CHAPTER 4

# Constellations

## 1 At the Southernmost Point

In an interview with a migrant that I witnessed at the Osservatorio Giuridico per i Migranti [Legal Observatory for Migrants] in the border town of Como in 2020, when the association operators asked the person on the move where in Italy he had arrived a few years earlier, the boy replied "Lipadusa," using one of the ancient names of the small island of the Pelagie archipelago.[1] This answer is relatively common both for people on the move living in the Como area and in other Italian cities. Despite its relatively small length of twenty square kilometres, the island of Lampedusa is one of the main entry points into Italy for people on the move who come via the African route. The information about the first arrival in Italy is relevant for migrants' legal assistance because the first point of arrival is where they are usually enrolled into the European database for asylum seekers, EURODAC, by registering their fingerprints. Thus, the Italian boundary is approached here through the fragile landscape of Lampedusa, the small island off the coast of Sicily, a dislocated "where" of the Italian border. While the island is located more than a thousand kilometres from the Swiss-Italian border, this point in the extreme south of Italy is dynamically linked to the northern border.

In the vague geographical horizon of the "south" in the Italian panorama, the island of Lampedusa represents an iconic point of the sea border because it has been at the centre of the media and political narration of the migration crisis, becoming a hyper-visible piece of the Italian borderscape.[2] In considering how the border in Lampedusa has been turned into a stage for the spectacle of crisis by hegemonic representation, Federica Mazzara has challenged this very notion of crisis.[3] Indeed, it would be wrong to speak of the phenomenon of people on the move as a crisis because migration flows are not temporary events. Some specific locations have long operated as entry platforms to Europe, including the island of Lesbos, the town of Ventimiglia, and the tiny

1 During the fieldwork I carried out in the Swiss-Italian border area in July 2020, I witnessed several interviews with migrants carried out at the Osservatorio Giuridico per i Migranti.

2 Cultural productions have also taken an interest in the island; see for example the documentary by Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare* (2016).

3 Mazzara, "Subverting the Narrative."

spot of Lampedusa. Since 1983, the island has hosted to over 400,000 people on the move, which means about eighty times its own population.[4]

Much scholarly writing reflects on the intersection between the migration "crisis" and the role of representation in supporting or questioning such a crisis.[5] The case of *Forensic Oceanography*, research developed by Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller as part of the *Forensic Architecture* working group, is emblematic. With their representations, mappings, and investigative reconstructions of some events related to shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, they have highlighted the moral and legal responsibilities of European governments with respect to the deaths of people on the move that systematically occur in the sea. The hyper-visibility of the island has indeed been shaped around the recurring landings and shipwrecks. In 2011, ten thousand people fleeing Tunisia after the Jasmine Revolution arrived on the island. Two years later, a major shipwreck that occurred on 3 October first gave rise to a moment of collective awareness and the birth of the governmental humanitarian rescue mission *Mare Nostrum*.[6] In 2015, following another tragic shipwreck, different NGOs started to operate their own vessels for rescue in the Mediterranean Sea because the operation *Mare Nostrum* had been disbanded. While many more landings and shipwrecks had taken place, in 2019 the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3*, captained by Carola Rackete, forced her entry into Lampedusa port after seventeen days spent at sea with rescued migrants because the Italian government denied access.[7]

Lampedusa is also the focus of a work by the Italian and Swiss artist Marco Poloni, who has constructed a sort of visual and metaphorical non-cartographic atlas of Lampedusa in *Displacement Island* (2006).[8] The work may recall an atlas because it systematically confronts the islands borderscape's different geographical, historical, and political layers. However, it does

4 Cremaschi, "Luoghi e Legami."

5 Mazzara, *Reframing Migration*; Odasso and Proglio, *Border Lampedusa*; Heller and Pezzani, "Drifting Images, Liquid Traces"; Zucconi, *Displacing Caravaggio*.

6 For more on this shipwreck, see Aime, *L'isola Del Non Arrivo*.

7 Further information on these different episodes can be found in the work of Italian journalist Annalisa Camilli. See for example Annalisa Camilli, "Perché dare un nome ai morti nel Mediterraneo è necessario," *Internazionale*, 5 July 2016, https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/annalisa-camilli/2016/07/05/mediterraneo-migranti-morti (accessed 2 March 2021); and Annalisa Camilli, "Lampedusa è lo specchio dell'Italia," *Internazionale*, 5 July 2019, https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/annalisa-camilli/2019/07/05/lampedusa-italia-sea-watch (accessed 2 March 2021).

8 The work is visible on the artist's website; see "Displacement Island," *The Analogue Island Bureau*, http://www.theanalogueislandbureau.net/projects/03_displacement_island/index.html (accessed 2 February 2021).

not build upon a classificatory approach; rather, it is constructed on a constellation of a differentiated mix of visual materials. First displayed in 2006 at the Centre de la Photographie in Geneva with an installation of 69 images, and later published in book form as *Displacement Island*, it confronts different socio-anthropological and spatial issues of this border outpost in the sea as seen by a participating observer.[9] The artist's practice has long engaged with the "exploration of the sea as a space intersected by geopolitical processes."[10] The work produced throughout the years is collected in The Analogue Island Bureau, an agency Poloni founded in 2014 that "attempts to build an index of plots, problems, and tropes of the Mediterranean Sea."[11] Among these, *The Analogue Island* (2010–2011), research into power configurations of Sicily, and *The Majorana Experiment* (2008–2010), an investigation triggered by the disappearance at sea of the physicist Ettore Majorana, who is linked to nuclear weapons, also confront the southernmost region of Italy, Sicily.

