PRINT NO BORDER

QUESTIONING THE NATURE OF BOUNDARIES VIA PRINTMAKING PRACTICE

Laura Bortoloni

As borders gradually open up once again, the consequences of the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic are casting light on the renewed importance of regional and national borders. This is also true of European national borders – which had already been tested by the intensification of migratory flows and populist impulses – now in the process of becoming unwilling symbols of the restrictions ushered in by the pandemic. Closed for months, or at the very least made difficult to get through by health-related restrictions, the internal EU national borders that European peoples were coming to think of as a thing of the past were, quite suddenly, extremely concrete once again. This is a process that has been brought even more dramatically to the fore by the tragedy of the war in Ukraine.

From the starting point of these premises, the Print no border project explored the border and frontier concepts via xylographic practice, juxtaposing, stratifying, and comparing the geographical representation of boundaries with images borrowed from nature and the man-made elements that boundaries cut through.

BOUNDARIES AND FRONTIERS

Back in 1959, geographer Ladis K.D. Kristof (1959, pp. 269-82) posed the question: What is the difference between frontiers and boundaries? Some languages tend to downplay the difference in meaning, but it is one that is worth underlining.

"Boundaries denote an internal or external line which is not to be crossed while frontiers conjure up the idea that there is a place in which two diversities 'face one another'", answered Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla (1997, pp. 132-135), stressing that the difference between the Italian confine and frontiera is weaker than, for example, that between the English words border and frontier.

In the hope that the future holds increasingly fewer boundaries and more and more frontiers – with the latter understood as places in which two or more cultures can act as reciprocal filters and places for discussion rather than conflict, especially from the standpoint of a Europe that is based precisely on variety and wealth of difference – La Cecla applied a concept close to his heart, that of misunderstanding, to the frontier concept. For him, misunderstanding is not simply the opposite of understanding. It is actually comprehensible only if the time variable is brought in as a crucial element so that otherness is to be cut through and understood.
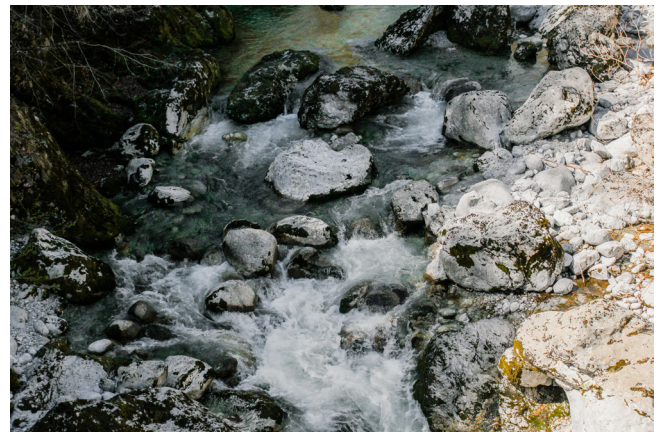

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Bortoloni L, (2022), The Italian-Slovenian border along the river Uccea
Figure 2: Bortoloni Laura (2022) Checkpoint at the Italian-Slovenian border in Uccea

ARE FRONTIERS NATURAL OR ARTIFICIAL?

Italian anthropologist Marco Aime (2018, pp. 12-19) asked himself whether it is boundaries that generate diversity or the reverse, in other words, it is diversity that leads to boundaries. It is a question that lays the foundations for thinking about the natural or artificial nature of boundaries. In the sense of international law, frontiers have primarily been generated through war. Even frontiers, which are often seen as 'natural', are the outcome of man-made processes. Bruno Tertrais and Delphine Papin (2018, pp. 20-23), in Atlante delle frontiere, mapped out 750 world frontiers, of which 100 or so are on the European continent alone. For them, 55% of the world's total frontiers have been considered 'natural', with the other 45% being considered artificial. The criteria on which the naturalness of frontiers has been determined over the centuries has, however, primarily been their 'defensibility'. The ways in which a boundary can be defined as natural are ambiguous and controversial. For example, in the case of a mountain chain, is it more opportune to consider the ridge line or the waterline? Where rivers are concerned, should it be the banks halfway across or the talweg? And what happens when rivers change course?

