PAOLA LEONARDI

Borderlands
The Edges of Europe

Project details

Output author	**Paola Leonardi**
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Budget	**£12,000 (estimated)**
Funders	**Arts Council England; European Cultural Foundation (STEP Beyond Travel Grant)**

Figure 2.War Memorial, Border Moldova-
Romania Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 3. Crucifixion, Border Moldova-Romania. Image: P. Leonardi.

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

This portfolio presents key research insights gathered through the development of *Borderlands: The Edges of Europe*, a collection of analogue photographs depicting people and places along the borders of the European Union. The project focuses on borders perceived as points of both exchange and collision. Through juxtaposing geographical and political Europe, it creates the first comprehensive portrayal of European identity along the entire land border.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Borderlands interrogates the meaning of European identity within communities that inhabit the edges of Europe.
- How does the presence of a physical border impact on the construction of identity?
- How does identity relate to ideas of home, belonging, memory and territory? How is it shaped by current and past events?
- What are the commonalities or differences that define cross-border identity?

PROCESS

Grounded in documentary, portrait and landscape photography, *Borderlands* links ideas of representation in human geography to the practice of identity portrayal through four methods:
- Analogue medium-format photography documenting people and places along the borders;
- Walking in close proximity to the borders using map and compass;
- Collecting narratives of lives through conversations along the borders;
- Collecting maps and conversation records for use in exhibition displays.

DISSEMINATION

The project has been extensively disseminated through group and solo exhibitions in the UK and internationally, as documented in the Dissemination section of this portfolio. The research has been shared with large audiences through talks, interviews, online and printed publications, including a self-authored chapter in *Il Dialogo Creativo 2020: Parole Sull'Europa.*

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Borderlands offers a new perspective on transnational and transcultural identities in liminal territories, depicting communities that are otherwise excluded from mainstream narratives about national identities. The project's novel approach has informed teaching and research across UK and EU institutions including London Metropolitan University, University of Suffolk, Chester University and European University Institute of Florence.

Introduction

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe is a photographic series developed with the aim of narrating life at the edges of Europe. It creates a visual archive of identity in liminal areas of Europe and depicts people and places that are rarely represented in mainstream narratives.

Building upon contemporary photographic practices that represent cultural identity interwoven with concepts of human geography, this collection of analogue images offers a unique perspective on the construction of European identity and composes the only existing representation of the entire length of the European land border.

My personal interest stems from my own family history of transcultural and cross border experiences, and specifically from my grandmother, whose family originated from the border area of Istria in present-day Slovenia. Born as a refugee in Switzerland during World War I, she later moved to Italy and went on to fight as a royalist partisan in World War II, driven by the hope of regaining a land she had never seen but felt her own. My grandmother was nicknamed 'the Yugoslavian' as other family members humorously referred to her life experience through an idea of otherness.

This body of work has been further inspired by the current socio-political climate. We have seen new countries such as Croatia joining the EU, whilst Greece has been under the threat of economic collapse and expulsion. More recently we have witnessed the Brexit referendum, in which the UK has rejected its European identity and left the European Union. Observing this process of expansion and contraction has led me to question the relevance of European identity in relation to its geopolitical configuration, and how the opening and closing of borders affect the communities that live along them.

By combining images of people and places, *Borderlands: The Edges of Europe* investigates how people relate to the territories they inhabit. It fosters debate on a research topic centred on how the physical presence of a border impacts the construction and perception of cultural identities in individuals and communities. This is debated by analysing the narratives of soft and hard borders and questioning how these relationships have been shaped by history and events, investigating a sense of belonging through Europe in a landscape of fluid socio-political changes.

Figure 4. Lubjia, Border Moldova-Romania.
Image: P. Leonardi.

Research context

Art critic Marcus Jauer defines borders as watertight barriers that divide countries, cities or social classes and ethnic groups. In the foreword to the volume *On Borders*, he writes: "Ultimately a border simply strengthens differences. Once it has been drawn, it affects both sides. It encloses and it excludes, sorting people according to the differences that led to the border in the first place… in the end, it is a question of defying where one begins and the other one ends" (Jauer, 2012). This project seeks to challenge Jauer's position because it fails to recognise the complexity of history, politics and social relations that relate to border zones.