*Displacement Island* is geographically rooted in a "paradise on the migrant smuggling routes," as the subtitle suggests. The work revolves around the two issues of tourism and unauthorised migration, two practices that occupy such separate spatial systems on the island that they rarely cross over. The fact that people on the move who arrive on the island are closed off in an identification centre, and that the centre is not open to anyone else, makes them mostly invisible to the eyes of tourists, except at times such as landings and departures. In an article in which Poloni presents his interest in the concept of heterotopia, he addresses the clash between tourism and migration through this story:

> A number of less anecdotal moments of heterotopia are to be found when investigating social realities. In one instance, groups of migrants sailing from the coasts of Libya and Tunisia were tossed up on the beaches of the island of Lampedusa (South of Sicily) after floating adrift for days in the open sea. Jailed behind barbed wire in the Temporary Detention Center located at the end of the airport's single landing strip, their gazes met those of tourists landing for a short vacation in a visual loophole—an instance of two parallel worlds disrupting one another.[12]

In *Displacement Island*, the two evoked figures of the tourist and the person on the move are associated with others that come along in the miscellaneous

9 Poloni, Holert, and Bader, *Displacement Island*, 2013.
10 Poloni, "The Land Seen by the Sea," 114.
11 Poloni, Holert, and Bader, *Displacement Island* (2013), 122.
12 Poloni, "Sudden Heterotopia," 108–9.

images that Poloni brings together, including fishers, astronauts, and police guards. Besides Poloni's photographs, the project also incorporates images taken from the press, tourist leaflets, film stills, and press agencies, reflecting how we have become at the same time consumers, producers, and disseminators of images, and following a paradigm shift that has been going on in the post-Fordism era.[13] The book opens with pictures of the sea as experienced by summer tourists, who swim and dive in the clear blue water. Then, in a fragmentary way, come images of space exploration, boats, and abandoned dresses on the beach, footprints in the sand, military vessels, historical aerial pictures of the island, seagulls, tuna fishing, the centre for migrant identification, a stone hut abandoned in an un-urbanised part of the land, and much more. All these elements revolve around the Mediterranean Sea, which seems to be both the geographical and mental horizon for the project, as the Strait of Gibraltar was for Yto Barrada's work on the Spanish Moroccan borderscape.

Yto Barrada's *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (2005), investigating the idea of leaving that permeates that borderscape, has some points of contact with the subject of *Displacement Island*.[14] The Strait of Gilbraltar, which gives the project its title, corresponds to the short physical stretch of sea crossed by unauthorised people on the move, but also to an idea: It is the geographical connotation of the aspiration to migrate to the promised world of Europe. One image in the series is strikingly similar to one of Poloni's. Showing migrants who attempt an illegal crossing in Ceuta by climbing up a muddy area, it resonates with the photograph of tourists in Lampedusa who hike to leave a beach. Despite a similar visual framework, the contrast between the two situations is evident. Poloni's image, shot at dusk and only showing the backs of the beachgoers, points to the subjective experience of the borderscape. Among the tourists leaving the beach "no one is turning and watching back anymore: they have literally turned their back on the nightly trafficking."[15] Since ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea has accommodated different types of mobility: existential, hedonistic, military, and economic.[16] Within this broader frame, Poloni's work develops with an open structure, collecting images of Lampedusa's different shades.

In the artist statement that comes with the project, Poloni describes his way of working by using the word "constellation," accumulating visual materials—a term used by Paul Valery to describe Mallarme's poem "A Throw of the Dice

13 Bader, "Drifting Towards the Vertical Beach."
14 Barrada, *A Life Full of Holes*.
15 Van Gelder, "Lessons from Moria," 44.
16 Holert, "Marco Poloni's Displacement Island and the Visuality of the Border Regime."

Will Never Abolish Chance" (1914)—affirming that "metonymical and metaphoric signification is produced through cinematic montage strategies in an apparently loose narrative matrix."[17] In the series on Lampedusa, there is no reference to one specific story, and neither is there a clear hierarchy in the organisation of images, which proceeds in a non-narrative flow. The relation of one image to another triggers references to something else, just as in metonymy one word opens the door to another concept. Seeing an orange and blue life jacket abandoned on a beach, and then those same colours on the uniform of an astronaut in training, we may come to think of people on the move as space travellers, and then go back in our minds to the Argonauts of Greek mythology, related to the Mediterranean Sea, while also perceiving the contradictions inherent in the different types of mobility present in the contemporary borderscape, which depend on relations of inclusion and exclusion in the Schengen Area.

Jean-Christophe Royoux links the concept of constellations to the idea of allegorical images, where "allegorical construction is a process of stratification of meaning, in which the layers are superimposed in an undefined palimpsest."[18] The allegorical image does not use a process of hierarchical and orderly categorisation of iconographic elements. If anything, there is a chaotic simultaneity of contents, something that makes the images a repository, an archive. This process is based on the principle of the supplement, as "one image leads to another … because of the 'impulse' which it gives to the interpretation. This 'impulse' is facilitated by resemblance or contrast, that is to say the creation of an initial connector … which generates the possibility of multiplication."[19] This kind of interpretative progression is based on the subjectivity of the observer. The constellation dissociates the individual parts that stratify the allegorical image's meaning, deconstructing it into single images: "The resulting constellation creates a new space which highlights the particular forms of the association inherent in the allegorical image."[20] The constellation exposes the process of signification and points to the multiplicity that is inherent in the allegorical image.

The term constellations also recalls Walter Benjamin's writings. In the prologue to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin states that ideas are to objects as constellations to stars.[21] Despite not being concrete nor totally

17 "Displacement Island," *The Analogue Island Bureau*, http://www.theanalogueislandbureau.net/projects/03_displacement_island/index.html (accessed 2 February 2021).

18 Royoux, "Constellations. Manières de Faire Des Mondes," 40.

19 Ibid., 41.

20 Ibid.

21 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

objective, constellations are a way to read the particular elements of the stars in their perspectival relations. While stars as objects are already there in the sky, constellations arose as a historical and mythical construct. Yet stars have a specific positioning with respect to each other, which makes us see them in a certain way, and this way is then culturally constructed in the form of constellations. What Benjamin alludes to, and what is later taken up by Theodor Adorno, is an epistemology of the constellations, "in which a truth not 'direct[ly]' knowable is able in a mediated way, through a specific constitutive modus of its 'linguistic form,' to become legible."[22] It is a way of reading things through combinations of different elements, which considers other possible readings than the one being built.

