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Spaces In-Between

Images and Texts by Women in Foreign Places

Ursula Biemann

My presentation might stand out for being less academic than most other titles on today's program. However, by starting with a more practical approach I will give you the unique chance to tune in gently.

The project I'm going to talk about is called *Zwischenräume – Interespacios*, which translates roughly into "Spaces In-between," suggesting a plurality of spaces that can be inhabited and occupied rather than a gap to get stuck in.¹

Zwischenräume was a community project I conducted last year in Zurich. It was conceived and realized in, and for, a different context, but I'm very interested in bringing it to an academic audience.

First and foremost, the spaces in-between — interspaces — *interespacios* — connotes a cultural interstice, i.e. the space that opens up between two cultures at the occasion of cultural displacement i.e. immigration.

In this respect, I wish to say a couple of things about my own situation. As a visual artist, I have centered my research and my art practice on the cultural identity of Latin American women over the past few years. First, I focused on Mexican women on the US border, where I made a film, and later on Hispanic culture in New York barrios, where I used to live for several years. When I returned to Switzerland, I was extremely bored with the local art scene and thought it would be interesting to initiate a project with Latin American women who live in Zurich. No longer did I want to speak *about* women from the Third World in my work, rather, I

women who live in Zurich. No longer did I want to speak *about* women from the Third World in my work, rather, I wanted to work *with* them. Also, I felt I was qualified to do so, since I could look back on my own personal immigration experience.

The project started off as a visual communications workshop entitled "Women and Immigration" that asked Latin Americans to think about their position as Women and as Immigrants, to think about this question in terms of photo and text and to further combine the two to formulate a visual-verbal language. I made a special effort to clarify that I didn't understand my role as a social worker who was supposed to help them solve their problems, but as a visual artist interested in realizing an art project. This "creative idea," however, turned into a turbulent one year project, challenged many a personality, brought about identity crisis, resistance and tough negotiations, and finally lead to the publishing of the book *Zwischenräume – Interespacios – Photos and Texts by Women in Foreign Places*.

It looks like nothing, but this project is in fact quite complex. I will try to expose the various layers, always with the understanding that these layers are not neatly separated but, on the contrary, tightly intertwined.

The institutional frame was a local immigrant women's organization who agreed to host my proposal and mail its announcement. As a result, seven women from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and Colombia signed up for the workshop. With only one exception, all of these young women had little substantial experience in writing or photography, though all of them had received a higher education. The assignment was broadly formulated — everyone was to choose a topic on which they wished to elaborate. They were free to treat it in any way they wanted, whether it be in a socially critical, poetic or psychoanalytical manner.

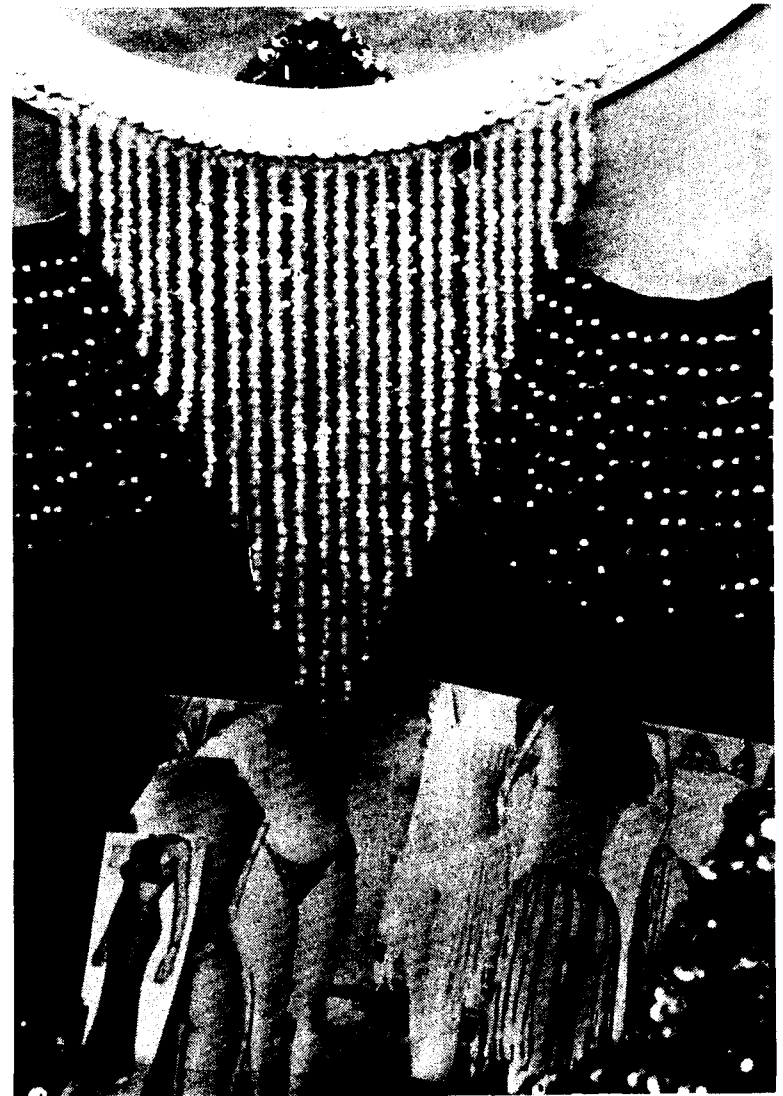
From the start, these women were amazingly motivated in finding and discussing their topic. As socially interesting as all of the topics were, it turned out sooner or later, that they had deep personal roots. Of course, the whole purpose

