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The Death of Nzoy Investigated by Border Forensics: An Interview with Nico Alexandroff

Elisa Ganivet

In this exclusive interview for BIG_Review, Art & Borders Editor Elisa Ganivet speaks with Nico Alexandroff about his work as a spatial researcher at Border Forensics. Border Forensics is a non-profit research agency that investigates border violence using spatial analysis, cartography, and forensic reconstruction. It builds evidence to support victims' families, emphasizing that violence is structural and linked to racialised and unequal systems. Their investigation into Roger Nzoy Wilhelm's death challenges official accounts (images from the Nzoy investigation are reproduced at the end of the interview). The project highlights limits of legal justice and the need for broader accountability and collective memory. Through the "forensic turn" they use open-source and scientific tools to contest state narratives. Ultimately, they redefine the border as a diffuse system of control operating beyond the physical frontier. With their documentation, Border Forensics establishes a kind of "counter-monument" to the border wall.

Nico Alexandroff is a spatial researcher and designer whose practice spans counter-forensic investigation and strategic design. At Border Forensics, he develops methodologies for cartographic and temporal reconstructions, synthesising audio-visual information, geospatial data, and testimony into evidence that challenges state narratives of border and racial violence. His wider practice focuses on anticipating and interrogating how emerging technologies reshape spatial, political, and socio-cultural conditions, taking the form of frameworks, spatial interventions, film, and writing that have been exhibited and published internationally. He is a Senior Lecturer on the MA Narrative Environments course in the Spatial Practices department at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London.

https://www.borderforensics.org

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Elisa Ganivet: You present Border Forensics as an agency that "produces human rights reports, maps, video reconstructions, and other visualizations together with, and in support of, communities exposed to border violence." Our readers are a well-informed audience in the field of border studies, but could you begin by outlining the origins of Border Forensics?

Nico Alexandroff: Border Forensics was founded in 2021 in Geneva by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani as a non-profit research agency dedicated to investigating border violence. It builds on more than a decade of work carried out within the Forensic Oceanography project, which examined the militarisation of Europe's maritime frontier and the abandonment of people at sea. The agency was established to develop the geographical and conceptual scope of earlier investigations, emphasising new or emerging research, analysis, and documentation methodologies. Our aim is to investigate how violence is structured and to operationalise spatial and statistical evidence that can contribute to legal and political struggles. We understand border violence not as a series of isolated events, but as the outcome of governance regimes that deliberately produce precarious conditions for those already made vulnerable by racialised and unequal mobility systems.

EG: Your work follows in the wake of *Forensic Architecture* (Weizman 2019), which has demonstrated spectacular, tangible, and structural forms of violence, and *Forensic Oceanography* (Heller & Pezzani 2013), which has exposed and made legible the mass abandonment of people at sea. How do the methodologies developed by Border Forensics compare to those of *Forensic Architecture* and *Forensic Oceanography*? Why was this methodological shift necessary?

NA: As a spatial researcher and digital cartographer within Border Forensics, I work specifically on reconstructing events through spatial and temporal analysis and on producing cartographic evidence across multiple scales. This involves synchronising video footage from different sources with geospatial data, audio data, and witness and victim testimony to establish sequences of events and the spatial conditions in which they unfolded. Our methods continue to evolve in response to the cases we investigate, drawing on techniques from Forensic Architecture and critical forensic science, including video-pixel analysis and biomechanics analysis of hands, which played a central role in our recent investigation into the death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm—a Swiss and South African man who was shot and killed by a police officer in Switzerland—while also refining the ways in which highly sensitive material, such as acts of racial violence, are presented. The question is therefore not only what can be shown, but how and for whom it should be shown. We also respond directly to the needs and concerns of those affected and their families, with a significant part of our work involving listening carefully, sharing progress updates, and ensuring that our reconstructions genuinely reflect their questions and experiences.

Cartography played a central role for Forensic Oceanography as they pioneered the use of geo-spatial technologies drawn from satellites and oceanographic modelling, utilising Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) in marinescapes to model and simulate sequences of events in the search for truth and justice. With the creation of Border Forensics, these methods were extended beyond the Mediterranean to a wider range of geographical and institutional contexts. This expansion was driven not by a predetermined research agenda but by the expanding nature and complexity of border violence, which required us to develop and adapt our methods across different scales, landscapes and forms of evidence. Our team includes specialists in geospatial data gathering and analysis, and a central part of my work is converting that material into something aesthetically legible, capable of showing patterns of movement and state aggression without overwhelming the viewer. The aim is not to render as many layers as possible within a single map, but to be highly selective about which layers, and which sources, when placed together, produce new meaning that sheds light on our research questions.

EG: Based on your methodology, what objectives do you seek to achieve? How do you work?

NA: Across our investigations, the objective is to accompany the victims and their families' quest for truth and justice in cases of violence and human rights violations. Our investigation on the death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm led us to expand on what we understand as justice. Evidence production is a necessary but insufficient condition for it. Working alongside the The Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm and Nzoy's family and friends, this became the central methodological and ethical question: what does justice actually require, and how does our critical forensic practice need to expand in order to pursue it? The answer, we found, operates across several interconnected levels.

Firstly, justice means truth, which involves establishing the circumstances that led to Nzoy's death. The police investigation had produced inaccurate narratives, failed to properly reconstruct the sequence of events, and mishandled key evidence. Our counter-investigation directly challenged

those findings and demonstrated that it was the police intervention itself that escalated a situation involving a person in psychological distress, rather than Nzoy posing a threat that justified the use of lethal force.

