

Action without Reaction: A Mongolian Border Intervention*

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter

For academics, activists and artists with means – various as they are – to global mobility, an encounter with national border inspections is, in many senses, a routine experience in which passage to the next destination is rarely refused. It is all too easy for social networks immanent to digital communications media to hold a delirious sense of unconstrained possibility – a condition which needs to be carefully untangled from the notion of organisation without ends. Within the upper echelons of the symbolic economy, individuals trade so often in ideas that amount to nothing beyond self-gratification and the possibility of career enhancement. Is this the same as organisation without ends?

The staging of a border action is one instantiation of how limits might operate as an experiential resource for thinking the organisation of organisation without ends. A network without limits is a network of inaction. But what happens when the relationship between determinacy and indeterminacy occupies a space of indistinction? And to what extent can a border zone – defined precisely in its distinction from the freedom of movement – be understood in terms of indistinction?

There can be little doubt about the coordinates of departure and termination on the fixed line of the Trans-Siberian Railway: Moscow arrives in Beijing. And within these constraints contingencies abound: sorties can be made from stops along the way, and myriad disruptions, experiences and encounters are more likely to happen than not. Indeed, it is even incorrect to speak of the Trans-Siberian Railway as a fixed line in this instance, since one must transfer to the trans-Mongolian line if the terminal is Beijing and not Vladivostok. The trans-Manchurian line would be yet another option. Thus while a network of lines composes the linearity of movement, an historical phantasm perhaps shaped the collective certainty of passage on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

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Images: Helen Grace, video freeze frames from the performance 'border action-with/(out)-reaction', on the night of 17 September 2005, Naushki (Russia).

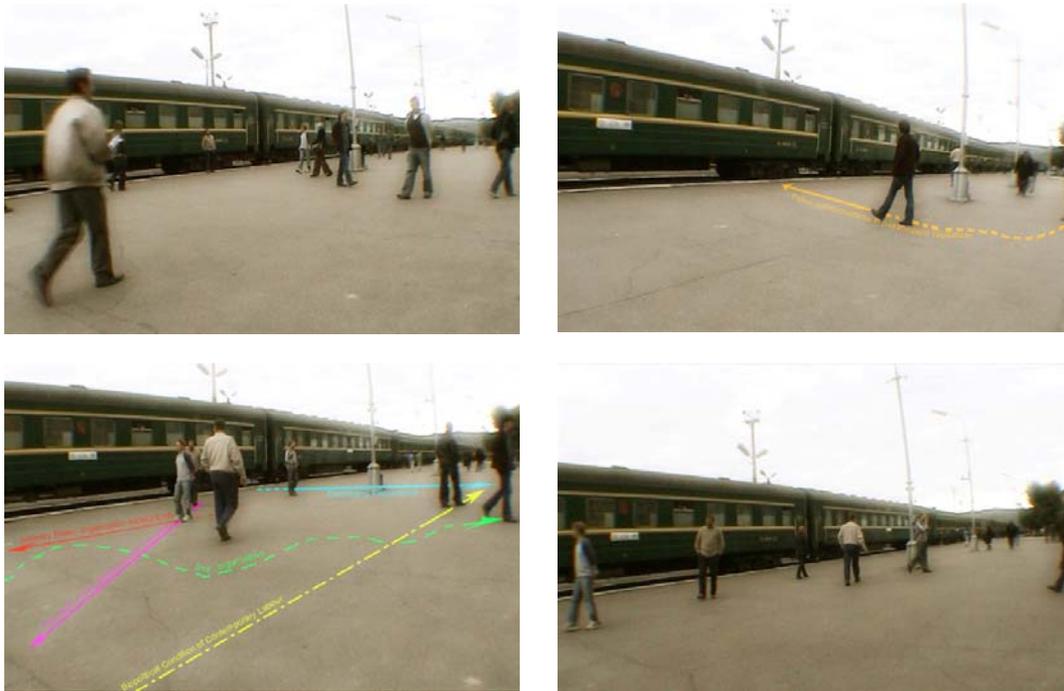
Naushki, the train station where the exit procedures for Russia are carried out is, in many respects, no different from any number of stations that precede it. But of course a border crossing is never without distinctions and possible consequences. Differences, in this context, are of a temporal, mythic and procedural order. Each time the train stops the body undergoes a rhythmic equivalence of a drug addict's withdrawal process. Unlike the usual 10 or 15 minute train stop – a refrain at once irregular in terms of the uneven distances between stations, yet also regular insofar as the repetition of the stop marks the interruption of movement – both this last station in Russia and the first station in Mongolia take time. The equivalence between motion and a temporal present gives way to stasis marked by an extension of time in the transition between national territories; movement is subtracted from the body's recently acquired kinaesthetic comportment as the body constantly adjusts to the sway and speed of locomotion.