of proposing a workshop on Women and Immigration was to secure a personal involvement, since no topic in the world could possibly be more fascinating than one's own situation.

With some, it was obvious and conscious from the beginning, that on a deeper level, they were really reporting about themselves. While with others, it took several weeks or months to immerse. In most cases, and not surprisingly so, the work could only take off once this personal connection was made and accepted. To illustrate, I'll give you three examples of this convergence and investment.

Santusa Herbas from Bolivia had a background as a psychologist with a rich professional and social curriculum before she left her country. Now she works as a cleaning lady at the hospital in Zurich. Without hesitation, Santusa decided to write about the discrepancy between the education and skills she acquired in her home country and the lack of professional opportunities available to her in Europe. An experience, such as she describes, led to her identity crisis, and feelings of inferiority and depression. Through the effort in formulating her ideas, Santusa found a tremendous strength in her roots and visualized this in the portrait of Mama Juana, a Bolivian friend and role model of hers. I would describe her project as the straightforward kind.

Angela Ceballos, a very young woman from Colombia, literally threw herself into the research on Latin American women who are lured to Europe by agencies which promised them the opportunity to become models, and then channeled them directly into networks of topless bars. I greatly admired her fervor in writing about this topic and often accompanied her often to gogo bars and to the street on icy winter nights to take undercover photographs. One day, I said, I will surely find out why this is so fascinating to you. A week later, she suddenly remembered the traumatizing story of her cousin from Cartagena who had gone through this nightmare herself, risking her life when she escaped a Dutch brothel, being rejected by her family and never returning to Colombia. "I had completely forgotten about her ...," Angela said. We decided to fit this personal story into her critical documentation and to mark the segments with



Zwischenräume
Gedichte von Pierrette Malatesta
Fotografin Ursula Biemann



Zwischenräume
"Leben in den Zwischenräumen"
Fotografin Ursula Biemann



Zwischenräume
"Ein Pass zur Glückseligkeit"
Fotografin Angela Ceballos

visual signs.

A third example, Monica Zegarra, tried really hard. But five months into the project, Monica had not come up with any text, photograph or even one useful idea. She knew that if she didn't produce anything decent soon, she simply couldn't be in the book. I was anxious about deadlines and she was desperate. On the day before I had to present the project to the publishers, she came to the group, radiating. She had written a number of stories she called "Just another flop." They go like this: *A Latina falls in love with a Swiss man, preferably blond, who is vacationing on tropical beaches. Invariably this man convinces her to come to the New World of opportunities and promises to marry her. Once she is here, however, her dependency gets on his nerves, he loses interest and abandons her.* Monica wrote subtle variations of this quotidian drama in a monotonous narration and complemented it with the isolating bareness of her photographs. Of all the pieces, I think hers is one of the more successful ones. She must have carried the stories inside her all this time and was only willing to release them under considerable pressure.

To make the courageous step of moving to another continent often requires a radical break with the past, which means, by the same token, disconnecting from one's social and psychological roots. In some way, these women were floating in a cultural limbo.

By opening up a space between their cultural heritage and the new and strange Swiss context, the project offered them the first opportunity to reconnect the past with the present, and, in doing so, to lay a more sound foundation for their future trajectory. Very soon, our workshop came to represent this space in-between or *interespacio* that we set out to fill with names, words and images. For several women in the group, engaging in this work initiated a disturbing process of reorientation. The question was:

What happens, when we relocate from one cultural context to another? From a readable context to one where different conditions are operative. First, we depend on the old values to

interpret the new conditions — *valores de allá* for situations here. The result is an oddly interesting perspective. Then, we enter a state that increasingly resembles a vacuum in which we commit to neither the old nor the new notions of value. We remain skeptical towards the new values, yet the moment in which we can slip back into blissfully ignoring them has passed. It is an awkward position to be in, everything is called into question. It's life in a limbo, life in the cultural interstice.