Legal accountability remains important even where its limits are clear. Working closely with Nzoy's family and their lawyer, our reconstruction is built to function within traditional legal arguments, capable of both exposing institutional failures and supporting the pursuit of accountability in formal legal settings, including international courts if domestic processes continue to fall short.

Beyond the individual case, the investigation had to confront structural racism directly. The death of Nzoy reflects wider patterns, and our analysis concludes that there is a demonstrable relationship between racialisation and overexposure to the risk of police-related death in Switzerland. This kind of justice confronts the conditions that produce violence, including the fact that legal processes themselves rarely address racism directly, which means that the work of making structural racism legible falls largely outside the courtroom and depends on the analytical and forensic methods we have developed.

Something we learned through this process is that the pursuit of accountability cannot be carried by families alone. In the face of state institutions, building a broad community of solidarity is both necessary and protective. The name Nzoy has become a rallying point, connecting his death to those of others who have died at the hands of police in Switzerland, and part of our role has been to support and document that collective dimension rather than treat the investigation as a purely technical output.

Perhaps the most delicate dimension of this work concerns memory. Our work with the Independent Commission revealed that media coverage played a significant role in distorting the narrative before any formal investigation had taken place, racialising Nzoy and portraying him as a threat rather than as a person in need of care. Forensic reconstruction carries its own risk in this regard, since focusing on the circumstances of a person's death can reduce them to it. Justice, therefore, requires careful and ongoing consideration of how we protect memory and restore dignity, and it is why working directly with Nzoy's family has been central to every decision we have made about what to show and how to show it.

EG: Do you position your work within what has been described as a forensic turn?

NA: Yes, the work we do is certainly situated in this new conception of forensic investigation. This methodological and technological rebalancing, through OSINT, witness documentation, and resource sharing in solidarity networks, has shifted power dynamics in meaningful ways, giving non-state actors the ability to contribute to the scientific production of truth. In this sense, evidence production redistributes epistemic authority away from the state and toward those who have historically been excluded from it, creating a more contested terrain on which those who are most exposed and vulnerable to violence can be served and represented. What distinguishes how Border Forensics practises this turn is that it operates across two scales simultaneously: the reconstruction of individual events and the production of structural knowledge that the state has actively prevented from being known.

At the systemic level, this turn also enables civil society to intervene in regimes of invisibility. In our investigation on the death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm, we produced what we called an Archive of Absence, an interactive database of police-related deaths that is the first of its kind in Switzerland. The very fact that this resource did not previously exist is itself evidence of the epistemic power being questioned. The information had to be painstakingly collated from multiple sources, and the difficulty of that process revealed a landscape in which lethal outcomes are normalised as rare while the steady pattern of police-related deaths is maintained beneath the level of public recognition. Official narratives manufacture ignorance through silence, and the archive intervenes directly in that process. It operates as an evidentiary record and a memorial. It documents people by name where possible, is transparent about how each piece of evidence was found, and is explicit about what has been withheld or could not be verified, including in cases where individuals' names were not made publicly available.

In this way, absence itself becomes data. What is not named cannot be aggregated or compared, and the structural nature of police violence, especially its disproportionate impact on racialised communities, remains obscured without this kind of careful visibility. Across the 83 cases documented between 1992 and 2025, 67 percent involve at least one axis of othering, with racialisation, socio-legal precarity, and psychological distress appearing as recurring and often overlapping patterns.

While the forensic turn is usually associated with the spatial and temporal reconstruction of individual events, the Archive of Absence extends it into the domain of structural knowledge production. It

makes legible what has been systematically prevented from being known across an entire national context over three decades. In doing so, it returns to the founding argument of the forensic turn itself: that epistemic authority over violence, over who counts, who is counted and who is allowed to be forgotten, should not rest with the state alone.

EG: We have followed your investigation into the incident of 24 June 2022 at the Nador–Melilla border, which reconstructs the violent repression of an attempted crossing involving nearly 2,000 migrants. The report highlights the structural role of migration policies and the militarization of the border in transforming the site into a deadly trap, resulting in at least twenty deaths and numerous disappearances. More recently, you have made visible the case *The Death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm* (2025). Could you contextualize the geographical situation, explain what was at stake, and describe what initially drew your attention to it?

NA: Roger Nzoy Wilhelm was a 37-year-old Black Swiss and South African man who was shot three times and killed by a police officer at Morges railway station in the Canton of Vaud, Switzerland, on 30 August 2021. The case was brought to Border Forensics at the request of Nzoy's family and in collaboration with the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Death of Roger Nzoy Wilhelm, in a situation where the criminal investigation was not able to establish either truth or accountability.

What was at stake was challenging the official narrative surrounding the shooting and reconstructing the sequence of events with precision. A defining feature of our approach was the temporal and scalar scope we brought to the investigation. The criminal investigation and the media coverage that followed from it focused on the fifteen seconds of witness footage that captured the shots being fired, a framing so narrow that it made the shooting appear as an isolated moment rather than the outcome of a sequence of decisions and interventions. We structured our reconstruction across four sequences that together tell a different story. The first covers Nzoy's arrival at the train station and his initial interaction with two railway workers. The second examines the arrival of two police patrols and the rapid escalation that followed. The third addresses the sequence the prosecutor focused on almost exclusively, Nzoy's running and the three shots fired by a police officer. The fourth concerns the treatment and lack of first-aid that Nzoy received as he lay incapacitated on the ground after he was shot, before he was later pronounced dead.

