

Ursula Biemann

*Sahara Chronicle*

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What remains of Europe? What remains of that polynuclear, polycentric, geohistoric, civilizational, cultural complex that has only existed in conflict and communication, in resistance to political and cultural hegemonies?<sup>1</sup>

Reality or fiction. Fiction or reality. A back-and-forth that sails amid a series of mobile experiences, a desire in relation to fear and uncertainty. I see and listen to a video that shows an aerial view of a territory, an artificial videography of mobility that contrasts with real images of people in transit. An abstract place and time, segments accompanied by sounds, music, radio recordings. An extensive image of a territory that cannot be identified with precision. Lines, stains, dots that denote greater distance and surpass legibility.

How to learn to read mobility? What mediation is necessary to understand and read the mobile experience of an illegible place at once excessive and invisible? How to represent a map of mobility? How might we trace the outlines of a place that is forever circulating? And what if the place to be mapped is also on the verge of illegality? These are the underlying questions of Ursula Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle*. They are brought to the surface as the artist weaves together each of the fragments of this chronicle on the web of migration.

There is always an underside to the map, the representational notation of a territory. It emerges in the face of places that do not coincide, areas undrawn, spaces that have not been

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Morin, *Pensar Europa. La metamorfosis de un continente* (Barcelona, 2003), p. 58.

mapped, places invisible in the topography. This is where we are confronted with the perversion of verisimilitude: document as reality and reality as fiction.

### Narrative of Inclemency

*Sahara Chronicle* consists of a series of documentary clusters created on the basis of the artist's journey through different cities of Maghreb. The piece is an aesthetic political account of the current flows of representation of human mobility from Africa to Europe.

A critical cartography, this work does not formulate a metaphorical relationship with the topic it evokes. It entails, rather, a strategy of "fragmentation and disassemblage," as the artist puts it, where the audiovisual atmosphere makes it possible to reconstruct each segment of that shifting, pendulant body in motion.

As a critical tool for the description of discursive territories, cartography makes it possible to represent conflicts and to authorize the displacement of meanings between set and identifiable territories. But cartography also allows for the representation of illegal and secret situations.

Biemann composes a chronicle, a series of fragments that take place in an indeterminate timeframe. All we have to do is believe that this is happening, that this verisimilar present does not contradict our desire to avert our gaze from fragments containing intense and excessive reality.

The artist's strategy entails composing a simple and descriptive language, a detailed account like that of an eyewitness who circulates through different scenes, attempting to recover a series of traces and offering detailed commentary on a normal and permanent state of inclemency.

But what protocol should be followed to see and read the images in this chronicle of inclemency? The artist offers us images, documents, and fictions, and proposes that the legibility of this place through which she circulates does not depend solely on of what we call

the real, the verisimilar. We need to perform a certain subjective mental exercise, to unite the parts that come from our desire to compose, to read, to understand the scenes of our experience that confront what we are seeing. Each one of the viewers constructs his or her own mediation; the outlines and sketches of a territory of one's own, each one deciphering his own understanding of all the clusters that form part of a mobile Sahara that is simultaneously both real and imaginary. A place that represents the desire to be constituted in the impossibility of making everything around us still.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of the composition is that there is not a single narrative device to guide us; all there is is duration. Persistence, the continuation of each fragment, specific situations based on places sometimes unrecognizable, sometimes part of an identified collective biography. The duration of this mobility cannot be mapped or drawn, only imagined—in the pulsations of each of its parts that organize themselves, both shifting and containing—as if all we needed was this counter-geography to be able to define the limits of legality.