At the same time, the term constellation can have another meaning. The constellation is the form that connects the fixed points of the stars in the sky to the figure of a zodiac sign, and that facilitates the establishment of the sign in tradition. Yet it is also "the total configuration of the heavens" at a specific instant in which the conjunction and opposition positions of the moving planets are detected with respect to the fixed system of stars.[23] If the constellation of fixed stars is static, the horoscope is instead dynamic, but it can be read as a kind of snapshot, "for example, at the moment of an individual's birth, which … forms a configuration capable of interpretation, if not actually of determining power."[24] Therefore, this second meaning of constellation would be that of an epochal conjuncture, a momentous conjunction that becomes visible through an instantaneous image.

In *Displacement Island*, the metonymic representation of constellations might also correlate to a specific use of invisibility. Poloni never directly shows any person on the move, nor does he portray any border guard, but he assembles the elements that make their presence perceptible. The photographs of abandoned clothes or a packet of cigarettes with writing in Arabic on a beach hint at people on the move themselves (Fig. 4.1), while the military ships and the barbed wire remind the viewer of the regime of border patrol and hence of border guards.[25] Visibility is a multifaceted element, which can be both positive and negative for some subjects: It can empower or impede. For people on the move, visibility can often be threatening because it exposes them to being reported, for example by Lampedusa fishermen, and therefore confined.

22 Krauß, "Constellations: A Brief Introduction," 441.

23 Auerbach, "Imagine No Metaphors."

24 Ibid.

25 Holert attributes the mentioned correlation to Poloni himself, referring to an exchange of emails with the artist that took place on 25 February 2008; Holert, "Marco Poloni's Displacement Island," 4.


FIG. 4.1 Marco Poloni, *Displacement Island*, 2006, #68. One of 69 pigment prints, dimensions variable
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Likewise, invisibility can be dangerous because it condemns them to be forgotten in the public sphere and, in the island, to the concrete risk of drowning in an attempt to reach the shore.

*Displacement Island* selectively uses visibility. For example, the old identification centre Centro di Permanenza Temporanea [CPT, Provisional Stay Centre] is shown in a night photograph taken at close range from the outside, highlighting one of the material infrastructures of the borderscape which often remains invisible to tourists, except for those who pay attention when landing on the island. The CPT [Provisional Stay Centers], at that time called CIE [Identification and Expulsion Centres], and now called CPR [Permanence Centres for Repatriations], were first established in Italy in 1998. The centres were instituted to detain foreigners who are subject to expulsion when the measure is not immediately enforceable. They allow checks on the identity of people with a pending expulsion, or detention of people awaiting an expulsion order that has already been issued. The Lampedusa centre was converted into a so-called "hotspot" in 2015, following new European legislation. Hotspots are identification centres on the external European borders where newly disembarked foreign citizens are registered in the database EURODAC. For the registration, foreigners are photographed and their fingerprints are collected within 48 hours of arrival. If migrants refuse to be identified, they are transferred to

an expulsion centre; otherwise, they can apply for asylum in their country of arrival.[26]

Considering Poloni's work, Tom Holert writes that on the island "the media-constructed visibility of migration forms a counterpart to the migrants' need to remain invisible. … [Poloni's] visualisation of the situation defies the conventions of social documentary as well as the logic of the images and texts in the news media."[27] However, in the constellation of images on Lampedusa, what is made visible, albeit subtly, is also the artist's presence. First of all, through vacation images taken from Poloni's family albums, then through photos linked to the fieldwork, we can see Poloni himself swimming in the sea and his partner walking on a beach.[28] The choice of depicting himself appears to acknowledge his privileged experience as a tourist in accessing the island and a claim for a position as a participant-observer.[29] An essential component of this metonymic and metaphorical construction is the ambiguity of some scenery, which encourages multiple readings. The non-linear approach in constructing the sequence and the "narrative" can perhaps be read as a reflection on the impossibility of giving a coherent and exhaustive representation of such a complex thematic.[30]

The ambiguity of some specific images stands out. One of the first images, a photo showing the sea from above as photographed from an aeroplane, could represent both the view from a tourist flight to reach the island, or the view from a patrol flight for sea control. The same could be said of the picture of a plane from the Italian national airline (called Alitalia at the time), obviously related to the tourists but also possibly to the migrants, because planes are used to transfer them to centres of identification in other parts of Italy.[31] The images associated with space exploration—the space station and

26 See "I Centri di permanenza per i rimpatri," *Camera dei deputati. Documentazione parlamentare. FOCUS*, June 29, 2019, https://temi.camera.it/leg18/post/cpr.html (accessed 16 December 2020); and "I punti di crisi (c.d. 'hotspots')," *Camera dei deputati. Documentazione parlamentare. FOCUS*, 16 February 2018, https://temi.camera.it/leg18/post/pl18_i_punti_di_crisi__c_d___hotspots__.html (accessed 16 December 2020).

27 Holert, "Marco Poloni's Displacement Island," 3.

28 Holert, "Marco Poloni's Displacement Island."

29 Bader, "Drifting Towards the Vertical Beach."

30 Ibid.

31 An account of these dynamics from the point of view of a migrant is contained in the reportage by Italian journalist Fabrizio Gatti. The hotspot, ex-CPT, is inaccessible to the press and it cannot be photographed or visited. In 2005, Gatti simulated being a migrant by floating off the coast of Lampedusa for hours before being rescued and taken to the identification center, where he stayed for a week. See Fabrizio Gatti, "*Io clandestino a Lampedusa*," *L'Espresso*, October 7, 2005, https://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2005/10/07/news/io-clandestino-a-lampedusa-1.594 (accessed 17 December 2020).

FIG. 4.2–4.3–4.4 Marco Poloni, *Displacement Island*, 2006, #32, 33, 34. Three of 69 pigment prints, dimensions variable

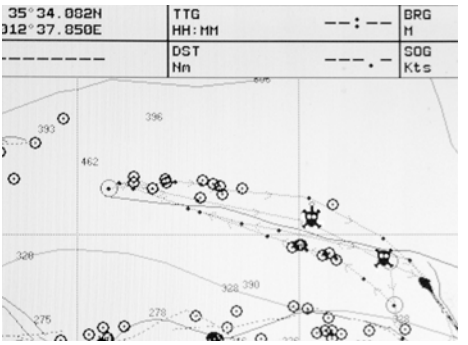

the astronaut carrying out tests in the water—refer both to the epic of travel and to colonisation histories. What the sea was for the ancients, crossed with a sense of discovery but also of domination, is perhaps today outer space. Even the term "landing" has the same ambiguity. It may indicate landing for the conquest of a territory, but also the arrival in a safe harbour, and therefore it may metaphorically represent home.

