KALEIDOSCOPE

Richard Mosse

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Investigating migrations and related issues of sovereignty, warfare and surveillance, the work of the Irish photographer forces us to confront our own complicity.

FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE In an essay called “Frontier Photography,” first published in *Artforum* in March 2009, Trevor Paglen writes about the connection between mid-19th century frontier photographers such as Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge and Timothy O’Sullivan and the military and industrial remote sensing systems in place today, “bringing symbolic and strategic order to blank spots on maps through surveillance, imaging, and mapping.” There is sometimes an almost cliché conception of the desert as this extra-territory, a place outside of sovereignty, a kind of colonial grasp of the desert and of those living inside or beyond it. In recent years, this colonial imaginary is being put into policy: the desert along the border between the US and Mexico, along the sea and desert borders of Europe, etc. These spaces are being mobilized as buffer zones, as hostile environments that are weaponized to guard Fortress Europe. Properties common to the desert and to the sea—flatness, scarce inhabitancy, minimal structures—somehow lend themselves to this kind of securitization that is very much part of the defense systems in both the United States and Europe.

RICHARD MOSSE In practice, certain parts of the Sahara Desert are extra-legal spaces—lacking sovereignty, like the High Seas. So it’s interesting to conflate them in terms of a colonial imaginary, as you say: a space in which the unpleasant spectacle of our refugee “crisis” can be outsourced, delegated or exported. EU immigration policy has tended to outsource its “wall,” for want of a better word, far beyond Europe’s borders, to places like Turkey, Niger, and even as far afield as South Sudan. For example, the EU sends personnel and large amounts of funding to the Libyan Coast Guard, which has a long record of human rights violations. This is deeply problematic, as a recent Forensic Architecture case study revealed.

FA Yes, the “wall,” or policy of containment, is definitely taking many forms, aiming on the one hand to delegitimize rescue NGOs from the central Mediterranean, while on the other, supporting the LYCG to intercept and pull back migrants more effectively. Some of which you address in your work, and some through our cases conducted alongside Forensic Oceanography, such as the Sea Watch or Iuventa investigation from 2017, where an NGO’s boat was seized by the Italian judiciary under suspicion of “assistance to illegal migration” and collusion with smugglers.

RM It's harrowing to watch the Sea Watch footage, showing the Libyan Coast Guard violently attack defenseless refugees, many of whom are in the process of drowning. This happened in international waters, where accountability and international refugee law are difficult to enforce. These "empty" spaces—the deserts and seas bordering Europe—become convenient liminal spaces to displace our national and international responsibilities. And so, like Paglen charting clandestine reconnaissance satellites, I feel there's a moral imperative for citizen activists to hold their governments to account and bring what goes on in these extra-legal places into view. Crucially, strategic litigation can use these images as evidence to prosecute such violations and impact change in international practice and policy, as hopefully will result from the Seawatch trial in the European Court of Human Rights, proving the culpability of the Italian state, which has funded, equipped and trained the Libyan coastguard. This is what I find particularly exciting about Forensic Architecture's work: how its case studies and investigations are instrumentalized towards legal prosecution, sometimes even leading to or contributing to judicial trials in international courts.

There are numerous other examples of EU immigration policy being carried out "offshore." Seen together, this can be described as EU border externalization, and it's not for nothing that this practice carries echoes of Europe's colonial past. This displacement of some of the less wholesome aspects of Europe's immigration policy to extra-legal "grey areas"—where EU immigration practices unfold in international waters and in the desert transit nations beyond European borders—usefully pushes them out of sight and out of mind, leaving EU citizens ignorant of loopholes in international refugee law exploited by less-than-scrupulous EU immigration policies.