Once you have sincerely entered the space in-between — the process of questioning — there is no return to a state of unconditionally accepting the values of your culture of origin. This means that there is something disturbingly permanent about this state. A change of culture is not a moment, rather it's an involuntary process in which the most inner values are challenged. It is a slow process of continuous negotiations between two cultures from which emerges a new reality, a *mestize space*. Creating the book *Zwischenräume* was a way of granting that space a legitimate existence, of giving it a form or Gestalt, as we call it in German.

Another space that opened up simultaneously with this project is the area between social production and art production. This seems hardly relevant to this audience, but you have to take into consideration that cultural studies are virtually unknown at Universities in Europe and that interdisciplinarity is not exactly a buzz word in Switzerland. In fact, many foundations and institutions were at a loss as to what funding category this product should fit into and most everybody found it very unusual that an artist would leave her territory and venture so far into the social space.

The book represents in many respects the situation itself: it is a bilingual text in German and Spanish with the exception of one Portuguese text. It seemed essential to integrate the translation in the concept of each piece and to use the photographs to link the two linguistic versions of the text while developing a photographic language that would convey messages reaching beyond a simple illustration of the written text.

In terms of its graphic appearance, the publication presents itself as a contemporary art production: clean layout, high print quality. Thus the question for me was: were we not stylistically confirming the very conventions that we were attempting to attack with our book. However, for the purpose of contradicting the prevailing image of Latin America as folkloric and technically set back, I thought it strategically better to use this format.

This brings me to the question of audience and reception. What can a document like this achieve? I would expect that the wide range of topics as well as the manner in which the authors treated them is likely to open up a more differentiated discussion and expand the stereotypical, sexualized image of Latinas still prevalent among the Swiss population. As for women readers who find themselves in similar situations as the authors, I can only hope that the attitudes and the ambiguities conveyed in these pages will encourage them to rethink and redefine their own experiences.

In all the above points — visual presentation, the use of language, the effect on the readers — I find the project to be quite successful. However, in terms of its failure and resistance, the conflicts that arose from this project lay elsewhere. They were inherently produced within the constellation of a group that consisted of one European who initiated and conducted the project and seven Latin Americans who participated in it.

This relationship which characterized our group dynamic was further complicated by the fact that besides being the project manager, and therefore a figure of some authority, I was also a participant producing a piece. So that on one level, I was working on a collective project to which each one contributed an individual piece, and on the other — and I refused to deny it — I was the only one in the group who had the knowledge and the skills to produce a book and publish it in Switzerland. Effacing this fact, I felt, would put me in the role of a well-meaning social helper instead of confronting the group with a reality. In the end, my double role was programmed to provoke a crisis.

In the course of a few months, the deep involvement

with issues of colonial oppression, relations of dependency both as colonized beings and as women, led up to revolutionary feelings in the group. They clearly went through a process of liberating themselves ideologically and emotionally, and the closest subject at hand to liberate themselves from was the group's figure of authority: me. I was accused of seizing power and was deposed from my leader position. From that point on, the politics in our group changed from a liberal classroom situation to a pseudo-democratic system, in which I had seven votes against me. That made my job very difficult, but I had invested too much in this project to abandon it so easily. Most tasks that needed to be done required a thorough knowledge of German and professional know-how including an understanding of local politics, so that I had to continue doing them anyway but now without acknowledging it to the group, playing down what I accomplished, so that nobody would feel threatened by it. In fact, I found myself exactly in the spot I dreaded most in the beginning.

If I had set out to emancipate these women, I could say that the project was a full success. But since I never had this ambition, I can't revel in the achievement of it. I have to admit that we, as a group, did not manage to transcend the conflicts that we address in the book. However, a more prosaic process of political and psychological awareness — as trying and unpleasant an experience this is — was set into motion for all of us and is still in progress today.

Notes

¹ The publication resulting from the project is: *Zwischenräume — Interespacios — Bilder und Texte von Frauen in der Fremde — Imágenes y textos de mujeres in lo extraño*, Amaya, Lyana, Ursula Biemann and Pierrette Malatesta, eds., Dortmund-Zürich: eFeF Publishers, 1993.