Introduction

In the *Atlante Farnese* (second century AD), Atlas is holding on his back a globe with the symbols of the constellations as seen from a non-geocentric perspective.[1] As one of the most ancient representations of a globe, it shows the borders of the known at the time: the cosmos. Through a specific representation—that of the constellations reversed from the sky on the surface of a sphere—the statue seems to suggest a specific conception of the terrestrial world as bound with the astronomical realm. The sphere shows 45 constellations, those apparent groupings of stars historically used to identify specific figures otherwise invisible. In other words, it is an interpretation figuratively bringing together elements that are separate. Beyond the complex iconological, symbolic, astronomical, and scientific meanings of the sphere with the figure of Atlas, when viewed with contemporary eyes, this depiction of the constellations clearly shows the humanly constructed nature of globe representations.

Political maps, as contemporary representations of our globe, show Earth covered with lines dividing and defining states, another human conception of the world as we imagine it to be, and therefore another specific conception of the world, belonging to our era, which conceives of our planet as divided by territorial borders.[2] If we put ourselves in a non-geocentric perspective, as from satellites in outer space, we would see yet another globe, with no visible lines. Just like the *Atlante Farnese*'s constellations, the divided surface of political maps does not correspond to the physical reality of the continuous topographic surface on the ground, where borders are mostly invisible. Although our collective imagination of borders is often that of highly visible walls or barbed-wire barriers, only 10% of the world's national boundaries are thus given form.[3]

As human constructs, national borders exist beyond their visible markers, through their territorial and social effects, manifesting the power of nation-states which took shape in modern history.[4] Although from a geographical and technical perspective a border is a line defined by international agreements delimiting the extension of a territory, and although that line ontologically exists through its representation on a map, conceiving borders as lines is highly

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1 Valerio, "Historiographic and Numerical Notes," 198.
2 Popescu, *Bordering and Ordering*.
3 Szary, "Borders," 20.
4 Maier, *Once within Borders*.

problematic for different reasons. It implicates an excessive focus on borders' physical characteristics, an attitude that has often been linked to the prejudice that national territories have "material" borders and that the state is a container precisely defined by them. The conventional narration of international borders dominated by linearity and fixity has tended to naturalise them, reinforcing the idea that they are unchangeable and immobile.[5] Maps are often the outcome of selective political views, which hide alternative geographies to the hegemonic power of mapping.[6] Those fixed border lines can be contested or be experienced differently, depending on one's citizenship status.[7] Even more, thinking of borders as lines may lead to the idea that borders have effects only there where the line is placed and, at times, it is visible. However, borders are at the same time visible and not visible, in the line and beyond the line.

The idea of a utopian world without human-constructed borders arose with the very appearance of national boundary lines, although borders are tangible and intangible signs that persist in time and are difficult to erase because they provide a condition for the existence of western civilisation.[8] In the last decades, borders have changed in shape and function, reflecting the changes in the definition of citizenship, sovereignty, and national identity, but they have since regained their significance: Now no one seems to believe anymore that they can disappear. This re-bordering effect might be related to the crisis of the nation-state, with its territorially bounded sovereignty and its reaction to this crisis, which progressively led states to close themselves off.[9] The rise of mobility between nations, the competition deriving from globalisation flows, and the controversies over migration fluxes also played a role in the general increase in control and closure of borders.

Almost in contradiction to the increasing closure for some people of borders, contemporary reality is crossed by intersecting global cultural flows.[10] Among these are images, which are today omnipresent and have profoundly modified the way reality is lived as well as how contemporary culture and theory are scrutinised, following the so-called "pictorial turn."[11] In the panorama of borders, the use of images is evident in the "border spectacle" of migration, that is, the enormous and growing chatter in the media which feeds a paradoxical visibility, making borders visible in an overly essentialist and polarised way, which can be deemed as disempowering for those who are more fragile

5   Giudice and Giubilaro, "Re-Imagining the Border."

6   Baud and van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borders."

7   Rigo, *Europa Di Confine*, 200.

8   Gaeta, "Segni Sulla Pelle Di Un Gigante."

9   Brown, *Walled States*, 201.

10   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes."