My hypothesis is that the physical configuration of a border deeply affects how the local communities that inhabit that boundary perceive themselves. This perception is further affected by their personal experiences of the socio-political changes that happen both during their lifetime, or that have affected their families and communities through history. This reinforces Michele Acuto's depiction of borders as "time written in space" (Acuto, 2008). Whilst it is true that, as Jauer states, once a border is drawn it affects both sides, my work aims to highlight that borders do not define the limits of one's identity but rather result in the formation of cross-border identities that are multifaceted. This echoes Michele Acuto's reading that along a frontier, "populations shape and are shaped by the ones on the other side of the fence and redefine their identities in these terms" (Acuto, 2008, p.8).

Anthropologists Donnan and Wilson (1999, p.64) similarly identify borders as relational: liminal zones in which residents, travellers and the state are continuously contesting their own roles. As a result of this, borders and the communities that live along them have multiple identities that shift with their socio-political contexts. The relationship between individuals and communities with the physical infrastructure of the borders affects their sense of identity. This results in either 'soft borders' where communities identify with the other side or 'hard borders' where communities resent the other side and simultaneously feel abandoned by their own central government.

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe engages with these themes through the practice of photographic storytelling. It combines elements of documentary, portrait and landscape photography to create a lyrical narration that maps relationships at the European frontier. Through visual representations, it documents the geopolitical, historical

Figure 5. Abandoned house, Border
Moldova-Romania. Image: P. Leonardi.

and cultural changes taking place along the borders between countries, cities and communities. In doing so, the work sits within a rich tradition of visual artists utilising the photographic medium to map the territory and its people. These include, for instance, Cornelia Mittendorfer's *Green Line* (2017), which maps the buffer zone that divides Cyprus through images that encapsulate the passage of time and its effect on this territory. Secondly, Ute & Werner Mahler's series: *Where the World Ended* which traces the border between East and West Germany twenty years after the reunification, evoking past history through details in the landscape (Mahler & Mahler, 2012). Borderlands is also influenced by *Road Closed* by Anne Schönharting: a photographic project portraying people and places along the so-called 'peace lines' of Belfast, barrier walls that were erected by the British government to hinder riots, stretching a 20km length and effectively dividing the city. Schönharting combines the portraits of those who inhabit these borderlands with the contrasting narratives of Catholics and Protestants. Exhibited together, the photographs and text illustrate the juxtaposing points of view (Schönharting, 2011). Finally, my approach and methodology link to the project: *Granizi/Borders* by Russian photographer Anastasia Khoroshilova

(2005), which explores contemporary socio-political transformation through diptychs representing almost symmetrical sides of borders between EU and Russia. Her series *Russkie* followed the borders of Russia. Over the course of three years, Khoroshilova portrayed its inhabitants, creating images that form a visual map of all different ethnicities and cultures that inhabit the borderlands of Russia (Khoroshilova, 2008).

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe has been created by physically navigating the borders. In *Borderlands*, the act of walking is a form of labour that generates knowledge about and connections to places and people. My use of walking as a method engages in dialogue with other photographic and creative works utilising similar approaches. For instance Paul Graham's *A1: The Great North Road* is a visual travelogue spanning the entire length of the A1 from England to Scotland in the 1980s. Graham created both a visual representation of culture and a historical document by repeatedly following this road as a map to discover Britain. Through recording people, buildings and landscape he was able to document the years of Margaret Thatcher's government and the UK's declining industrial base (Graham, 2020). Following a road is also central to the writing of Ian Sinclair's book *London*

Figure 6. Balkan War cemetery, Border
Croatia-Serbia. Image: P. Leonardi.

Orbital where the M25 becomes a border that delineates London. Sinclair uses the practice of walking as a method to understand a territory and its culture, presenting to the public the liminal areas of London (Sinclair, 2002). Arguably, both of these works owe much to the work of British artist Richard Long, who utilises the medium of walking to generate knowledge of the territory, tracing his own movement through a landscape. The outdoor environment that the artist engages with shapes his artistic process—as seen in his seminal work *A Line Made by Walking* (1967)—and his experience of space and place propels him to create sculptures, photographs and text work.

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe is also a visual archive that combines photographs with vernacular narratives and artefacts to be presented within the context of an exhibition. It offers an insight into the multifaceted development of European identity that is accessible to a broad public. Several precedents informed this approach. Alec Soth's *Sleeping By The Mississippi* sees the photographer tracing a territory and spending time talking with his subjects to collect their personal narratives (Soth, 2004). Despite being primarily a photographic essay, his exhibition *Gathered Leaves* at the Science Museum

in London presented the framed images together with artifacts, such as journals, letters and annotations, to expand the narrative presented by the images (Soth, 2018). Similarly in his seminal book: *The Jungle Book: Contemporary Stories of the Amazon and Its Fringe* photographer Yann Gross follows the path of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, combining portraits with a collection of personal narratives of those who inhabit these liminal areas, as well as with images of collected artefacts (Gross, 2016).

