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Border Forensics: the politics of tracing border violence

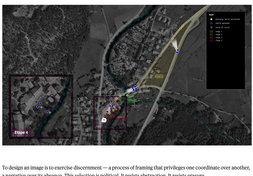
Working across architecture, forensics, and visual analysis, they transform images into tools of accountability within today's shifting border regimes

Author
Kamil Dalkir

Borders: engineered discontinuities, designed to regulate the mobility of human bodies through bureaucratic filtration — granting or denying access based on arbitrary configurations of birthplace, paperwork, or political favor. Beyond territorial demarcation, they choreograph inequality: determining who may pass freely, and who must risk death by aquatic submersion, desert dehydration, or administrative erasure. At their core, borders function less as protective barriers than as technologies of selective inclusion and exclusion. Etched into our collective minds, borders declare a separation between "us" and "them" — those deemed undesirable — evolving into omnipresent, shape-shifting apparatuses: at once invisible and militarised, virtual and concrete. And yet, how does one trace a violence that inscribes itself through absence?

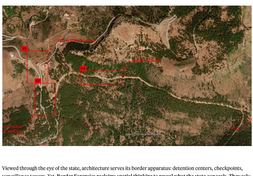
It is along this line that Border Forensics, co-founded by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, begins from the proposition that facts — when evidenced spatially, visually, and collectively — can be mobilised against injustice. Theirs is a practice of evidence-making, challenging official narratives surrounding the deaths, disappearances, and deterrents haunting today's migratory corridors. While image marks the terrain of their investigations, it is through the production of an image that their inquiries take shape.

Borrowing an array of instruments from multiple disciplines — cinematic techniques, architectural modeling, geospatial analysis using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), programming, statistical forensics, remote sensing, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) — **Border Forensics weaves these into an operative methodology that defines their work.** From satellite density maps of abandoned boats to time-coded animations of coast guard delays, each image is a site of confrontation — questioning the violence it documents, becoming a lens through which the border is made to speak.



To design an image is to exercise discernment — a process of framing that privileges one coordinate over another, a narrative over its absence. This selection is political. It resists abstraction. It resists erasure.

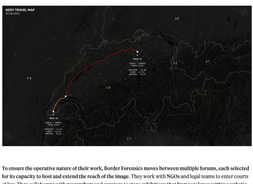
By reading the built environment as a field of traces, **Border Forensics approaches space not as a neutral container, but as an archive of movement and obstruction** — inscribed in nature, architecture, data circuits, and, ultimately, human bodies. It is in this inversion that their practice becomes investigative – moving backward from event to structure, from absence to trace, from silence to record.



Viewed through the eye of the state, architecture serves its border apparatus: detention centers, checkpoints, surveillance towers. Yet, **Border Forensics reclaims spatial thinking to reveal what the state conceals. They ask: What does it mean to design for evidence? To model for accountability?** Through this inquiry, architecture ceases to be the language of enclosure and begins to speak of resistance. Against the illusion of borders as fixed and eternal, their work reveals something quieter, but more enduring: that even the most fortified lines betray a porosity. Even walls, under pressure, begin to speak.

All forms of visualisation demand scrutiny, shaped as it is by the politics of perception. Satellite imagery can survey as much as it can testify; statistical renderings can dehumanise as easily as they can affirm. To visualise the border is to risk replicating its violence. In turn, **Border Forensics adopts a *disbodied gaze* — one that refuses the terms of state vision and instead asks: What is withheld, obscured, erased?**

This approach chooses to draw not the path of a migrant — which could be used to criminalise and detain — but the delay of rescue, the deletion of radar traces, the silence of patrol vessels. To disobey is to construct a new visual order—one that speaks from below, from between, from tragedy.



To ensure the operative nature of their work, Border Forensics moves between multiple forums, each selected for its capacity to host and extend the reach of the image. They work with NGOs and legal teams to enter courts of law. They collaborate with **researchers and curators** to stage exhibitions that frame violence within aesthetic and ethical critique. They publish in **academic circles**, where theory and method are placed in generative tension. For an image, to matter, must circulate. It must be seen, shared, and activated — called into the world not as representation, but as demand.

Among the many arenas of public address, the press conference emerges as a unique forum. More than a performance of institutional authority, it is an act of evidentiary rupture—where image, voice, and narrative converge to confront state violence in real time. Borrowing the aesthetic posture of power — its cadence, its choreography — and retooling it for exposure. Not obfuscation, but reckoning. Not spin, but a summons.

For Border Forensics, the press conference is a moment of immanent justice — acts that do not wait for judicial sanction or institutional endorsement, but stake their claim here and now, through testimony, presence, and public witnessing.

With every investigation, Border Forensics reorients the border as a field of contestation, interrogating the potential of the image — be it a map, an animation, or a model — to become operative in the politics of migration management. In revealing what is kept from view, they expose the border for what it is: an imagined line, materialised through force and sustained by systemic violence.

- Opening image: Asymmetric Visions. Exhibition view, Liminal / Border Forensics, Spazio Messina, Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan, 2025. Photograph by Luca del Pia.
- First gallery: Airborne Complicity – Frontex Aerial Surveillance Enables Abuse. Image from the investigation, December 12, 2022. The investigation reveals how Frontex's aerial surveillance facilitates human rights abuses at sea by coordinating interceptions and returns while avoiding direct responsibility. It exposes the role of European border technologies in perpetuating violence against migrants. Image by Border Forensics.
- Second gallery: The Death of Blessing Matthew – A Counter-Investigation on Violence at the Alpine Frontier. Excerpts from investigation video by Border Forensics, May 30, 2022. The project reconstructs the final moments of Blessing Matthew, a young Nigerian woman who died while fleeing law enforcement, using spatial analysis, witness testimonies, and digital mapping to expose the structural conditions and state practices that led to her death.
- Third gallery: The Nador–Melilla Border Trap. Images from the investigation by Border Forensics, June 10, 2024. Conducted in collaboration with Iridia, the investigation reconstructs the events of the June 24, 2022 massacre, using satellite imagery, videos, and testimonies to expose Spanish and Moroccan state complicity in the deaths and disappearances of migrants.
- Fourth gallery: The Nador–Melilla Border Trap. Exhibition view, Border Forensics, Kunstverein Dresden, 2024. Photograph by Anja Schneider. / Excerpt from press conference recording, Border Forensics in collaboration with Iridia, Madrid, 2024. The presentation featured findings from the investigation published June 10, 2024.
- Fifth gallery: The Death of Blessing Matthew – A Counter-Investigation on Violence at the Alpine Frontier. Excerpts from investigation video by Border Forensics, May 30, 2022. The project reconstructs the final moments of Blessing Matthew, a young Nigerian woman who died while fleeing law enforcement, using spatial analysis, witness testimonies, and digital mapping to expose the structural conditions and state practices that led to her death.
- Sixth gallery: From the Sea to the River – Border Violence Across Illegalised Migrants' Trajectories. Exhibition view featuring video installation by Border Forensics, including work by Forensic Oceanography, 2023. Photograph by Kira Kynd.
- Seventh gallery: Non è Stato Il mare. Dieci anni di Sea-Watch. Exhibition view, Sala Messina, Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan, 2025. The exhibition included contributions from Forensic Architecture, Border Forensics, Laika, Carola Rackete, and Ilaria Sallo. Photograph by Frank Stellitano.

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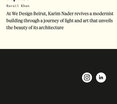

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