11   Mitchell, *Picture Theory*.

in the power relations established by borders.[12] Yet a clear distinction needs to be drawn between the power attributed to borderlines through map-making, on the one hand, and power attribution to borderscapes through images, on the other.

In this framework, the research that led to this book started in 2016. During a conversation with a friend who came from a small village on the Swiss-Italian border, I asked what it was like to live there. He told me that everything was normal, that there was nothing "to see," because the border was completely open. You could simply move from one side to the other in the woods and meadows, and none of the local residents thought too much about it. This absence of things to see struck me. A few days later, I took the car and drove for about an hour to visit that line for the first time. He accompanied me, facilitating my access to the invisible stretches of that border. The places we visited were mundane. In those same months, however, the so-called "migration crisis" occurred at the Como-Chiasso border. As was the case with the French border in the Ventimiglia area, large numbers of people on the move were stranded at the Como-Chiasso border, mostly camped near the railway station. Chronicles of the specific events in the border town of Como barely reached the national news. I remember feeling almost as if I had not heard about it. I was living in Milan, and that border was the one closest to my home. This project arose in that context, partly by chance and partly out of the urgency of that specific moment, which anticipated other moments that were to come.

This book adopts perspectives mediated from critical border studies, which is an expanding and increasingly multidisciplinary field of study, to confront borders' visibilities and invisibilities, while radicating in the Swiss-Italian border scenario. Since the 1980s, border studies have undergone a processual turn, which challenges the preconception of borders as statics or natural.[13] New conceptual paradigms were born, such as that of border landscape, accounting for the porosity of borders.[14] Recently, the emerging notion of borderscape has become established as one of the most relevant conceptualisations of borders.[15] The notion of borderscape recognises borders as fluid and multilevel ambits, arguing that they are composed of both spatial and territorial layers as well as social and political ones. Such layers also include borders' representations and imaginations, which are acknowledged as constituents of borders.

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12   On the "border spectacle" of migration see Mazzara, *Reframing Migration*.
13   Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, and Wemyss, "Intersectional Border(Ing)s"; Green, "Lines, Traces and Tidemarks: Reflections on Forms of Borderli-Ness."
14   House, *Frontier on the Rio Grande*.
15   Brambilla, Laine, and Bocchi, *Borderscaping*.

As a verb, the term *borderscaping* identifies a methodology that focuses on how borders are both represented and experienced.[16] In recent contributions that consider borderscapes, borders' representations and imaginaries are central topics.[17] The research presented in this book adopts the borderscape notion because of its potential to engage with the politics-aesthetics nexus, namely that dynamic relationship existing between regimes of politics and representations, thus between border governments and border imaginaries.[18] The politics-aesthetics nexus is particularly fertile for addressing the issue of the in/visible character of borders because it unveils the meanings of borders beyond the material and, through a redistribution of the sensible, aims for a change in their politics.

Moving from the specificities of the Swiss-Italian borderscape, the book aims to understand the potential of photography theory and photographic practice to reveal the in/visible constellations of borderscapes and to counter their hegemonic representations. Using the expression "photographic practice" I refer both to recent artistic practices based on photography and to the use of photography as a cultural praxis to do research in the field. The word "constellations" points to a set of material and immaterial (spatial) elements that must be read as a whole and in relational terms. With "hegemonic representations," I relate to representations that incorporate the normative perspective of the nation-state or the stereotyped perspective of the border spectacle. The idea of *countering* entails an objective of the research, as well as a potential inherent in marginal and border areas. Margins have often been described as creative areas;[19] among others, bell hooks addressed the margin as a space of "radical openness" with an inner potential.[20]

My objective has been, therefore, to investigate the visible and invisible shades of the Swiss-Italian borderscape, exploring the potential of photography to open spaces of imagination in borderscapes that are alternative to their hegemonic narratives, and ultimately more inclusive. In *The Production of Space*, first published in 1974, Henri Lefebvre aptly discusses how representations of space are the expression of ideologies and powers, which contribute to producing space, also outlining how counter-representations can contribute to producing differential spaces.[21] By considering such counter-representations,

