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No Women's Land.
Re-imaging Border Spaces through Visual Arts

The borderland between India and Pakistan is a travelling place; women visual artists from the subcontinent portray the frontier as an open space to be passed through and constantly rebuilt. Following multiple transgressions of limits and borderlines, this article explores how art can be turned into political praxis in order to actively modify reality. Shilpa Gupta and Nalini Malani use their art works to present border crossing as a valuable political action, able to re-signify geography and introduce a sense of community based on lack and mourning. Their artistic narrations of the Western Indian border invite the audience to take part in a journey across time and space, contact zones and war areas, and eventually question the very foundation of nations and national identities.

Wagah, the frontier on the trunk road linking Amritsar to Lahore, is the starting point of this journey; because of its position it joins and divides the two nations. Here, every evening a flag-lowering ceremony celebrates the closure of the border, before the eyes of many tourists and daily visitors that participate in the ritual. *YouTube* stores several videos of this event, many of them accompanied by brief explanations and personal comments. Here are some examples retrieved at the end of June 2008 (some of which were subsequently identified as spams):

> superpower555
> Only two words - Fuck Pakistan
> cruizer83
> Only Indian Punjab is enough to destroy Pakistan.
> khaled43
> what the hell u r telling?
> boxerbhai99
> PKI PUNJAB WILL FUCK U UP, WE HAVE LAHORE
> superpower555 (1 month ago)
> Muslims will never change their murderous ways. Killing them wholesale is the only way to clean-up the collective mess that is Islam.

But also:

> zuben21 (1 month ago)
> Let us break this border again and unite!
> *jigigijgij*
> From some of the comments posted from both sides, I can only give an example of an *infected wound* filled with pus that flows as the lava from an explosive volcano. As a people beware of those who have been gifted with nothing

> more than leprosy of the mind blocked from the understanding that it was no choice of theirs to have been born on the other side.[1]

Strong feelings and different perspectives are expressed in these comments, but they all seem to see the frontier as an infected wound, a wound that is still open, spreading a contagion of hatred.

The borderline crossing Wagah is called the *Radcliffe Line*; it owes its name to Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who in 1947 chaired the two Boundary Commissions in charge of giving a shape to the new nations of India and Pakistan. On the other hand, Punjabi citizens living in the areas surrounding the border call it the "line of hatred".[2] This definition derives from Partition and reveals its performative character: the cut causes an affective infection that extends the negative effects of splitting. The creation of physical borders can in fact reinforce and naturalize both ethnic and religious differences.

In India the national limit is a multiple divider and its existence is largely considered to worsen the tensions existing between Hindu-Indians and Muslim-Pakistanis. In a scenario where religion and nationality intertwine, the celebration of the frontier appears to have the theatrical function of re-drawing the limits it commemorates. In her lecture, "Porous Sovereignty Walled Democracy", Wendy Brown analyzes the new walled boundaries that are spreading all over the world (Gaza, USA, India, etc.) in order to show how delimiting territories means re-inventing societies. For her, walls are like staging devices "projecting power and efficacy" in order to create an image of security, of protection and, I would add, of purity. When Brown argues that "many of the new walls do not merely bound but invent the societies they limit", she is referring indeed to the strong impact frontiers have on the definition of national identities.[3] The materiality of the borders, together with the celebrations repeating the cut of Partition, promotes the idea of living in an enclosed, safe and homogeneous space, affirming and guaranteeing the existence of a natural belonging.

Within this homogenizing fantasy women occupy a space that cannot be assimilated, a space of difference. Contesting what Virginia Woolf in *The Three Guineas* identified as "the stigma of nationality", they retain their distinctiveness in responding to the cohesive impulse of the national project and oppose their own lives to the melting pot ideal lying at the basis of modern Indian multiculturalism.[4] Quoting from Guillermo Gomez-Peña's *The New World (B)order*, Homi Bhabha uses the powerful image of "stubborn chunks" to refer to hybrid and hyphenated identities that reveal the failure of the melting pot.[5] Like the stubborn chunks in Bhabha's stew ("*menudo chowder*"), women do not blend into any pre-constituted space but open new ones "remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any

[1] "Waga Border Crossing (India-Pakistan)", © YouTube, LLC,<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38z1oYyflu0&feature=related>, 30 August 2008.

