

Spaces of Power: The Video *Borderhole* by Amber Bemak and Nadia Granados as a Queer-Feminist Critique of the U.S.-Mexico Border, Gendered Violence and the Media
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**The following paper was developed in the course of the Where My Girls At Conference.¹ Part of the research derives from my master's thesis titled "Globalisation and Gender: Border Spaces between the U.S. and Mexico in the films by Amber Bemak, Nadia Granados and Mika Rottenberg" (University of Hamburg 2020). I owe new insights to the topic thanks to the Feminist No Borders Summer School (2020) organized by FAC-Feminist Autonomous Centre for Research, Athens.*

(Re)Presenting Border Spaces

My interest in the topic of border spaces as a *white*² European scholar in the field of art history is bound to my experiences working in Bolivia and being in a transnational relationship, experiencing my own privileges as a *white* woman with a German passport while at the same time being burdened by the gender disparities produced by the patriarchal societies we live in. Speaking from this position, my interest was drawn to works that explicitly focus on the structural inequalities between the so-called global North and global South, the underlying power dynamics that structure and reproduce these relations, and how the border space, functioning as reinforcer and instigator of difference, is bound to the broader political and social contexts we live in. This paper focuses on the question of the artistical strategies used by the artists Amber Bemak and Nadia Granados to visualize such abstract dimensions and what these imply for a feminist art practice. The greatest thing about art is that it shows us that there are no simple answers but rather questions that lead to new questions which broaden our horizons.

The video *Borderhole* (2017, 14') is the result of a collaboration between the Colombian performance artist Nadia Granados and the U.S. filmmaker Amber Bemak. *Borderhole* does not provide a stringent narrative; scenes are put together fragmentarily, whereby certain places, such as the beach and the sea, occur repeatedly. Bemak and Granados integrate found footage, a shot from U.S. television, and sequences they filmed themselves. The protagonists are the two artists, but Granados' body is shown significantly more frequently than the *white* body of Bemak. It is the third collaboration between the artists, who began working together in 2013 with the short film *Airplane Dance* and continued in 2015 with *Tell Me When You Die*. The artists use a pictorial language that can be linked to aesthetics of the internet, above all YouTube-Clips and self-made videos that have become

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² *white* is written in small letters and italics, following theorist and filmmaker Natasha A. Kelly, to refer to the privileged position. In contrast, Black is capitalized and used as an expression of a self-chosen socio-political positioning: "Black is always written with a capital 'B' (...), in order to break with the biologizing idea of (skin) colour and to express the social reality" (Kelly, *Afrokultur*, footnote p. 7; translation by Tonia Andresen). These are not descriptions of a phenotype, but inscriptions within the system of racism. Consequently, "Brown" is also written in capital letters. I use this term in reference to Granados, to make a distinction between her and the *white* body of Amber Bemak. The categories are to be understood as relational and describe the social position of the respective persons.

more and more influential concerning (re)presentation and the consumption of information in the last 15 years. Through the inclusion of this aesthetic, *Borderhole* visualizes one of today's dialectical relationships that can be interpreted as an effect of globalisation: the reinforcement of borders and the nation-state, which has become extremely obvious in the rise of right-wing parties, combined with the usage of new media which creates the feeling of a borderless world. *Borderhole* works with fragmented pictures that the viewers have to assemble on their own to generate meaning. This strategy counteracts a contemplative spectator attitude and calls for an in-depth analysis of the images shown. As *Borderhole* deals with the discursive and political aspects of the U.S.-Mexican border, an intensive examination of the video leads to an understanding of this complex situation.