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16   Brambilla, "Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept."
17   For research on contemporary border imaginaries, see Schimanski and Nyman, *Border Images, Border Narratives*.
18   On the politics-aesthetics nexus, see Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
19   Lavie, "Blow-Ups in the Borderzones."
20   hooks, "Choosing the Margin."
21   Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

this research aims to actively participate in changing the understanding and governing of present borderscapes. To do so, it combines different methodologies. It looks for conceptual insights into border politics and aesthetics, uses of photography in contemporary artistic works, and traces of bordering processes in a specific on-site borderscape through fieldwork and photographic practice. The research therefore developed not only through the study of the border space and its imaginaries, but also through a practice of image-making.

Since borders are not the privileged object of any discipline, they require a method of study that is transdisciplinary and spurious.[22] Beyond the expanded field of critical border studies, this book thus situates itself between urban studies, art history, and practice-based research, focusing specifically on photography and how it intersects with space. The choice of this focus came about naturally. In urban studies, photography is increasingly present as a research practice that draws on an established background. In the Italian scene, the influence of photography in urban studies is proven by the historical presence of photographers positioned in dialogue with the two disciplines, giving birth to a kind of Italian school of the photography of space.[23] More and more, photography is considered an essential cognitive tool for understanding and designing territories.[24] Contemporary art history is also opening up to investigations on how to introduce a relevant practice into its research methods.[25] Meanwhile, the notions of "artistic research" and "practice-based research" have entered European art academies and universities. Debates about what this type of research entails has been going on for three decades: In this context, I see it as a form of research that develops both on and through practice, here the photographic one, as research in the arts.[26]

The choice of producing photographs in the field for this research arises for different reasons. The intrinsic presence of photography in urban studies and urban design practice is connected to the fact that photography is often a tool to observe and understand places at the service of the geographical imagination, that element which gives shape to our relationship with the physical and social world and that allows us to see, remember, and imagine.[27] At first, it was

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22   Gaeta, *La Civiltà Dei Confini*, 35.

23   The organization Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea, which brings together a number of photographers, is perhaps the most renowned example of this.

24   Borgherini and Sicard, *PhotoPaysage*; Secchi, *Ricerche e Fotografia Di Paesaggio*, 202.

25   See for example Van Gelder, *Ground Sea*.

26   For an overview of the ongoing discussion surrounding practice-based research, see Candy and Edmonds, "Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts"; Borgdorff, "A Brief Survey of Current Debates on the Concepts and Practices of Research in the Arts."

27   Schwartz and James, *Picturing Place*.

first precisely my background in architecture and urban studies that drew me to photography and then led me to believe that practice itself has potential in the process of research. The need to use photography as a research practice and not just consider it an object of study arose naturally. At the same time, the lack of contemporary artworks about the Swiss-Italian borderscape, within the more general lack of studies about the area, stimulated outcomes that could account for the border's layered complexity.

The form of this book is of a photo-textual constellation, a form that ties into well-established working paradigms in contemporary documentary artistic practices. The conceptual framework of this approach is derived from, among others, Walter Benjamin. In an essay published following a lecture in 1934 at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, Benjamin considered "the author as producer."[28] Speaking of the writer who takes photographs, he suggested re-framing the author as a figure who reflects critically using the technologies of his time. Alexander Streitberger related Benjamin's ideas to the approaches of three artists whose works incorporated photography and text, namely Victor Burgin, Allan Sekula, and Martha Rosler.[29] The hybrid character of their works, which constantly move between photography and writing, can address the socio-political context of their very production and stimulate a critical reflection to change such conditions of production, as opposed to formalist approaches to photography that tend to turn images into objects to be consumed.