Our counter-investigation demonstrates that the police officers' inaccurate and biased perception of Nzoy as a threat led them to prioritise lethal force over assistance and care. Nzoy was in a state of psychological distress at the time of the encounter. When the second patrol arrived, spontaneously and without clear necessity, the four officers semi-circled him and the situation escalated within seconds. Through 3D reconstruction, 2D footstep trajectory analysis and a video-pixel and biomechanical examination of selected frames of witness footage, we were able to demonstrate that Nzoy was fleeing rather than attacking, and that it is highly likely he did not have a knife in his hand at the moment the first shots were fired. This directly contradicts the claim, repeated in police press statements and widely circulated by the media, that the officer was acting in self-defence against an armed attack. The moments immediately after the shooting are also highly significant. Once Nzoy was shot and immobilised on the platform, the police officers prioritised security measures despite a complete absence of threat. They handcuffed him and conducted a body search while he lay bleeding on the ground, and no first-aid measures were initiated during the six minutes that followed the final shot. The racialised logic of the intervention did not end with the use of the firearm. This is made plain by the radio communication immediately after the shooting, in which PO3 described Nzoy to the dispatcher simply as "a man of colour, he is on the ground". Emergency care was only provided when an off-duty nurse who had witnessed the scene intervened spontaneously.

Beyond reconstructing the events at Morges station, the investigation situates Nzoy's death within the broader structural conditions that shape police-related deaths in Switzerland. While Border Forensics has to date focused on the continuum of border violence affecting migrants, this investigation examines how the same logics of othering and differential exposure to lethal force materialise within national territory through policing practices. We aimed to show that the othering of Nzoy, including his racialisation, his masculinity and his psychological distress, shaped the police response that led to his death, and that the specific circumstances of that death correspond to a clear and demonstrable pattern across the cases we have documented in the Archive of Absence.

The Nzoy case sits within the same continuum of violence that Border Forensics has documented in Europe's border regime such as our Nador-Melilla investigation, where practices of othering determine who is protected and who is exposed to lethal force. What this investigation adds is the recognition that this logic does not operate only at the edges of migration control but extends to anyone whose presence within the national space is marked as other, regardless of citizenship or legal status.

EG: Why can the case of Nzoy be understood as paradigmatic of a shift in how the border is conceptualized?

NA: As you have identified, the case of Nzoy does not fit a conventional understanding of border violence. There is no border crossing, no detention centre, no external frontier, and, importantly, Nzoy was a Swiss citizen. To analyse his death through the lens of the border, therefore, requires its unpacking. Racialised policing has its own extensive literature and political history, and the killing of Nzoy belongs first and foremost to that conceptualisation, to the long record of black men, women, and children dying at the hands of police whose perception of threat was shaped by race. That is the primary framework, and we do not want to obscure it by folding it too quickly into a migration or border studies argument.

What the border concept allows us to add, rather than replace, is an analysis of the mechanism through which that racialised perception operates institutionally. Drawing on Étienne Balibar's argument (2002) that the border functions as a selective control system that appears wherever the state differentiates between those who belong and those whose presence is questioned, the Nzoy case reveals how that mechanism can operate independently of migration status or territorial logic. The border in this sense is not a geographical fact but a state practice, one that sorts individuals according to race, class, origin, and psychological difference, producing unequal exposure to law, administration, and lethal force. What makes the case paradigmatic is not that it is unique, but that it renders this structure visible and clarifies it, extending the analytical reach of border studies. Our Archive of Absence shows that Nzoy is not an outlier but part of a demonstrable pattern. To follow the border, as Border Forensics has constantly argued, is to follow the practices of differentiation that determine whose life is protected and whose death requires no accountability.

EG: The border is no longer a wall; beyond the spectacular, we see how a country's identity framework and the accumulation of micro-level police and administrative decisions become lethal. This is the trajectory of a young man born in Switzerland, of South African descent, who, because he embodied a border in a particularly explicit way, found himself in a situation of distress that ultimately led to his death. Your work makes explicit the denial of fundamental human rights.

The border as a wall was only the tip of the iceberg (Ganivet 2019): a visible device emerging from biopolitical and necropolitical dynamics (Foucault 1975, 197; Mbembe 2003). Today, infrastructure is no longer confined to a single site, as it has permeated everywhere. The case of Nzoy is explicit in this regard. While we may have already sensed a "beyond" of the geopolitical wall, your analysis of his death eradicates the monumental "façade" of the border. You turn it into a counter-monument.

The focus on an individual trajectory, the personalization of the investigation through the use of a first name, the absence of spectacular imagery, the sober aesthetic, and the precise collection of spatio-temporal data enable a reconstruction that contradicts official narratives. Your investigation produces a radical shift in the perception of past events and leads to an ethical truth that is essential for how border studies can be approached today. This shift in the narrative toward ethical responsibility is fundamental.

For this, we thank you and look forward attentively to what comes next. To conclude, could you tell us about your current projects?

NA: We appreciate this reading of the work. What we attempt to do is render visible the infrastructures, perceptions, and institutional arrangements that shape exposure to violence, whether at a geopolitical frontier or within national territory. In the case of Nzoy, the focus on an individual trajectory was not a stylistic choice but an ethical and methodological necessity. The official narrative reduced him to a threat and framed the event as an isolated confrontation. By reconstructing the spatio-temporal sequences with precision and situating them within broader patterns of racialised policing, we sought to restore complexity where simplification prevailed.