Leaving Russia for Mongolia, the process goes like this: the train stops at Naushki, the Russian border guards enter and collect the passengers' passports and other documents handed out earlier by the conductors, then the passengers alight to buy products from the locals near the platform (kebabs, dried noodles, vodka bottled from a flask concealed in a tent). At a certain point, the conductors give the signal to reboard. The Russian guards re-enter the train to return the passports, search cavities for human bodies, and harass the Mongolian traders transporting products like urine bags and dialysis tubes. And then the train makes its way into Mongolia, crossing the imagined line sometime during an indistinct half an hour. Then there is another delay. But this time there is no alighting. The Mongolian border guards enter, marked immediately by a different aesthetic order. In place of the dull uniforms and overalls of the Russian officials are patent leather boots, made-up faces, and stern expressions. The border crosser is told to stand while the face is surveyed. There can be little doubt here of the contiguity between the affective pull of colonialism's tropes of servitude, the always sexualized dynamic of power, and the state's governance of human mobility.

Independently of whether, at the border, one is confined to the cabin or not, there is always a restriction of movement. One is confined and beholden to a procedural system that conforms to the family of border controls. But this system varies in different sites and, in this case, on either side of the metaphysical line that constitutes the border. At Naushki, the passengers can get off the train. By this time, however, their passports have been collected for processing in the customs house adjacent to the platform. In these moments, the travelers are, in a certain sense, *sans papiers*. They are free, it is true, to get off the train and even to wander into the city or the territory at large. There is no visible policing of mobility from the station. But, in another sense, they are bound, physically attached to the border, by an imaginary line (a tether) that connects them to the place and to the documents not in their immediate possession.

Who are the border crossers, in these moments? What is their juridical status? Free to move without documents, yet tethered, each along a different global vector (depending on the passport that has been removed), to an international state system, which supposedly grants them rights. In this time and space, the traveller is no longer him or herself. Free to move but unable to cross the border, he or she is actively detained and, in this detainment, made to encounter the ephemerality of those same rights. Still, in this time and space, actions are possible. Action, in these circumstances, is predicated on not

knowing, of being uncertain about what is to follow. Organisation becomes structurally unhinged from any causal temporality. Indeed, it is precisely this 'not knowing' that serves as the precondition of experiencing action as that which can only ever be temporally present. Here we get a suggestion that the time of the present has multiple registers and dimensions. It is within this temporal cartography that action is without reaction.



Photos and artwork by Bernardo Giorgi

Action then divorces itself from the mechanics of cause and effect. And the point of such action, which is importantly not yet and maybe never 'activist', is to execute a certain de-motivation of the border – both this border and all borders. There on the platform at Naushki, where traders and suspected Chechen sympathisers are regularly held back, duties collected, and tourists given a few moments to stoke the local economy, there emerged a series of bodies, which slowly and deliberately, sometimes with joy and sometimes with solemnity, traversed lines back and forth, some tracing an arc, before the customs house.

To be sure, this action had no effect. Its only purpose was to mark and remark the border through movement in multiple directions, independent bodies each ambulating on its own path. Together, they created a kind of pattern generator, fabricating curves and interruptions, relations of proximity, distance and touch, illegible to the techniques of the border but somehow enabled by its very being. At stake was a kind of encryption. But one that begs for no decoding, as if in retrospect it could be revealed and labelled as an act of transgression (or as breaking the rules that, in the very act of breaking, restores the grammar of the border and all the metaphysical subtleties it carries to human thought).