The full etymology of the Italian term for landing, *approdare*, suggests an interesting relation between the idea of arrival and that of borders. The act of *ap-prodare* is literally "approaching with a boat to the edge of the earth on the water." The Latin root *prora* indicates the front part of a boat, while the later term *proda* indicates the shore of the sea (*riva* [shore]) and later also a boundary or margin on the land.[32] Poloni includes an image of the constellation portraying seagulls, also connected to the idea of travel. The birds are photographed at night with a flash, somehow suggesting a clandestine journey, while the fact that they are a flock recalls the mass dimension of migrations. Furthermore, Poloni mentioned that he was referencing Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), to signify that people on the move are not themselves problematic, but the perception that they represent a danger is.[33]

The triptych that appears in the middle of the constellation, combining images with different dominant colours—red, white, green—and that clearly detaches from the previous pages' chroma, appears as a reference to the Italian tricolour flag (Figs. 4.2–4.3–4.4). At the same time, the triptych hints at the use

32 See *prora* in *Lexica Forcellini*, http://lexica.linguax.com/forc2.php?searchedLG=prora (accessed 16 February 2021); and *proda* in *UTET Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, http://www.gdli.it/sala-lettura/vol-xiv/14 (accessed 16 February 2021).

33 Marco Poloni, email to author, 28 December 2021.




of colours made by Godard in the opening scene of *Le Mèpris* (1963), where the three different lights of blue, red, and white of the French flag appear.[34] However, the order of colours in the Lampedusa constellation is reversed from that of the original Italian flag, something that was not premeditated but was the result of the artistic creation process.[35] In the image with red dominant, we see an archer pointing an arrow, Odysseus in a still frame taken from *Le Mépris*. The arrow is directed towards the flag's central part. The inversion of colours also has a metaphorical meaning, as if Odysseus was pointing to the idea of "betraying oneself," that is, betraying the ideals at the basis of the nation.

This idea of betrayal can also be read in relation to the governmental failure to comply with an ancient law of the sea, according to which a ship in danger should always be assisted. The white central image was taken on a fishing boat and it shows a map with ship routes on a sonar monitor. The skulls symbols point at shoals which boats should avoid, where fishing nets could get stuck. The skulls have clear symbolic connotations of the deaths caused by shipwrecks, but they could also be reminiscent of the symbol of pirates, often associated with forms of resistance. The green colour appears in the third image at the bottom of the same fishing boat on which we see a dying or dead eel, probably recently caught. The idea of death repeatedly emerges in the series, together with that of hunting, which we see in tuna fishing. These images can acquire specific meanings when related to the geopolitical context, so that for example we can think of tuna fishing as a metaphor for people on the move hunting.

34 Grillo and Poloni, "A Conversation on the Margins of Italy."
35 Ibid.

Finally, the presence of fishing elements in the constellation may evoke the ancient economic system of the island before tourism. In an image at the beginning of *Displacement Island*, we see small, brightly coloured wooden boats left on land in a sort of deposit, as if they were in disuse, pointing to the fishing economy as a fragile system. However, the small boats could also recall the commonly known *sbarchi fantasma* [ghost landings], as the boats appear more clearly in a second photo of small boats shot at closer range, displaying Arabic writing and broken hulls. It is precisely in small boats that some people on the move manage to reach the coasts without being seen.[36] The "graveyard of boats," secured by wire mesh, also recalls the medieval ships of fools.[37] Ships of fools were known to contain "social driftwood" and were destined for disastrous ends, for which they were constantly mocked. Three aerial photographs of a gulf in a time-lapse series show the coast's increasing urbanisation over time, presumably due to the growth of tourism. Poloni addresses the island economy in the artist statement, explaining that both for the tourist and for the person on the move,

> the beach is a promised land. For the former, it is a … a break from his productive social existence … the tourist produces an alternate economy that supplements the island's modest fishing trade. For the latter, the beach is the final destination of an often deadly journey … The migrant's arrival should be the materialisation of a dream: an economically better life within the European Union.[38]

The old and fragile fishing economy is also glimpsed in one of the final sequences of the series, which shows the ruins of a stone hut in the natural Mediterranean landscape, an archetypal architectural form of the island. It is an old *rudere* [ruin] found in the landscape of Lampedusa, which Poloni imagined as a temporary refuge for a person who landed illegally and was looking for a place to shelter at night (Fig. 4.5). This ruin reminded Poloni of a

36 In the past, such landings mainly concerned the Turkey-to-Italy route, whilst a new route from Tunisia to Sicily had recently been opened. Estimating their size is difficult. Migrants arriving with *sbarchi fantasma* are thought to be around 3,500–5,000 per year. See "Cosa sono gli 'sbarchi fantasma,'" *Il Post*, 15 June 2019, https://www.ilpost.it/2019/06/15/sbarchi-fantasma/ (accessed 17 December 2020) and Valentina Furlanetto, "Sbarchi fantasma, così arriva in Italia l'80% dei migranti con barchini e contatti Facebook," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 29 September 2019, https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/sbarchi-fantasma-cosi-arriva-italia-l-80percento-migranti-barchini-e-contatti-facebook-AC8UyRn (accessed 17 December 2020).