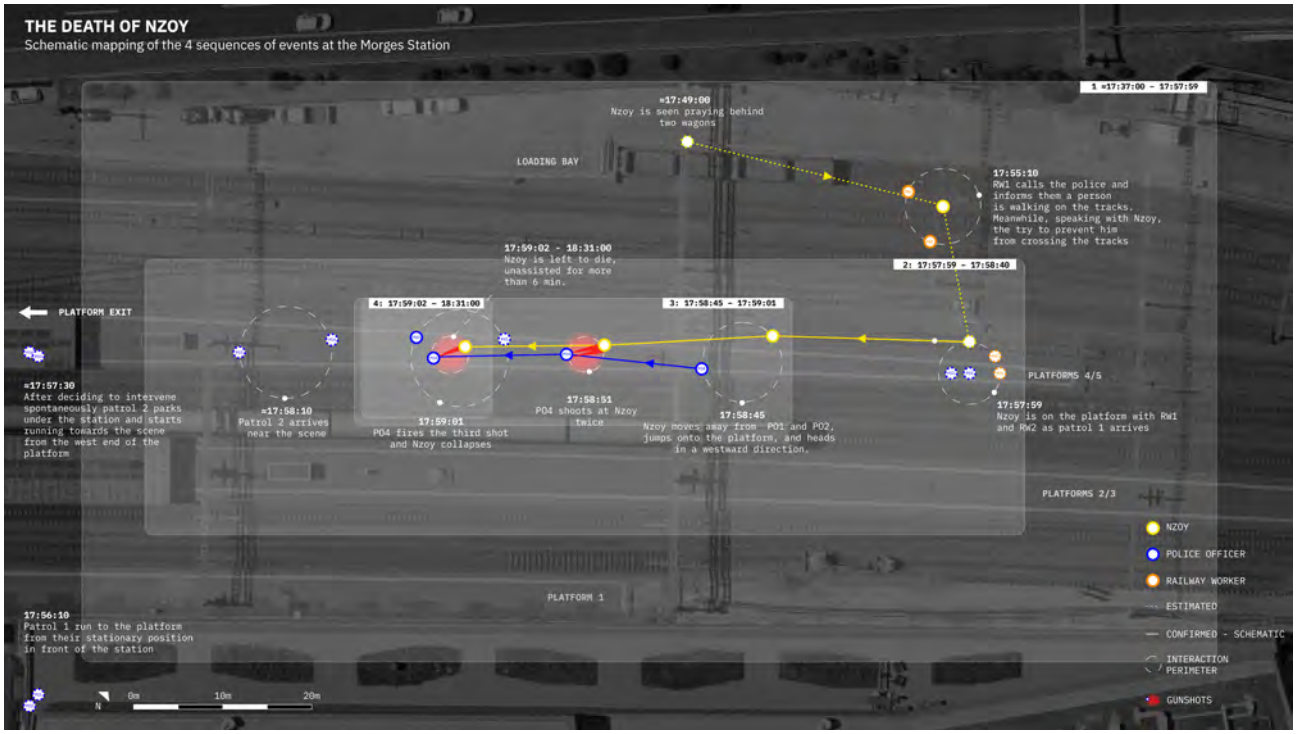
We are currently engaged in two investigations that extend our focus on how contemporary border regimes operate through dispersed infrastructures and policy assemblages.

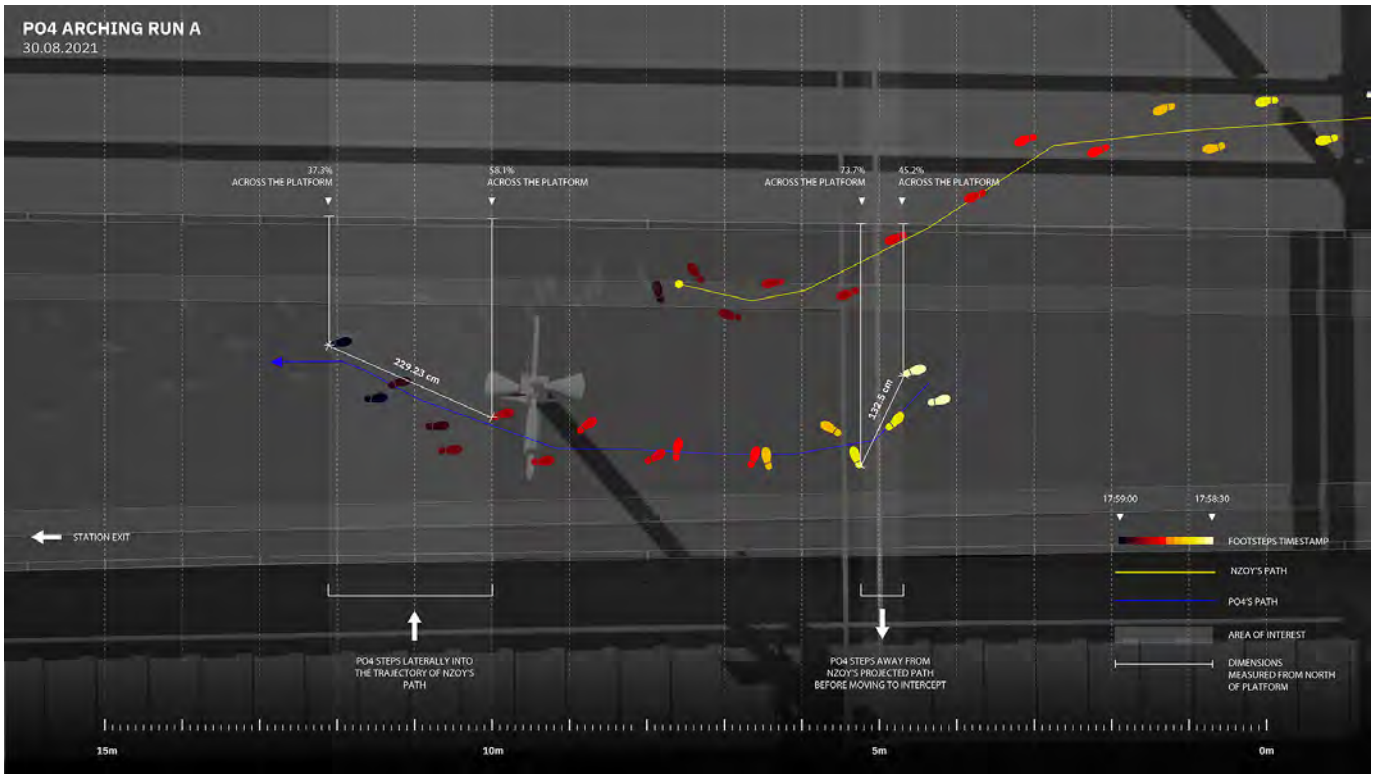
One concerns deaths in the English Channel, developed in collaboration with the Centre for Sociodigital Futures at the University of Bristol (UK). This project examines the recent increase in fatalities in the context of intensified anti-smuggling and "stop the boats" policies. Rather than treating deaths at sea solely as failures of rescue, the investigation explores how surveillance systems, supply-chain disruptions, policing tactics, and cross-border coordination shape the material conditions under which crossings occur. In particular, we are analysing how overcrowding, vessel precarity, and departures close to shore are structured by enforcement strategies.