[2] The expression is used by Ritu Menon in Ritu Menon, ed., *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004).

[3] Wendy Brown, "Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy", lecture given at Rome University, 29 March 2008, printed and distributed by courtesy of the author.

[4] See also Ashis Nandy, *Creating a Nationality: the Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[5] Homi K. Bhabha, "How Newness Enters The World", in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 218-219.

claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race".[6]

[6] Ibid.

In India their multifaced resistance took the public stage in the 1990s when a group of feminists and political activists, associated with the publishing house Kali for Women, gave a new impulse to the historical revision of Independence. Their testimonies and essays inscribed gender at the core of the problem of nationality. The revision of Partition started with a book entitled *Borders and Borderlines* (1998), edited by Ritu Menon, the co-founder of the feminist publishing house. In 2004 Menon also co-edited *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India*, a collection of essays highlighting how borders are drawn arbitrarily to mark an imposed difference.

Interestingly, the book starts with a physical description of the Punjabi border as a mined area:

> The 449 km. Punjab border is lined with 600.000 landmines, laid in place over 10-15 years ago by the Indian government in order to contain the Punjab insurgency of the 1980s. At Hussaniwala, fields and trees stretch away into the horizon shrouded in thick mist. In the near distance on the Indian side there is electrified fencing, great hoop of concertina barbed wire across the land.[7]

[7] Menon, ed., *No Women's Land*, 1.

The aggressive border and the in-between condition of the people living by the frontier immediately appear as the principal themes of this collection of essays. Here many writers openly declare the non-coincidence of the national limits with the territories of their belonging and underline the importance of questioning identity, nationality and borders.

> The great preoccupations of the human condition – freedom, nation, religion, home, friend and foe, Self and Other – are shot through with those other great themes – loss, exile, death, destruction, displacement and violence – , and they compel us to look anew at those age-old borders and boundaries of nation and religion, community and identity; and at those ancient myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging. For those women who have written Partition, all these are open to question.[8]

[8] Idem, 10.

Partition is described as a war fought on women's bodies: as Menon underlines, between 1947 and 1948 about 75.000 women were raped and an unknown number killed. Once kidnapped they often stayed with their kidnappers and, since they had had children, were unable to go back to their families. The trauma of Partition was thus repeated and five years after Independence thousands of women experieced a second forced migration, because each country asked to have 'its women' back. Almost fifty years have passed since that historical moment and women are now speaking out to show how modern states were born out of violence inflicted on the 'abducted women'.

Sharing the task of these writers, many women artists want to expose the female trauma inscribed within the collective trauma of Partition.[9] Malani has openly declared that her works react to this need for visibility; commenting on her recent installation, *MotherIndia*, she has underlined that an important role of art is to deal with history and its unspoken chapters:

> A Partition had taken place (the Independence of India and Pakistan), and then five years later both governments started to say, "We want our women back." And for these women it was like a second partition. They said, "But we have now established ourselves. We have learnt about their way of life, we have had our babies here." Some jumped into wells. Others said, "What do we have to go back to?" After this, many sociologists tried to speak with these people but nobody wanted to speak about it, there was just a curtain of silence. It is only now that these women are much older and they will soon pass away that they want to be remembered. And they want to talk.[10]

For all the women raped and kidnapped in the name of the constitution of the 'motherland', no identification with the nation is possible. Displacement, silence and sometimes death are inescapable. For this reason Sara Suleri concludes her short essay "Papa and Pakistan" stating that in this "most modern thing, a Muslim or a Hindu nation" that has replaced people's homes, women have no place.[11]

