

# Living in a Terminal

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*Summary:* My paper discusses the production of the borders, examining how they engage bodies and spatial scales. I carry performative research with mobile digital media, between these borders in order to enable new terms of artistic and political engagement. By bringing plurality of perspectives into dialogue around the themes of body, mobile technology and space, I hope to reinvigorate critical analysis of the border in all of its (im)materialities and locations. In this paper I explore what lies behind the making of performance art with digital media, particularly when crossing extremely volatile geographic and cultural borders.

*Keywords:* Border, Mobile media, Performance art, Auto-ethnography, Identity

JOE MULROY: Why do you think he'll leave?

FRANK DIXON: Because he slipped through and fell in a crack. Nobody likes staying in a crack because they're nothing. Nobody likes to be stuck in a crack.

(Excerpt from *The Terminal* 2004, 2")

Borders have traditionally been seen as lines of division, as the final line of resistance between mythical «us» and an equally mythical «them»; either a method of containment or a final barrier leading up to an ultimate liberation and freedom. We find many instances in contemporary literature and visual culture, such as *The Terminal*, where the border is represented as a zone of danger and order, and when the crossing is over-romanticised. Obviously inspired by recent histories of «ethnic cleansing» in the former Yugoslavia, the film focuses on the highly visible structure of a fortified border patrolled by guards, screens and surveillance technologies, simultaneously overlaid with intimate meanings and ungraspable situations, that make us human.

I do not have many close relatives who have emigrated or lived in different countries during their lifetime. My entire family has always been happy where it was, proud of their origins and struggling with the demanding cultural and political conditions of the Balkan region. However, that struggle was constantly emphasized with my grandmother's story about her father, the only one who left the country to

go to Chicago in the USA. At that time, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was an arduous journey, and one you would undertake if you wanted to disappear. Apparently he came back and stayed in Macedonia, though the conditions of his return were always puzzling and nobody wanted to discuss them, except my grandmother to her nieces. In secret she told us that if the Balkan wars had not been so cruel and if he had been less stubborn, all of us would probably be in the USA.

When I received my scholarship to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I went to see my grandmother. Having suffered a couple of strokes one after the other, she was quite senile. When the news of my scholarship was shared at the table with our family, her eyes opened wide and for a moment she seemed to be quite her old self. She almost yelled in joy «I knew it, I knew that it will be you!». She then took me by the hand and said that it was my job to fulfil the dreams of my great-grandfathers. She showed me a box of old photographs and a passport — memories that had not been shared with anyone before. The box was now mine, I deserved it. There were many reasons why Todor, my great-grandfather was a silent man and never talked about his life in the USA. He was extremely liberal with his daughters, who were educated to the highest level at a time when females were only allowed to attend the first two grades. He was fluent in Italian and English in a country that was on the wrong side of the Cold War wall (he passed the English on to my grandmother and mother in secret). And every day he silently questioned his decision to return.

It was a painful gift, a Pandora's box in a way, a gateway to someone's life story: so well kept. Even now it puzzles me that these mediated memories, an aged screen into a lost life, are such a strong burden for me. I am still struggling to understand why my grandmother thought that it was my job to fulfil his dreams and why until the day she died (just a couple of months after I left for USA) the only things she remembered clearly were my name and my location. What was the process that linked all of us to this painful story of migration, borders and invisible liminality?

My research is part of my body, thus inevitably carrying its history. It is a very specific history, of a body that has been trapped in liminal spaces for a very long period (both in a geographical/historical

sense, but also in a metaphorical and metonymical sense). The link between my body, theory and the tools that I use has become the most significant element of my exploration of borders. I cannot possibly outline my arguments without offering snippets of my personal experience, both through reflective writing and the autobiographical use of mobile digital media. It was challenging to write this paper at the same time integrating my life and tribulations as an artist, running the risk of «confessing» what no one needs or wants to know.