It is an issue that has been instrumentalised many times throughout Italian history, bringing the Alpine chain into a narrative that obliged it to act as a 'natural' boundary line. The great Italian geographer Claudio Cerreti (cited in Rossi, p. 26) spoke of "ambiguity" when a natural element such as a river is forced into a narrow line to ensure that it corresponds to a boundary line, although rivers are actually to be defined by their beds or their hydrographic basins. In the same way, boundary lines that run along mountain chain ridge lines have nothing real about them in actual fact, but are none other than "straight-line segments lasting a few kilometres and stretching from one stake post to another".

"In actual fact, all borders are artificial because they are the work of human beings", stated Tertrais and Papin (2018, p. 23), shifting their attention from boundary lines to space, observing the way that cross-frontier regions are inherently places of exchange, trade, movements, and migrations, some of them every day, such as cross-frontier workers, for example. Frontiers are thus as much spaces as they are lines, both fabrics, and routes, by nature porous and permeable.

WHAT DOES DRAWING UP A BOUNDARY LINE MEAN?

Depicting boundaries has a very long history, whose roots are frequently dated back to the Babylonian Mappa Mundi and Ptolemy's Geography by way of now-iconic artefacts such as the Tabula Peutingeriana (proto travel guide), the Renaissance Mappa di Fra Mauro, portolan charts, and the atlas tradition probably set in motion by Mercator himself, including Blaeu's Atlas Maior and 20th century atlases.

An important point in any assessment of the way maps are drawn is the focus of Tim Ingold's essays devoted to the power of the line, in which he distinguishes between "designed" maps and cartographic
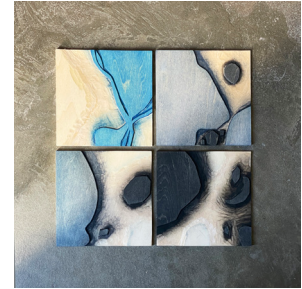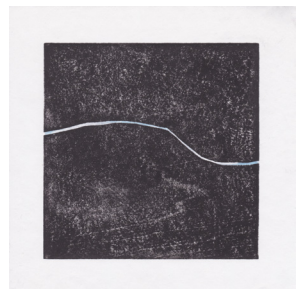

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Figure 3: Bortoloni L. (2022) Woodcut matrixes for Uccea #03
Figure 4: Bortoloni L. (2022), Uccea #03
Figure 5: Bortoloni L. (2022), Uccea #02

maps (2016, p. 85). The former are both part and outcome of the action they perform, while the latter are "connectors joining up points". The former have a narrative, gestural, dialectic, and even performance, dimension, while the latter are designed to divide up, and separate an inside from and an outside, defining occupation rather than habitation. The former evolved from actions and are designed along a route while the latter are designed by way of surfaces as connectors or – more sadly – dividers.

SCALES, MAPS, DEFORMATION

Mein Herr looked so thoroughly bewildered that I thought it best to change the subject. What a useful thing a pocket-map is!" I remarked. "That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?" "About six inches to the mile." "Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!" "Have you used it much?" I enquired. "It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well." (Carroll, 1893).

This is a famous passage from Sylvie and Bruno, Lewis Carroll's last novel, which brings up the map scale theme, a subject also taken up on multiple occasions by Borges and Calvino. It introduces the loss-of-information dilemma in the choice of scale. Charles and Ray Eames made a similar point in their Powers of Ten short documentary, which came out in two versions dated 1968 and 1977, in which these celebrated designers reflected on measuring the real and the proportions of the universe, showing progressively larger- or smaller-scale representations of objects, from a blanket stretched out in a Chicago park to the dizzying heights of the universe to the infinitesimal details of human cells under a microscope, on the basis of scale-of-10-based enlargements and reductions.

