In/visible geographies
An investigation of the Swiss Italian borderscape

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The PhD research 'In/visible geographies. An investigation of the Swiss Italian borderscape' develops a theoretical and visual investigation of the border landscape between Italy and Switzerland through the notion of borderscape, an emerging conceptualization of borders as multilevel and mobile which include overlapping socio-political and physical dimensions, against the flat and static representation of the modern map (Brambilla, 2015). In contrast to the growing invisibility of the border physical infrastructure, its space continues to be *produced* (Lefebvre, 1974) by multiple in/visible processes, by the performativity of its crossings and by the imaginations associated to them. The geography of the border is constantly re-shaped by the bodies routinely moving across it, sometimes displaced far away from the boundary line itself. Combining photography, urban studies and oral history, the research is developed first along the border and then across it, by focusing on the stories of transits of people who are differentially included by the border – cross border workers and migrants – with the aim of developing alternative imaginations of these spaces. The practice based part is developed as a photographic practice engaged with places, which allows to see and understand places differently, deepening the immaterial and symbolic dimensions associated with material space. For CA2RE, an artifact will be presented, i.e. a series of twelve photographs taken during walks along the border, where the border infrastructure itself is often invisible or in ruins, accompanied by a narrative text of the encountering made along the line. This constitutes the first part to fieldwork for the thesis.

According to Lefebvre's theory on *The production of space* (*ibidem*), space is produced through the triplicity of (1) spatial practices, (2) representations of space, and (3) spaces of representation – corresponding to (1) the perceived, (2) the conceived and (3) the lived dimension of space – and are deeply conditioned by mechanisms of economic production, which in the case of borders depend on the differential between two neighboring territories. The representations of space (2) correspond to the space thought by experts, technocrats and urban planners, materialized in maps and drawings, which he identifies as a manifestation of hegemonic power. The spaces of representation instead (3) coincide with those each one experiences individually, often dense with symbols and images linked to the hidden aspects of social life, tending towards nonverbal systems and signs of representation and containing counter-hegemonic expressions. In the context of the research, the most obvious representation of space is first the cartography of the border, where it is identified as a fixed line on a map, and the resulting laws (such as the Dublin regulation for asylum seekers or tax exemption within 20km from the border for cross-border workers, i.e. the things that establishes the framework within which people can move). In contrast, the spaces of representation are more complex to identify and must be sought both in the borderscape places and social life.

The geographical discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after pursuing the idea of vague natural borders linked to geographical elements such as mountains, found the most suitable expression of borders in a line exact and without thickness. There is a sort of ontological relationship between cartography and borders, as they come to exist first of all in being drawn (represented) on a map. Yet maps, while they are useful to understand the

ideology of the nation-state, are not enough to grasp the complex historical reality of borderscapes, which extend far beyond the boundary line. The border between Lombardy and Canton Ticino, established in the Treaty of Varese in 1752 and then revised at the beginning of the 1900s[1], identifies an area that has peculiar characteristics. It is the only flat stretch of the border, not running in the Alps, therefore not 'natural'. It divides two regions where the same language is spoken - Italian - but where the mechanisms behind the economy and the production of space are very different, linked to the in / visible processes of the borderscape. Moving from west to east, the research considers different areas of the border. In Ponte Tresa, on lake Lugano, the two sides of the coast almost come to touch each other. Here smugglers used to pass into the water. Then comes the flat area south of Lugano, full of industries where Italian cross-border workers are employed. In this area the border was closed with the *ramina*, a metal mesh, that soon fell into disrepair and is now almost completely dematerialized, allowing people to constantly move from one side to the other for daily activities such as running or biking. More east, there are transnational woods - sometimes crossed by migrants on foot - where the border barely appears at times as a faint trace, the city of Como and further on the top of the Sighignola, where the border pass through its transnational panorama.

The photographs of landscapes where the border is invisible, collected along these itineraries, question the very nature of the borders and how they function, what is 'present' in places and which meanings are associated with them. The invisibility of the infrastructure counters the cartographic reality of the line and its allusion to immutability. If in aftermath photography (i.e., photographs taken in a place where something has happened but is no longer visible) the images are deliberately made at the 'wrong' time to develop a reflective practice (Brett, 2016), the photographs of invisible borders are taken in the 'wrong' places. The most scenic appearances of the border, such as customs, are not shown. At the same time, its less obvious appearances, which are the majority and which are associated with local memories, are made visible. This approach is particularly relevant for internal European borders, which do not function as militarized borders where the iconic architectural element of the wall can be taken as a reference, but which live on in / visible processes that continue to produce their space. Images of landscape had been used in the past to build national identity (see the German Heimat, *ibidem*), something which makes landscape the element where to interrogate and deconstruct this narrative. Along with the photographs, a narrative text developed thanks to a series of interviews allows to deepen the knowledge of the places. The meaning of photos, like places, is indexical, as it is given by the context and by our knowledge of the context conditions, showing how our engagement with landscape is historically situated, embedded in social relations and political (Bender, 2002). Rethinking the prevailing, often hegemonic, narratives can open up to a better understanding of lived spaces and their imaginations.

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[1] See Adami, Vittorio. 1927. Confine Italo Svizzero. Volume II – Parte I. In *Storia documentata dei confini del Regno d'Italia*. Rome: Provveditorato Generale dello Stato.

Design Driven Research

The method combines in-depth fieldwork engaging with place through photography as a practice to see and understand places. Moving away from traditional cartographic representations that characterize both urban studies and border studies, it enters into dialogue with the landscape photography tradition of the Italian school, which played an essential role in the design culture. The photographic practice is developed through a series of walks whose parameters - time, duration, route - are established *a priori* to retrace specific itineraries, such as those of smuggling, under certain conditions. It is accompanied by narrative texts whose content is shaped by a series of interviews with people providing oral histories. In doing so, the method relates to Girot's (1991) four trace concepts, meant as tools for landscape investigation and design, which cluster around issues of memory. The first act of knowing a site is *landing*, something which may revolutionize the preconception that one has of a place. The second is *grounding,* connected to coming back multiple times to a place while researching its evolution. The third is *finding*, summarizing the searching and the outcome, the tangible and the evanescent. Finally comes the *founding*, which formalizes a transformed construction of the site. In this case, the practice is situated in the finding and before founding, in that necessary stage of conscious *reading* a landscape before *writing* on it.

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Bio

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Nicoletta Grillo graduated with a master's degree in architecture from Politecnico di Milano in 2016. After the graduation, she studied photography at CFP Bauer in Milan and worked as an architect and photographer. In 2018 she started a PhD in Urban Planning, Design & Policy at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, under the supervision of prof. Hilde Van Gelder (KU Leuven, Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art & Visual Culture) and Luca Gaeta (Politecnico di Milano, DAStU). Her main research interests are landscape, photography and border studies.

Landscape where the border is invisible # 12, Balcone d'Italia, Lanzo d'Intelvi. Image by the author.