fence and all it encompasses: border control and national state power.

#### Saturation

Documenta 11 faced criticism that it was largely 'issue-driven' leading it to be termed the 'CNN Documenta' by one commentator.<sup>30</sup> In an age of 24-hour news coverage that uses screens within screens, ticker tapes for live updates, or incorporates technologies from military reconnaissance into everyday policing, the debates on de-sensitization are themselves over saturated. As briefly noted, *From the Other Side*

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<sup>29</sup> The strategies of defamiliarization that Margulies cites are 'phenomenological' recordings of the minutiae along with heightened sounds and colours. Margulies, *Nothing Happens* (1993), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Kim Levin, 'The CNN Documenta: Art in an International State of Emergency', *The Village Voice*, July 2, 2002.

signals a first for Akerman that accords with the proliferation of a digital panoptic: the incorporation of second-hand re-appropriated images. In this instance, the surveillance footage shot by border control police from within the helicopters. While hovering above ground, their infra-red cameras identify and hold in their gaze the ghostly white apparitions of men, women and children as they attempt to make the journey under the cover of night (Fig. 6). Akerman's decision to incorporate images that are not her own but do attest to a 'negative', or absence, as it were – the people cast in white against the back of night – reveals not only the violence of images but different regimes of visibility (here, infra-red) and the manner in which they overlap to co-produce meaning.

Dealing with the same borderspace, Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border* (1999) harnesses and foregrounds a range of different (yet co-dependent) regimes of visibility. *Performing the Border* focusses primarily on the *maquiladoras* that play a strategic role in national and international trade. The video-essay explores the disposability of women's bodies in the push for profit and trade. Here the questions settle less on movement from one place to another as in *From the Other Side* and more on the layers of contradictions that build up the logic of free trade and export processing zones. While Akerman cannot represent the actual act of crossing, save through the inscription of the US law enforcement, Biemann cannot gain access to the factories in which the women work. Nor does she provide a space from which the women workers themselves, save one, can talk. Rather, other women, all deeply rooted in the geopolitics of the border, whether they be activists, sex workers, sexual health advisors, artists or journalists, speak in their place.

Unlike Akerman, we do not hear Biemann ask the questions, her voice is present through voice-over, a device previously much critiqued for imposing a 'voice of God'

that serves to own, through interpretation, the parameters of the image. Despite this Biemann re-deploys the voice-over. It is her voice, and her statements range from the declarative, based in scholarly or theoretical research, to rhetorical questions posed via text on screen to the viewer: it is both summative and wandering. Nonetheless, it evokes a device with a problematic history which appears to bypass the focus on the autobiographical and/or poly vocal – devices signalled by postcolonial and feminist scholarship and activism as crucial to fracturing a (masculine) singular voice. Angela Dimitrakaki's notion of Biemann's voice as the 'non-autobiographical "I"' is helpful here. For we might think of it as a strategy that aims to re-purpose the function of the voice over; one that does not ignore authorship but decouples it from authority.<sup>31</sup>

The absence of the women workers' voices in *Performing the Border* mimics the control and silencing of the 'white, male, middle-management' on employees.<sup>32</sup> In their absence Biemann aims to make visible, through existing images, the (largely) female workforce. A final scene in *Performing the Border* re-appropriates images from Mexican television news stations. These are first distorted by Biemann's re-filming, she then uses repetition and looping to attend to the question of how overly determined these female bodies are in such technologized spaces. A second strategy is to use data: images and text, which intercept and roll over the 'first-hand' images. Biemann layers corporate logos obliquely present on discarded pieces of the *maquiladora* workers' clothing. Police reports that identify the bodies via case numbers, ages and the brutal infliction of injuries and causes of death cascade down

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<sup>31</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki, 'Materialist Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann', *The Oxford Art Journal*, 30/2 (2007), pp. 205-232.

<sup>32</sup> Ursula Biemann speaking in *Performing the Border*, 1999, 42 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Women Make Movies.

the image with just enough time to read yet little time to digest their content. Here, Biemann attempts to block the easy consumption of the image precisely through the proliferation of images, through the saturation of the screen, rather than the slowing and paring down seen in Akerman's *From the Other Side*. Biemann's decision to use a variety of images produced for different purposes – mainly to determine the bodies and subjectivities of the workers – alongside one another alerts the viewer to two important aspects. First, how thoroughly over-determined such a geopolitical space and its inhabitants are. Secondly, the sovereignty of the image in late capitalism: to ignore its power (and its prominent role in, for example journalism, state and private surveillance, branding and advertising) is to risk ignoring how subjectivities are formed.