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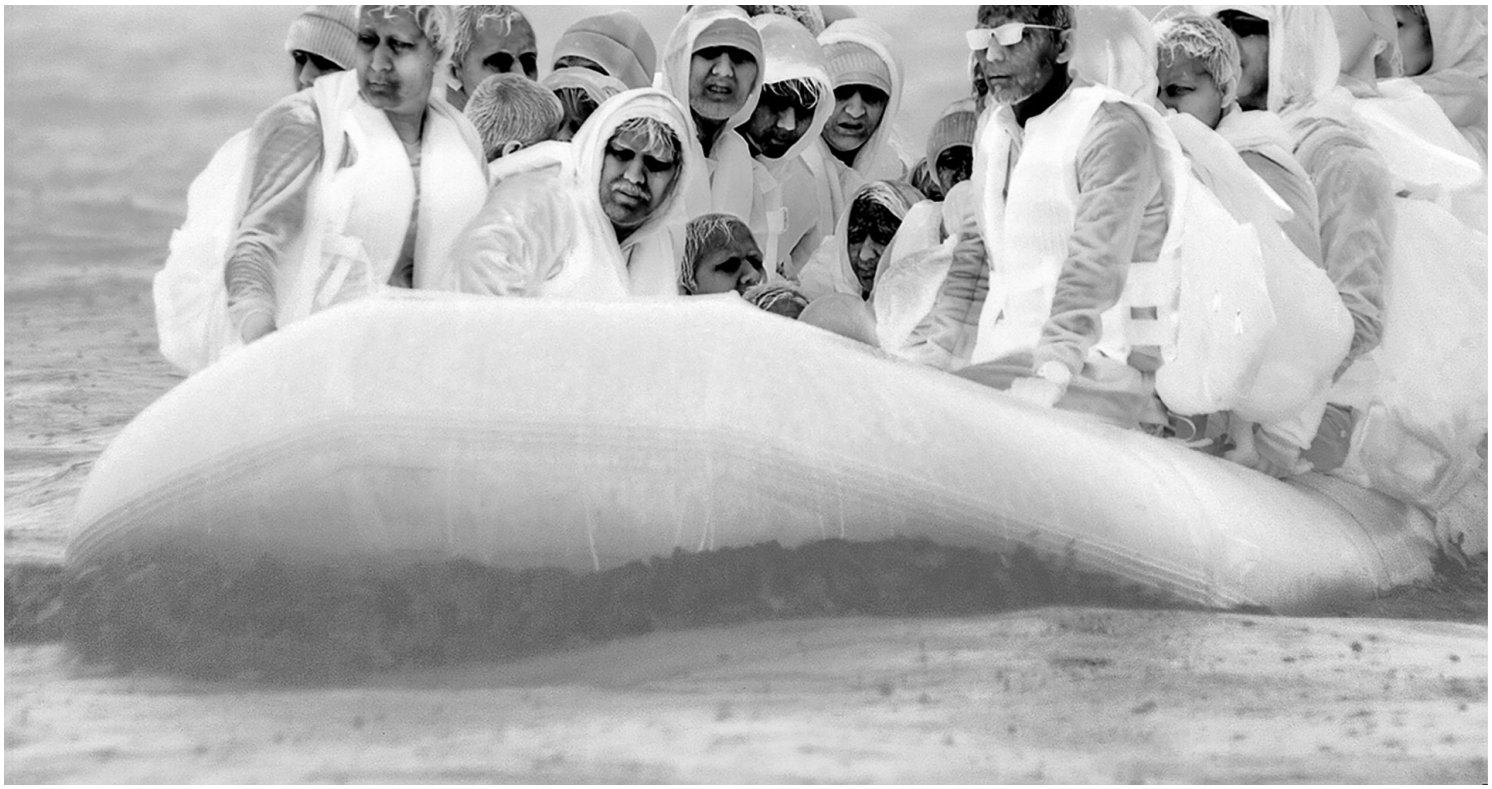
An important example of EU border externalization is the EU-Turkey Statement. This complicated migrant redistribution deal struck with Erdogan has dramatically reduced the flow of illegal migrants across the Aegean Sea. Yet, as a case of mass *refoulement*, it sets a precedent for expedient erosions of the human rights of refugees. This is the systematic collective expulsion of extremely vulnerable asylum seekers who have landed on the shores of Greek islands back to detention centers in Turkey, a transit country where their human rights are not guaranteed and where they are liable to be subject to persecution. It's very similar to Australia's notorious offshore detention policy, such as we see on Manus Island.