Figure 7. Danube Overflown, Border Croatia-
Serbia. Image: P. Leonardi.

Research process

The project's methodology includes four key processes: photographing, walking, conversing and collecting.

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe utilises *photographic storytelling* to visually map the physical presence of the border through the images of its inhabitants and landscapes. This body of work has been created using an analogue medium-format camera, a Hasselblad 500cm which has a waist-level viewfinder. This choice is not only due to aesthetic preferences but also to portability and unobtrusiveness, as this type of camera allows me to overcome restrictions on the use of photography near the borders' military exclusion zones. The use of a waist-level viewfinder allows me to photograph without visibly pointing the camera, avoiding tension with border patrol guards. Using an analogue camera also makes people realise that I am not a photojournalist and it is often a starting point of conversation, allowing me to engage with my subjects and increasing the chances of people agreeing on being portrayed.

Central to the methodology is the physical process of *walking* long distances in close proximity to the borders between EU and non-EU countries. My journeys are unplanned and I progress with the support of only a map and a compass, following the land boundaries that define the perimeter of the European Union within a 2 km radius. Proceeding slowly on foot is fundamental to gain a distinctive experience of the European frontier through fostering encounters with the communities and individuals that live in proximity to the borders.

During these journeys, I dedicate time to *conversing* with the people I photograph in order to collect personal and local narratives of life along the borders. Conversations are carried out mostly in Russian, which is widely spoken along the borders, as well as Italian, Romanian and occasionally German. At the beginning of the project, I carried a voice recorder to obtain formal interviews with the subjects of my photographs. However, I soon found that this was received with suspicion and often resulted in people refusing to talk to me or to be photographed. Therefore, I stopped recording conversations and decided to rely on informal conversations, which were then written up. Through these conversations, I have accessed a wealth of vernacular storytelling and family histories, and I have gained valuable insights on personal perceptions of 'the other side', as well as on the historical, political or economic shifts that might have influenced the construction of

identity in borderland communities. These conversations often present a point of cultural exchange and understanding between my subjects and myself, as I often rely on them for hospitality in these remote areas.