Both *From the Other Side* and *Performing the Border* place in crisis the binaries of talking *for* another, or providing a platform *from* which the subject speaks. In speaking *for* we impose ideological stoppages. We might recall Craig Owens's praise for Foucault's notion of the 'indignity of speakers for an other'; in which a Marxist aesthetics past, present or future was rejected on the basis of Marx's claim in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 'they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented'.<sup>33</sup> Despite one being aware of the issues abound in speaking for another such issues are not simply removed by offering the 'stage' from which to speak; power dynamics remain and terms are still set. This cul-de-sac is noted by Hal

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<sup>33</sup> Craig Owens, "'The Indignity of Speaking for Others': An Imaginary Interview", *Art and Social Change [USA]* ed. David Deitcher, (Oberlin: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1983), pp. 83-5.

Foster when he states that Owens's view on the indignity of speaking for another produces 'a censorious silence as much as an alternative speech'.<sup>34</sup>

The strategies of absence and saturation whilst perhaps antithetical in initial effect, operate within a paradigm of negation in related yet specific ways. Saturation over-determines our knowledge of the space, commenting on how different image regimes structure our perceptions, and in this instance, images almost cancel one another out. Whereas absence in *From the Other Side* is evoked through the formal indexes of sound, negative images rendered by infra-red technologies, diegesis and the repetition and duration of particular shots.<sup>35</sup>

Bodies and landscapes, soliciting affect

Long-held assumptions prevail about the relation between humanism and the emergence of the documentary project. Particular techniques have tended to be associated with heightening and producing such a relation, such as the 'close-up' frame, often used to solicit affect in the viewer through the process of identification. Akerman, however, rejects the close-up. For example, when tears are shed by interviewees they are never magnified under Akerman's lens. She remains at a distance. Such a rejection can be understood in a number of ways. First is Akerman's claim for a Levinasian ethics, which underpins the choice for front-on framing. For Akerman, such a formal decision asks the viewer and the subject to face one another

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<sup>34</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996), p. 276.

<sup>35</sup> For an illuminating and much needed account of sound across Akerman's work see Barbara McBane, 'Walking, Talking, Singing, Exploding...and Silence: Chantal Akerman's soundtracks', *Film Quarterly*, Fall 2016, Volume 70, Number 1. <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2016/09/walking-talking-singing-exploding/> accessed 12.12.16

directly with implications of mutual trust and respect.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, and not something Akerman herself has directly referred to, we might turn to the debates raised by the feminist critique of both Hollywood melodrama and documentary ‘realist’ work. In both cases, despite the very different mode and genre, the close-up shot was understood as manipulating the viewer into a shared empathy, stitching them in to the fabric of the film. This had the effect of producing an over-identification with the filmed figure which ultimately neglected to acknowledge the active (critical) role a viewer might have.<sup>37</sup> Akerman’s treatment of hitherto heavily critiqued aspects of the documentary project are indeed so subtle in *From the Other Side* that one is tasked with a close looking, a command rendered by the formal and durational aspects of work. Alongside such framing of interviewees, Akerman’s use of sound, whether through amplification or musical score, requires closer scrutiny in relation to affect.

The musical score used, most prominently, to open and close *From the Other Side* is visceral in its charge, plugging the viewer into a serious, dysphoric and, thus, emotional state of anticipation. The foreboding and melancholic cello is reminiscent of the manner in which musical score is used in more stylistically conservative documentaries. Indeed, these problems are not unique to the last forty years but have rather always been present in the earliest of debates. For example, the synchronicity between sound and image – in which musical score contributes to and directs the

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<sup>36</sup> For Schmid on Akerman’s interest in Levinas see her *Chantal Akerman* (2010), p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> There is a great deal of important scholarship on the function of the close-up that cannot be covered here. For instance, I state ‘possible’ exploitation inherent to the zoom-lens. For many this was not debatable: the close-up had been used to objectify and transform women to Woman as sign on screen (Laura Mulvey) or solicit affect and sentimentalise (Claire Johnston). For a more extensive account of the ramifications of these debates see B. Ruby Rich, ‘The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism’, *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no.19, 1978 <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC19folder/RichCrisisOfNaming.html>> accessed 15.04.15. An additional platform for important debate around these issues is the critical reception of the 1970-5 film *Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Collective) by Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)’, *Screen*, Vol. 16, no. 4, winter 1975/6, pp. 101-19, pp. 114-15.

viewer's emotional response -- is parodied to great effect in Luis Buñuel's film 1932/3 *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan (Land Without Bread)*.<sup>38</sup> Here the score moves from the mournful sound of languid stringed instruments to fitful discordant symbols. That the inappropriateness of score to image is being exploited is best articulated when joyous music marks the treacherous journey the Hurdanos face when searching the mountains for sustenance, while crashing symbols confound the otherwise quiet village idyll. While Akerman's mournful score could be read as an uncritical complicity between image and sound, Schmid argues that the politics lies in the repetition of the musical leitmotif, as this works to open out the relevance of this particular image and story rather than isolate it to its specific locale.

