

*Islands of Displacement in Renata Poljak's Partenza*  
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Beyond their physical and historical existence, islands have been and continue to be metaphors and symbolic resources for understanding one's ontological place in relation to the rest of the world. Despite being disruptions in the continuous flow of land, islands have a great power to invoke the imagination as ideas are often projected onto them. They have been sites of leisure, escapism, and the exotic, as commonly found in science fiction and adventure genres from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present; metaphors for independent thinking regarding liberation and slavery, as in the works of Martinican poet, writer and critic Édouard Glissant; or sites of pirating or offshore banking as seen, for example, in the recently leaked trove of documents known as the "Panama Papers". As Glissant<sup>1</sup> might suggest, islands are in many ways ellipses or incomplete ideas representing something else other than normative realities that compete against our fixed ideas of meaning. To speak of islands is to speak of the land and sea at the same time, spaces of limits and boundaries, spaces of both arrival and departure.

Geological and environmental forces such as tectonic plates and erupting volcanoes first shaped islands. But human history, industry and culture have equally influenced how we define and make sense of these sites. *Partenza*, a 2016 multi-media project by Croatian artist Renata Poljak, articulates the meaning of islands by engaging with the emotional consequences of living remotely, and thus acts as an apparatus to gauge and figure, making sense of visual territory. The work is set on the island of Brač in its southernmost tip in the city of Bol. Bol is famous for its popular beach, Zlatni Rat ("the golden cape") that stretches out into the sea with its edges constantly shifting according to the seasonal tidal movement. Reexamining the sea's historic and superficial remoteness, *Partenza* profiles the sea as a space and subject of political and emotional significance. The work is comprised of a single channel film, nine photo collages, two ink and six charcoal drawings. Nearly all the material is fixed in black and white. Their installation mimics the Adriatic archipelago with similar yet distinct individual features tied together by a geopolitical bond. Together, these works describe a longing for another place, another time and an eternal return that may never occur.

The establishing shot of the film is a dune on Zlatni Rat. A sharp horizon line divides the frame and sand is suddenly punctured when seven women in modest, dark, traditional Croatian clothing slowly make their way up the dune and approach the camera head-on. They reach the apex of the dune, pause and wait. Further close ups are captured and their identities and emotional and psychological states are defined: women with tears, some pregnant, young and old, standing and facing the sea's horizon. As these figures descend the dune and pace along the island's beach, they look past the camera almost religiously as if to blink might lead them to miss something crucial. These women, later joined by a few older male compatriots, are framed by Poljak's rich use of aesthetic and art historical references: soviet montage theory, traditional fashion, experimental western cinema, an absence of color and dialogue. Balanced between tight close up and low angle sequences of these figures and between long shots of Zlatni Rat, every succeeding moment in the film is fraught with the expectation that something is about to happen and yet nothing does.

Croatia is comprised of over-1,200 islands dotting the Adriatic Sea<sup>2</sup>. This is significant when observing Croatia through the lens of its history and its proximity to water systems, its navy, its fishing and tourist industry and recent economical and socio-political situations. The scenes in *Partenza* refer to the early 1900s when the Tierra del Fuego gold rush attracted thousands of Croatians to the Argentinian and Chilean coasts. By 1939, nearly 15,000 men had emigrated, leaving their families behind and sighting better economic opportunities abroad particularly in Latin America due to relaxed immigration laws<sup>3</sup>. Despite the efforts and sacrifices of these migrant miners, there was little gold for them to be found and nearly no fortunes to be made. Some continued to work for Argentinian president Juan Perón's public works projects in major cities and some in agricultural labor, but a very limited number of workers were able to return to their homes and their families<sup>4</sup>. They continued to work and remit wages back home where there was little economic opportunity on the island, particularly on remote islands such as Brač. As borders shifted and fighting prolonged, many Croatians endured displacement and sought refuge by leaving the region all together.