The fourth component of the methodology is the *collection of artefacts* that represent my journey: I collect maps of local areas, onto which I record the conversations with my subjects, as well as making notes of my own border experiences. The collected artefacts were curated together with the photographs in exhibitions: a solo exhibition at the Stone Space Gallery in 2016, for instance, was composed of photographs displayed in wood frames, overlapped onto collages created utilising maps and handwritten notes.
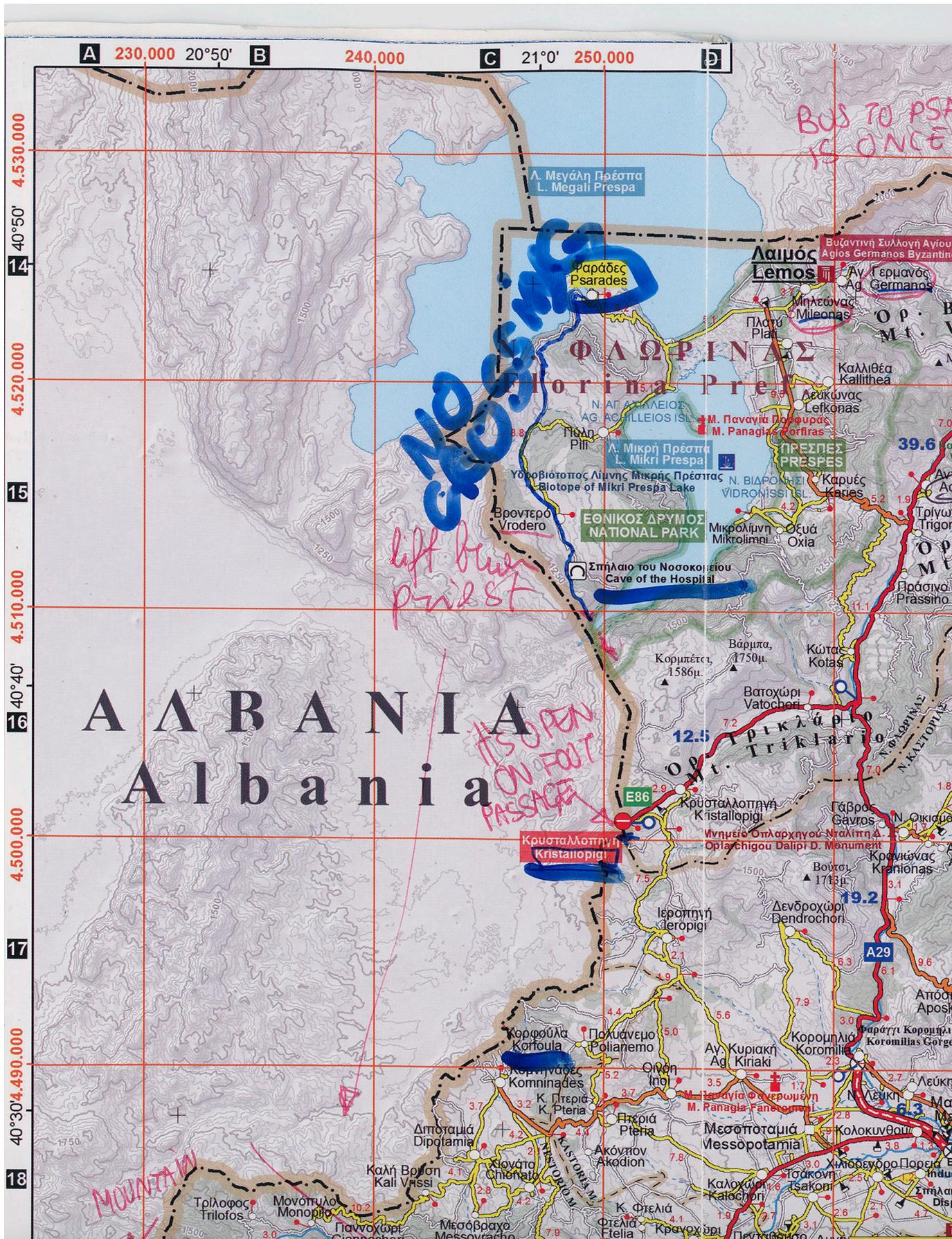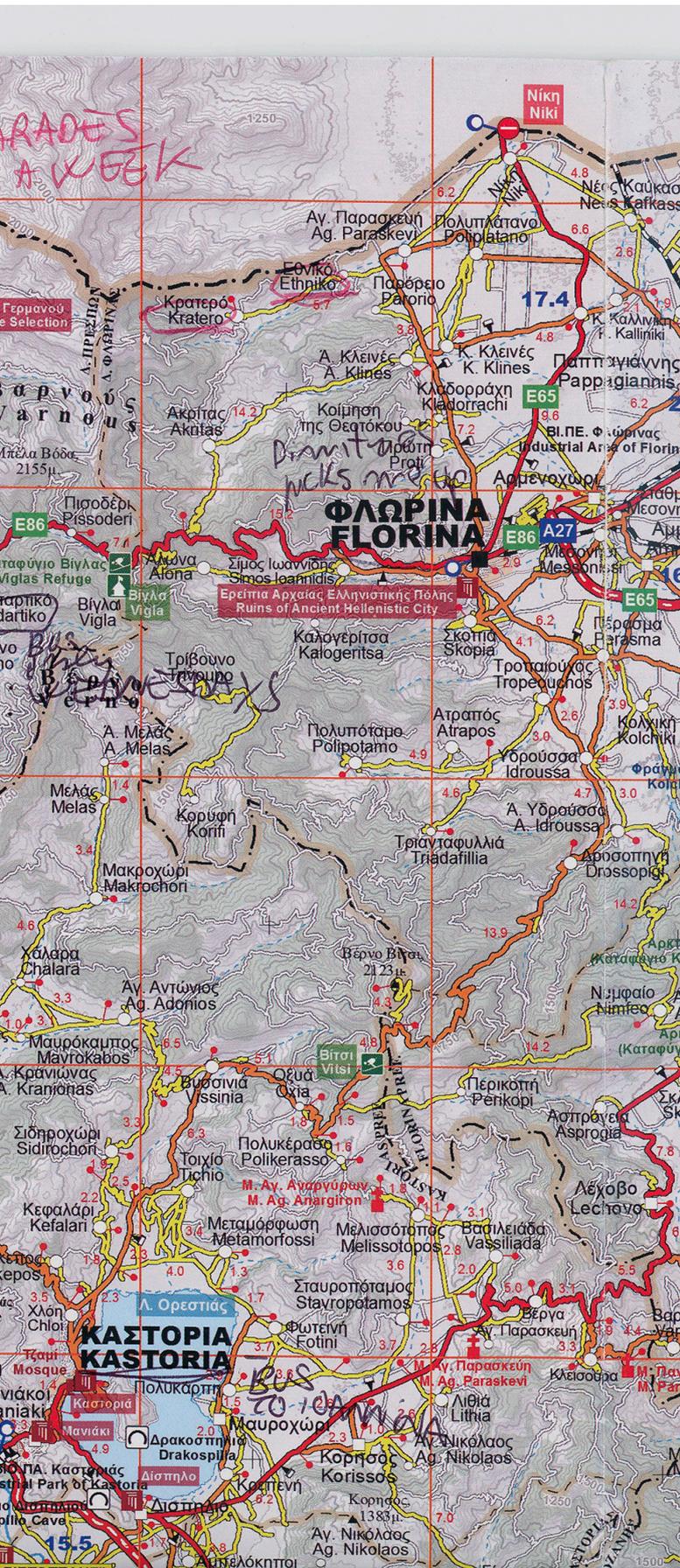
Figure 8. Annotated maps used to navigate
the borders. Image: Paola Leonardi