Within this space of exclusion women can make room for themselves and, using visual arts, reimagine the space they live in and their national borders from a new perspective. The Aar-Paar art project, which started in 2000 and is coordinated by Gupta and Huma Mulji, deals with political issues of identity.[12] Artists contributing to this project challenge the fantasy of a unified modern nation by showing that it is built on women's blood; they disrupt the very idea of nationality by presenting art as an ongoing, perpetual experiment of border-crossing. The literal meaning of the word Aar-Paar is " 'this side and that side',though it has additional meanings of '[pierced] through and through'" and it has "undertones of crossings, over rivers, for instance".[13] This metaphorical crossing of borderlines is a way to promote the emergence of a new way of living within the geographical spaces.

Recent productions by the co-ordinator of the project are particularly interesting in this perspective, because they directly question the naturality of borders and border-drawing. *Blame*, Gupta's 2002 contribution to Aar-Paar, first appeared as a sign hanging in the peripheral areas of Indian and Pakistani metropolises. In its digital form, via e-mail, it crossed the physical gates and iron curtains delimiting the frontiers in order to be printed and hung beyond them by partner artists. The poster carries the slogan "Blaming you makes me feel so good, so I blame you for what you cannot control, your religion, your nationality, I want to blame you, it

[9] On the trauma of Partition see also Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain", in Veena Das and Stanley Cavell, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 38-58.

[10] Jennie Guy, "Interview with Nalini Malani", 9 July 2007, <www.recirca.com/articles/2007/texts/nm.shtml>, 12 May 2008.

[11] Sara Suleri, "Papa and Pakistan" in Menon, ed., *No Women's Land*, 25.

[12] Huma Mulji is a Pakistani artist born in Karachi and based in Lahore. Her works, often sculptures, question rootedness and belonging in a post-colonial world; *But What is Your Country, Madam?* (2006) and *Run* (2009) focus on unstable, constantly travelling identities. See her official website: <http://humamulji.com>, 2 September 2008.

[13] Chaitanya Sambrani, *Printing Across Borders: The Aar-Paar Project*, paper presented at The Fifth Australian Print Symposium, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2004, <http://www.aarpaar.net/text.htm>, 5 September 2008.

makes me feel good". The violent act of blaming creates a clear-cut division between the 'you and me' polarities. The sign mimics the political propaganda based on the connection between religion and nationality and refers to a contemporary episode of violence to reveal the destructive effects of strict identity policies. With white letters clearly impressed on a blood-red background, it iconically reminds Indian and Pakistani viewers of the bloody pogrom that caused more than one thousand deaths in Gujarat during the same year.[14] The massacre epitomizes the mournful consequences of the cut showing that an act of separation implies the construction of a deadly dialectic and of imaginary boundaries built up in language.

In 2004 Gupta transformed this work into a performance. First in the streets of Mumbai and then in different western towns, she distributed small kits with bottles of synthetic blood and a few other tools carrying the following instructions: "Squeeze small quantity on dry surface. Neatly separate into four equal sections, can be unequal too. Tell apart sections according to race and religion". After this invitation to divide and label the blood under the sign of violence, the performance is eventually accomplished when the audience is forced to face the impossibility and nonsense of cutting a fluid and shapeless substance. Through art and the travelling bottles, this simulated blood circulates within an imaginary transnational body; thanks to its crossing of borders, it can no longer be used as a signifier of purity and belonging.

[14] The Gujarati pogrom or massacre is not a single episode but a series of violent riots that took place between Hindus and Muslim communities in the Indian state between February and May 2002. For a socio-political analysis see Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

Fig. 1: Shilpa Gupta, *Blame*, 2002-2004, interactive performance (selling Blame kits which contain bottles of simulated blood, posters and stickers), courtesy of the artist.