37 Van Gelder, "Lessons from Moria," 44.

38 Poloni, Holert, and Bader, *Displacement Island* (2006), 1.

primordial hut, like that of Robinson Crusoe, because it is a nondescript architectural form where function is the only defining parameter.[39] Many houses of workers and fishermen along the Mediterranean coast are defined according to similar criteria, void of aesthetic rationale. In this framework, the stone hut appears as an *iconema*, what Eugenio Turri defined as an "elementary unit of perception."[40]

Such an elementary unit takes on meaning within a larger set of signs, embodying the *genius loci* of a territory as a visual reference with a strong semantic charge from the cultural relationship that society establishes with its territory. It is a distinctive visual sign of the island's landscape, a fragment of reality that the photographic medium identifies and frames. Thus, the landscape of the island subtly emerges in the constellation as shaped by the gestures of fishermen, tourists, migrants, and border guards. At the same time, the constellation seems to point to how this process of shaping could be represented and how it is represented within certain contexts. That is, we perceive not only the gestures and crossings of the different subjects and their link with a situated economy, but also the role of representations in these dynamics through the fragments of different sceneries. Poloni blends images from newspapers with photographs taken in the field and pictures from his private archive, and the constellation shows a subjective version of the Lampedusa-scape which makes visible the construction of power in which images themselves play a central role. As aptly addressed by Reinhard Braun, "Poloni addresses the viewer's knowledge of images, which he here, however, directly links with a public image politics and thus with the politicisation of publics."[41]

In the juxtaposition of fragments whose nature is different in time, space, and subject, the constellation also suggests the idea of looking at space as something becoming, rather than as a static entity. Poloni mentions the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and he translates that theory to the liquid space of the Mediterranean.[42] This way, he conceives of the Mediterranean's space as non-static, fluid, and crossed by multiple flows, both the marine currents and those of people in motion or on aeroplanes flying over the sea. The flows that traverse the small island of Lampedusa and their associated practices are performative, because they contribute to the making and becoming of space, something that recalls the idea of scape as a shaped polity. This idea of space as becoming can be linked to a notion of space as a result

39 Grillo and Poloni, "A Conversation."
40 Turri, *Il Paesaggio Come Teatro*.
41 Braun, "Marco Poloni," 342.
42 Grillo and Poloni, "A Conversation"; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

FIG. 4.5 Marco Poloni, *Displacement Island*, 2006, #64. One of 69 pigment prints, dimensions variable


of a process of production, rather than as a given and pre-existing entity. This concept has been presented by, among others, Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) in his theory of space. Lampedusa's constellation, and more generally the notion of a borderscape, could be considered in relation to Lefebvre's theory, especially because he also attributes a role to representation in the production of space.

Written between 1968 and 1974, *The Production of Space* gives a comprehensive account of how space is produced as a material and social entity. In this book, in a journey that moves between different eras and spaces, Lefebvre also considers the border of the Mediterranean sea, noting how the perimeter of the Mediterranean had become the leisure-time space of industrialised Europe, reserved for tourism.[43] It was a "non-working" space, yet part of the social division of labour between working time and free time, and thus linked to other productive areas far away from the coastal margins. The tourism that runs through Lampedusa could be understood as a *spatial practice*, that is, one of the three levels that contribute to producing space, according to Lefebvre. The other two levels are *representations of space* and *spaces of representation*. In Lefebvre's theory, the term "representation" comprises a complex layer of

43 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 58.

meanings which needs to be fully unpacked in order to be put in relation with the space of Lampedusa and the (visual) constellation produced on the island by Poloni.[44]

## 2 Henri Lefebvre, Representation, and Space

Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* came after other works arising from the French climate of the 1960s and 1970s and in the encounter between sociology, architecture, urbanism, and philosophy.[45] His thinking on space, recently re-discovered by Anglo-American scholarly literature, must be understood in the frame of Marxist philosophy.[46] The topic of representation is in Lefebvre's writings a small part of a larger work, yet a fascinating and still underexplored one. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre rejects a view of space as a purely natural or purely social entity, or as something pre-given or geometric. Instead, he states that (social) space is a (social) product.[47] Space is, therefore, a product of nature and men, always changing and in a state of becoming, something which can be related to the space of Lampedusa or of the Mediterranean Sea as a dynamic place of interactions.[48]

Beginning with the Roman *Mare Nostrum*, over the centuries the Mediterranean Sea has been crossed by men and events that have shaped its geopolitics, with effects still visible today.[49] Since men have different ideologies, space is also a product of their ideologies, power, and eventually capital. Any society—and any related mode of production—produces its own space, meaning that space contains a symbolic representation of social relations of production and re-production. Lefebvrian discourse is part of the development of his "original heterodox Marxism."[50] However, social space is not only attributable

44 For a possible application of Lefebvre's theory on the production of space to borders, see Gaeta "Lefebvre, Il Quotidiano e La Dialettica Del Confine."

45 See Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1961) and his writings on the city, along with the much-cited *Right to the City* (1968).

46 Among these, see Rémi Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l'Aventure Du Siècle*; Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*; Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. More recently, Kanishka Goonewardena et al., eds., *Space, Difference and Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*; or Biagi, *Henri Lefebvre: Una Teoria Critica dello Spazio*.

47 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26. The parentheses around the word "social" are present in the original.

48 Milgrom, "Lucien Kroll."

49 Abulafia, *Il Grande Mare*.

50 Kipfer et al., "On the Production of Henri Lefebvre," 2.

to economic forces but also to the human actions of everyday life. According to Lefebvre's "spatial triad" analytical tool, space is produced through the triplicity of first, *spatial practices*, second, *representations of space*, and third, *spaces of representation*.[51] These three moments, which are not to be understood hierarchically but which act simultaneously and without one being more relevant than the other, are connected to what can be called phenomenological dimensions of space, that of first, the *perceived*, second, the *conceived*, and third, the *lived*.

First, *spatial practices* correspond to the material dimension of social life and interactions, concentrating on the simultaneity of actions. Practically, this comprehends networks and paths of everyday life—such as the daily connections between home and workplace—and the production/exchange relations networks. Spatial practice implies everyday material reproduction of space. This level involves the individuals moving and performing tasks in space, as well as the infrastructures and articulations through which they move.

Second, the *representations of space* refer to the dimension of discourse, incorporating verbalised forms such as definitions, laws, and scientific theories of space. Maps and plans, the information in pictures and signs, are representations of space, produced by disciplines such as architecture, planning, social sciences. The representations of space incorporate space as conceived of by experts, technocrats, and urban planners, hence by those in charge of designing space, which Lefebvre associates with the hegemonic classes. It is the level of space corresponding to society's dominant mode of production, shaped to follow a specific political and economic agenda.