There are many other examples, such as bilateral defense agreements between EU member states and transit countries (e.g., Italy and Tunisia or Germany and Egypt), the establishment of asylum registration centers in non-EU countries (such as Egypt or Lebanon), or foreign aid sent to counter the crime of human trafficking, but actually intended to stem the flow of "irregular migration"—a kind of indirect violation of our asylum obligations.

An effect of EU border externalization in Middle Eastern and North African nations has been the rapid growth in border security spending, including donations of military equipment and arms exports, sometimes in spite of existing EU and UN arms embargoes. EU immigration policies in these regions have greatly profited European weapons companies. Leonardo, the Italian weapons manufacturer, actually produced the long-range thermographic camera that I used to make *Incoming* (2017). This camera was designed for littoral (coastal), marine and land-based battlefield situational awareness and insurgent detection, tracking and targeting. I became interested in it as a kind of manifestation of an aspect of the military-humanitarian complex that forms the EU's response to the mass movement of refugees towards its shores. I began to understand the camera as a specific example of the security, reconnaissance and biometric technologies built to monitor and control the tide of irregular migration and enforce EU border externalization throughout the Middle East and North Africa. I purchased, worked with and studied the camera as a vehicle or prism that I hoped would give me insight into these aspects of EU border enforcement, in the hopes that its functions, the ways in which it was designed to be used, and the ways in which it was built to receive and represent the world, would help reveal certain details of EU border enforcement.



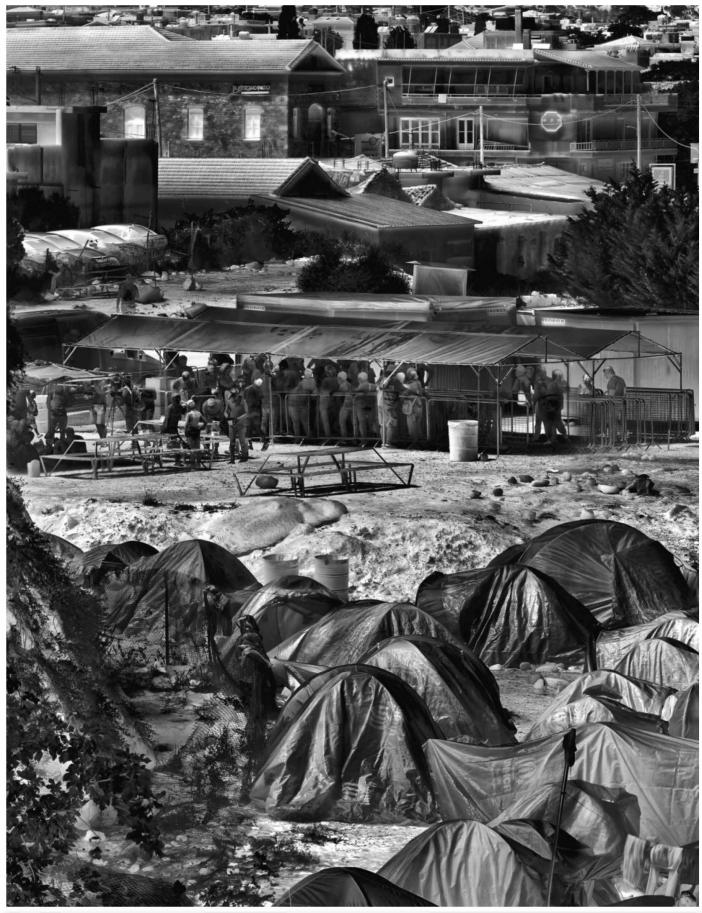
FA When you were filming *Incoming*, in what ways did these border mechanisms and regulations, extending from Europe, meet you? In Libya, for instance?