Simon Garfield (2012, p. 128) summed this up in his On the Map: geographical maps are not simply geographical maps but also projections of the world, models for other maps. And in a way, all maps are wrong because they are all products of a projection process. The defects of the Mercator projection are now well known, although it is still the most widely used model. Although the Mercator projection was capable of maintaining the shape of the continents (and thus allowed seafarers to plot straight-line routes, the grounds for its huge success), it betrayed their dimensions, offering up an imperialist representation of the world. A great many later models have been put forward, including the Gall–Peters and Winkel–Tripel models, but the Mercator projection is still the cornerstone of the Google Maps service and others of the same type.
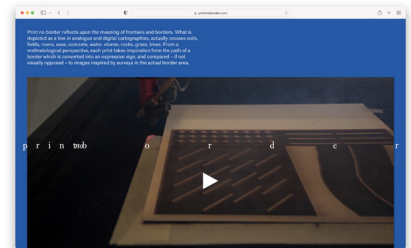

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Figure 6: Bortoloni L. (2022), Boundary stones at the Italian-Austrian border in Tarvisio
Figure 7: Bortoloni L. (2022), Project documentary and website
Figure 8: Cartography of the Italian-Slovenian border

SOURCES AND INSPIRATION

Many artists have explored map representations.

The entire professional career of Indian artist and printmaker Zarina Hashmi (1937–2020) focused on the exile theme and the representation of boundaries and home, from the starting point of the ultra-powerful Dividing Line (2001) in which a simple line cuts through and wounds a sheet of paper, in reference to the division between India and Pakistan in 1947. Line width and quality conjure up violence, pain, and separation and can be decodified on the basis of a knowledge and understanding of the artist's life story in which concepts of otherness and exile find expression in the practices of incision and elimination, exploiting intimate or global scale cartographic views such as in the Home is a foreign place (1999) and Atlas of my world (2001) series.
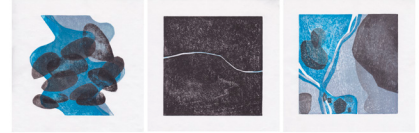
In his Atlante Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri (1943–1992) took photographs of maps, deconstructing the very concept of cartography with ultra-close-up prints of maps that dispel and break down textures designed to represent territories, surfaces, roads, lakes, and seas, turning a journey through space into a journey through signs, giving what were, for Jacques Bertin, visual components and variables in cartographic representation a new, rarefied meaning.

PRINT NO BORDER

In physical terms, we might say that frontiers do not exist. In both territorial and cartographic terms, whether they are imaginary objects, man-made abstractions, or realities that exist primarily to the extent to which they are represented, their drawing up has tangible, sometimes terrifying consequences.

Very little about borders is real, as Domenico Luciani noted in his interview with Massimo Rossi: "Imagining, outlining, adding, subtracting signs of changes to maps is like adding a new stratum on top of all the strata built up by a place over time" (Luciani, cited in Rossi, 2016, pp. 127-128). On the other hand, representing borders makes them real. But what does that line on a sheet of paper or that sequence of pixels on a screen really correspond to?

Print no border reflects on the meaning of boundaries and frontiers from the starting point of their geographical representation. Cartography lines – whether they are paper or digital – actually cut across land, fields, rivers, seas, concrete, water, stones, rocks, grass, and trees.

WHERE: THE ITALY-SLOVENIA-AUSTRIA THREE-BORDER AREA

The area chosen for the first implementation of the project's methodology covers a handful of valleys at the intersection between Italy, Slovenia, and Austria.

Figure 9: Bortoloni L. (2022), Uccea #01, Uccea #02, Uccea #03, 19 x 19 cm, mokuhanga
Figure 10: Bortoloni L. (2022) Grenze-Meja, 19 x 19 cm, mokuhanga (Grenze and Meja mean "border" respectively in German and Slovenian)

The town of Resia (Resije in the Resiano language, Rezija in Slovene, Rèsie in Friulana), in particular, is located in the Alpine valley of the same name in the Alpi Giulie. Bordering on two Slovenian towns (Kobarid and Bovec) and no more than 20 kilometres from the Austrian border, it is one of the project's starting points. The town's five hamlets (Gniva, Oseacco, Prato, San Giorgio, Stolvizza) are scattered across a valley whose primary characteristic is the fact that the border corresponds to a mountain massif which comprises Monte Canin. Its southernmost boundary, marking the Italy–Slovenia border, runs along Rio Uccea, a water course surrounded by shrubby vegetation mainly made up of spruce and beech trees. Its folklore and traditions – Slavic in origin, deeply felt and still observed by the valley's people – are a fully-fledged part of the project narrative.

Upper Friuli is a polyglot area in which the Italian, Friulana, Slovenian, and German languages are spoken, together with dialects of these, with their language status being a deeply felt issue around which policies designed to safeguard, promote, and teach the area's linguistic heritage have emerged from demands that began, at times with some difficulty, to strike a chord in local and community policies only in the second half of the 1920s.