Through their way of working, these artists "insist the photographer should frame the images with language to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, supplement, specify, or extend the meanings depicted by the images themselves."[30] Already in one of his first works, namely *Aerospace Folktales* (1972), Sekula assembled 142 photographs, a written commentary, and four audio interviews around his familiar story, following his father's dismissal as an aeronautical engineer. This assemblage points to the ideological and economic context surrounding the family and the underlying society at large. Sekula's best-known later work *Fish Story* (1995), dedicated to marine space and part of his trilogy on global capitalism which includes *Sketch for a Geography Lesson* (1983), aptly shows the critical potential of interweaving writing and photographs. Taking up Benjamin's ideas, Burgin also affirmed the necessity of using a "pan-discursive" approach, in which different elements such as photography

28   Benjamin, "The Author as a Producer."
29   Streitberger, "'Cultural Work as a Praxis.'"
30   Ibid., 208.

and writing, artistic and political movements, are intertwined to pursue technical progress that is the basis for political advancement.[31]

The choice of the geographical area of research, an under-studied internal European border, also deserves reflection. By internal European borders, I refer to borders between countries adhering to the Schengen Agreement. These types of borders are generally less studied than paradigmatic cases of contested borders, such as the US-Mexico border or the EU external border.[32] The invisibility of internal European borders, which are (selectively) open and apparently not much militarised, can lead one to think that they have disappeared. Yet, they keep on "acting" despite their invisibility, and it is still necessary to reconsider how they are represented and even imagined. This reason prompted a focus on a "boring border" like the Swiss-Italian one, in the words that Anke Strüver applied to her study of another "boring border."[33] A boring border can still be alive in the memory of the people who settled there; it can carry symbolic meanings, or it can be perceived in radically different ways, depending on one's subjective status and one's ability to move within Fortress Europe. Moreover, the Swiss-Italian border has some specificities that have motivated its choice as a case study, besides that of my personal experience of it. I specify that with the expression Swiss-Italian border, I point to the border section between Ticino and Lombardy, namely the border between the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland and one of Italy's four northern regions bordering the Swiss Confederation.

In this stretch of the Swiss-Italian borderscape, the differences in laws and values between the two countries have created distinct and lively crossing dynamics, such as cross-border work and migration, that reflect in a visible and an invisible way both on the territory and on the concept of citizenship, far beyond the boundary line. These dynamics of bordering have led, for example, to the creation of industrial areas close to the border to employ cross-border labour. Both cross-border workers and migrants are subject to a differential inclusion between the two countries, that is, they have partial citizenship rights.[34] In our civilisation, the border works between inclusion and exclusion by providing some possibilities for inclusion—for example, being able to request political asylum, but also other prospects for exclusion—such as preventing the freedom of movement. If the differential inclusion of migrants might appear evident, the case of cross-border workers needs to be further

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31   Burgin, "Photography, Fantasy, Fiction," 80; Streitberger, "'Cultural Work as a Praxis,'" 195.
32   On the concept of paradigmatic borders see Gaeta, "Paradigm Shifts."
33   Strüver, *Stories of the "Boring Border."*
34   Mezzadra and Neilson, "Between Inclusion and Exclusion."

examined. Cross-border workers are citizens of and live in a country but do not work there, while they are working in a country where they do not hold citizenship, and therefore the right to vote, although they materially contribute to its economy and to shaping its territory. These functions of the boring Swiss-Italian border are often perceived as normal and irrelevant, despite their large numerical dimensions. Every day a massive flow of people moves between the two sides of the Swiss-Italian border for labour, and 30% of workers in Ticino are cross-border workers.[35]

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the peculiarity and also the contradictions of this massive imported work system. With the necessary closure of the border, the entire health and business system of Ticino was put at risk. In the end, a full closure of the border was not implemented for cross-border workers, although it occurred at other places on the Italian boundary line. There was also a visible impact on consumption and daily life, which in this area is clearly transnational. For example, it is normal for Swiss residents in Ticino to do their shopping in Italy. The pandemic also made carrying out this transnational research more difficult, because that simple movement between the two sides of the line that had seemed completely normal until March 2020 suddenly became much more troublesome, if not impossible. Indeed, the COVID-19 outbreak hindered the on-site presence I had desired or had initially aimed for, providing a set of limitations for the research.