RM There was a kind of bureaucratic metanarrative to working with this camera, which is classed as military grade, dual-use rated and controlled under the International Treaty of Arms Regulations (ITAR). The camera's movement across international borders is tightly regulated under arms trafficking laws, an irony that wasn't lost on me as I traveled with it to intercept human trafficking routes, using it to document waves of stateless individuals attempting to cross international borders illegally. At great expense, I hired lawyers to apply for export clearance certification from the Irish government to allow the camera's international movement under ITAR, a bureaucracy protecting proprietary weapons technologies from falling into the wrong hands. I traveled with official export licenses which stated, among other things, the camera's End Use ("To Raise Awareness").

It was a perverse inversion, in some ways, of the unseen subterfuge of asylum seekers, willfully discarding, for example, their Afghan passports on the shores of the Aegean Sea. But these restrictions on my own freedom of movement gave me a certain understanding, an emphatic reminder of the camera as a tool of the state. ITAR strictly forbids the export of this camera to a blacklist of sanctioned nations which includes Libya and Syria, two countries which are key to understanding the European refugee crisis. This means that I couldn't actually work with this camera inside Libya or Syria as a result of arms embargoes, under threat of being arrested for arms smuggling. In some respects, the piece was formed in part by those export limitations.

The only legal way around them was to record from across international borders, which the camera was especially capable of, and which we did in the case of Syria, filming from an ancient archaeological mound on the Turkish-Syrian border named Oylum Höyük, one of the largest archaeological mounds in the Middle East, and an historically strategic vantage point overlooking the desert plains of northern Syria. From Oylum Höyük, we were able to record fighting between Free Syrian Army troops, fighting with US air cover, and Islamic State forces in and around the town of Dabiq. This is significant because Dabiq was preordained in the Koran as the place where a great final battle would be fought between Sunni Jihadis and their heathen enemy, so holds great symbolic resonance in Daesh ideology.

The camera's dual-use export controls also prevented us from traveling with it inside Libya. Libya, too, is sanctioned under EU and UN embargoes, so we intercepted the northerly migrant flow south of the Libyan border in the Sahara Desert of northern Niger, picking up the route again off the coast of Libyan waters in the Mediterranean, where we embedded with Guardia di Finanza, Italian customs police based out of the Sicilian port of Messina, on migrant rescue patrols.



Trans-Saharan migrant routes are in a constant state of flux, captive to shifting security conditions. Older routes through the Malian cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu have become extremely unsafe due to Islamist insurgencies, Azawadi separatists and lawlessness in the north of the country. The situation is similar in Chad. As a result, many migrants from the Sahel region, along with numbers of sub-Saharan and Horn of Africa migrants and a handful of Syrian refugees, choose to cross to Libya through Niger, which has turned the city of Agadez into a busy trafficking hub. Beyond Agadez, the roads peter out into desert, and the route to Libya is an intensely difficult off-road journey through treacherous landscape. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimates that an equal number of migrants die crossing the Sahara Desert as die crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and some estimates put that death toll at double this figure.