The weight of history is evident in every moment of this work. Poljak's camera focuses on minutiae, on the seemingly mundane aspects of waiting. Her characters register the aftermath of trauma eliciting empathy for

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<sup>1</sup> *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant, 1997. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

<sup>2</sup> *Croatia Country Study Guide Volume 1 Strategic Information and Developments*, 2013. International Business Publications: Washington DC, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Croatian Migration History and the Challenges of Migrations Today*, Dubravka Mlinarić, Mario Bara, Snježana Gregurović, Drago Župarić-Ilić, Simona Kuti, 2015. <http://aemi.eu/croatian-migration-history-and-the-challenges-of-migrations-today>.

<sup>4</sup> *A different kind of multinational: Immigrants to Argentina from Eastern Europe*, Michael Soltys, *Buenos Aires Herald*, 1998. <http://www.casahistoria.net/easteurope.htm>

what lies in and out of the frame. They suffer in a purgatory defined by disconnection, separation, estrangement, frustration and forever waiting for a return. The politics of waiting are a key aspect of *Partenza* as there is direct gender imbalance between being those with opportunity to leave and those whom stayed behind. And so, another form of falsified return becomes apparent in this film. In *Partenza*, waiting condenses a woman's existence into a cycle of waiting for life to begin while attending to and maintaining the lives of children and the elderly. In the second to last scene, action is finally taken. The cycle breaks down when one of the women revolts and walks alone into the sea until she is completely submerged in water never to surface again.

The film engenders space for speculation and interpretation as Poljak does not employ a completely fixed narrative but rather the work becomes a shifting story that pays close attention to the articulation of space with room for contemplation. As in the works of Maya Deren and other avant-garde film makers, this physical space can also be understood as a psychological space for both the subject and the viewer to project their personal experience and narrative onto the work in order to fill the gaps and spaces between islands of emotion and thought. *Partenza* is silent except for diegetic sounds of waves colliding onto the beach. Here we are able to imagine our own dialogue, locating a nascent power in the actualities of our surroundings. If the characters are firmly fixed in existential condition, the location itself equally becomes Poljak's subject matter; her camera panning parallel to the coast, extending and contesting boundaries and our relationship to continents, islands and land-sea divides. Turning her camera onto the present, in the final shot the camera dives underwater and changes from black and white to color. Clothing once worn by bodies but now left empty sink to the sea's floor, perhaps evoking the Italian island of Lampedusa<sup>5</sup>. The film is released from a national perspective of remembrance to an international responsibility of the very present and very urgent movement of peoples across intercontinental waters.

*Partenza* is a story of exclusion told through aesthetic employment of abstractions and absence. In a series of nine 130 x 90 cm photo collages, Poljak presents outtakes from the filming and removes large geometrical fragments to replace them with black voids, which when looked at closely, appear to be images of the dark sea. The collages are accompanied by six 50 x 60 cm charcoal drawings marked abstract circular hand movements, and layered almost obsessively. These circles are history cannibalizing itself wherein pattern of migrations seem to endlessly continue. With her circles, voids and cinematic narrative, Poljak reveals how the contemporary capitalist paradox to follow better economic pursuits and risk lives is a dangerous challenge to those who flee and those that are left behind. She connects contemporary migrations in Northern Africa to historic accounts in Eastern Europe, and empathizes with the conditions of alienation felt from forced departure from one's home. Here, the sea represents the division of continents and the division of families while critiquing the global market that demands migration and labor in the first place. *Partenza* interrogates how imagination and negotiation of our place in the world is charged with both the complexities of the past and present simultaneously. Looking outwards to the sea, its depths are unknown as our futures.

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<sup>5</sup> Lampedusa is an Italian island territory in the southern Mediterranean which lies about 70 miles from Tunisia. For about 20 years, the island has become synonymous with the transit point for Northern African migration to Europe. For more information on the politics regarding visual culture and representations of migration in the present, please see *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* by T.J. Demos.