



Marco Poloni

The Desert Reporter, 2006

The Desert Reporter is a constellation of works that attempt to articulate the position of the Western observer on contemporary events in North Africa and in the Middle East and Maghreb, taking as their cue Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Passenger* from 1975. The film features a reporter (David Locke, played by Jack Nicholson) who fails to make a documentary about a guerrilla movement in North Africa (with Algeria standing in for Chad).

This constellation of works is comprised of 3 elements:

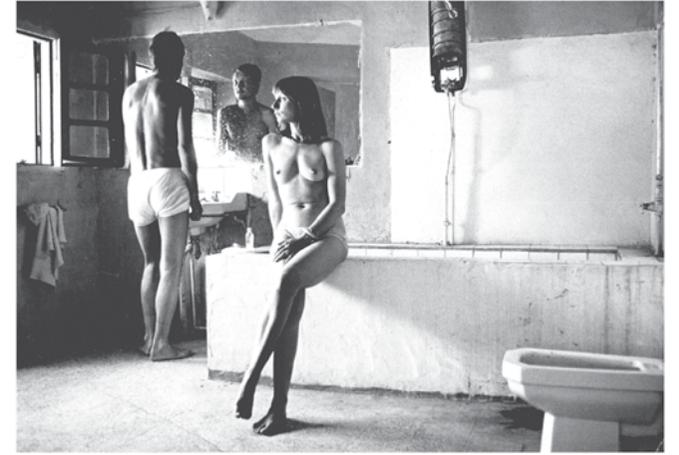
- *The Desert Hotel*, 2006
- *The Desert Room*, 2006
- *Mr. Locke, ...*, 2002



The constellation of photographs *The Desert Hotel* intersperses stills from Antonioni's film *The Passenger* with images of the site and the village of Illizi in the Algerian Sahara, where the desert hotel sequences in the film were shot. Today, the "Hotel Restaurant Bar Abba Kada" used as a set is barely recognizable. It is said to have become a retirement home for ex-Mudjaheddin fighters of the National Liberation Front. The remains of a Land Rover, in all aspects similar to the vehicle of David Locke, rots in front of the nondescript building. The work attempts to show the romantic, economic and geostrategic underpinnings of the area, which was a haven in the desert for hippies during the seventies, and today is a basin for oil extraction and the site of an American military base for aerial surveillance of guerrilla and terrorist movements operating at the Libyan border of Algeria.

15 pigment prints, dimensions variable











مبنى الأمم المتحدة في 1979





The dispositif of “The Desert Room” is based on a meticulous reproduction of the hotel room in the North-African desert where, in Michelangelo Antonioni’s film “The Passenger” from 1975, the depressed television reporter David Locke, played by Jack Nicholson, trades his identity for that of an arms dealer working for the Chadian guerrilla. In the film, Locke finds him dead in the neighbouring room and doctors the man’s passport with his own photograph, thus enacting his formal disappearance into another man’s life.

A turn in a narrow corridor, its walls painted blue, leads the spectator to a carved wooden door that opens to a barely furnished, neon-lit room: a blue metal bed, a lamp hanging from the wall, a chest of drawers, a nightstand, a desk lamp, a round table with a chair, a coffee table with a TV set tuned to Al-Jazeera broadcasting around-the-clock news in Arabic, and a ceiling fan spinning against the immobile hot air. The tiled floor provides some hints of colour. The large window is open to the desert night. The only discernable sound in the surrounding darkness is that of crickets. The dull and worn-out furnishings, the pink desert sand on the floor, the flickering of the defective neon, the sound of the rotating ceiling fan, the nocturnal sounds, the hot temperature, the odour of ‘whateverness’ that pervades the room, contribute to a sense of transport and alienation. There are, still, some traces of life: the bed is unmade, and lying around, there are a couple of books, an attaché-case and a suitcase, a half-drunk bottle of gin.

The laptop on the table is open, showing the interface of a video editing program, as if someone has been working on a project. On the computer screen, the spectator sees a slow forward travelling shot filmed inside the same room, randomly interwoven with documentary footage, showing U.S. soldiers in an array of urban warfare situations which clearly take place in contemporary Iraq. The footage alternates with images of the room, with an interval of about ten seconds between takes on average. The spectator can control the movements of the camera with the computer’s keyboard and choose to frame objects in the room. Through the TV program and the flickering of the neon, which appear in sync on the screen, he realises that he is seeing live footage of the very room he is in. Yet the camera does not register his or her presence in the room. Everything else is there, but the seat he or she is occupying is empty.

The undetectable camera that the spectator could manipulate in the life-sized room actually moves on a motorized dolly inside a 1:3 scale model of the room, which is visible when exiting the room.

Dispositif, various materials





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In the short video *Mr. Locke, ...*, the soundtrack of a scene in Antonioni's film *The Passenger* is superimposed onto a low-definition clip downloaded from the web. The original scene from Antonioni's film features a key exchange between the reporter David Locke, played by Jack Nicholson, and an African witch doctor, who responds to Locke's interview questions by stating matter-of-factly "Your questions are much more revealing about yourself than my answers will be about me," and then literally turning the camera back on the reporter. In the video, these words are heard over the close-up of a bearded, Arab-looking man. In the aftermath of 9/11, the spectator is left wondering whether this man is an Al-Qaeda terrorist. The play of reversed specularities, prompted by the soundtrack, is constructed in order to confront the spectator's beliefs.

SD Video, 1:1.33, colour, sound, loop of 1 min 30 sec