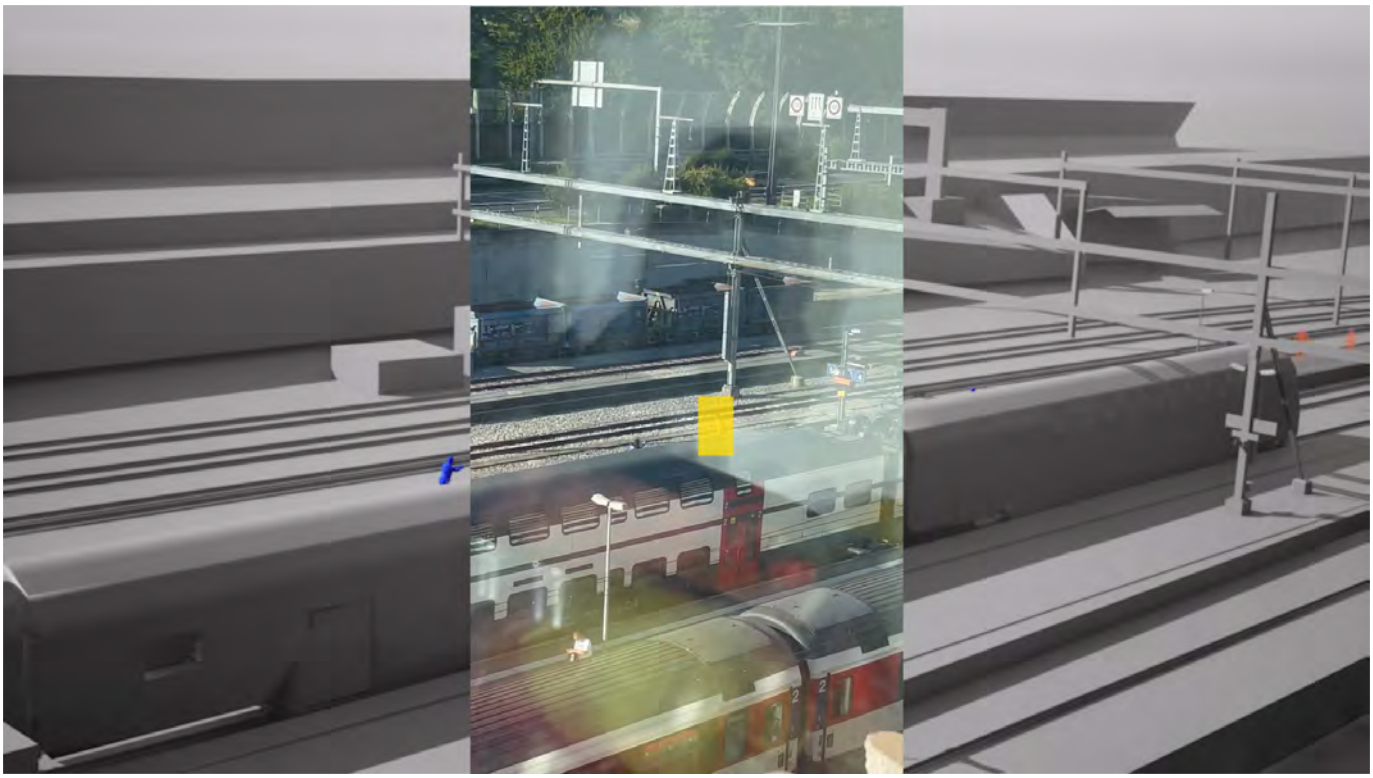
In parallel, we are developing a counter-investigation into the push-back regime at the Poland-Belarus border, in collaboration with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the University of Bern (Switzerland). This work examines the longer-term consolidation of policies, legal amendments, and border infrastructures in recent years, and their relation to deaths and enforced disappearances in the borderlands. A central concern is the interaction between environmental conditions and enforcement practices, and how landscapes become sites of attrition when access to asylum and humanitarian assistance is restricted. As with our previous investigations, a core part of this work involves producing spatial and visual evidence that can be used to support legal and political demands for accountability.

Across both contexts and across all of our work, what remains constant is the demand that has driven every investigation we have conducted: truth and justice for those whose exposure to violence has been rendered invisible, and whose deaths have been explained away.