Research insights

PHYSICAL BORDERS AND IDENTITY

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe explores the impact that the physical presence of a border has on the construction of identity for the people and communities that live in proximity to it. The creation of the European Union was rooted in the desire to stave off geopolitical conflict and enhance economic cooperation, making territorial sovereignty increasingly irrelevant for member states. The process of unification has been accompanied by a hardening of the borders between EU and non-EU states, which requires an efficient policing of the external EU borders (Diener and Hagen, 2012, p.109).

Etienne Balibar writes that borders are sites where "the dialectic between confrontation with the foreigner, transformed into a hereditary enemy, and the communication between civilisations is periodically played out" (2005). My work links this duality to the perceived presence of the border and how communities relate to it, broadly distinguishing two categories of 'soft borders' and 'hard borders.'

'Soft Borders' are borders that are easily crossed, where the barrier is weak and communities identify with 'the other side.' It means that borders are frequently crossed—legally or illegally—because people feel an affinity with the other side. A soft border is one that is perceived as a limitation, rather than a defence imposed by the state on the community. This is the case of the Lithuania-Belarus border: in this area, the border infrastructure is constituted by a very simple and flimsy metal fence (fig.11) or even by just a marker in the ground. People will cross over from Belarus into Lithuania to work or visit family and will return home on the same day by simply moving the metal fence that separates the two countries. This type of crossing is illegal but is quietly tolerated by the authorities. For example, figure 13 portrays a daily labourer from Belarus cutting grass in the Polish cemetery on the Lithuanian side of the border; the border fence can be seen in the background.

'Hard borders' can be found between countries that have a long-standing history, marred by war such as Greece-Turkey or Serbia-Croatia. Hard borders occur where communities resent the other side and rely on a heavily militarized man-made border to defend them or a significant natural barrier to protect them. The border between Croatia, the most recent member state to join the EU in 2013, and neighbouring Serbia is largely delineated by the river Danube. The Danube, once the long-standing

Figure 9. Danube Overflown (Grandad and grandson), Border Croatia-Serbia. Image: P. Leonardi.

frontier of the Roman Empire, serves as a commerce waterway between ten European countries and a point of contact for the exchange of goods and movement of people. This natural border between Serbia and Croatia shows the scars of the Balkan war. Whilst walking alongside it, I encountered various signs of the conflict, such as the Vukovar war cemetery (fig.6). The relationship of the inhabitants with the river speaks of people's relation to the territory and to their neighbouring country. Despite the Danube frequently overflowing, the Croatian inhabitants continue to build houses very close to the river banks. In the towns of Vukovar and Aljimas, the people I portrayed (fig.7, 9) narrate tales of how they hid in the rising waters of the Danube when the Serbian troops invaded Croatia and murdered civilians. The river continued to be used as a waterway for commerce but was also seen as an efficient natural barrier to protect them from the enemy. People expressed how the river was much more 'on their side' than NATO, the UN or the EU had been during the Balkan war.