Officially quadrilingual, until World War One, Val Canale (Val Cjanâl in the Friulana language, Kanalska dolina in Slovene, Kanaltal in German) was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and annexed to Italy in 1919. For centuries, the main language was German, with some Slovene language minority groups, and it is now unique in Europe for the co-existence and contemporary use of languages belonging to three language families: Latin, German, and Slavic.

These are landscapes permeated with toponyms in multiple languages, villages, rivers, and hills existing simultaneously in a range of languages. Multilingualism as a vision and identity filter. They are lands whose maps have, over the decades, expressed a zeitgeist, a cultural feeling, with differences that conjure up not only the outcomes of wars and politics but also changes in cultural thinking just a few years later.

Early 20th-century and inter-war maps of the Alps in general, and the Alpi Giulie in particular, reflect these changes in thinking, passing through an emphasis on national unification, moments of uncertain attribution of bilingual zones, and changes in borders in accordance with wartime developments.

HOW: ICONOGRAPHY, METHODOLOGY, TRANSMEDIALITY

In methodological terms, all the prints are inspired by the boundary lines drawn between the two nations. Boundaries such as these, as shown on digital maps, are reinterpreted, and transformed in expressive ways and measured up – even juxtaposed – to the representation of patterns, fragments, and marks deriving both from

satellite images and photographs and images, often of nature, collected during surveys of the various locations.

The project focuses on boundaries or frontiers seen through a range of filters, both physical and cultural, responding to the rigour of line-joining-up-points, generating an emotional cartography that starts from physical representation, cites the reproduction scale, and then uncouples from the recognisable atlas to generate an emotional one.

Borders are narrated when various objects, materials, and places take periodic physical shape, such as ice, land, roads, or water, as in the case of boundary lines running through the Uccea stream. But also frontiers whose height changes are designed to straddle high ground, such as Monte Forno, a point at which three boundary lines intersect. These are boundaries that echo the political and economic divisions of the 20th century and are still marked on the ground with now unused and abandoned checkpoints or boundary stones hidden in the undergrowth, rubble, and fences marking maintenance areas.

They then dematerialise once again into language frontiers, exploring toponyms expressed in multiple languages. At this point, the visual cartographic variables exit maps to become textures, fabrics, and fill-ins, just as lines open up and turn into areas and territories.

In this sense, the potential offered by printmaking, proceeding in levels, also becomes significant in restoring the stratification of the various languages and offering up a transparency process. The technique chosen is the Japanese mokuhanga (wood block print), which uses natural materials – wood and water – both in generating the matrix and in the inking process. Manual engraving devoted to the more expressive actions is juxtaposed with laser engraving for the more repetitive structures and grids, mixing up manual methods with digital manufacturing. The scale theme comes in every time reference is made to boundary lines, which take overt form in the scale in which it is represented, measured, and juxtaposed to the dimensions and organic forms of the natural elements.

The project as a whole is structured around square proportion matrices and identical sizes. This makes it possible to combine all the graphics developed in a modular way, making the decision to structure the visual information in the strata structural and not only expressive. The inspiration behind this decision is, on the one hand, an observation of the network structure of the cartographic projections and, on the other hand, the structure of the atlases themselves, with enlarged portions relating to overviews. This conjures up the contemporary use of maps in screens and windows and thus within rectangular forms, which pervade our digital interface with the devices we use.

The observation of natural elements translates into a practice in which the graphics developed for printing pass from photographic surveying to the elaboration and design of organic forms. While observing, the existing cartography evolves into an attempt to over-enlarge these,

taking the textures characteristic of choropleth viewing to an out-of-scale dimension and making them centre-stage players.

The linguistic frontier theme – or rather plurilingualism – is developed via the elaboration of a series of printing compositions that stratify a single concept into multiple languages. Printing, in particular, is first composed and then deformed and distorted with the tools of vectorial design along fluid trajectories capable of resembling the non-linear trajectory of natural elements. Arranged on various matrices, these are printed with stratifications, transparencies, overlaps, and misalignments highlighted.