*Las Hurdes* was part of a broader critique launched by Buñuel at contemporaries such as Robert J. Flaherty, whose *Nanook of the North* (1922) Buñuel saw as over-extending the homology between hostile environments and the people who inhabit them. The moments throughout *Las Hurdes* in which identity is determined by the land has relevance for our analysis of *From the Other Side*. This notion of inhospitality is intensified by Akerman's choice of images that reveal little infrastructure, and the stories of those whose only two choices appear to be enduring the hardship of this economically poor area or the risk of crossing the desert to the USA. Indeed, an interviewee reports on the implementation of a new US government policy that sought to re-direct the more established routes taken by so-called 'illegals' to even more treacherous routes without any amenities. Somewhat unsurprisingly, people continued to attempt the crossing, despite the increased risk. In the first half of

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<sup>38</sup> Buñuel was invited to take part in 'Mission Dakar-Djibouti' led by Marcel Griaule in 1932. Instead he made *Las Hurdes*, understood as one of the first polemics against the 'mission'. See Jeffrey Ruoff, 'An Ethnographic Surrealist Film: Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*' *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 14, issue 1, pp. 45-57. Pitched as ethnographic Surrealism by Ruoff, Buñuel's film also reveals his dissatisfaction with Surrealism and its – as he understood – penchant for homogenising distinct cultures in its aim to repudiate the European, a sentiment not too far removed from the aforementioned 'mission'.

the film an elderly woman, un-prompted, discusses the depreciation in wages for coffee bean harvesting. Akerman chooses not to pursue this information on changes to farming (presumably the aftershocks of N.A.F.T.A) through her questioning.<sup>39</sup> The elder woman's account makes clear the connection between the destruction of the means of production and the need to cross to the 'other side', this however, appears of less importance to the filmmaker herself (Fig. 7).

For the interviewee, there is a cause and effect relation that speaks directly to the position of Mexico in the world economy that does not appear to coincide, for Akerman, with this story as she makes an effort to redirect the interviewee back on point; the death of her son and grandson in their crossing north, that is, their absence. What Akerman does offer us in place of the spoken testimony is the image. A sequence of largely silent shots takes us from the cut of the elderly interviewee, to a long-range shot of a lone figure in the landscape and the audible click of tools, to three people waiting by the side of the road. We might surmise that Akerman is attempting to avoid causal explanations that limit the story to one specific locale. Instead, she offers a series of images that translate her wandering thoughts. Thoughts which are shaped by the conversations and encounters she has with those in the film. Despite these evocative and poetic mediations, we should not neglect that Akerman engages with the polarised position of 'stranded victim' or 'heroic fighter', individualised man against nature, rather than a focus on the collective body against the international forces of global trade. It is easier to romanticise this relation of 'man' to (natural) environment. Such degrees of sentimentality can result in socio-political and economic forces and constraints appearing less relevant.

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<sup>39</sup> The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (N.A.F.T.A) took place in 1994.

## Unknowingness and Identification

T.J Demos has noted that the documentary often follows a standard narrative arch that progresses from obscurity to clarity; suggesting that when one reaches the end of the work one expects to know something about the subject area or topic. Demos sees this problematic one-directional flow (from opacity to clarity) reversed in the 2008 video essay, *Nervus Rerum* by The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar).<sup>40</sup> In this work Demos argues that we go from what we think we might know about Jenin refugee camp in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, to a space outside of, or beyond representation that is predicated on the absence of political representation in such a place.<sup>41</sup> Eshun and Sagar have stated their refusal to court two oppositional poles associated with notions of representation: empathy either from what they see as an enforced identification between viewer and subject or through cultivating a mode of address codified by and through the defiance of the subject (in the figure of witness).<sup>42</sup>

In their discussion of the use of the Steadicam, Eshun and Sagar foreground a nuanced discussion of the interface of form with content. Here they focus on the mechanical capacity it has to semi-autonomously ‘hover’ and register below eye level, formally dislodging the primacy of vision as we know it, disorientating any

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<sup>40</sup> ‘The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group’s *Nervus Rerum*’, *October* Vol. 129, Summer 2009, pp. 113-128. Demos’s claim takes its lead from the artists, Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun (the Otolith Group).