The people photographed along the Croatia-Serbia divide spoke of resentment towards the bordering nation and their narratives reflected how the border affects their life. For example, figure 16 portrays Zara, an ethnic Serbian living in Croatia, near the border town of Vukovar. I photographed her standing on the ruins of her former home that had been bombed during the war. Zara talked at length about ethnic tensions that remained after the war and her difficulties as a Serbian living in Croatia. Her experience was similar to that of Maria (fig.10), an elderly Greek lady living in Marasia, the closest village to the border with Turkey. The village is isolated and only served by 1 train service; the only bridge had collapsed and I had to walk through a stream to reach Marasia. The military presence and heavy border infrastructure seemed to form the only tangible presence of the Greek state. Maria warned me against the Turks, speaking of their aggressive stance against Greeks and warning me it was dangerous to cross the border. Despite their mistrust, members of the community still drive across the border, going through checkpoints, to buy provisions, relying on the Turkish side for supplies.

Figure 10. Maria, Polish Worshipper, Border
Lithuania-Belarus. Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 11. Border fence, Lithuania-Belarus
border. Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 12. Border marker, Border Lithuania-Belarus. Image: P. Leonardi.

BELONGING, MEMORY AND TERRITORY

Borders possess both a significant physical presence and a strong symbolic meaning that defines them as "time written in space" (Acuto, 2008). *Borderlands: The Edges of Europe* investigates territories that are rich in symbols and reminders of past events such as wars and political turmoil as well as bearing witness to social changes, such as the depopulation of the countryside. To research the European Borders from the perspective of belonging and memory, I engage in conversation with the people I photograph. Discussing with them their experience of living near the borders, collecting their personal narratives and vernacular histories.

Along the borders between Romania and Moldova a large number of Soviet-era monuments can be found (fig.2) juxtaposed to an equally large number of newer religious monuments (fig.3). These have sprung up in the post-soviet era and signify how political changes have shifted the cultural and religious perspectives in these areas.

In the village of Leova, coasting the river Prut which separates Moldova from Romania, I talked to and photographed Lubjia (fig.4). Lubjia had worked many years in Italy and communicated with me in my first language, providing me with a large amount of information on the town and local histories. She took me to see the places where the Romanian soldiers crossed the river to invade Moldova, and the point where her grandfather tried to protect a Jewish family during WWII. Leova was the site of major deportations of Jewish civilians, all of which perished except one child named Anastasia. The Jewish homes stood empty and derelict (fig.5), a harsh reminder of the Holocaust. This dereliction has since been enhanced due to the depopulation of this village as residents move to larger cities or to other European countries such as Italy to work.

The stories I collected reflect the narratives of my grandmother. They speak of belonging to a territory that seemed to exist only in memory. The act of collecting narratives and artefacts combined with the act of walking along the border made me part of the border-narratives, and the photographer becomes a member of the community.

Figure 13. Day Labourer, Border Lithuania-
Belarus. Image: P. Leonardi.

CROSS-BORDER IDENTITIES

Along the frontiers, populations shape and are shaped by those on 'the other side'. This form of transnationalism is developed by the sharing of ideas and traditions across the border—a process partially conditioned by each side's distance from the respective national core (Acuto, 2008), and made more intense when geo-political borders are overimposed on territories without paying attention to the reality of community ties and identities.

The 'soft border' between Lithuania-Belarus (fig.10-13) is constituted by a very simple and flimsy metal fence (fig.11) or even by just a marker in the ground. The yellow ribbon shown in figure 12 identifies the border: it is located in the back garden of a house on the Lithuanian side. At the fall of the Soviet Union the border had been drawn using a satellite, indiscriminately cutting through villages, houses and gardens. However this border did not succeed in dividing communities and over time the attitude toward it has become more relaxed. A Lithuanian house had ended up with part of the garden being positioned in Belarus (fig.14). Inhabitants and guests are currently allowed to access the whole garden, effectively crossing a border between EU–non-EU.

This border is characterised by communities that identify as Russian, Belorussian or Polish and have maintained for centuries their ethnic and cultural traditions. As a consequence, Polish, Russian and Belorussian are the main languages spoken along the Lithuanian side of the border, whilst Lithuanian is rarely spoken. An example of this is Maria (fig.10) a Polish-speaking worshipper attending a Polish Catholic church.

