The narrative of the nation-state frames people and places within a suitable narrative, making them tools for creating histories from which the national narrative can be taught. A telling example is that of the “Ebrat Museum of Iran” that exhibits the harsh and insane techniques of interrogation and torture used by the Pahlavi regime. The Ebrat Museum of Iran was originally a secret prison that became known to the public in 1972. After the 1979 Revolution it remained a prison, meant for opponents of the revolution and the new government. After severe criticism in 2000, the prison was closed. Three years later, the prison was transformed into the Ebrat Museum of Iran. “Ebrat” literally means edification, a term mostly used to describe historical events that serve as a form of instructive pedagogy aimed at preventing the repeat of mistakes. The State wanted visitors to learn about was what happening during the Pahlavi regime. The re-opening of the prison as a museum framed a specific relationship between a specific place and time as history. It staged history as an artifact: as something in the past, closed and finished.

We want to introduce another method of learning that goes beyond these traditional narratives; a technique that will highlight the frame and the learner, opening up the arena for new stories. Because states use institutions such as museums as tools for their framing, we will use this method to highlight how borders are performed in the everyday. At museums, people are invited to look at things that are
staged, that are ‘there’ to be looked upon; things whose histories certify them as relevant ‘objects’ for our future, our culture and our history. These are things that we as citizens are supposed to be edified by. However, the comfortable gaze offered by the officialised and institutionalised witnessing performance in museums can tell us something else. For this, the Ebrat Museum is a good example. As it invites people to look at historical crimes, it simultaneously bans observations outside the frame at which we are not invited to look. The Ebrat Museum of Iran indirectly creates an awareness of places such as Kahrizak, the unofficial prison outside of Tehran – a place well-known for its torture and harsh interrogation of not only so-called “thugs”, but also of demonstrators in the post-election protests of 2009.

In the case of the Ebrat Museum, it is evident that the frame is porous, even elusive. The act of framing does not simply call our attention to that which is overlooked, but it also makes us observe the framer and consequently the frame itself. As Judith Butler argues in Frames of War, the point is not to locate and define what is ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the frame but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself (Butler, 2009:75). That which is outside the frame is also inside. The undesirable is part of the desirable.

In 2009, the so-called REVA project, Legal and Effective Enforcement (Rättssäkerhet och Effektivt Verkstäldighetssarbete), was initiated by the police, the Swedish migration board (Migrationsverket) and the Prison and Probation Service (Kriminalvården) in response to a request by the government. The project was co-funded by the European Return Fund. REVA aimed to search for, arrest, and deport people who stayed in Sweden “illegally” and who did not leave Sweden after being denied the state’s permission to stay in the country. The project did not do something that
was not already happening, but rather it functioned as a communicative platform; a sort of branding and marketing of a section of the authorities work. A unified, collaborative, national and efficient will over the willfulness of individuals who did not leave.

REVA is a peculiar choice of name, as in Swedish the noun “reva” refers to a tear, or a rip. This is what the project did. It did not just materialise the border by defining who is allowed to cross and who is not, it also tore at society and left a split in the social fabric. A tear was created in what it meant to belong, as well as in what it meant to be living in Sweden or being Swedish. The police stopped people if they matched a certain profile, using racial profiling in order to find “deportable” persons. People were being forced to perform the border; the border was performed.

But it was not a staged performance that we were invited to look upon. Despite the traumatic effects on people living in Sweden, these episodes will not last beyond individual effects and will not materialise or be staged outside the police archives. These incidents will not form a materiality for “our” future, nor will they become lessons of history. Yet, these events are as much a part of the national narrative as are the objects in a museum. Even if they are not staged to be visible, they are events as much inside as outside of the frame.

In order to bring attention to these actions, we created the project borderframing.eu together with the graphic designer Johanna Lewengard. It was initiated to mark the places where the border was materialised: at town squares, in cafés, at bus stops and in community centres. Places of racial profiling and deportation-arrests were to be marked so that we could create a collection of material testimonies. Such testimonies become meaningful at sites of arrest and
racial profiling, where a form of impossibility of speech has been introduced. Sites, or bodies, that are recorded in police and migration office reports will form an archive. The instability that borderframing.eu would bring into such archives by materialising testimonies through an enactment of the possibility of impossibility of speech can be understood in the comparison that Giorgio Agamben makes between archive and testimony:

The archive’s constitution presupposed the bracketing of the subject who was reduced to a simple function or an empty position; it was founded on the subject’s disappearance into the anonymous murmur of statements. In testimony, by contrast, the empty place of the subject becomes the decisive question. (Agamben, 1999:145)

Borderframing.eu is an attempt to sustain the materiality of the places and practices of deportation, to create testimonies and stage discourse. It also calls attention to what is inside the frame, the discourse that produces these assaults and the very condition that makes such injustice possible. By marking these places, a pattern of the nation-state border system within the everyday life of the city is drawn. It is a design that fluctuates inside and outside of the frame. It makes the frame an evident entity. It is a method of framing and materialising the borders. It is a starting point from which to write histories and make shifts in what has to be witnessed, testified to, and learnt from.

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