Print no border is a transmedia experience that interweaves multiple media languages. The analogue results of the printing process are generated via a combination of digital tools. The base process involves extracting the borderlines from digital archives. Drawn from Open Street maps, these lines are elaborated using Qgis software, isolating and filtering the various information levels to the extent of isolating the minimum lines, which render borders still recognisable in their context, both physical and abstract.
The process as a whole is narrated via a website (https://www.printnoborder.com/) that intersects cartographic visualisations with audio-visual narratives inviting visitors to compare borders with prints in an attempt to generate a small, intimate personal atlas of the area enquired into, an intimate diary of a journey along the margins.

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IMAGE GALLERY

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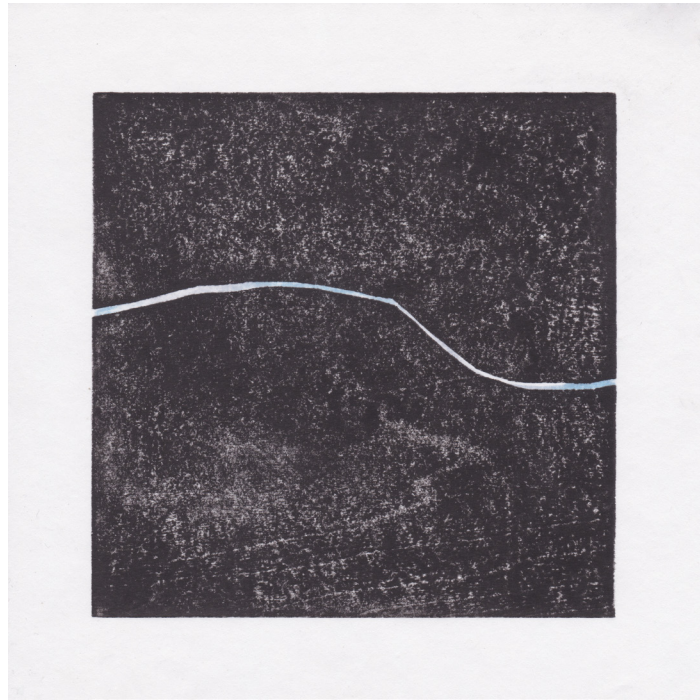Figure 4: Bortoloni L. (2022), Uccea #03

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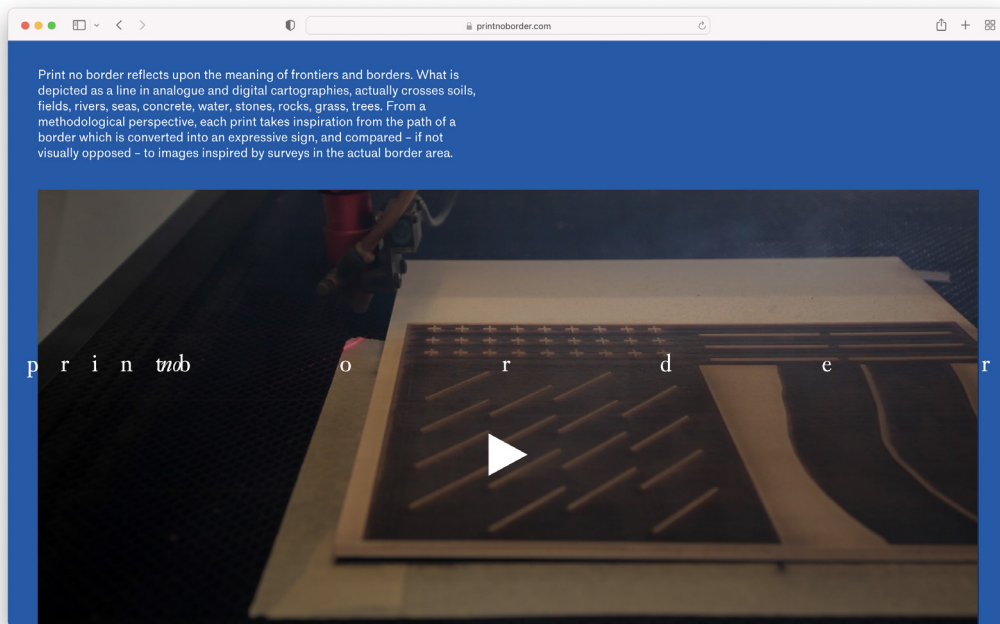
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