Images from the Investigation



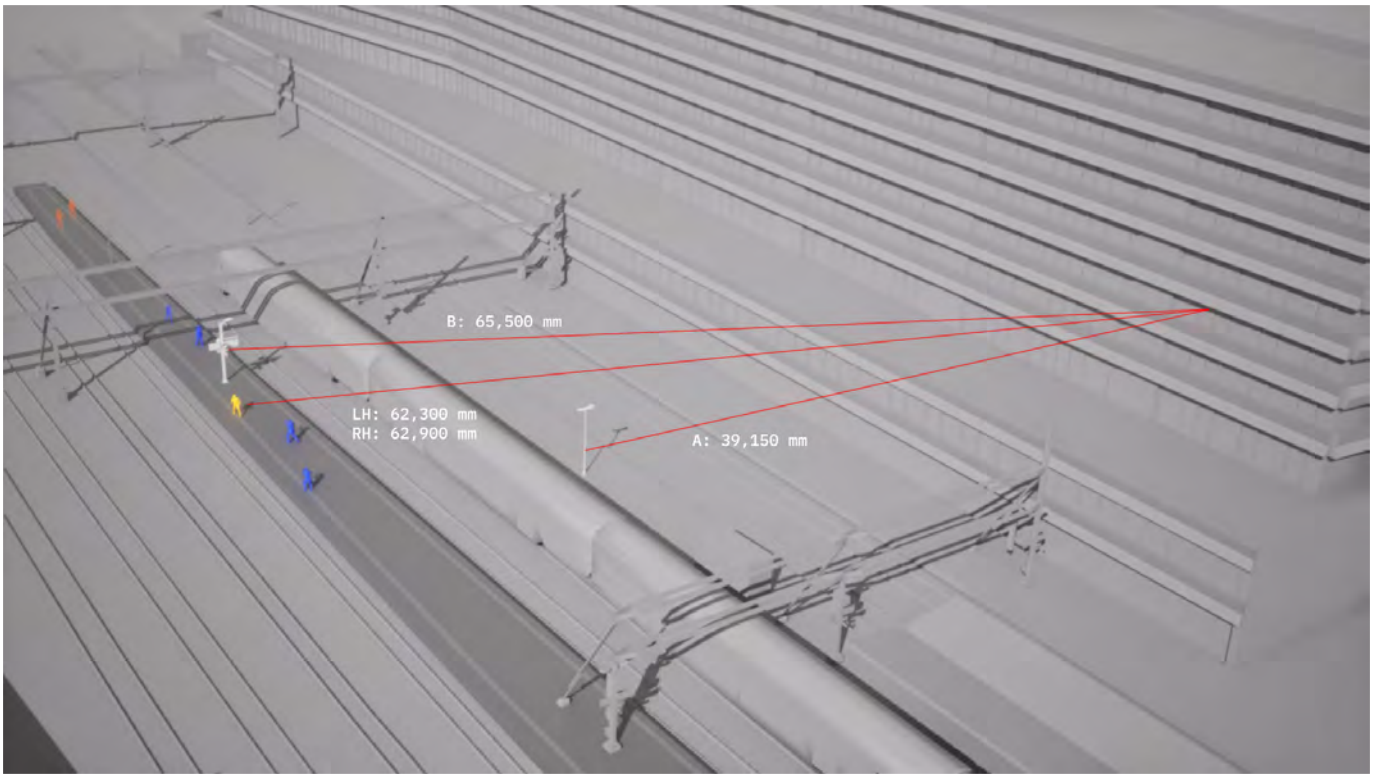

PO4 ARCHING RUN A
30.08.2021
37.3%
ACROSS THE PLATFORM
58.1%
ACROSS THE PLATFORM
73.7%
ACROSS THE PLATFORM
45.2%
ACROSS THE PLATFORM
229.23 cm
329.5 cm
STATION EXIT
PO4 STEPS LATERALLY INTO THE TRAJECTORY OF NZOY'S PATH
PO4 STEPS AWAY FROM NZOY'S PROJECTED PATH BEFORE MOVING TO INTERCEPT
17:59:00
17:58:30
FOOTSTEPS TIMESTAMP
NZOY'S PATH
PO4'S PATH
AREA OF INTEREST
DIMENSIONS MEASURED FROM NORTH OF PLATFORM
15m
10m
5m
0m