Similar examples of cross-border identities can be found along the Romania-Ukraine soft border, where the delta of the Danube constitutes a very porous border between the two countries. This delta is home to the Lipovans, a Russian ethnic and Russian speaking group that settled in this area in the 18th century, many of which live in houseboats along the delta crossing between the two countries (fig.15).

Figure 14. Before the storm, border
Lithuania-Belarus. Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 15. Lipovan lady, Border Romania-Ukraine. Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 16. Zara, Border Croatia-Serbia.
Image: P. Leonardi.

Dissemination

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

The outcomes of *Borderlands* have been presented in national and international exhibitions such as the Copenhagen Festival of Photography, an established festival with over 10,000 visitors. This has also led to the development of my curatorial practice: in 2019 I co-curated *Shifting Stances* at Museum Palazzo Riso in Palermo, which received national media coverage.

Shifting Stances (2019). Museum Palazzo Riso, Palermo (Italy). July–December 2019. Curator and exhibitor.

Borders (2018). Birdwell Theatre Gallery, London. January–March 2018. Curator and exhibitor.

Shutter Hub Open 2018 (2018). Truman Brewery, London. October 2018.

Ginnel Foto Fest 2018 – Borderlands (2018). Ipswich. October 2018 [Award Winner].

Royal Photographic Society – International Photography Exhibition (2017). Truman Brewery, London. October 2017.

Territorial (2016). The Cass Bank Space Gallery, London. October–November 2016. Curator and exhibitor.

Copenhagen Photo Festival (2015). Copenhagen. June 2015.

Who Gets Carried Away by Europe Award Exhibition (2015). The Jungen University, Berlin.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe (2016). European University Institute, Florence. June 2016.

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe (2016). The Stone Space Gallery, London. October 2016

Borderlands: The Edges of Europe (2014). The Waterfront Gallery, Ipswich. April 2014.

SELECTED TALKS

Artist talks centred around my research have been presented to large audiences during events such as the PhotoEast Festival, where in 2018 I presented together with renowned artists such as Mark Edwards and Steve MacLeod. In the same year I was invited to present at 'A New Europe' in the Brighton Photo Biennale Open Forum.

Leonardi, P. (2019). 'Borderlands: The Edges of Europe'. *Il Dialogo Creativo*. 19 October 2019.

Leonardi, P. (2018). 'Borderlands: The Edges of Europe'. *Brighton Photo Biennial 'A New Europe'*. 6 October 2018.

Leonardi, P. (2018). 'Approaches to Landscape'. *PhotoEast Festival.* 26 May 2018.

PUBLICATIONS

In October 2019 I presented my work to an audience of 150 people at the annual cycle conference organized by Il Dialogo Creativo in Pordenone, Italy. Il Dialogo Creativo is an annual series of artists talks by artists whose work fosters cultural exchange across borders. This collaboration led to the publication of the self-authored book chapter: 'Borderlands: Istantanee ai Confini dell'Europa' in the book *Il Dialogo Creativo 2020: Parole Sull'Europa.*

Leonardi, P. (2020). Borderlands. Istantanee ai Confini dell'Europa, in *Il Dialogo Creativo 2020: Parole Sull'Europa*. Pordenone: Il Dialogo Creativo.

Leonardi, P. (2017). Borderlands: The Edges of Europe, in *IPE 160 Catalogue*. London: Royal Photographic Society.

Leonardi, P. (2016). Borderlands: The Edges of Europe, in *Darwin Magazine* 6.

Leonardi, P. (2015). Borderlands: The Edges of Europe, in *Copenhagen Photo Festival Catalogue 2015*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Photo Festival.

