DRIFTING TOWARDS THE VERTICAL BEACH

About Marco Poloni's Work
Displacement Island

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If Marco Poloni chose Lampedusa as the place to investigate his project *Displacement Island*, it is because this rocky strip of land – closer to Libya in Africa than to the boot of Italy – is today equally attractive to tourists, Maghrebis and sub-Saharan Africans alike. The island is an allegory for a globalised world that cuts the rich off from the poor. According to the geographer and researcher Ali Bensaâd, the allegory of the island also applies to contemporary Maghreb, and is the hinterland from which the "brûlés," among others, come. These are the people who burn their identity papers before boarding a boat headed for the closest European shore.

In his article *The militarization of migration Frontiers in the Mediterranean,* [1] the author reminds us first that the Maghreb was originally called "Djeziret al-Maghreb," "the island of the setting sun," which means that it seemed to be surrounded by three seas: the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean and the Sahara. This image is repeated in the Arab word "Sahel," which today refers to the countries in the south of the Sahara, but which in Arabic originally meant "shoreline." Ali Bensaâd also reminds us that Fernand Braudel, the historian of the Mediterranean, spoke of the Sahara as that "other Mediterranean." It is worth noting in passing that on a similar geopolitical scale, the notion of an island is implicit in the expression "Festung Europa" that designates the space covered by the Schengen agreement as "Fortress Europe."

Today migrants who want to undertake a journey across the Mediterranean, at the risk of losing their lives, are sometimes forced to wait for months, or even years, in the Maghreb before boarding a rusty vessel setting out for Lampedusa or the southern coast of Sicily. Because of this, the Maghreb is becoming a region of clandestine immigration after being solely an exporter of labour for the past sixty years. [2]

The idea of passing between the "solid" and "liquid" states of an insular formation was radicalised by *multiplicity*, a collective of artists, town-planners and architects that thought of the Mediterranean as *terra firma* as of 2002. For them "the Mediterranean is turning into a large continent lying between Europe, Asia Minor and Africa… A liquid continent dissected at different depths by impenetrable corridors and subdivided by high barriers in which specialized enclosures and vast, uninhabited plains alternate." [3] For *multiplicity* the geography of the Mediterranean was determined by the routes followed by tourist cruises, cargo ships, military patrols and migrant-trafficking networks.

In Marco Poloni's *Displacement Island,* two different networks of migration, assumed to be unaware of one another, intersect: that of illegal immigrants and of tourists. Added to that crossing of paths is a third network, that of the local fishermen. Today they are required to refuse migrants any assistance, even if they are in distress, by the Italian security law of 2009, which identifies all clandestine immigrants as "criminals." The work *Displacement Island* becomes ever more important as immigration policies harden in Europe. An increasing number of commentators are alluding to the darkest past (as under fascism) of the "Old Continent."

In August 2009, Renzo Bossi, the son of the far-right politician Umberto Bossi, launched the computer game "Rimbalza il clandestino" ("Send the illegal migrant back"). A map of Italy appeared on the screen with boats of immigrants arriving by sea. Players had to repel the boat, even if it entailed sinking it. [4] This anecdote tells us a lot about what is being "played out" in one of the most militarised zones in the world in a period of peace. [5] We are also witnessing a contemporary war of images: in the basin lying between Lampedusa and the southern shores of the Mediterranean, a fair number of producers of images are operating:

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coastguards and police forces, press agencies, government observers, NGOs and of course journalists from daily papers and European television. The images of migrants produced by the latter are often edited as short clips referring indirectly to other images from other news stories, showing famine, disease and war in Africa. Thus an indirect link is created in the collective imagination between the stereotypical images of overcrowded, derelict vessels and those of the distress of peoples on the "dark continent." Causal links are generated between the former and the latter: migrants *are* the starving hordes from Africa coming to take work from the European working classes, who in turn vote for right-wing xenophobic programmes.

In view of mass media's propensity to oversimplify intricate situations, since the mid-1990s a growing number of artists have been working on building up accurate pictures of complexity, along poetic lines and with little sentimentality. The video-essayist Ursula Biemann speaks of "sustainable representation" against the "staccato of television news slots." [6] In the field of photography we could cite Yto Barrada or Bruno Serralongue. Working in this direction, Marco Poloni takes a radical approach. In none of the 69 images that constitute *Displacement Island* does the artist depict a migrant. On his photographs only the traces or indexes of their presence appear, for example a packet of cigarettes with Arab writing, or a woollen hat left on the sand, or ramshackle buildings lit up at night. The artist thus seems to be reformulating a response to the question: "how can 'invisible people' be depicted?"