The instructions in the box, as well as the slogan, suggest that every cut needs a narration and a rhetoric in order to create new borders, or to rework the appearance of borders that already exist. After *Blame* Gupta kept on working on the re-presentation of frontiers through language and visuality and in 2005 she represents the borderlines as strips of self-adhesive tape printed with the statement: *Here There Is No Border*. The strips were located in places where they spoiled the natural landscapes, but also marked contact zones like banisters, gates or walls. These 'borders' are thick with words: not simple lines or borderlines, they appear as 'intense' spaces contrasting any sense of limit and barrier. *Here There Is No Border* both affirms and denies the existence of a border. Its beginning, "here there is", could lead the viewer to expect a real frontier to be actually and actively present; but its ending, "no border", excludes this possibility. The non-border enters the domain of ghostly presence: due to its adhesive properties it exists, even when it is invisible, in the very possibility of its being removed and shifted somewhere else. Its spectral presence, activated through language, is able to modify the surface it is placed upon.

When stuck on a wall, the strip seems almost to pierce the flat surface transforming it into a dimension that can be crossed. Using the line of the adhesive tape, Gupta uses this idea to sketch the outlines of some houses whose mobile walls reveal the precariousness of living in a 'third space'. Gloria Anzaldua considers the interstitial space as the residence of the illegal immigrant, the *mujer indocumentada* who is unrecognized within the order of the nation. The danger of the immigrant's condition lies in living on the border, in a house built on the edge of a barbwire fence: "This is her home/this thin edge of/barbwire".[15]

[15] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 35.

Fig. 2: Shilpa Gupta, *Here There Is No Border*, 2005-06, Installation with self adhesive tapes, La Cabaña Fortress-Havana Biennial, courtesy of the artist.

The houses Gupta draws on the walls are characterized by the same features that separate inner domestic spaces from the exernal environment; here, however, the walls are as permeable as doors and windows, resembling thresholds that call for new crossings. The frontier then metonymically presents itself as a threshold "where an earlier understanding gives way to a new investigation", as Iain Chambers underlines in his discussion on "The edge of the world".[16] "Here", in the contingency of the encounter, Euclidean geometry cannot hold; it appears inadequate to represent the multiple space of the frontier. As a contact zone, the frontier is irreducible to the monodimensional mark of a line or to the bidimensional aspect of a wall: on this multidimensional threshold every point can be the place where old knowledge is re-articulated. The wall itself, modified by these drawings, stops being a frontier: it is put under erasure, ironically becoming the physical reminder of perpetual and unstoppable crossings.

[16] Iain Chambers, *Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 186.

In several of Gupta's works this transformation is a key point: the wall is often turned into a contact zone promoting communication. Like *Here There Is No Border*, *Untitled 2005-2006* hosts open walls that allow different scenarios to interact. The installation creates a narrow corridor between the walls of the museum room and the outer walls of a house in which interactive touch screens are inserted. The audience can look through these window-screens expecting to access a vision of inner spaces. But instead of showing a single scene, the screens transmit several fluxes of images and sounds that weave a discourse on the Kashmiri borderland. Two of the five screens that make up the video installation stress the permeability of the frontier by using the possibilities provided by new media.

One of them looks onto an open space: the border landscape from Srinagar to Gulmargh is shot from the window of a taxi. The view of this beautiful Kashmiri land is only disturbed by the presence of military

figures that appear, like ghosts, in an almost unspoilt territory. The soldiers, whose spectral shapes clash with the natural environment, keep towns and villages under siege. Touching the interactive screen, the spectators can stop the video loop and see clearly what these figures are, after which the journey can start again. While the trip goes on, the artist's voice questions the taxi-driver about the land they are crossing: does it belong to India or Pakistan?

