

In his sixty-seven-part work *Displacement Island*, Marco Poloni focuses on a site of geopolitical importance: the Italian island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean. The southernmost extension of Europe, it marks the boundary between Europe and Africa. However, this boundary is in every respect more than a cartographic marker.

The economic divide between the north and the south meets with its equivalent here in bitter political and cultural contrasts. Europe seals itself off from the African continent as forcefully as possible. Because every year, thousands of people set out to cross the sea between the two continents in hopes of being granted asylum in a European country. Marco Poloni dispenses with illustrating the simple rhetoric of injustice. Even when he shows that what is being dealt with are destinies that are dictated by a specific political situation, he avoids depicting stereotypes of victims and perpetrators. A standard reportage about the island would call for refugees in small boats, menacing border patrols, the emaciated faces of people who are stranded on its shores, or images of the dead. However, Marco Poloni draws a differentiated picture of the situation and at the same time goes far beyond the political focus of the present. This becomes necessary, because a sociopolitical artistic work has to be wary of confirming what everyone already believes to know anyway. In order to be able to send both an emotional as well as an intellectual impulse, the artist's formal presentation and sociopolitical line of argumentation have to clearly stand out from the mainstream of general dismay over the deplorable situation that during their attempt to travel across a border, thousands of people lose their lives.

The American artist Martha Rosler put the necessity for this approach in a nutshell: "The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position."¹ Because the reportages published in magazines make social problems appear to be natural disasters whose devastating nature is unavoidable. It is beyond doubt that the image of a *victim* as a *victim* produces concern. At the same time, a clear division of the protagonists' roles manifests itself within this doubt: victimhood remains the result of an appalling and unalterable state of the world in general. But concern does not solve any problems, and it often merely serves to exclude someone's own direct or indirect involvement in what is taking place. For any enlightened resident of Europe it is unacceptable that helpless people, driven by their will to survive, have to take flight from economic and political situations that offer them no perspective. Just the same, the West upholds a restrictive policy of exclusion and deportation.

So much for the facts all of us have already heard about and for which most of us have no real answer. A political and moral dilemma emerges as soon as we compare the pros and cons. We try to comprehend the refugees' motivation and place our own life with its advantages and what appears to be our natural needs in relation to it. For many northern Europeans, Italy is first and foremost a place for longing and recreation. Lampedusa is also a popular vacation spot. One's own entitlement to the life one leads is just as unalterable as the fact that others sink in the surges of the sea, vegetate in reception camps, or are simply abandoned in the desert by the Libyan authorities,

who take in many of the deported refugees, as human waste.

Even though Europeans provide a minimum of charity, they obviously do not break the closed cycle of hope, departure, deportation, and often renewed attempts to flee. The subjects of dictatorship and the violation of human rights are at best mechanically called upon in order to demand that there has to be political and social perspectives in Africa as well. But regardless of where one takes the issue up, a political or cultural trap door immediately opens up and one becomes entangled in complex and quasi stereotypical, apparently inextricable contradictions: vacation and recreation on the one side, and flight and death on the other. The only thing that is clear is the number of dead people: far more than 1,000 every year.

In one of Marco Poloni's images we see tourists climbing up a rocky coast to get to their accommodations. Scantly clothed and carrying plastic bags, at first glance these people could also be illegal aliens who have just gone ashore and are now attempting to reach the island's interior. Although the photograph was taken on Lampedusa, what it shows is anything but clear. In *Displacement Island*, the artist works with references and analogies: on the one hand, he shows Lampedusa, the real location, but also images that only have something to do with the island and the political and social circumstances that prevail there in the broadest sense. Marco Poloni blends photographs he has taken himself with images he has found in magazines, films, or the Internet. The photographs of the custody, control, and registration of the refugees were taken on Lampedusa, as were those of the airfield, the fences and container dwellings, the floodlights and police vehicles, as well as several of the landscape pictures of the beach and the sea or portraits of the islanders. The artist always maintains a distanced perspective and deliberately does not show arrests or deportations, the refugees' arrival on the island, or police officers and their assistants at work. The images have a representative effect, drawing the viewer into a space of images and argumentation that is both direct and metonymic.

Marco Poloni always argues on several levels. At first there is a direct, virtually classically photographic impulse that makes reference to a concrete subject. Then there is the social context, which is more complex than public opinion suggests. What is more, the photographs are embedded in the overall pictorial constellation, which Poloni presents as a large pattern on the wall and in the book. References and ambiguities are produced by combining what are different to contrary images. An aerial image not only shows the position of the island, rather, it above all makes reference to the reason the photograph was taken: aerial reconnaissance in order to monitor the points at which the refugees go ashore.

However, there are other images that refer to unarticulated impulses slumbering in our unconscious: in one sequence, giant ants crawl through the sand, a motif out of a horror film shot somewhere in New Mexico. Yet the connection is clear: everything that is alien is perceived as threatening, as the enemy, or as

a subject that arouses disgust. Marco Poloni shows a wide spectrum of images and interpretations: the tracks of the stranded people like trails in the grass; clothes or simply a discarded cigarette pack clearly indicate their covert movements, allow us to apprehend their waiting, their hiding, their slowly inching their way forward. Motifs that could have been taken from a travel catalogue, like the one with the three luxury boats in almost obscenely blue water, provide us with another interpretation. For some, the sea is a surface to play on, a mirror, a place to strut one's money and one's right to luxury. For others, the sea is a dangerous or invincible place that can quickly become one's grave.

Marco Poloni has created a political analogy with *Displacement Island*. As real as the location and what takes place there may be, the content and the images can be interpreted in a way that is fundamental and removed from the location. Those viewing this work cannot take a simple moral, cultural, or political stance in order to channel their arguments and feelings accordingly and to then finally be satisfied by a specific critique and insight. As ambiguous as the images are, the political situation can be described and understood in simple terms. The real occurrences are shockingly brutal and embedded in a history of colonialism, cultural hegemonies, national identities, economic dependence, and to a high degree in social angst and political mechanisms of exclusion. The geographic demarcation can apparently be clearly defined using military and technical means and more or less successfully defended. However, the social, cultural, and psychological shoals of this restriction raise moral and political questions which are so fundamental that a simple documentation of the status quo is too insufficient to pass as critical commentary.

¹ Martha Rosler, *Positions in the Life World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).