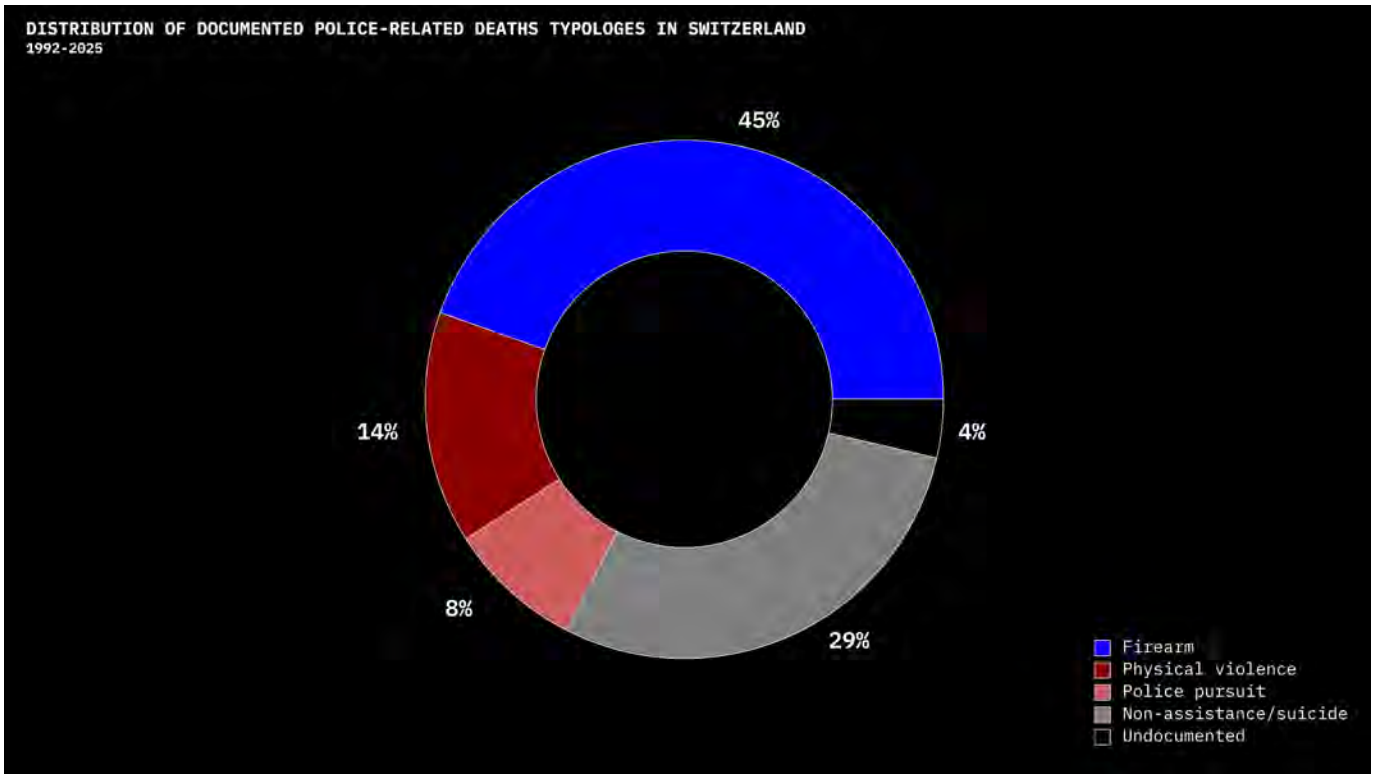


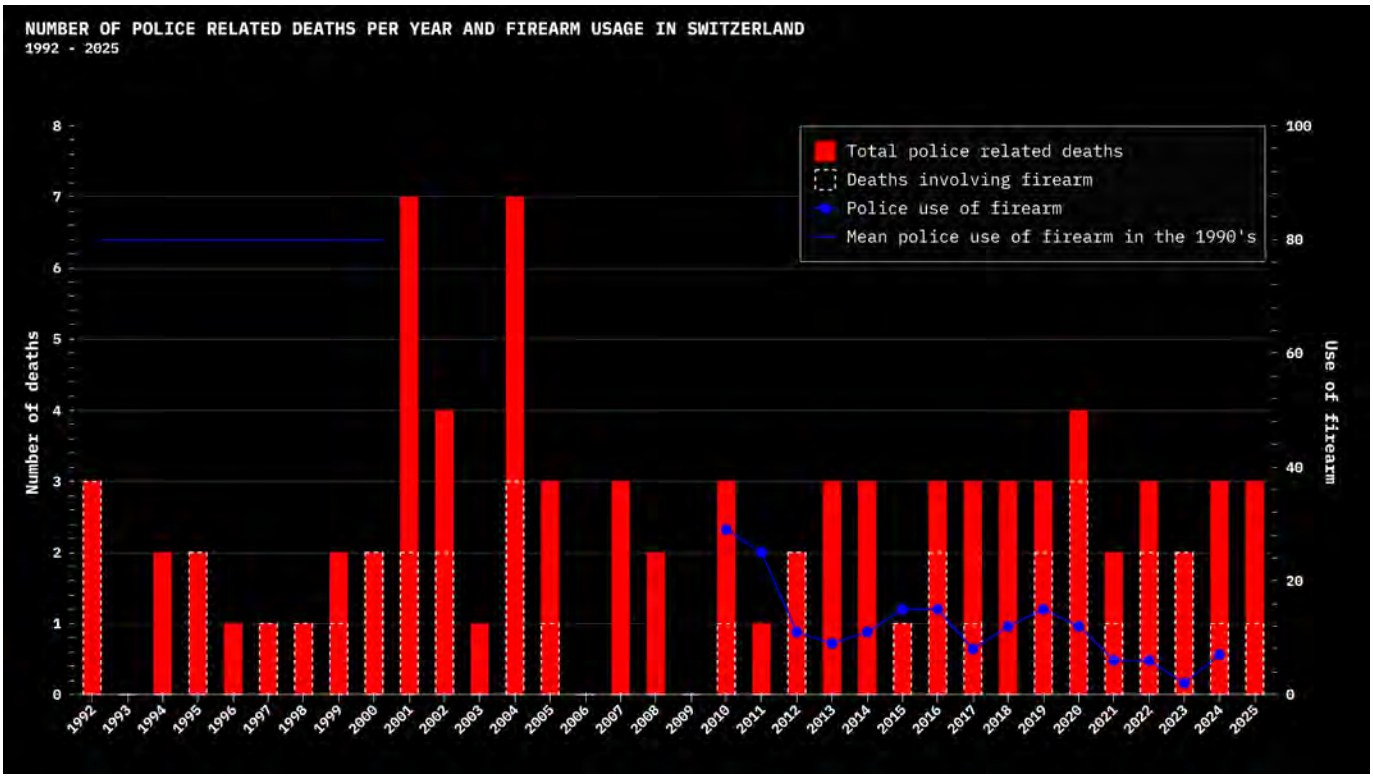
NZOY BOTH HANDS VISIBLE FRAMES
30.08.2021
SHOTS
1
2
SHOT
3
WITNESS VIDEO 1015
17:58:50
17:58:55
17:59:00
17:59:05

