

Anti-racist video activism On the Berlin Premiere of “Border Crossing Services”

Carsten Does (hybrid video tracks, Berlin)

The title is already a provocation: today border crossing services isn't called border crossing services, but, rather, smuggling and they also aren't services, but, instead, a crime. The video, “Border Crossing Services,” was completed in Spring 2001; made by two Austrian artists. Martin Krenn and Oliver Ressler examine common ideas about migration and border crossing services based on numerous interviews with political activists from anti-racist initiatives and immigrant organizations.

The film is arranged in four separate sections. Chapter one: “Who is allowed to migrate?” examines through the view of migrants the European closed-door logic and selection rationality based on useful immigration in a historical context of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. In the second section a soldier from the Austrian army proudly demonstrates the newest equipment for man-hunting at the border, while the third section is dedicated to the deconstruction of the hegemonic discourse on border crossing services as anti-human, and the most highly organized “smuggling or trafficking.” The last chapter “Against racism,” concludes the film with the insightful hint from an immigrant that racist laws – in Germany the mandatory residence law, for example, by which the residency of an asylum seeker is limited to a single county – can be fought most effectively by the native majority population.

That is correct – and if that were being done, then this film would not have been necessary. However, the film is a component of a more comprehensive anti-racist intervention by Krenn and Ressler, who also designed, together with students at the University of Lüneburg, an exhibit with the same title in the Kunstraum Lüneburg. The research for this, carried out in a block seminar, which brought the students in contact with immigrant groups and led them to the German-Polish border, was included in a further video that the project group produced and called “Antirassistische Perspektiven.” In addition, the students joined in the production of a mail circular called “Neues Grenzblatt,” which was sent in large numbers to households along the outer EU-border. Produced in conjunction with initiatives such as the “Forschungsgesellschaft für Flucht und Migration” (research society for flight and migration) and immigrants’ self-organized organizations such as “The Voice”, “Neues Grenzblatt” formed the third base of intervention. In the sense of a “communication guerilla”, the layout was kept in the style of a folkloristic village paper and was meant to stir the initial interest of the target audience. Finally, an Internet presence rounds off the entire project “Border Crossing Services.” The website (<http://www.t0.or.at/fluchthilfe>) not only brings together the individual activities but also offers a view of the various public reactions.

As a whole, these elements correspond with tactical media work that shows the basic understanding that different means must be used for intervention in different spaces. In close cooperation with politically based initiatives and migrant organizations, whose political affairs are thereby strengthened, the artists have succeeded in connecting both; occupying spaces in an artistic or university context as well as penetrating quite concretely in the bourgeois living rooms of numerous households close to the border. It is this type of concept of political media activism that stirred the interest in “Border Crossing Services” of the Berlin exhibition project, “hybrid video tracks,” which took place in September 2001 in the NGBK.

Organized by a loose merger of Berlin video and media activists, “hybrid video tracks” (<http://www.hybridvideotracks.org>) reflects on the history and current approaches of political media work through video. The idea was to show that political media work with video meant much more than the expanding practice of mere media duplication of political action solely for the pleasure of the sympathizers who stayed at home. On the contrary: politically effective video activism should occupy and play various channels. It must confront, carry out counter explanation, and undermine the hegemonic discourse. Rather than merely educating the political movement and initiatives, it is necessary to ally with them, in practice, and likewise maintain a critical distance. In this sense, anti-racist video work also forms a central programmatic element of the exhibition.

“Neues Grenzblatt” and the various video presentations in the border region place the project “Border Crossing Services” in a long line of media and political interventions in the EU-border regions. The Berlin video project “ak kraak” already produced three video clips in 1997 which were presented together in their video covers with the title “Grenzperformances.” The clips took up several aspects that were then continued with the project “Border Crossing Services.” The first of these clips, whose production coincided with staged performances and video rallies directly in the border space, portrays normal everyday life on Germany’s outer EU-border to Poland and the Czech Republic. The

formation of an entire region as a bulwark against actual or imagined streams of migration, meant not only the constant armament of the German Federal Border Police (BGS), but was also accompanied by official calls for denunciation of supposed illegal border crossers, and the creation of citizen patrols as well as a wave of repression set off by the first indictments of taxi drivers. The goal of this process was to make the taxi drivers direct aids of the BGS – an undertaking that set off protests throughout the country, as is also documented by an interview with a taxi driver in “Border Crossing Services.”

The most outstanding expression of the formation of a smoothly functioning border regime is perhaps the openness with which numerous residents of the region described their role as informers: – “Yes, in summer, when the Neiße is low, then every once in a while you see someone run across. But until the BGS gets here, well, that usually takes a while.”

– “Then you call them?” – “Yes, there is a citizen’s telephone at the BGS.” (“ak kraak No. 16” – Grenzperformances part 1).

The matter-of-fact manner in which the refugees are handed over by “normal citizens,” the openness with which they speak about it, the lack of any hints of doubt or even “bad consciousness” reveals the complete absence of a critical public awareness in this region. It is this unbroken social consensus on man-hunting and denunciation, which makes necessary the initiatives such as the border camps that have existed since 1998 and also the “Neue Grenzblatt.” It is still necessary to ask which means or strategies will be used for intervention even if it is only to represent the real existence of a radically different view in these regions. Where will the target audience be picked up, what is the relationship of explanation, provocation, camouflage, openness, and one’s own pleasure in each action? Whereas the “Neue Grenzblatt” playfully takes on the layout of a folkloristic village paper, the texts themselves are expressed as left-wing fliers with objective humanistic explanations. Not that this is fundamentally wrong, but it might miss the opportunity to maintain the magazine character: “Scandal! The Neue Grenzblatt reveals: how refugees are made illegal.”