The representation of the border between Mexico and the United States in *Borderhole* runs counter to common visualization strategies, which usually show the border fence, stage it monumentally, or—with reference to Claire F. Fox' analyses (1995)—depict the region of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. In contrast, Bemak and Granados construct a fictitious border space between Colombia and the U.S., but use the image of the U.S.-Mexico border. The 'real border' is only shown for a short second and in the form of a photograph, depicting the border as a yellow line that cuts through the landscape. Meanwhile the border between Colombia and the U. S. appears as a *green border*, a forest area equipped with sensors and surveillance cameras. The representation of the border as fictitious in combination with the reference to its real existence illustrates a specific understanding of border spaces. In this context, the border functions not only as a physical barrier, but also as a complex and discursive apparatus of political decisions, international laws and internal conflicts, kept alive by border controls and the construction of walls. Its fictitious moment does not mean that it does not have tangible effects on a population but refers to 'fiction' in the sense of a discursive process of production, which works on a cultural level and manifests itself concretely in the surveillance and armament of spaces. The border in *Borderhole* consists of sensors and surveillance cameras and thus constructs a border region on a piece of forest that at first glance seems rather unspectacular. The supervising and punishing authorities are invisible, the subjects *hypervisible* – a panoptical arrangement in Foucauldian terms. This is made tangible through the usage of different camera angles that depict the scene: the surveillance camera perspective (fig. 1) is intercut with scenes filmed from an 'objective' perspective, which means that the scene is shown from the observer's point of view. Another layer is added through the incorporation of media, such as the voice of ex-judge Janine Pirro from a commentary



Fig. 1 *Borderhole* 2017 © Amber Bemak & Nadia Granados

on *Fox News* referring to the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) while Granados tries to reach the top of a huge rock. Her statements recall a friend-enemy discourse, producing differentiations between ‘them’ (the terrorists) and ‘us’ (the defenders of the nation), leaving no space for anything in between: “They are either with us or against us” (Pirro). Detached from its original context, the statement leads to a recontextualization, revealing the political power of discourse.

Borderhole does not stage the border as an overpowering entity, but rather extends it to several places. French philosopher Étienne Balibar speaks of “inner” or “invisible borders” (78). These inner or invisible borders can always be traced back to the physical border; both are mutually dependent. They do not disappear at the moment of crossing, but extend far into the interior of a country. By only briefly depicting the U.S.-Mexico border once and in the form of an aerial photograph, Bemak and Granados allow the border to recede in its massive physical reality. At the same time, this makes the spectators all the more aware of it as an inner or invisible border whose real political effects are fragmentarily put together. The border appears as an expandable and constructed power space that structures and influences the relations of the entire population. The border region not only affects the countries directly involved – the U.S. and Mexico – but the whole of the Americas, especially North and Central America, and becomes clear in its “*world configuring function*” (Balibar 79), as an instigator of difference between the Western world and the global South.

Gender, the Media and Institutionalized Violence

An image that repeatedly appears in *Borderhole* and is already named in the title of the video: the hole. We see the artists digging holes on the beach or in the forest. The word ‘hole’ can be used to describe an unsightly or unpleasant dark and dirty place. It is also used in a derogatory manner for vagina. The first scene in *Borderhole* generates an impressive image: Granados and Bemak stand on a beach in two large, empty metal trash cans (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 *Borderhole* 2017 © Amber Bemak & Nadia Granados

Around them are other garbage cans filled with rubbish. The spectator sees the artists from behind. When the artists bend forward, their backsides and pubic area become visible, only covered by transparent tights. They wear golden high heels; otherwise they are naked. Since the title *Borderhole* appears in the moment

when the view of Granados' and Bemak's genitals becomes clear, the meaning of 'hole' as the sex organ becomes particularly obvious. Here, the skin can be read as the body's boundary, the sex organ as the 'entrance' that makes the crossing possible. The title establishes a connection between border, body, and gender on several levels.

Throughout the video, the bodies of the artists play an important role. The nudity underlines the body's defencelessness and vulnerability while simultaneously emphasizing its sexual aspects. Furthermore, the transparent tights and the golden high heels are both garments that can be interpreted as 'traditional' signs of femininity and arouse associations of women working in the entertainment, adult, or service industry. Scene 2 follows, in which Granados lies under a black plastic bag amidst the garbage on the beach (fig. 3). This presentation evokes associations with violence against migrant women, the murder cases in Ciudad Juárez or crimes in the context of drug cartels. In most cases, these persons remain invisible as individuals and are only remembered as bodies, as a number of statistics publicly communicated through the media. By becoming a pure body, emptied of all subjectivity, sexualized, naked and vulnerable, women lose all value in a patriarchal society.