NZOY HANDS MOTION ANALYSIS
30.08.2021
RIGHT HAND
multiple bends suggesting finger joints, not the wrist joint. fingertips curve downward and the form tapers, unlike the rounded shape of a clenched fist.
LEFT HAND
stays open and outstretched carried upward across the body by the arm, moving in the direction of the torso.
KNUCKLE
WRIST
FINGER TIPS

PO4 ARCHING RUN B
30.08.2021
VANISHING POINT
PO4 MOVES BACKWARDS AND ACROSS
20.8% OF THE PLATFORM'S WIDTH
VANISHING POINT
STATION EXIT
PO4 FOOTSTEPS
PERSPECTIVE LINES
DIMENSION MEASURED FROM THE NORTHERN EDGE OF THE PLATFORM
PO4 MOVEMENT ACROSS THE PLATFORM
SHOT 1 & 2 FIRED
THE DURATION OF PO4'S ARCHING RUN
NZOY STARTS RUNNING
18:00:00
17:58:55
17:58:50
17:58:45
17:58:40


B: 65,500 mm
LH: 62,300 mm
RH: 62,900 mm
A: 39,150 mm


DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTED POLICE-RELATED DEATHS TYPOLOGES IN SWITZERLAND
1992-2025
45%
4%
29%
8%
14%
Firearm
Physical violence
Police pursuit
Non-assistance/suicide
Undocumented


NUMBER OF POLICE RELATED DEATHS PER YEAR AND FIREARM USAGE IN SWITZERLAND
1992 - 2025
Total police related deaths
Deaths involving firearm
Police use of firearm
Mean police use of firearm in the 1990's
Number of deaths
Use of firearm
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
0
20
40
60
80
100
1992
1993
1994
1995
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
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2012
2013
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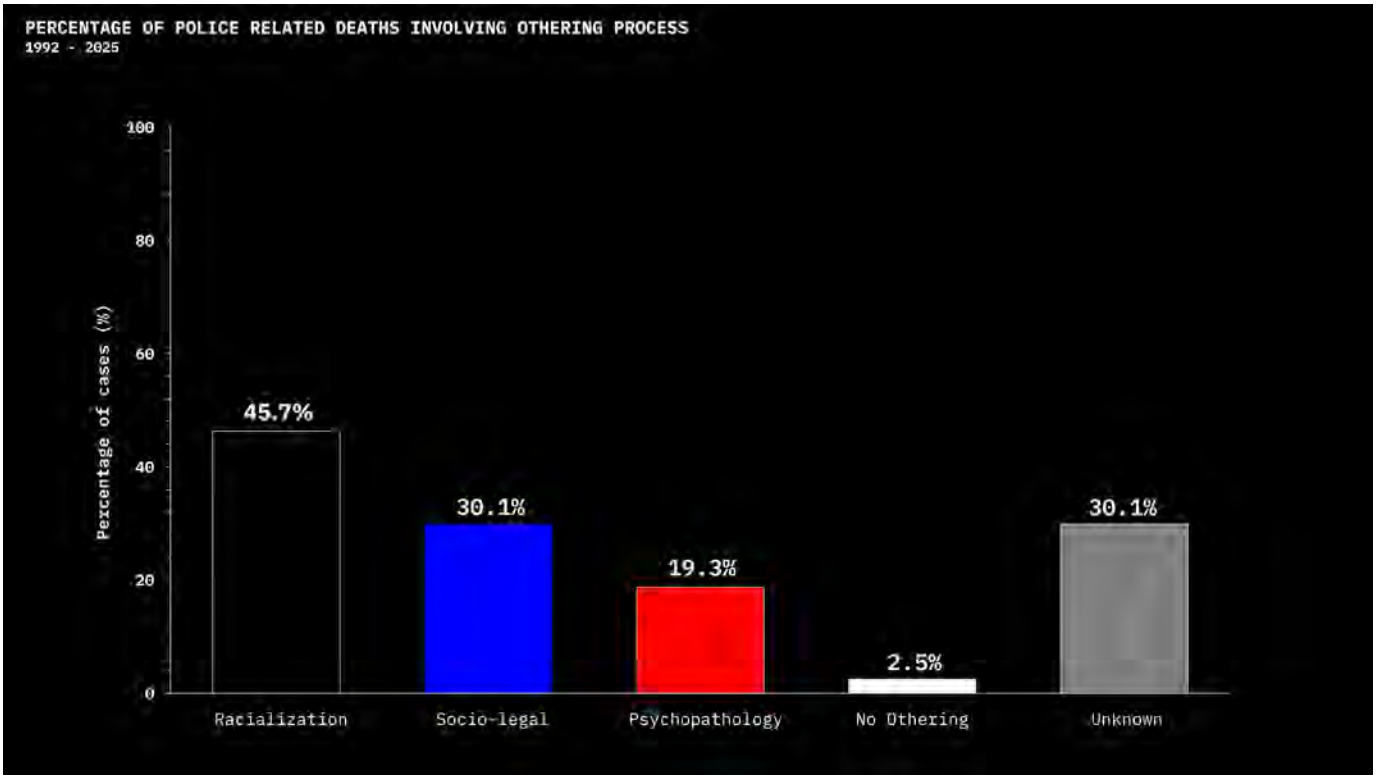
2024
2025



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