Incendiary Traces at the EU Border: Frontex to the Hellenic Coast

In June 2017, six artists took out their watercolor sets, pencils and sketch pads, and began to record their observations of the Frontex Situation Centre, the primary border surveillance center of the EU border protection agency, in Warsaw. We were part of Incendiary Traces: the exhibition at nGbK Gallery, Berlin, in conjunction with the 2017 exhibition of the same name. The full publication is available on their website, www.ngbk.de.

HILDA MUSKIN

Hilda Musklin is an artist and chair of Art at Cal Poly Pomona. Her essay, “Incendiary Traces: the EU Border to the Hellenic Coast” was first published in the exhibition catalogue, Frontex to the Hellenic Coast, published by nGbK Gallery, Berlin, in conjunction with the 2017 exhibition of the same name. The full publication is available on their website, www.ngbk.de.

Frontex uses a military-style command and control apparatus to collect and share border surveillance data in near-real time from a wide range of government agencies within and outside of the EU. Surveillance comes from observations on the ground, the water, and in the air. The goal is to gain "situated awareness" in order to control the observed area. While Frontex agents in the Warsaw control room render "security alerts" as abstract data points on maps, the agency projects a public view of itself as an on-the-ground humanitarian rescue agency. Its press office provides heroic images of field patrolling and maritime rescue missions. It is a warzone in uniform and spy-fi-looking books set. The world is made up of men, women and children in everyday clothing and floating small vessels. The maritime images are most striking because the water and sky are so pleasurable. The people are in a sea of blue, friendly and figurative. With no markers, they could be in any large body of water, close to land or far from it. The circumstances surrounding their situation – including where they are when they came from and where they are going – are unclear, though certainly critical for everyone pictured. The people in the conference rooms and control room of Frontex headquarters, too, are in a pleasurable setting that could be in nearly any international city.

Where is the EU border? As much as it is defined and mapped through politics, laws and agreements, it exists where it operates – in addition to the vessels in the sea. It includes the Frontex headquarters in Warsaw, the European Space Agency satellite control rooms in Italy, their satellites in space, and the objects of their gaze, located in Niger and viewed by Frontex agents in Warsaw. Together, these places compose a constant border ecology.

Following our visit to Frontex in Warsaw, Incendiary Traces traveled to Athens to explore the headquarters of the Hellenic Coast Guard. The Greek paramilitary agency in charge of Greece's sea border surveillance and a key affiliate of Frontex. As it happened, our view from a bus stop nearby had been occupied by hundreds of refugees tents around months earlier. Inside the building, a control room where Greek agents share surveillance data with Frontex in Warsaw.

Note to the Reader: This essay is an excerpt from Tunnel Below / Skyjacking Above: Deconstructing the Border, published by nGbK Gallery, Berlin, in conjunction with the 2017 exhibition of the same name. The full publication is available on their website, www.ngbk.de.

HILLARY MUSKIN

Hilda Musklin is a visual artist and research professor of art at California Institute of Technology. She served Incendiary Traces in 2017 to re-imagine the politics of surveillance economies. Subjects included the Master Corps for Ground Controls, in the Near East, California; Mexico City's CSS, Neighborhood Archeology Projects, in Mexico City; and the Atlantic coast, California, the US. The exhibition included the CUNY Institute for Creative Technology, in Los Angeles, and the CUHK Institute for Creative Technology, in Hong Kong. A larger retrospective exhibition, "Project Series: Incendiary Traces" was recently presented at the Russian College of Art and Design, which organized the exhibition "Vox Spatia." The accompanying book includes an essay by Robert Nevels discussing the effect of military technology on visualization culture, as theorized by Nancy Ikeka in the Context of Southern California's Art Industry and the artistic networks associated with the California Valley, and narrated by Hilda Musklin. Musklin's move on the project and Mexico City's master Chilean Bogosy surveillance system will be included in the forthcoming Routledge book, "Cultural Networks, Nodes of the Networked City," edited by Franco Moreo and Andrea Lujan-Maria, with chapters coordinated by Brian Lonza and Beatriz Galindo.