Museo Palazzo Riso   01.07.19 ———— 02.12.19

Figure 16-17. *Shifting Stances* exhibition
at Museum Palazzo Riso, 2019. Image: P.
Leonardi.
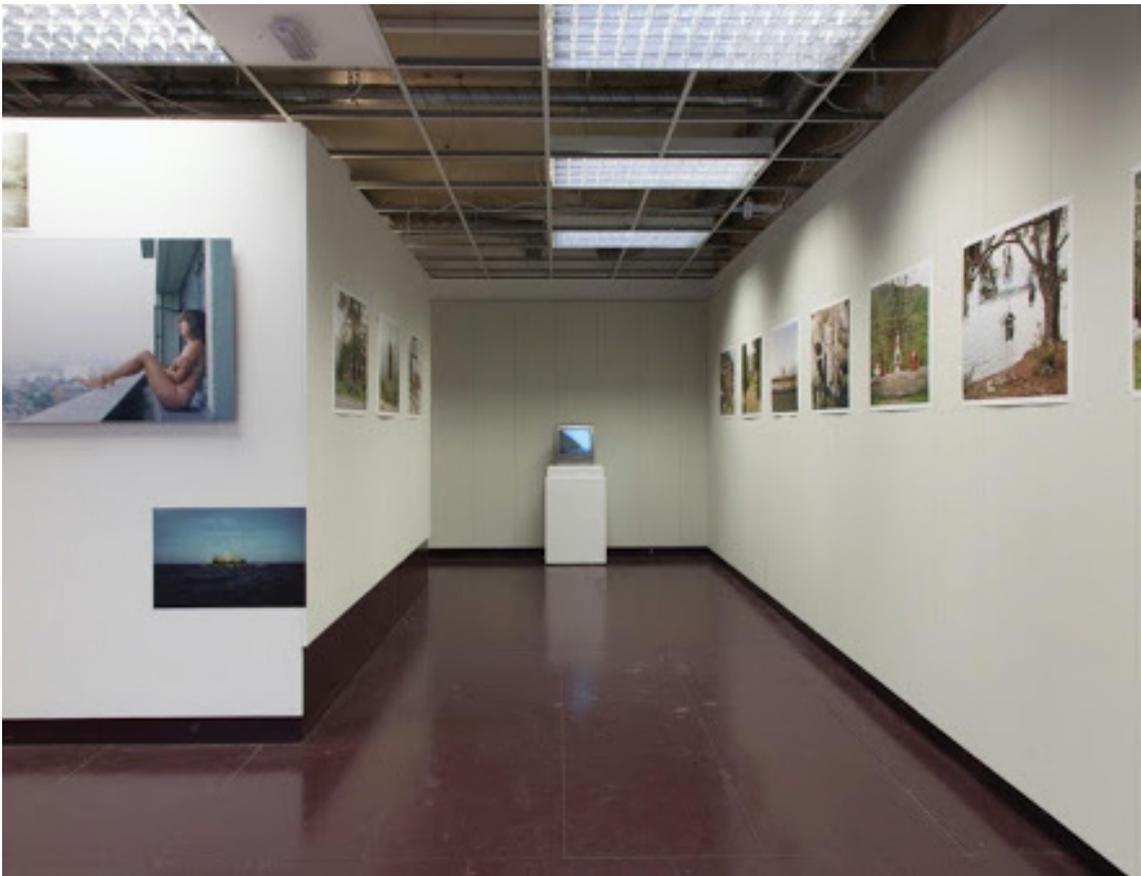
Figure 18-20. *Territorial* exhibition at The Cass Bank Space Gallery, 2016. Image: P. Leonardi.

Figure 21-22. Publication on *Darwin Magazine.*

SELECTED PRESS

(2019) 'Palermo, a Palazzo Riso "Shifting Stances": le foto di Paola Leonardi'. *La Repubblica*, 6 July. https://video.repubblica.it/edizione/palermo/palermo-a-palazzo-riso-shifting-stances-le-foto-di-paola-leonardi/338980/339578 (Accessed 16 Dec. 2020).

(2019). 'Shifting Stances: al Museo Riso mostra fotografica su identità e cambiamenti sociali'. *Il Sicilia*, 28 June. https://www.ilsicilia.it/shifting-stances-al-museo-riso-mostra-fotografica-su-identita-e-cambiamenti-sociali-foto/ (Accessed 16 Dec. 2020).

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Impact

This project offers a visual representation of the people and places along the land borders of the European Union, offering the public access to narratives that are rarely represented in the media. The success of which is highlighted by its vast dissemination through international exhibitions, talks and authored publications.

The impact of my research has also been recognised outside of the art world. In 2016, I was invited to present at the European University Institute (EUI), and subsequently offered a role as Project Artist in the ERC-funded research project *EU Border Care: Giving Birth on Europe's Remote Borderlands* led by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the EUI. The project combined ethnographic fieldwork and creative representation to document the lives of pregnant migrants on the EU's peripheries. It's aim is to address wider questions about health governance and equity, identity and belonging, citizenship and sovereignty in Europe.

Additionally the project's novel approach has informed teaching and research across UK and EU institutions including London Metropolitan University, University of Suffolk, Chester University.

Figure 23-26. Excerpts from the series.
Images: P. Leonardi.

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