Third, the *spaces of representation* coincide with the symbolic dimension of space, tending toward non-verbal systems of representation.[52] Spaces of representation correspond to elements that transcend the material dimension of space, such as a divine power, the logos, the state, and the masculine or feminine principles. This level of the triplicity "refers to the process of signification that links itself to a (material) symbol."[53] Symbols could come from nature (e.g., a tree), or they could also be artifacts, buildings, and monuments. Spaces of representation often emerge in art and poetry, but are also linked to

51 As noted by Carabelli in *The Divided City and The Grassroots*, 35, the three levels presented by Lefebvre maintain a certain ambiguity that lends itself to different interpretations, so that the understanding of these concepts is not univocal among scholars. For a deeper debate on the three moments of space production see Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*.

52 This is what Lefebvre calls in French "espaces de représentation," a terminological inversion of "représentations de l'espace," that is sometimes translated into English also as "representational spaces."

53 Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space," 37.

the instinctive and the irrational level of social life. In contrast with the representation of space by bureaucrats and planners, it is the space of dwellers and users.

Lefebvre's three-dimensional dialectic on the production of space must be understood through historicisation, as developed in the book. For instance, in ancient Rome, all three elements of Lefebvre's dialectic presented a dual character. *Spatial practices* describe the Roman roads that joined the city to the countryside in their production and consumption relationship, allowing for the establishment of a centre in the city, from *urbs* to *orbis*. At the same time, they also included the two opposite poles of private life and private property, the Roman family and the Roman house. *Representations of space* drew, on one hand, upon the circular dynamic of *urbs* to *orbis*, which was declined into morphological elements of architecture such as the arch and the vault; on the other, it drew upon the linear military camp, based on the two axes of *cardo* and *decumano*, and the subsequent techniques used to draw the boundaries of a settlement. *Spaces of representation* coincided first with the male principle of the *pater-rex*, a principle that was military, authoritarian, dominant, and based on Roman law; and then with the feminine principle, which was dominated and pushed into the abyss of the Earth. Different myths originated from this push back into the abyss, the symbolic association of Earth from death to seed, symbols that later entered into Christianity.

In his conceptual progression, Lefebvre moves in time from a pre-modern world to a modern (capitalistic) world, respectively from "absolute space" to "abstract space." Absolute space is the space of religion, underpinning a conception of space-as-given-by-God, a formal abstraction that poses space itself as a substance. Abstract space, instead, is the space of modernity. In historical time comes first a kind of natural space, a primordial space which cannot be described in geometrical terms but rather in terms of natural rhythms associated with human activity.[54] Absolute space originates from a fragment of the agro-pastoral space, when natural space is progressively occupied and used by shepherds and peasants, who transform it and shape it with their gestures of labour, something that recalls the customary activities displayed in Bruegel's work (see chapter 1). The distinction between speech and writing is introduced in absolute space, while more and more spaces are carved out from nature.[55] Over time, the process brings about the production of centres—cities—and peripheries—the countryside. Absolute space is the space that introduces the division between city and countryside, linked to an unbalanced relation of

54 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 117, 163.

55 Ibid., 158–64.

economic power. From the twelfth century, the space of accumulation started to emerge in Europe along with the birth of money and goods.[56] Trade developed with its own spaces, as the markethall replaced the Greek *agora* and the Roman *forum*. The religious space did not disappear in the face of the commercial space, which was added to it. In the sixteenth century, the city prevailed over the countryside, for its economic and practical weight, which meant that money dominated the Earth.[57]

The change of space is reflected in a change of representations. For example, during the Renaissance many representation techniques, such as bird's-eye views related to the city, arise. The representations of space conceived for journeys by rivers and by sea, fuelled by travels for trade, were applied to urban reality. A detailed example of this can be found in Lefebvre's account of renaissance Tuscany. The municipal revolution led the urban oligarchy to transform the relations of production. The feudal system changed, and the peasants became sharecroppers instead of servants. With this change in social relations, the landscape was also transformed, making the city-country relation readable through the rows of cypress trees that connected the farms to the palace. Thus, new social forms were born, but also a new space—that of the Italian Renaissance city—and new representations of space—the technique of perspective.

Developed by architects and painters, the perspective as an intellectual representation was made possible by the fact that there was a space produced with its own logic. This technique subjected and dominated the space of representation, reduced it to symbolic figures, legends, and myths, which lingered in it. Those who inhabited towns and villages kept on living their space in an emotional and religious way, "by means of the representation of an interplay between good and evil forces at war throughout the world, and especially in and around those places which were of special significance for each individual: his body, his house, his land, as also his church and the graveyard which received his dead."[58] Even if this space of representation appears in works by painters and architects, many representations of space would be very different, displaying a homogenous space, defined according to the horizon line and the vanishing point of the parallel lines of perspective drawings.

Abstract space is born from accumulation processes as a space measurable and quantifiable, just like commodities. This shift continues to be reflected in the three space categories. If in absolute space people oriented themselves

56 Ibid., 262–75.
57 Ibid., 269.
58 Ibid., 79.

according to categories that could be called cosmic (the high and the celestial, the low and the underground), in abstract space the categories become geometric (the cardinal points, the Euclidean dimensions). Throughout the process, wars around accumulation are unleashed. This space of accumulation contains the nation-state's seeds, which arise from it and are defined through territoriality, namely by exercising sovereignty over specific areas. The nation-state operates through violence to control a market defined within national boundaries.[59] The use of violence and the creation of a specific market are therefore the two constitutive elements of the national space.