Fig. 3 *Borderhole* 2017 © Amber Bemak & Nadia Granados

It's noteworthy that in all the scenes in which the body is exposed to a threat or appears as dead, Granados assumes the pose. We see her running naked from a car barefoot on a big street, trying to climb a rock, in a demolished building, and dying in the end scene with a plastic strap on her neck while she's being pushed under water. As there are hardly any individual traits of her figure, she can be read as embodying the migrant and Brown female body. In contrast, Amber Bemak's body functions as an example of the social position of a *white* body that possesses privileges. Both women are exposed to the objectifying gazes of the spectators – this becomes especially visible in the scenes in which Granados and Bemak dance together in front of a webcam – both are linked to sexuality and the animal because of their physicality. The displayed objectification, sexualization and association of the female body with nature connects the two women in their oppression and implies the female body's difference to the male subject. This 'character of difference' is metaphorically brought into the picture by the nudity of the two artists. But *Borderhole* also makes it very clear that the border has different effects on the women's bodies: it is the racialized body that is persecuted and must fear for its life.

Another layer is added through the implication of a romantic relationship between the artists: the spectators see them kissing or caressing each other. While Granados and Bemak

dance and present themselves to an imaginary audience in the webcam scene, their queerness is linked to violence and associations of violence in two other scenes. The bodies released for consumption and presented in front of the camera/webcam play a role assigned to them in the logic of the patriarchal structure and do not have to fear for their safety. The



Fig. 4 *Borderhole* 2017 © Amber Bemak & Nadia Granados

moment the female homosexuality answers the gaze by asking “Do you want to see us now?” (Fig. 4) and no longer presents itself as a pure object of consumption, in its private form, it negates the order that sets heteronormativity as the basis of social coexistence. The border space is a

symbol for the exercise of state power and the ‘to be’ defended and protected nation. It materializes itself not only in economic and political processes, but also in the production of specific subject constitutions. Heterosexuality becomes a decisive factor for obtaining citizenship. Homosexuality was considered a legitimate reason for rejection at the U.S. border until the passing of the *Immigration Act of 1990*. Appearance and language became the most important indicators whether a person was inspected on suspicion of homosexuality or allowed to cross the border. This process is linked to specific visual codes that construct and define homosexual subjectivities and at the same time reproduce traditional images of masculinity and femininity (Luibheid 106-133). Queer identities and citizenship are closely linked – both statuses are established and legitimized by the state. Through the mode of governance, gender becomes the core of modern subjectivity as a dichotomous structure whose ‘true signs’ are the female or male body, hence its genitals. This applies as well to the categories of race and class, which are also bound to certain aspects of physical constitution. Granados and Bemak negotiate the “cultural weight of the genitals” (Hoenes 103), especially that of the vulva in relation to processes of citizenship and the construction of affiliations. The devaluation and violence to which Granados is subjected reflects the differences between *white* women and women of colour. Appearance is shown as the most important distinguishing feature and symbol of belonging, connected to processes of subjectivation and the influence of the state on them. The elimination and/or exclusion of certain groups of people play a decisive role in the construction of citizenship. Access to the latter goes hand in hand with gendering processes in which heterosexuality and the reproduction of the nation become a fundamental requirement.

Questions of Representation and Objectification

There are various scenes in *Borderhole* where Granados' body is objectified through the mode of filming. In particular, the images of her lying on the beach under the black trash bag and running from a car or being pushed under water can be read as playing out the stereotype of the defenceless migrant woman who is solely defined through her status as a victim. Putting themselves into a trash can, bending forward and becoming a pure body, generates strong images that have shocking effects on the viewers. Through the incorporation of media images and the different camera angles that resemble the webcam, the security camera, and the movie camera, the spectators find themselves constantly in a voyeuristic position. By referring to a collective pictorial consciousness formed through media, Bemak and Granados question the underlying power structures that lead to the objectification of marginalized and female bodies. The images are not a simplistic repetition or appropriation but rather a recontextualization of photographs and pictures that the spectators know from newspapers, videos, and television. Furthermore, the bodies do not refer to an individual person; the faces of Bemak and Granados are rarely seen, but, as I argued in the previous section, can be interpreted as resembling social positions in a society built on *white* supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and other hegemonic paradigms. Linking them to the political and economic relations between Colombia and the U.S. draws attention to the question of which role the objectification and the usage of a friend-enemy discourse plays in the creation of subjectivities that become excluded in the logic of state power and the sake of the 'to be defended' nation.