<sup>41</sup> This follows, unsurprisingly, an Agambian tract. Demos, ‘The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group’s *Nervus Rerum* (2009), p. 114, p. 120 and p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz, ‘A Trialogue on *Nervus Rerum*’, *October*, Vol. 129, Summer (2009), p. 131.

previously assumed clarity.<sup>43</sup> In a turn to Edouard Glissant, Eshun asks if opacity might create a condition of intimacy without inserting the usual demands on the image in which knowledge is produced and ownership sought, resulting in an extraction of value.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps it is then possible for the viewer to understand the relation between oneself and filmed subject as something other than misguided identification on the one hand or insurmountable distance on the other. For Sagar this might be best put as a move beyond the impasse of the victim or witness figure.

Demos's account of *Nervus Rerum* positions the work as a 'reshuffling of the cards' of realism and the documentary. Somewhat belatedly, Demos makes an important acknowledgment regarding Glissant's conception of opacity as being one not of erasure, alienation or nothingness but rather 'that which cannot be reduced'.<sup>45</sup> I would then argue that this does not equate to a space outside or beyond representation, a position Demos appears to arrive at, but rather a warning that what we see at any given moment is never fully comprehensive but which equally cannot be dismissed as untruthful.

Perhaps the most useful proposition to follow is that of Sagar when she states that, 'Opacity is understood as the right to a singularity that displaces the demand of difference for transparency'.<sup>46</sup> Her claim suggests that the notion of transparency,

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<sup>43</sup> Eshun and Sagar in Irmgard Emmelhainz, 'A Trialogue on *Nervus Rerum*', (2009), pp. 131-2.

<sup>44</sup> For Edouard Glissant, see his *The Philosophy of the Relation* (2009). His concept of opacity has received increased interest from those within the field of contemporary art. Particularly so as Glissant underpinned the 'Créolité and Creolization' platform at Enwezor's Documenta 11 in 2002. Glissant's concept rejects transparency as a mode for knowing rather accepting that it is possible to relate without fully possessing all information about a given person, or situation.

<sup>45</sup> Demos, 'The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum* (2009), p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> See Sagar in Demos (2009) p. 123.

when caught in an uncritical documentary project, is always bound to the ‘other’. Instead of pairing this notion of transparency with difference, Sagar offers (taking Glissant’s lead) a pairing of opacity with singularity. Through such a formulation we can conceive of an acceptance of difference without it replacing commonality, or what we share (have in common). Demos notes that Glissant’s conception of opacity as one of an ‘open totality’ – whilst certainly not collapsible – does recall Gail Day’s reading of Lukács’s theory of totality, which she posits might be productive in understanding contemporary artist’s informed by the 1970s ‘politics of representation’ debates as foregrounding a realist impulse. An impulse central, I would add, to this most recent ‘documentary turn’.<sup>47</sup> To dismiss, or skim over, earlier debates on realism as entirely outmoded due to an uncritical notion of ‘bearing witness’ reveals a too cursory application of a post-structuralist critique of representation that, in this most recent turn to documentary methods, histories and theories, evidently requires renewed attention. For what stands most importantly here is – as Day contends – a relatively modest aim in Lukács’s concept of totality, that is, a demand that we consider the interrelations between different phenomena: that we relate the parts to the whole, or indeed that the fragment reveals something of the whole.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Gail Day ‘Realism, Totality and the Militant *Citoyen*: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art’, *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics*, (eds.) Timothy Hall and Timothy Bewes, (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 203-221, (p. 205).

<sup>48</sup> Day, ‘Realism, Totality and the Militant *Citoyen*’, (2011), p. 210

Fictive endings?

The majority of *From the Other Side* pivots around a number of interviews with Mexican and US citizens and with observational portraits, as it were, of the border fence. The film closes, however, with a fictional yet indicative story recounted alongside largely harmonious images woven through the returning cello score. In a change of register, Akerman adopts the voice-over. Shot at night, from the inside of a car, our gaze follows highway lights and road signs which stay in focus long enough to signal imminent US towns and cities. As these images gather pace, Akerman recounts the tale of a female Mexican migrant worker. This woman is not named or pictured but rather operates emblematically. The narrative makes clear that the journey north does not end at the other side of the border, if one should reach it. Rather, the life of 'an illegal' as inferred, is one of journeying, avoiding authorities, moving from job to job.