As for migratory movements, the Swiss-Italian border is not one of the most topical at the moment. Yet in 2017, when this research began, the area was facing a moment of emergency regarding the presence of migrants. In fact, between 2016 and 2018, there was a "crisis" at the border, with a huge presence of people blocked in the frontier area, especially in the city of Como. This situation arose due to the exponential increase in arrivals at the Swiss-Italian border of migrants who wished to cross the border to proceed to northern Europe. The resulting pushbacks by Switzerland to Italy, required by the Dublin regulations, have given rise to a stalemate. In fact, the Dublin agreements provide only for the possibility of submitting a request for political asylum in the country of first arrival in Europe, which in this case was generally Italy. Although the situation calmed down, these movements undergo systemic fluctuations, and emergency moments may come back in the near future. Therefore, it remains relevant to consider this border and to outline its relations with other historical bordering activities.

It should be noted here that the term "migrant" has become problematic. Generally speaking, this is related to the fact that it has become a stigmatising

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35   For more detailed data, see chapter 2, "Between Representation and Experience," of this book.

word, used in political contexts with derogatory or judgemental connotations. Emblematically, in the Italian context, the word used in the past, *immigrato*, has gradually acquired a negative connotation, to the point of being replaced with the more neutral term *migrante*, which however is in the process of also changing connotation. Yann Moix underlined how the very term "migration" is in some way de-humanising because it is used in scientific contexts to indicate the movement of animal species, plants, and cells.[36] Amnesty International proposed the expression "people on the move" as a more appropriate way to refer to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.[37] From now on and whenever possible, I will adopt a combination of these four words to refer to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers.

Following the very fluidity of the border's dynamics, the structure of this book is designed to move in and out of theory and practice, in and out of the Swiss-Italian border, between north and south. After a brief start on the Swiss-Italian border, the first part of the book (chapters 1–4) builds a theoretical and conceptual understanding of borders, their representations, and their imaginaries. At the same time, it introduces some key concepts on the historical and contemporary dynamics of the Swiss-Italian border. The second part of the book (chapters 5–6), fully immerses itself in the Swiss-Italian border in the field, developing a photo-textual travelogue that draws on the theoretical concepts previously presented.

Chapter 1 introduces the Swiss-Italian border immateriality on the ground through a series of photographs of the boundary line that remain as markers of the invisible. To move beyond a linear understanding of the border, chapter 2 conceptualises borders as scapes, considering their dual meaning of political and scenic spaces, and the relation between power, representation, labour, and environment in shaping territories. It moves from historical landscape painting to contemporary photography, from Pieter Bruegel the Elder to Allan Sekula. Chapter 3 first presents the Swiss-Italian border's visible existence in cartographies and then focuses on its dynamic reality through spatial practices of cross-border labour and migrations as processes of performative construction of the borderscape. Chapter 4 turns to Italy's southern margins, a displacement of the border dynamically linked to the north, considering work by Marco Poloni on Lampedusa. Poloni's work is put in relation to Lefebvre's theory on space and representation. Chapter 5 develops a mobile epistemology of the Swiss-Italian borderscape, moving on the ground along trajectories of cross-border work and migration. The chapter builds a travelogue in two sections. The visual narrative and the textual one, at the same time autonomous

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36   Moix, *Dehors*.
37   Van Gelder, *Ground Sea*, 206.

and interrelated, complement each other. Writings from fieldwork, extracts of conversations, archival images, and on-site photographs come together. Chapter 6 sums up the conclusions on the potentialities of photography to open spaces of imagination, starting from a firefly image, a still surviving from a documentary on women's labour in Canton Ticino of the 1920s.

Finally, the introduction to this work must clarify some intellectual premises. In his book *La Civiltà dei Confini* (2018) dedicated to the "society of borders," Luca Gaeta devotes the introduction to indicating how to study the border.[38] The border eschews the binary categories of thought and requires relative thinking. Since it is not the privileged object of any science, a method of study that is transdisciplinary and spurious is the most appropriate.[39] This recommendation has been followed since the beginning of this research. Gaeta also talks about what he calls the "prejudice of us" [*il pregiudizio del noi*]. Those who study borders always stand on one side or the other of that real or imaginary line, intended in both an auto-biographic and a disciplinary sense.[40] In my case, I studied the Swiss-Italian border as an Italian, which inevitably influenced my perspective. Likewise, I cannot divest myself of my disciplinary background, which influenced my methodological choices. Furthermore, I acknowledge that I moved from a privileged position, that of a white female with a European passport.[41] I am aware that this has given me a freedom of movement that is impossible for others, and that my experience could never be close to that of someone who moves from a different positionality.