The construction of the "out-of-field" is a constant in Poloni's work, like for example in the 54 photographs of *Shadowing the Invisible Man – Script for a Short Film* dating from 2001. These images of shooting locations for a film that will never be made show sites that might have been crossed by illegal immigrants travelling from the south of Italy to the Swiss border. The "place" of the invisible migrant is indicated by a blurred zone in the field of these photographs.

In *Displacement Island*, Poloni produces a different articulation of this visual omission by utilizing discursive reverse angle shots. We in fact notice that the artist depicts himself in some images – we see him several times swimming in the water, or see his girlfriend walking on a beach – as if to signify his acceptance of his own condition as a tourist, but also to claim a position as a participant-observer. For *Displacement Island* the artist also establishes a strategy of appropriation. For the first time he uses photographs that already exist, mixing a collection of images from the press, tourism, and the military with his own photographs. Increasingly, artists who use photography – like Jürgen Teller, Thomas Ruff or Jules Spinatsch to cite a few – appropriate other people's images and integrate them into their own work. Through a major paradigm shift that is now taking place in the post-fordist world, we are all not only consumers of images, but also producers and disseminators of them.

In *Displacement Island* the viewer is invited to make his own way through the photographs pinned to the wall. This is an innovative aspect in the work of an artist who had previously presented his work in a more linear manner. This *dispositif* is in fact exhibited with no obvious leading thread, one might go so far as to say without a story. The method of hanging *Displacement Island*, along different invisible lines and according to rhythmic intervals with no immediately comprehensible rules, can be understood as the expression of a profound doubt as to the possibility of constructing a coherent narrative given the complexity of this subject. Moreover, when it was first hung at the Centre de la photographie de Genève, *Displacement Island* had neither a beginning nor an end because the viewer could enter the dispositif from any of the four walls of the exhibition room.

The position occupied by Marco Poloni is like that of a tightrope walker in a world saturated with linear and simplistic representations. He eludes both the aporia of the sensationalism of the mass media and the affected and polarizing posture of organizations. Not being satisfied simply with images of a documentary nature, the artist – who often has recourse to tropes derived from cinema in his work – further stratifies *Displacement Island* by adding film stills. These

http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-migrationeurope/
militarising_borders_3735.jsp

6   *Agadez Chronicle* published in the catalogue of the
collective exhibition *The Maghreb Connexion*, which
she devised with Brian Holmes at the Townhouse Gallery
in Cairo, from December 2006 to January 2007.

images, extracted from the signifying chain of
a work of fiction, partly acquire the status of
documents, but retain a meaning in relation to
the narrative, albeit a slightly skewed one, as
for example the photograph depicting the tracks
of a very large animal in the sand. In that same
category of images, another photograph refers
directly to the cradle of Mediterranean culture,
or more specifically to one of the central epic
poems of Greek Antiquity: this is the still de-
picting Ulysses drawing his bow, taken from
Jean-Luc Godard's film *Le mépris* in which a
fragment of Homer's *Odyssey* is re-enacted.

Faced with current events, we are entitled to
doubt whether contemporary Europe, with its
demand for millions of men and women from
other parts of the world to keep its social system
and its economy working, is going to give these
tens of thousands of immigrants the means of
arriving safely in harbour, as that major figure
in European literature, Ulysses, did. A first step
would be to show an account of their journey
that would live up to their tragic epic.

1   Ali Bensaâd, *The Militarization of Migration Frontiers
in the Mediterranean*, in Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes
(eds.), *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life
Across North Africa*, Actar, Barcelona 2006.
2   It very often happens that countries formerly known
for emigration in their turn become countries of immigra-
tion, like Italy or Spain.
3   Stefano Boeri, *Around a Solid Sea*, Archis Magazine,
November 2002, Amsterdam 2002.
4   http://radiofrance-blogs.com/eric-valmir/2009/08/
5   Saskia Sassen, *Migration policy: from control to gov-
ernance*, in *Open Democracy*, 12 July 2006,