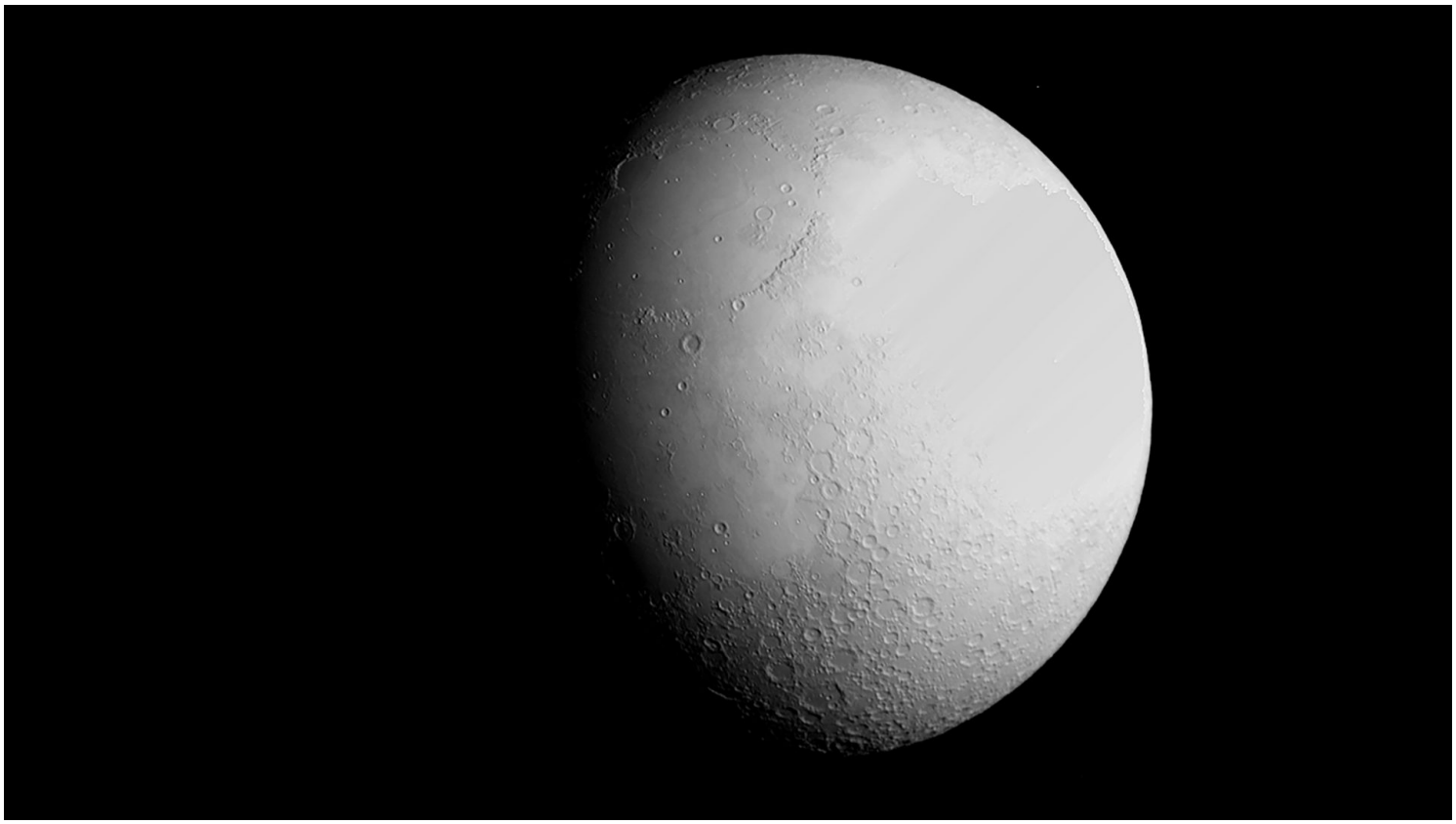
The migrant convoys massing in northern Niger are extraordinary to witness. Huge numbers of all-terrain vehicles, mainly Toyota Hilux pickup trucks but also bigger lorries stacked with cargo, mill about in the streets of Agadez, waiting for passengers before hurtling off-road through the desert in a staggered caravan. The route becomes unsafe past a certain army post north of the city. There are frequent ambushes, and the drivers seem nervous, choosing to drive at high speed through night and day. The journey to Libya takes around four to six days. We joined one of these convoys to capture footage that forms a scene in *Incoming*, traveling with the protection of soldiers from the Niger Army. Military escort is required in this region due to the scattered presence of Islamic State, as well Al Qaeda in the Maghreb.