This border action was an experiential experiment, a political and emotional making of lines as a preparation to cross (or not to cross) the line. Furthermore, it was a strike against the tendency to celebrate border crossing in concept alone, the kind of disposition that preaches resistance and then has a crippling encounter with the sublime right at the very edge. What came into being was a bending of lines, a menagerie of motions that exceeded any single path, and, in so doing, marked the very arbitrariness of borders – both their geographical locations and the powers that institute them. Here, there was a movement into the very space where rules are generated, an intervention into the grammar of the border, a manipulation of its genetic codes, or, if you like, a refusal to take the rule as anything but a command.

Let us speak with absolute precision, without fear or suasion. This was not a jump. There was no leaping of fences or tearing them down, no falling into the cinders of modernity – as necessary and as liberating as such actions can be. Nor was it an action that moved the group on the train forward or backward in any way. Certainly, there had been some ad hoc planning and discussion as the train approached the border. And with this there came a scintilla of contention, both from those concerned that movements illegible to the border control would spark reprisal and from those who thought the action altogether without fire. But, even though the group had earlier expelled an individual who had lost a passport, precisely because his passage across this line could not be guaranteed, there was, in these movements, no effort to atone, to displace or condense. To be sure, this would happen in other times and places. But, at this point, another dynamic and potentiality were at play. The border imposed an urgency in which the group's own exclusions could not be made to stand, like some kind of algebraic symbol, for those constitutively outside it. There was a line on the ground, but it was not here that the group reached its limit.

Perhaps this is because to cross the border, one must be who one is. Whether this is established through the passport photo or through some more sophisticated biometric device is hardly the issue. Any movement, any movement at all, is enough to precipitate one's being called aside. Thus, upon return to the train, one individual was taken aside and interrogated by the Russian officials, since his mere presence in another cabin to the one he had occupied when he had handed over his passport rendered him suspicious. The event was innocuous and forgettable enough. But its relevance is not to be underestimated. To cross the border, as became clear in Sukhbaatar, the Mongolian border town, one must stand and say who one is. And so the group chose to rise and face itself as at once highly mobile and free to move, even as each stood before the guards as an individual and a citizen.

This crossing of the Russian-Mongolian border was a routine process with a routine outcome. Let us remember though that contemporary capitalism cannot be reduced to the culture of speed and deterritorialisation. And the border, while an older technology than the current networks of informatic mobility, remains instrumental to the smooth functioning of the global system. It is a block to separate zones where labour attracts different costs, a means of controlling populations who resist proletarianisation, and a device to allocate the access of capitalist speculation to geographical space. This is too easily forgotten in the metaphorisations that make border crossing an act of aesthetic-epistemological rupture. In towns like Naushki, all this hits the ground. In the

lineaments of the passage, right there on the platform, another time and space was conjured. There is nothing here to be celebrated or remembered. No stab at posterity or utopia. Just a number of bodies in motion, feeling the thud of the repetitive tug, back and forth, this way or that, again and again, for several minutes only, for an eternity of delay, between one point and another, in a straight line or curve, as the train endured its stop, and waited to return to velocity.

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the artists

Bernardo Giorgi plans and realises relational work. His work investigates the boundary between author and user and the limit that divides art and life. It attempts to circumscribe a common area where artists and anyone else can connect through mental and material exploration of places, territories and different cultures. Bernardo's research is therefore focused on borders and identities, using journeys and the mapping of territories as instruments of investigation. www.borders.de Major exhibition: 2003 Biennale di Venezia. in the [ve]01: border counter, Utopia Station; Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella // 2002 Adriano Olivetti Foundation, Roma; Kunst Haus Dresden; Italian Cultural Institute, Prague // 2001 Palazzo delle Papesse Contemporary Art Center, Siena // 2000 Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw // 1999 Küntlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin
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