My research explores the production of the borders, examining how they engage bodies and spatial scales. Despite their seemingly confounding specificities, I carry research with mobile digital media, between these borders in order to enable new terms of artistic and political engagement. By bringing plurality of perspectives into dialogue around the themes of body, mobile technology and space, I hope to reinvigorate critical analysis of the border in all of its (im)materialities and locations. I want to reveal what lies behind the making of performance art with digital media, particularly when crossing extremely volatile geographic and cultural borders.

So, I have embraced the chance to undertake the autobiographical practice as research project called *Valid until...*, in the hope that some readers/viewers will see their lives, faces and ideas reflected in my writing and art created with the use of mobile digital technology. In my practice, I am bringing together Latour's (2004) concept of body as assemblage; Bacon's (2006) processual approach and Colley's (2007) autobiometry. The aim is to explore in depth the borders that I have to cross continuously in my everyday life and how they are articulated through the mobile screening devices.

Bruno Latour in his pivotal essay «How to Talk about the Body», defines the body as the actor that «leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of». The body, for Latour, is an «assemblage» through the way it is connected to material practices, human and non-human, which articulates its potentiality. Latour developed a subtype of grounded theory called Actor Network Theory (ANT) that is based on ethnographic methods focusing on meanings as defined by the actors themselves. In my methodology I am emphasizing the process of assembling my body through continuous reflective writing and auto-

biographical use of the mobile phone. This is what Jane Bacon calls a «processual approach», rather than product oriented. This approach (methodology) according to Bacon enables the researcher to «think of themselves as an ethnographer as doing so will give a particular viewpoint or set of tools for the analysis of the fieldsite or research setting. Through this embodied reflexive practice the researcher is able to examine and explicate the nature of interaction with the subject of study and [ ] ground this engagement in the experiential, or performative aspects of the creative workshops» (2006, 138).

I became especially focused on how mobile imaging with a camera phone is informed by an autobiographical impulse and, thereby, belongs to a long tradition of first-person forms of documentation. Colley uses the term «autobiometry», to designate a mode of self-record or catalogue; or more specifically, an account of one's life: mobile-imaging as an autobiometrical accounting of the self in its living. Autobiometry is in a way for me a rigorous self-monitoring. That shaped my choice to continuously document my practice on a blog, since electronic media forms (e.g., personal webpage and blogs) have been and continue to be the sites of autobiographical practice as well. In my process I am deliberately focused on mobile screening devices (MSDs in the future text) as a tool. Heidi Colley developed the term MSDs to refer to mobile phones equipped with gaming and imaging capabilities which as a result have acquired colour LCD (liquid crystal display) screens.

In the promotional speech for iPad that came out on the 27 January 2010, Steve Jobs emphasized the following experience as a defining element of the new device: «It's the best browsing experience that you ever had, you can see a whole web page right in front of you and you can manipulate it with your fingers. [...] Holding the Internet in your hands» (2010). The iPad is just the tip of the iceberg, the most recent project by Carnegie Mellon is called Skinput, the primary goal of which is to provide a readily available mobile input system — that is, an input system that does not require a user to carry or pick up a mobile device at all as it will be integrated into the body.

There are many interdisciplinary research examples about this relationship. However before complete body-screen integration inevitably happens, there are two important questions that must be asked:

- Who is reflected on the screen?
- How do we handle the screen?

### *Borderland*

Guillermo Gomez Pena tackles these questions, by commenting on the disjointed state between body and technology and how the technological space can become a closely monitored border space:

In the mid 90s, when the artworld went high-tech overnight, the debates about the human body and its relation to new technologies dramatically polarized the experimental arts community and particularly the performance art milieu. There were those in the «machine art» movement who advocated the total disappearance of the body and its replacement with digital or robotic mechanisms; others believed that the body, although archaic and «obsolete», could still remain central to the art event if physically and perceptually enhanced with technical prostheses. *None of these options were viable, however, for Chicano/Latino performance artists and other politicized artists of colour interested in new technologies.* (Emphasized by me, 2000, 38)