Another screen is a hazy window. On the other side of this window you, the spectator, can see a finger moving and writing letters as in a game for children, while a childlike voice invites you to do the same and use your finger to touch the 'other' by touching the screen. The specular image that is thus created reveals the permeabilty of this separation. "Left, Right, make a Dash. Left Left Left Right Right Right Right Right Left Left. A for Army." says the child's voice, while the game slowly builds up a feeling of horror. Together, the fingers write the alphabet of the war zones, in which every letter bears images of death.

Fig. 3: Shilpa Gupta, *Untitled 2005-2006*, 2005-06, Interactive Installation with touch-screens, courtesy of the artist.

B for bomb. C for curfew. D for death. E for explosion. F for fear. G for garden. G for grave. H for hospital. I for Identity Card. J for jail. K for kalashnikov. L for Land of Free Kashmir. M for militant. N for NTR - Nothing To Report. O for obituary. P for Papa 2. Q for questioning. R for rape. S for scar. T for television. U for utopia. V for VDC – Village Defense Committee. W for widow – half widow. X for X-ray. Y for Yes Sir! Z for Z-Security.

Thus the security zone proves to be insecure and the walls cease to be a barrier to become an area of contact.

Walls in this work are the frame from which to access the real war experience of this region. Touch screens enable communication between spaces ambiguously constructed, presenting no difference between inside and outside. As Lev Manovich states in his study of cinema as a cultural interface: "the frame acts as a window onto a larger space which is assumed to extend beyond the frame", casting the spectator into a plurality of contexts.[17] At one and the same time the frame can connect and separate different spaces that somehow coexist.[18] In the article "Who am We?" the sociologist Sherry Turkle observes that this possibility of being in different places and different selves is deeply constitutive for the self using new media:

> Windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system…the self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times. The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time. Now, real life itself may be just one more window.[19]

[17] Lev Manovich, "Cinema as a Cultural Interface", 2001, <http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/cinema-cultural.html>, 28 August 2008.

[18] Cfr. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (Massachusetts: MIT, 2001), 95.

[19] Sherry Turkle, "Who Am We?", in David Trend, ed., *Reading Digital Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 236-250.

Art then uses new media to show how multiple selves can simultaneously be in several places and communicate.

Well aware of the power of windows in new media, Gupta uses multiple screens to present several chances of unfolding subjectivities. Her interactive art involves subjects in a sort of role-playing game offering "a play of difference through identities", as Axel Roch underlines in his essay on the "Critique of Mediation through Art as Polycontexturality".[20] Interaction appears as an invitation to make contact with other dimensions; rather than pushing the spectators into a system of power, controlling their free will, Gupta promotes critical and differentiated participation. Art can be the utopian space where multiple interactions contribute to an eventual dissolution of the dialectical alterity. It is polycontextural because it mediates between multiple contents and contexts: a double transformation, of both the means and the subject involved, occurs in this open communicative process: "Whereas the common definition of interactivity is that the viewer changes the artwork, the artwork changes the user. Similar to polycontextural computation, the change of the identity of the system, the spectator is changed through the introduction and staging of polycontexural content".[21] The possibility of decentering the self is linked to a reconfiguration of the wall, which can be reimagined as an open frame. Domestic walls then lose any reassuring power; instead of representing inner spaces, they become the material signifiers for unknown and uncanny places. This uncanny power links them to the doubleness characterizing the border. Gupta's works question the concepts of familiarity and domesticity, showing how the Freudian terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are inextricably intertwined. A dark shadow falls on the very idea of the 'house' as a secure and comfortable place.

[20] Axel Roch, "Critique of Mediation through Art as Polycontexturality", Catalogue Essay, in *Shilpa Gupta 2006* (Bombay: Spenta Multimedia, 2006), 61.

[21] Ibid., 70.

Unreachable security and a sense of dispossession haunting one's own house and national territory are also the main themes of Malani's video installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998). Malani only joined Aar Paar in 2004, but her art has always been engaged in political issues like the constitution of the nation and its borders. This video forces the audience to experience life as it was in the borderland between India and Pakistan.