Before these desert routes became popular with migrants, traffickers were said to carry drugs north, returning from Libya with weapons to trade with Islamist groups. An official from EUCAP Sahel, who I met with in Bamako, assured me that vehicles traveling in these migrant convoys still do. In practice, the trans-Saharan trafficking routes are lawless areas subject to few regulations, and there is minimal police or military enforcement, making it a safe haven for Islamist training camps and infrastructure. US, EU and UN military bases have been established in Niger, Mali and other Saharan nations in order to surveil and strike Islamist groups. In some respects, the region's lawlessness and relative lack of sovereignty, along with received notions of this place as a no man's land, have given Western forces a much freer hand to deal with (strike) Islamist insurgents and local populations with impunity.

Many aspects of EU border externalization strategy are correlative and intertwined with anti-terrorist security activities, which is why I refer to the EU's response to the refugee crisis in terms of a military-humanitarian complex, and why I see this long-range military-grade surveillance camera as a useful medium through which to understand it, and through which to portray it.

FA Yet, as far as I understand them, imaging systems, be they satellite remote sensing, terrestrial surveying machines or military, industrial or even medical camera systems, could be narrowed down to two generalized modes of operation. The first is a human-based reading of the image data, while the second is a machine-learning-based semantic "understanding" of the information coming in from sensors on the camera system. These AI-driven systems interpret the incoming images, lock into specific features, track them, measure and compare them across time, then make operable decisions that are carried out by either humans or other automated machines, be they weapon systems, alerts or a medical diagnosis.
The question is, when one only has the visual input from such a camera system without being linked into the larger data and algorithm network, in what ways does it affect the possible understanding of what the image shows? Though comprised of tones of grey, these are not traditional greyscale images, but rather heat maps derived from a completely different part of the optical spectrum and captured by a different camera sensor. So how do we hint or point towards the further sets of sensors and interpretation that are inherent to this camera-weapon system? There is obviously a technical facet to this, but it ties directly into political and moral questions running through any counter engagement with the military-humanitarian complex, as you described it.

RM Other artists are, of course, very welcome to carry out such an investigation of the AI-driven systems that interpret the footage produced by this camera and how it is analyzed and used by state structures. Such artworks are not uncommon actually. *Incoming* was recently shown in Hamburg alongside Trevor Paglen's video *A Study of Invisible Images*, Broomberg & Chanarin's *Spirit is a Bone*, Edmund Clark's *Negative Publicity*, and other excellent works by artists that investigate images in the ways that you prescribe. But these are not the only ways to make politically-engaged art that attempts to counter or reveal state structures and the military-humanitarian complex.
My own work has a different emphasis. It attempts to implicate the viewer within the work's gaze, to force the viewer to confront their own participation on many levels. I wish to transfer to the viewer this sense of complicity that I feel as a European citizen, the shame that I have felt when I visit refugee camps here in Europe, and to perceive the extent to which our governments and our society have failed—and continue to fail —these people.
I have attempted to do this, moreover, through the production of original primary documentary material, footage which can also be used in other contexts as evidence. For example, certain scenes shot during the making of Incoming have been used by Forensic Architecture in a forthcoming investigation into one of the worst human trafficking disasters to occur on the Aegean Sea. There is something to be said, in my opinion, for independent photographers who continue to produce original imagery of historically significant events.



Richard Mosse (Irish, B. 1980) is an artist who lives and works in New York.
Forensic Architecture (FA) is a research agency, based at Goldsmiths, University of London.
All images Richard Mosse, *Incoming,* 2017.
Courtesy of the artist; Jack Shainmann Gallery, New York; and Carlier | Gebauer, Berlin.