While the old representations of space, such as the celestial spheres and the firmament, tend to disappear, spaces of representation, such as "the realm of the dead, chthonian and telluric forces, the depths and the heights," are transported through different epochs.[60] Thus, the bureaucratic space expressed by the nation-state, beginning in the seventeenth century, is contrasted with spaces of representation centred on "the lyrical space of legends and myths, forests, lakes and oceans."[61] These spaces of representation emerge in romanticism but are then used instrumentally in the twentieth century to support the discourse on the homeland, as in the case of the German *Heimat*.[62] The nation-state aims to create a homogeneous space, a space with specific citizens belonging to the same nationhood, where the state regulates a class balance. Gradually, abstract space develops as the space of neo-capitalism. Highways and airports that connect banks, industrial production sites, and so on are built. While also having homogeneity as its goal, abstract space is not a homogeneous space but a fragmented one, it is a *contradictory* space.[63]

In this contradictory space, there is an ongoing dynamic of domination—appropriation, a dynamic that involves the power that governs reality versus the "other" inhabitants of that same social reality. Over time there will be dominant spaces and dominated spaces, and the same distinction is true for representations:

> Think of medieval space: on the one hand, the space of magico-religious representation, with hell below, God in heaven above, and the terrestrial world between the two. But this did not prevent representations of space: the construction of the first maps, the knowledge of navigators,

59 Ibid., 278–85.
60 Ibid., 231.
61 Ibid.
62 Schama and Connolly, *Landscape and Memory*.
63 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 292. Lefebvre devotes an entire chapter to this concept of contradictory space; see chapter five of *The Production of Space*.

> merchants and pirates; the Mediterranean as the centre of the world, etc. The history of space would show how spaces of representation and representations of space diverge and come together, with practice "really" changing the nature of space and the space of nature [*espace-nature*].[64]

While the representations of space are generally the expression of hegemonic powers, the spaces of representation are often dominated. Still, they are more likely to contain the seeds for a re-appropriation. As seen in the triad's application to Roman times, the spaces of representation were dominated by the *pater-rex*, but they also contained the dominated dimension of spaces of representations, that is, the female principle. The aspiration to re-appropriate the social space is linked to the very objective of the book: Lefebvre's work aims at a project, or counter-project, to move from a homogenous and fragmented space to an "other" space, a space of empowering differences that he calls a *differential space*, a counter-space. According to Lefebvre, the possibilities of countering are always present in social space, which contains the potentialities of re-appropriation first in art and second in a body that "by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space."[65] In the potential of re-appropriation Lefebvre refers on the one hand to the spaces of representation—through art—on the other to the phenomenological dimension of the lived—through the reference to the body. The focus on spaces of representation as spaces that can be re-appropriated is a key to understanding the counter-hegemonic potential of a circumstantial case, like the work Poloni on Lampedusa, and more generally to understanding the role of representation in borderscapes.

## 3 Photographic Re-Imaginations of Lampedusa

Relating the theory on the production of space as drawn by Lefebvre to the work of Poloni on Lampedusa allows for further exploration of the levels at play in the complex social and material reality of the island, and leads to some other insights. For Lefebvre, the historicisation of space is a process that denies the fixity of spatial categories and of the very notion of space by making it clear how these change over time. Thus, the relations of power and the relations of production that are inscribed in the representations of space in a specific time emerge. Lefebvre then proceeds to a form of declassification that he considers

64 Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 229.
65 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 379.

necessary to see signs of the possible in the real. Poloni's work carries forward a similar operation, by way of art rather than philosophy, to declassify the representations of the southern Italian border. His attempt aims at breaking stereotypes about migration and making possible another narrative for people on the move. The three dimensions of space articulated by Lefebvre are also at play in the production of Lampedusa borderscapes.

The island's *spatial practices* incorporate the routes of tourists, migrants, and fishermen, as well as the material infrastructures connected to them, such as the migrant identification centre, the hotels, the port, and so on. The networks related to such spatial practices are clearly non-linear and as intricate as a tangle. They extend far beyond the geographical reality of the island, stretching as far as the productive space of the cities from which tourists arrive, or the northern Italian border, which many people on the move reach after Lampedusa, with the aim of moving into fortress Europa. As mentioned, Poloni's constellation hints at the Mediterranean as a continent crossed by various flows and networks.

The *representations of space* of this borderscape include the dimension of the laws and the normative discourse, such as the Schengen Agreement, the Dublin regulations, and national regulations, which establish the parameters within which tourists, migrants, and fishermen can move. Emblematic are the recent border disputes over the waters, not only for migration but also for fishing.[66] Therefore also, practically, representations of space include the techniques applied to ensure that this regulatory dimension is respected. In *Displacement Island* we see for example sonar maps for sea control, which identify the sea as a monitorable and measurable space. On the island the representations of space seem to be supported by dominant media and political narrative. There are no other explicit references to the representations of this borderscape in the series, yet we see the material effects of border policies, while further information on this dimension comes from the understanding of the geopolitical context.

*Spaces of representation* can also be glimpsed in Poloni's work. On the one hand, there is a dominant space of representation, corresponding to the

66 The issue of territorial waters for fishing limits is itself a topic currently much discussed in contemporary borderscapes. See the recent debates in the context of Brexit, or the seizing of some Sicilian fishermen in Libya in autumn/winter 2020 as they entered to fish in an area of the sea that Libyans claim exclusively. See Paola Cipriani, Antonio Iovane, and Giulia Santerini, "107 giorni a Bengasi: dal sequestro alla liberazione, l'odissea dei pescatori di Mazara del Vallo," *La Repubblica*, 18 December 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/12/18/news/107_giorni_a_bengasi_dal_sequestro_alla_liberazione_storia_dei_pescatori_di_mazara_del_vallo-278883436/ (accessed 19 February 2020).

FIG. 4.6 Marco Poloni, *Displacement Island*, 2006, #69. One of 69 pigment prints, dimensions variable


military principle that emerges in the panoramic views of military ships in the sea (Fig. 4.6), as well as in the views of the sea from above, which incorporate a scrutinising and controlling gaze. On the other hand, there is a dominated space of representation that seeks to re-emerge. This may correspond to the sea as populated by marine creatures, and the link between natural time, the rhythms of fishing, and the island, which combines the island's past with the present and opens up a series of symbolic associations within the maritime realm. At the same time, we might re-imagine the space of representation connected to the epic of the journey as discovery and as seeking refuge, rather than as colonising conquest. Thus, the small boat we see arriving on the shore in one image may be not only that of conquerors but also of those seeking refuge. We also glimpse the lived experience of "other" subjects, that is, with rights of inclusion in the borderscape, other than those of the observer. However, it is never possible to fully convey the lived experience of a body, as Lefebvre himself notes, neither with images nor with words.