I would add to his argument, that this debate was not relevant for female artists either, and especially female artists that come from a less privileged background. This gets even more pertinent with the digital multiplicity and expansion of the screen technology in the last ten years. Female artists and theorists have been exploring the border and how it is performed through our bodies and with the use of technology for quite a while. Gloria Anzaldúa writes that the borderlands «are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper class touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy» (1987, 5). She is grasping on the psychological, the sexual and the spiritual borderland. I would like to add the technological borderlands as well and especially, the screen as a bordering territory that marks our body dramatically. To Braidotti, being nomadic, homeless, an exile, a refugee, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, is no metaphor. There are highly

specific geopolitical and historical locations-history tattooed on your body (2002, 3). For Ettinger, *a borderspace* is not a boundary, a limit, an edge, a division. But it is not a site of fusion or confusion. It is space shared between minimally differentiated partial subjects who, while they can never know each other, can, nonetheless, affect each other and share, each in different ways, a single event. There is line of artists who are examining the borderland in their work, like Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Ursula Bieman, NSK, Electronic Disturbance Theatre, but for the purpose of this paper I will focus on the work of Tanja Ostojić.

### *Tanja Ostojić*

In the late 1990s, early 2000s, the new political, ideological and economic reorganization of Europe and especially, the political events that were taking place in Yugoslavia have significantly affected the work of the artists in the region. The crossing and creation of borders became a theme that many artists from the Balkan region integrated into their work. You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real; otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it is a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border. The crossing is a process that never ends. Even when the state constructs authorities are crossed, the body carries the imbalance and the notion of being different, challenged, objectified. Tanja Ostojić in her intermedial project *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* is using over-identification as a tool to retain a distance from the mimed border regime and as claimed by Žižek to frustrate that same regime of power.

The first phase of the project *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* consisted of a simple Internet advert with an image of the artist's shaved body that was followed by the distribution of leaflets and posters in a shopping mall in Skopje, for the project «Capital and Gender» in 2001. The next step was a website that enabled correspondence between the artist and her «suitors». The project gradually moved from the realm of «imaginary» to the realm of the «real» when the artist met and married one of the «virtual» suitors (the German

artist Clemens Golf who deliberately delved into the «art-marriage» adventure). The final stage of this long-term art and life commitment started in the realm of the complex intertwining of conditions: the artist started facing the German state authorities in order to acquire the long-awaited Schengen visa and started going through seemingly endless procedures for long-term residency. After three years of «fictive» marriage, the couple separated and filed for a «real» divorce. Obviously, it is very difficult to make the borderline between the «fictive» and the «real» in this context, the body and the social freedom offered in exchange for a passport. The main objective of Ostojić's work is over-identification with the established regimes of power and representation through which the objectification of the female body usually takes place. Her body becomes the medium that she uses in order to stress the necessity to question these issues.

In a way, the body carries the process of crossing, the gender figure becomes the articulator of the border; that fragile line marking the edge of the national body. It is from here, on this body, according to national(ist) discourse, that all disease, illegality, contamination, and poverty come. This is the most vulnerable, penetrable site, the place where anxieties tend to concentrate. But Ostojić quite vividly carries in her work the autobiographical impulse, never acknowledging that her body has become completely translated into information and technologized in order to be legalised. She is a piece of information, a glitch in the border system and she has to carry on this invisible label into her life and work as well. When we cross the border, our body is demonstrated and performed, exposed and hidden.

Diary entry, Day 91

Living between two worlds can be demanding. Like an illness, you can't escape from it, it is so deep in your body. It goes over every border that protects you from outside. You can articulate yourself on the screen, but deep inside you know that the screen never articulates, only imposes form.  
Delivery at gate.

There are two gates. One in. One out. And me in between.

A: «We miss you so much». Her eyes get tearful.

I can't deliver the news.

B: Maybe we will stay.

A: Stay where?

B: I am not quite sure....

I am thinking of my great grandfather. How do you deliver a loss?