The stillness of Granados' body is reminiscent of former ethnographic regimes, the *white* gaze on the colonized body, and brings a whole history of oppression into the picture. Artworks have played an especially important role in (re)producing objectifying gazes concerning female bodies, transforming the *white* female nude into an image of ideal beauty while the Black female nude was mainly used to distinguish it from the *white* one or depict it as a servant/sexualized Other (Lavalley 77-97). Who has the power to (re)present whom? To strip someone of their right to representation transforms them into a screen of projection, revealing more about the gazing entity than the actual person shown. Visibility does not equal power; rather the 'over-visibility' of the naked, sexualized and racialized woman codifies her as object to be looked at, deprived of her own subjectivity. To underscore this status, Bemak and Granados use aesthetics of women working in the adult and/or sex industry. The connection between sex work and female objectification evokes critical concerns from the standpoint of the individuals carrying out this form of work. Turning to the structural conditions that push sex work to the margins of societal acceptance, the sex worker can also be read as "the conjunction between the sexual (Freudian) and the

economic (Marxist) fetish, as well as the condensation of commodity and spectacle” (Bryan-Wilson 87). She is the “ur-form of wage labourer, selling herself in order to survive” (Buck-Morss 184), while constantly being negated in her status as worker by society. It seems as if depicting the aesthetics of sex work hints more towards the topic of female labour and its constant devaluation. This can be seen in the case of maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juárez. Mainly single women from Mexican rural sites migrate to the city in order to survive economically and/or support their families back home. While El Paso, Ciudad Juárez’ sister city on the U.S.-American side, is a rather calm city with low homicide rates, Ciudad Juárez unfortunately became famous for its high numbers of femicides. Melissa W. Wright connects the murders with the economic and social status of the Mexican maquila worker, who exemplifies stereotypes and role expectations of ‘the’ Mexican woman: “In the tale of turnover told by maquila administrators, the Mexican woman assumes the form of variable capital whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to one of waste” (185). In the logic of capital, the worker has only value in so far as her labor creates added value for the company or factory. The murdered women who, similar to Granados, are buried in the desert, the outskirts of town, or disposed of in rubbish bins, are only to be understood in the context of a general devaluation. Like the dead migrants who tried to reach the U.S. through the desert, they are rarely identified and their cases are rarely properly investigated. They only become visible as a number – as statistics rather than by their individual stories.

Final Remarks

_____ Through the appropriation of an aesthetic that resembles media images, Bemak and Granados intervene and disrupt their normality, demasking their entanglement in the production of hierarchies and stereotypes of racialized and female bodies. ‘Order’ literally becomes subverted through the scenes that do not form a stringent narrative; rather, they can be described as rhizomatic. Thought further, this also counteracts views of history as a linear process (of ‘progress’). Referring to the internet, which is alluded to in the webcam scenes, Bemak and Granados connect popular media to the construction of gendered and racialized identities and its upholding of certain image-regimes that then form a collective pictorial consciousness in the spectators/consumers. Here, the artists question the role the media plays in the construction of knowledge, especially through the repetitive usage of images. Furthermore, Bemak and Granados make it clear that a feminist intervention concerning border spaces needs to address gender from an intersectional framework that considers other categories such as race, class, sexual orientation, and locality to grasp the

functioning of the border space as an instigator of difference and power. In this context, gender must be used as a fundamental category of analysis in order to adequately address the topics depicted by the artists. The construction of gendered identities is shown as connected to the wider political frameworks we live in. The queer-feminist potential lies not only in the topics that the video deals with but also in the appropriation and subversion of images, that can be also be read as an attempt to fail the gender performance by producing gaps in the cis-heteronormative image-regime. The act of questioning images and the underlying power structures that are stabilized through them appears as a feminist artistic strategy to visualize and critique hegemonic structures. Bemak and Granados show that a queer-feminist intervention is not only about gendered bodies but one that unfolds all the connected and intertwined systems of oppression that we live in.

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Biographical Information

Tonia Andresen studied art history, education and gender at the University of Hamburg. Her research focuses on contemporary artistic practices that address gender, work, migration, activist strategies and global inequalities. Recently she finished her M.A. thesis with the title "Globalisation and gender: Border spaces between Mexico and the U. S. in the films by Amber Bemark, Nadia Granados and Mika Rottenberg". She is working as a research assistant in the international research group 'SVAC – sexual violence in armed conflict' at the Hamburg Institute of Social Research and currently pursuing her PhD about global work relations in contemporary art practices since the 1990s.

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