The first border camp, organized in 1998 by the campaign “No one is illegal,” attempted to maintain the balance between cultural happening, political provocation, explanation, and destabilization through concerts, a fit-for-border crossing services-walk, a taxi-procession, the opening of a provisional border crossing, (video) rallies and a home delivery paper, to strengthen those people on location who have been holding back their doubts and critique from the public. At the center of this first border camp was also a public podium discussion on the theme of border crossing services. The goal of the event was to deconstruct the concept of the smuggler and to make clear how differently the theme of border crossing services is valued in a historical perspective according to political interests. The film “Mit fremder Hilfe,” was produced for Arte two years later by the Berlin group dogfilm for a theme night by the initiative “No one is illegal” also follows this concern. It presents a successful attempt to penetrate the hegemonic media channels with anti-racist media work.

Both the film as well as the above mentioned event make clear how current talk of “inhuman smugglers” and “purely profit motivated human traffic” suddenly becomes strange if we recall that the professional border crossing services of the 1970s were able to offer their services on television, and the German federal court confirmed that 25,000 DM presented a fair price for an escape from East Germany. The video “Border Crossing Services” also uses this historical context to begin to totter the highly ideological differentiation between the “good” border crossing services of East German days and the “evil” smuggling of today. The wonderful sequence in which, thanks to the skill of the questioning authors, even a trained official German border guard gets tangled in the traps of the official language rules, is so effective because the viewer must come to the necessary conclusions from the contradictory argumentation of the official. Unfortunately, the video only seldom develops such an openness that the power of interpretation is brought back to the viewer. This is a difficulty the film shares with many political videos based mainly on interviews with political activists, even when these are, laudably, primarily immigrants as in “Border Crossing Services.” But also at the pictorial level, the video scarcely leaves room for interpretation or ambiguity. On the contrary, through the blending of certain key words into running interviews, the clarity of the message is purposefully strengthened. The Critical Art Ensemble, in its polemic “Video and resistance,” accuses political documentary film in general of this intended production of clarity in order to counter the creation of this type of “authoritarian interpretation matrix” and support a freer, more associative narrative logic in which the viewers are also given a thoroughly contradictory collection of material with which they can form their own conclusions.

Even if one does not completely agree with the Critical Art Ensemble’s view in its final consequence – the dissolution of all causality – the previously mentioned videos from dogfilm and ak kraak make evident the possibility of producing a greater public realm, whether through associative images of a surreal border performance (ak kraak) or even through found-footage-material collections from films and television shows on the theme of border crossing services (dogfilm). The project dogfilm, in

particular through the off-commentary of a fictive border crossing helper, characteristically leaves the given clarity of the message open.

The authors, Krenn and Ressler's attempt to approach the realm of border crossing services as a feasible practice of solidarity by an anti-racist left also appears unfortunate. Instead of de-mystifying such a contradictory practice and showing that border crossing services, in spite of the actual threat of repression, are something that normal people can do (and which they in fact do) the interview in the video, mysteriously incomprehensible in parts, with an Austrian border crossing helper whose picture could not be shown due to police investigation, supports the idea that border crossing services are actually something which, in the end, are unthinkable. A more exact selection of interview partners could have been possible here, as evidenced not only by the border camp event, in which an already convicted preacher describes his humanist motivated aid, but also by a second clip in the border performance series by ak kraak, in which an activist reports openly and unspectacularly about his border crossing services and in general urges the creation of "non-profit-smuggling-organizations."

Despite the described objections, "Border Crossing Services" stands out positively from the meanwhile immense flood of videos and television productions, which were produced from an anti-racist impulse. The identity-critical immigrant project Kanak Attak, justifiably expressed their indignation in the "hybrid video tracks"-event – that most of these videos produce nothing more than an overwhelmingly dismal picture. The dubious attempts to stir only pity and dismay, largely hides the difference and the "kanak living conditions' relative independence from good-German help" (Kanak Attak).

Thus, one of the few positive film examples that Kanak Attak presented during their critical television evening was an excerpt from "Border Crossing Services." They showed the speech from Grace Latigo, a formerly illegalized immigrant, which not only forms the center of the first section of the video, but can also be considered one of the most powerful moments of the film. The speech about her personal experience as an illegalized person describes, without ever setting off a false, pity-demanding consternation, how the steady lack of perspective of the illegalized person is first expressed in depression and finally in a justifiable anger, whose amazing tone still sounds through in the interview: an anger, which not only leads to political involvement, but also, does not stop with its critique of a paternalistic anti-racist scene which the Viennese artist had to first work off.

It is not only the selection of such interview partners that makes the film recommendable, and through which Martin Krenn and Oliver Ressler show great sensitivity. Much more, the two authors are able, in a conclusive and concentrated way in a 51 minute film, to relate the very diverse aspects of the themes migration and border crossing services, to each other as the different social battle fields on which immigrant organizations and anti-racist groups have toiled in the past few years. The film offers an excellent introduction and base for continued debates.