### *Valid until...*

During the first year since my move to Northampton and UK, I walked in the town in order to see it more clearly. I was looking to acquaint myself with the cultural sprawl via a corporeal practice that allowed me to experience the foreign space in a more intimate way. The geographic terrain of Northampton felt «foreign» to me because its shape and scope were unfamiliar and navigating or getting a sense of either posed a challenge beyond what I had expected. My need to walk in Northampton was not only, in order to map out the city. It was a physical and neurological need to get out of my own feeling as a foreigner, best understood by this journal entry from my walking research, when I first arrived,

Driving past the Racecourse, on a rainy Monday. The town shape is melting on the wet windshield. I feel like disappearing and seeing another place, a better one, warmer, more responsive, not so intimidating and foreign. Place where I will fit in as well, where my language and presence will be acknowledged. Maybe if I walk long enough, my traces will not be erased. Maybe if I wait long enough, my body will become visible.

It was during these walks that various technologies became important for my artistic practice and the performance that I would make in response to walking in Northampton.

The three phases of my processual approach were: «experience», «discovery», and «performance». The first covers my initial experience of walking in the town that I barely knew, as well as how video and writing were used to document it and later became material for analysis. Second, the shaping and actual discovery of the content of the piece took place on the screen. Third, the performance will bring this work in front of an audience. In practice, these phases were not



isolated chronologically as they overlapped, dissolved into and influenced one another.

This initial exploration lead to a more in-depth research on the theme of borders and lines. *Valid until...* consisted of a series of autobiographical writing, performative photographs and videos taken during a period of 140 days. The period was symbolic, equal to 140 questions that I had to answer about my family and me in a visa application. This is a challenge that is repeatedly occurring into my life. Coming from South East Europe (ex-Yugoslavia region), my validity and legal status is constantly re-evaluated and subject to the scrutiny of the Western European authorities.

The act of making the photographs and the videos is both performative and processual. The mobile phone camera is set. I am standing with the camera in hand or it is attached to my body or to an object that I carry — in a singular, unchanging position. I frame initially and the camera records or takes multiple photographs of my walk. I do not stop until I finish my determinate route. The long take emerges as a process of discovery, enabled by the duration of the frame. It is a way to move closer to the possibility of uncovering the essence and significance of things, a gesture towards clarity. The time in-between the beginning and end of the take extends an opportunity for greater awareness of the topic at hand. Within the time of the frame, everyday things become visible and one is offered a moment to linger on a question rather than pursue a particular answer. In the editing process, there is always a tendency to cut, to reduce the duration. And I am going against this. I am trying to put two takes in parallel or to assemble many photographs together, in order to reflect on the moment of experience and discovery. My tendency towards the long take is autobiographical. My inclination towards the long take derives in part from being drawn to everyday things that often go unnoticed. The long take affords what is neglected to become the centre of attention. The border becomes a process rather than an act.

Diary entry, Day 43

I remember the first time my parents took me to visit a mosque. There are beautiful Ottoman mosques in my city and as Christians, we hardly

every visit them. My parents love the mosques, and the Ottoman architecture. My father bought me ice cream from the Old Bazaar. We ate it while crossing the Open market and looking at spices, fresh fruit and vegetables, chickens and eggs, underwear and linens. He talks constantly about the shapes, and corners and angles and colours...I hardly hear anything, but I enjoy the security of his velvety voice. And then we entered the mosque's yard, it was flooded with roses — white, purple, yellow, red...We took our shoes off and entered. My father leaves us at the door. I am puzzled. My mom pulls my hand. I look at the walls, abstract shapes in blue and orange, it's so silent. We sit in the left corner, behind the wooden screen. Through the holes, I stare at the bare feet of kneeling men. It feels like home, but so foreign. It smells different. I look through the screen, it is like a different country, outland... And then from the corner of my eye I see my father, amongst all those silhouettes that go up and down in a repetitive movement. Still and with a flickering smile on his face. Perhaps we are home after all.

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