When asked if counter-representations could contribute to creating a counter-space, Poloni answered that *Displacement Island* is not from this perspective a strictly militant work.[67] Poloni did not aim to directly fight an

67 Grillo and Poloni, "A Conversation."

existing and prevailing representation, which in this context is often binomic: There are the Italians and the others, that is, foreigners who are believed to steal jobs or bring illnesses. In this work, he was mainly trying to account for the complexity of a space. However, "the fact of accounting for this complexity perhaps becomes a sort of reverse shot of the hegemonic representation."[68] Establishing a direct link between alternative representations and material changes in space is a difficult task. Lefebvre offers a key to the mechanism of re-appropriation of the spaces of representation at a conceptual level, when he describes the space of representation as

> space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users," but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.[69]

In this way, Lefebvre delegates a central role to the re-appropriation of the dominated space and of the dominated representations, to the imagination. The term "imagination" is perhaps mediated by Gaston Bachelard, who in *The Poetics of Space* (1969) dedicates an analysis to imagination from a phenomenological perspective.[70] Bachelard considers how literary works devoted to the home's internal space can bring out "imaginations" through a mechanism he calls *retentissement*.[71] The poetic images resonate with one's own lived experience and leads the reader to feel like the poet and to perceive their own poetic power. The act of imagining is radically different from that of remembering: While memory is linked to the past, imagination is generative; that is, it projects us towards something else, the future. This orientation to the future lines up with Lefebvre's thinking on a counter-project of space, or a counter-space. A project is itself something projected to the future, as shown by the etymology of the term *projectum*, "throwing ahead."

At the same time, the term imagination is linked to image. The etymological root of imagination is in the Latin *imago* (noun) and *imaginari* (verb), "to

68 Ibid.

69 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

70 Jeremy F. Lane considered the influence of Bachelard's studies on "poetic" and "material" imagination in other contexts of Lefebvre's thought; see Lane, "Towards a Poetics of Consumerism." Christian Schmid stressed the possible link between some aspects of Lefebvre's and Bachelard's theoretical thought as something that has yet to be explored; see Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space."

71 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

picture oneself," originally having a self-reflexive meaning. Imagination ends up indicating a potentiality of the mind to prefigure future events or entities other than reality through an associative mechanism, which unites thoughts and images. It is similar to the mechanisms of the allegorical images and constellations described by Royoux in *Displacement Island*.[72] Thus, I propose the expression "spaces of imagination" to transplant Lefebvre's idea of spaces of representations fully into the image and visual realm and to point to the potentiality of photography to allude to spaces of representation by means of visual montages. Through constellations of images, photography can allude to non-dominated spaces of representation: An image, associated with others, opens up a space of imagination where the symbolic underlying social life can re-emerge.

The connection of imagination with the image did not go unnoticed in Lefebvre's writings. The research that he carried out on the experience of the Parisian Commune of 1871 and the Parisian May of 1968 suggested to him the revolutionary potential of the image and the imagination of the city, and then expressed in the idea of re-appropriating the spaces of representation.[73] The first research pertained to the proclamation of the Commune on 26 March 1871, while the second reflected on the experience of May 1968, when Lefebvre was at the University of Nanterre. Both experiences were occasions for the production of new centralities in an uncontrollable repossession of the urban centre by those who were excluded. When Lefebvre stated that the image of the city had been the trigger of the events related to the Parisian May of 1968, "he also mean[t] material images, perhaps photographs, perhaps even photographs of the Commune, which he reproduced in his book as testimonies of the first major political events fixed on light-sensitive film and a direct reference of the students."[74]

In *Displacement Island*, the image as a visual element triggers the mechanisms of imagination of something other, fostering a re-appropriation of the island-scape dominated by a vision overly dependent on one's subjective condition in the borderscape. Thus, in the final image, which shows the sea horizon from above with a military ship in the water, we can imagine this as the vision of different subjects who we do not directly see (Fig. 4.6). Lampedusa is a thin strip of rock in the water, and this photograph, explains Poloni, was taken from a cliff overlooking the sea towards the south, where Africa is. While a classic reading in cinematic terms would associate it with the omniscient,

72 Royoux, "Constellations."

73 Lefebvre, *La Proclamation de La Commune*; and Lefebvre, *The Explosion*.

74 Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, 191.

with the camera symbolising the eye of the creator, this may also be considered as a "look at invisible Africa, where the invisible ones come from."[75] On the other hand, the western-centred representation of space reinforces the invisibility of Africa, as the cartography traditionally used in Europe shows the African continent as much smaller than it actually is. The military ship present in the photograph seems to mark the border between the two continents, while the light of the sun filtering through the clouds introduces a note of hope in the closing of the constellation.

The imaginative aspect of a constellation of photographs is also a way of overcoming the visible, as different images through their associations and montage end up referring to something more than themselves, something already attempted by Poloni in a photo-textual project antecedent to *Displacement Island*, namely *Shadowing the Invisible Man—Script for a Short Film* (2001), which traces the journey of a person on the move from the Puglia region to Italy's northern border.[76] This former work, five years before the one made in Lampedusa, demonstrates Poloni's long-standing interest in exploring the Mediterranean reality in a layered and large perspective, while also testing the possibilities of the photographic medium. Reconstructing the possible itinerary of a person on the move via a series of photographs, shot as embodied in a traveller's viewpoint, and short snippets of text, that recall camera instructions, the project builds a script for a movie that was never made, while moving physically and imaginatively all the way through the peninsula until it reaches precisely the Swiss-Italian border, at the opposite end of the country from the island of Lampedusa. The final image in the series shows a view of Lake Maggiore, which stretches between Switzerland and Italy, taken from the point of view of someone moving through the water. At the bottom of the photo we glimpse, out of focus, the tip of a sailboard moving on the water, carrying with it a passenger whose point of view is that of the camera.

75 Grillo and Poloni, "A Conversation."
76 Lienhard, Poloni, and Banz, "Scenarios for Invisible Narratives."