Interacting images are projected onto three screens. The largest one shows images of the nuclear bombs that killed millions of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War. These fragments refer to the political decisions that lead to underground nuclear tests in India in 1998. The two other screens are placed on the smaller walls of the rectangular room and depict two women's faces and bodies facing each other. The room also houses twelve tin trunks, each of which contains TV monitors and bedding, representing the trunks refugees use to carry their goods during forced migrations. While these television sets broadcast archival images of deportations, the spectators unwillingly inhabit the

house of memory. There they can share a feeling of both displacement and loss with the refugees, because the house is a place where everyone lives "but nobody possesses".[22]

On the side screens the two women mimic their disappearance under the flowered fabrics of their saris. Then they throw the edges of these long strips of material at each other and try to fill the gap that separates them, but the fabric they throw never manages to reach the other side. In spite of the constantly audible noise of a fax or a web connection, the voice-over reads some excerpts of a short story by Sadat Hassan Manto. It is the story of Bishen Singh, called Toba Tek Singh from the name of the land he comes from. After 15 years spent in a lunatic asylum, because of Partition, Bishen Singh is taken to Wagah with other patients to be relocated. But while policemen divide them according to their 'new belonging', he dies in this blank space between India and Pakistan:

> Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh screamed and as the officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground. There, behind barbed wire, on one side lay India and, behind more barbed wire, on the other side lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. [23]

Manto's words stress the indeterminacy of this borderland. The "bit of earth" with no name can only be identified by barbed wire, as a space of death and mourning. In Malani's video though, Toba Tek Singh is a woman and her dying image provides a fitting representation of a space of exclusion and subalternity.

The tale crosses genres, sewing together news and fiction, history and 'stories', present and past, as it reiterates the traumatic event of the nation's splitting. Memory permits the emergence of a spatial cracking characterized by a simultaneous presence of different tenses and by non-linear time. Future war times, represented by nuclear experiments, then appear to be already inscribed in the earlier moment of Partition. The room, like the narrow corridor of the frontier, is inhabited by a messianic time and disseminated with women's bodies and voices. As Lidia Curti underlines: "their voice is crucial in re-configuring frontiers and borders, in transforming what was considered an exotic alterity into an active and powerful presence".[24] The borders Malani explicitly calls "man-made" are supported by a "national fantasy" that "bars the way to memory", a process Jacqueline Rose has illustrated in her discussion of memory and mourning.[25] On the contrary, if personal stories are recollected, it will be possible to challenge the homogenizing trend of nationalism and pave the way for a sense of community founded on both mourning and loss. Mourning and loss, which are also the necessary consequences of the cut of Partition, may come to represent a long-lasting call for ethical responsibility.

[22] "The house of memory is not simply our customs, rituals and traditions, our bodies, institutions and monuments, nor even our innermost selves and individual unconscious. It is ultimately the place of concentrated being that is the historical hum of our earthly habitat"(Chambers, *Culture After Humanism*, 53).

[23] Transcription of the translation chosen by the artist and read in the video.

[24] Lidia Curti, *La voce dell'altra: scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcoloniale* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006), 85. Translation mine.

[25] Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 5.

As the art historian and curator Chaitanya Sambrani writes:

> The border between India and Pakistan has remained, for successive generations after partition, the constant marker of an absence: and it has been a very curious absence. For it is an absence of one who is intimately known, and yet shrouded in the mystery that impermeable barriers generate.[26]

[26] Sambrani, *Printing Across Borders*.

This intimate absence existing within a single self has the power to neutralize the dialectical opposition between 'self and other' or 'me and you' used by political rhetoric to sustain the foundation of a national identity. In the intimacy of mourning lies the awareness that all the pain we suffer when we lose someone comes from the part of ourselves that we lose when someone goes away. Ethical responsibility derives from this fundamental mutual dependence as well as from human exposure to loss; an exposure that is a daily experience for those who live on the border, just as death is the trauma by which the border is haunted.