Photography itself can also be hegemonic. It is not the tool that plays a counter-representational role, but rather the way the tool is used. Photography has been hegemonic in border-making when used to map the territory to help design the frontier, or to create a strong identity vision of the national landscape instrumental to the discourse of the nation-state.[42] In addition, aeroplane photography, used first during World War I for survey campaigns, exploited the two technologies of transportation and communication in the service of warfare, so that these two globalising—in the sense of hegemonic—media were instrumental in drawing borders.[43] Today, one of photography's hegemonic

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38   Gaeta, *La Civiltà Dei Confini*, 17 (my translation here and following. Unless otherwise acknowledged, all translations are my own).

39   Ibid., 35.

40   Ibid., 25.

41   In the expression "white privilege," I follow Alessandra Ferrini's reflections on entering Italian colonial archives as a person who identifies as white; Ferrini, "(Re)Entering the Archive."

42   Brett, *Photography and Place*.

43   On the concept of globalizing media, see Sekula, "The Instrumental Image," 27.

appliances is expressed in surveillance activities, such as in the employment of drones for patrolling borders.[44] This hegemonic dimension has also been employed in the identification of individuals through their bodies. Since the control and governance of people pass through counting and identifying, from the very beginning the state has tried to develop strategies to implement forms of identifications. In the Swiss context, a police photographic campaign carried out on *sans papiers* in the mid-nineteenth century, shot by Carl Durheim, is emblematic.[45] Photography was used to produce records that made recognisable those people who had no nationality documents and moved freely, and thus it responded to the state's need to normalise them. One such image is that of Magdalena Lauber (1852–1853), one of the 221 portrait photos made available by the Swiss Federal Archive (Fig. 1.1).

Given these contexts, I decided to focus on the study and production of images as "minimally complicit" as possible with the global hegemonic representations of borders, following contemporary art historian Hilde Van Gelder, who used this expression for an approach that refers to Sekula's seminal work on "photography against the grain."[46] To go against the grain means you do something that you "would not usually do … because it would be unusual."[47] Besides choosing non-complicit case studies, during the photographic fieldwork I focused on those elements, apparently neutral or without meaning, which may act as pointers to how much the national identity of a landscape is constructed, rather than implicitly contained in its material existence. In the panorama of the indexicality of the image—that is, the ability of a sign to point to some object in the situation in which it comes about—the contextual information brings photographs into a full domain of readability, also revealing the complex intangible stratifications of in/visible borders. Even the nationality of Magdalena Lauber, the *sans papier* photographed by Carl Durheim, remains concealed if we simply look at her photographic image emptied of anything else, including the caption. In that same photo where she is identified, Magdalena Lauber would also remain without a clear homeland and nationality, simply a person who is looking back at us.

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44   Willumeit, "Seeing the State vs. Seeing like a State."

45   "Carl Durheim's police photographs of stateless persons," *Swiss Federal Archives*, https://www.bar.admin.ch/bar/en/home/research/searching/search-engines-portals /wikimedia/carl-durheim_s-police-photographs-of-stateless-persons.html (accessed 29 December 2021).

46   Van Gelder, *Ground Sea*, 26; Sekula, *Photography against the Grain*.

47   https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/go-against-the-grain (accessed 29 December 2021).

FIG. I.1   Portrait from a Swiss police photographic collection of stateless persons arrested
               and jailed. Carl Durheim, *Magdalena Lauber, alias Magdalena Vollmann,*
               Magdalena Einholz, 1852–1853, signature E21#1000/131#20507#99. Salt paper print,
               13.5 cm × 17.5 cm
               SWISS FEDERAL ARCHIVES (PUBLIC DOMAIN)