

# Personal Geographies in the Bulgarian-Turkish Border Zone

Some thoughts regarding the exhibition *Eine Europäische Grenze* at the Goethe-Institut Bulgarien

Janis Schroeder, Berlin 5.10.2023



*Eine Europäische Grenze*, Janis Schroeder 2023

It was in the context of an artist residency in September 2021, that I first visited the Bulgarian-Turkish border zone. I spent a few days in Swilengrad, the first major city that one encounters when traveling on the busiest road from Turkey to Bulgaria. Much of what I saw there is a manifestation of its proximity to the border: casinos, dance clubs and other facilities for people who are passing through. Police and border guards are omnipresent with their military vehicles, border installations, watchtowers, checkpoints and cameras.

Since 2007, when Bulgaria acceded to the European Union, thereby transforming this line into an external border of the EU, the area has become increasingly militarized and monitored by sophisticated surveillance technology. Frontex – the European Union’s powerful organization for external border protection – is key to surveillance operations here. It comprises police units from various EU countries, including Germany.

I am struck by the way in which this high-tech surveillance program and the omnipresent police forces have been brought in from elsewhere and are not integrated with the pre-exist-

ing patterns of local, daily life here. It seems to me that the habitants of the border region have had to endure great changes to their living spaces in a rather short period of time, namely in the 16 years that Bulgaria has been a member of the European Union. These changes have arisen with the development of the border zone and investments in the police and surveillance infrastructure; however, interestingly traces of how the landscape looked before it became an external border zone of the EU are still present and visible. In that way, old and new stand right next to each other.

This contrast became a defining pair of opposites for me and formed a kind of pattern through which I perceive the place. For example, next to the newly built highway, which facilitates the enormous flow of traffic through one of the world’s busiest border crossings, there is an old, narrow, parallel road that is hardly used today. It is dotted with modern ruins from the pre-EU era: money exchange offices, gas stations, and stores, none of which serve their original purpose any longer and into which people, animals, and plants have moved as non-paying guests.

In this context, I felt small, uncomfortable, unprotected and vulnerable. Before arriving I was unable to estimate how the police or the general public would react to my presence. I was very conspicuous as a solo traveler, equipped with a lot of curiosity, which was obviously expressed in the usage of my camera. During my explorations on foot or by bicycle, I faced large police cars and a huge number of trucks. On several occasions, it was made clear to me that I should disappear as quickly as possible from where I was at that moment.

But the diversity and strong contradictions in this region had already piqued my interest. A year later, I decided to return in order to visit different towns and villages, and to engage more deeply with the complexity and history of this border and the surrounding landscape. From my point of view, what is going on there is closely related to my life in Berlin. Operations at the European border as well as migration policy decisions from Brussels, Warsaw (where Frontex is based) and other capitals have an impact not only on the lives of people living at the borders, but on everyone inside the EU as well as on many people outside it wishing to cross these borders. My privilege in being able to choose how, when and where I travel and realize my artistic projects, stands in a strong contrast to the European policy of strict border control and the illegal pushbacks of asylum seekers and rejection of other mi-

grants. The great advantage of a German passport, which barely limits my movement, cannot be overstated. Additionally, my second trip to the border was funded by an arts grant from the German government. My privileges are made particularly clear to me in the context of these travels, during which most of the people I met are far from being able to enjoy similar advantages and opportunities.

Another aspect of this border region which is of major importance from a European perspective, is the flow of goods that cross the border in huge volumes, transported in trucks and destined for the European market. Additionally, both Bulgaria and Turkey have a long, multifaceted history with Germany and other European states that goes far beyond the current political decisions of the EU. These facets and many more are very present as I, a German, travel in the region. The fact that it is a European border becomes clear not only when one deals with the foreign and domestic policies of the EU. Throughout the history of both Bulgaria and Turkey, there have been many major territorial shifts and changes in the meaning of the line between them. This movement has resulted in deep connections and inextricable entanglements between the two countries as well as between both countries and Europe. Both in the large context of European politics and history, and in the smaller contexts of the stories that take place at the level



"Change" – What is written in peeling letters on this former exchange office could also be symbolic of the entire border region.

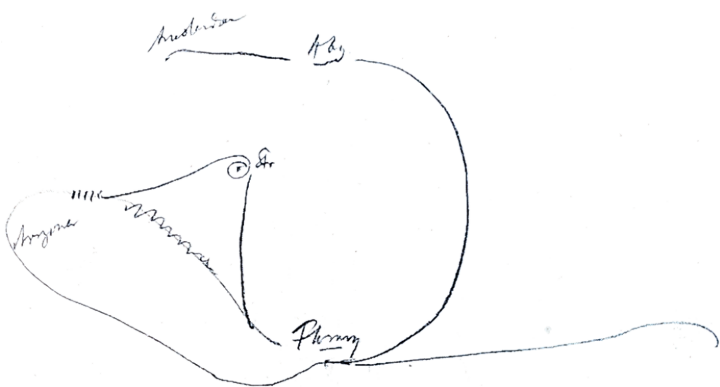




of everyday life, there are a large number of aspects that interest me as a traveler in the region and as an artist.

In a sense, the project grew beyond me due to its complexity, as I sometimes had a hard time deciding which of all its interesting aspects to focus on in my work. This complexity and the

feeling of being overwhelmed is reflected in the exhibition. The various media (in addition to video and photography, I also use archive material, drawings and text) are juxtaposed through montage and collage. In this way, new images of the border region emerge, which I call *Personal Geographies*, a name borrowed from Aby Warburg. This is what the art historian Warburg called a sketch that acts as an emotion-based map showing various stages of his life (see drawing on the left). Using this concept, I also began to make small drawings which reflect my emotions in specific situations and sites on the journey. Partially on transparent paper, they overlap images and archival material that I made and collected during this research project. In one of the collages, 20 to 30 documents, drawings and photos are pasted on top of each other on transparent paper meaning many details of the individual layers are only partially recognizable (see photo above). For me, this is emblematic of my engagement with the region, which is defined by its complexity, its history and stories, its far-reaching international entanglements, and its ceaseless changes.



Aby Warburg, *Schema einer persönlichen Geographie*, 1928, pencil on paper, The Warburg Institute, in: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010

*The exhibition Eine Europäische Grenze. Persönliche Geographien in der bulgarisch-türkischen Grenzregion takes place at the Goethe-Institut Bulgaria in Sofia from 14.9.2023 to 13.10.2023. On display are artistic works by Janis Schroeder. The exhibition is curated by Radoslav Mehandzhiyski.*

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*More pictures and information about the exhibition on [www.js-lab.net](http://www.js-lab.net)*