This story in which the woman eventually disappears, leaving little trace, begets the paradox of visibility and invisibility. For she is both acutely visible – held in the floodlights of the US border patrol – and invisible; her image and voice is absent from the film, she is without official papers, without citizenship. The prevailing picture drawn via Akerman's flatly delivered talk-block is that of the sand left on the land lady's doorstep each Sunday where it is speculated that the 'maid', on her one day off, chooses to spend time at the beach. We are thus left with a material trace, however slight, of a negative – comparable with the re-appropriated ghostly apparitions held in the gaze of the infra-red camera trained on the border by US border control police.

Akerman's return to the line of the border through static or tracking shots speaks of a marking-out, a line drawn in the landscape between the 'here' and 'there' of not only two nation states but between peoples. The stillness of these images, those in

which Mexican citizens stand to one side conversing through the wire with US border patrol officers for instance, infers that the rusty precipice of the border fence is solely symbolic. However, when the fence is returned to night its violence is exposed by the glare of lights bouncing off barbed wire and the steady hum of helicopter surveillance. *From the Other Side* is compiled through a range of linear structures: from Akerman's use of time to the domestic worker's journey north. This linearity is continually erased and redrawn by both those crossing and those whose job it is to stop them: a cyclical back and forth of endless attempts. To some extent, the strategy of saturation speaks to the circuitous; through its layers, repetition and appropriation, while the linear structures, for example, the tracking shots, or the narratives that extend beyond the filmed testimonies, accept a degree of unknowingness, as they open beyond Akerman's frame, resisting finality. The technologies of film and digital video offer a degree of difference in the approaches taken between the three works discussed, for example, the digital in *Performing the Border* is visible in the constant layering and effects of simultaneity produced in post-production, a strategy that lends itself to the over-determination of such a place.

Demos claims that 'it is precisely when imagery becomes ensnaring that it is imperative to evoke new creative strategies' that contributes to the need for a 're-invention' of the documentary.<sup>49</sup> This predilection for the 'new' however can often be premised on a restricted impression of documentary history and its interaction with realism. And, moreover a perhaps too swift appreciation of developments in technology. For example, the automaton presence of the Steadicam might very well enforce a dislocation or disembodiment of vision, but we must ask if it nevertheless belies the presence of the filmmakers, removing the political gesture of the authorial

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<sup>49</sup> Demos 'The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum* (2009), p. 123.

(decoupled from authority) and replacing it with a kind of observational flânerie that is assailable to a charge of disinterestedness.

Akerman has stated that ‘after a documentary is shot and edited, if it does not open a breach into the imaginary, if fiction does not slip in to it, then, for me it is not a documentary. As for fiction, if no documentary aspects slip in to it, then I find it difficult to think of as a fiction film’.<sup>50</sup> Thus the filmmaker acknowledges the co-dependency of fact and fiction, which speaks to a particular conception of the documentary as it relates to the history of the essay-film.<sup>51</sup> The scene with which I began this essay features of a group stranded at the border, their representative reading out loud a co-authored letter to the viewer. Towards the end of the film, a border control officer, surrounded by colleagues, friends and families, reads from a piece of paper at a funeral for a fellow officer who lost his life on the job. The scenes and their framing mirror one another, from each ‘side’ they compose the logic of the border. While their formal composition is comparable, despite their loss and pain, the positions from which they speak to the viewer are from markedly different places in spite of their shared locale: one speaks to universal human rights, the other bound by fear. Audre Lorde claims that speaking ‘profits’ the speaker, even if it is misconstrued.<sup>52</sup> While we cannot conflate Lorde’s claim for her own voice to Akerman’s mediation of an other’s voice, Lorde’s statement is an important reminder. These voices reach us, as viewer, from a very particular lens, that of Akerman’s.

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<sup>50</sup> Chantal Akerman: *Autoportrait en Cineaste*, editions du Centre Pompidou/Editions Cahiers du Cinema (2004).

<sup>51</sup> Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), pp. 46-7.

<sup>52</sup> ‘I have come to believe [...] that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That speaking profits me, beyond any other effect’, Audre Lorde, ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action’, *Sister Outsider*, (New York: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 40-4 (p. 40).

What binds these two propositions (Akerman's understanding of a documentary and Lorde's claim for the primacy of voice) is the potential political function of the incomplete. The problem with a reactionary distrust of the documentary has the related effect of discrediting those voices that emerge from it. Such offhand dismissal could quite easily render these voices silent despite their demand to be heard. As those artists and filmmakers contributing to the politics of representation debates beginning in the late 1960s stressed, we must avoid overly simplistic conceptions of form, despite the problems inherent to the documentary form itself. At its best, the documentary form, aims for a socio-historical grounding that unashamedly attempts to say something, but simultaneously acknowledges its inability to ever fully settle, as it is consistently agitated by the changing parameters of the personal.

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