

# The Literal, at Sea

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Reference, though discernable, has been reduced to an absolute minimum. In each image, a wake—or is it a wave?—cuts across the frame, a bit of turbulence that, lacking any visible origin, reads as little more than graphical abstraction. What remains are fleeting bits of form that froth, fold and foam at the edges, rising out of their aqueous ground just long enough to register photographically; gradient fields that are not quite gradient fields, pockmarked by the accidental pointillism of the wave caps that dot the sea's surface, striated here and there by bands of dark and light that suggest the presence of something machinic, some vessel or engine capable of carving the ocean into geometric pieces, carefully, methodically, with intention. But even these slip away at the edges, drifting hazily into one another, making things murky, maybe brackish, depending on how far we happen to be from shore. If the photograph aspires to or carries with it the promise of the literal, of registering what is or what *has been*, here it captures only littoral, the watery recession of tidy edges, discernible causes, and legible itineraries.

Small wonder that the images, produced by the artist Zineb Sedira, are gathered under a title that proves equally slippery. *SeaPath*, read aloud, speaks in the imperative, almost like a command: “See Path.” Rendered textually, however, the imperative is set adrift. The title becomes a proper noun, a name for something. But at sea, as it turns out, there is remarkably little to see; that *something*, that path, has already begun to wash away, its source already outside the frame, the literal already littoral. If these are images of anything, they are images of movement, of passage, of circulation; a moment, a cut, into some journey for which we are given no point of origin, no destination, and no trajectory. Or, they are visual intervals in which clear distinctions between coming and going, directionality and drift, intention and turbulence, indeed the constructed and the natural (wave and wake blend imperceptibly together) break down, swirling together in arresting (and arrested) eddies. These eddies fill the frame, staging a confrontation with motion that seems overwhelming, almost frustrating, one that refuses to resolve, to vectoralize.

But these images are, of course, of something in particular. To generate *SeaPath*, Sedira photographed the wakes left by the ferries that transit regularly between Algiers, in North Africa, and Marseille, on France’s Mediterranean coast. This same route is also frequented, however, by Harragas—young Algerian border crossers who seek differently licit means of maritime entry to France or Spain. This is indeed something, quite something: a scene of embodied action that puts immediately at stake precisely

those things Sedira's images render so turbulent and elusive: vectoralized movement, determinate starting points and ending points, definitive boundaries between this and that, here and there. Indeed, it is largely within and through scenes like this one that such categories are *constituted* in the contemporary juncture, circumscribed as it is within the temporal and political imaginary of (migrant) crisis. As we know well, for instance, the figure of the illicit or illegalized border crosser, the one who arrives from without (allegedly) intent on exploiting the humanitarian goodwill and economic possibilities that (allegedly) attend admission into the European body politic, prompts fearsome performances of national integrity that manifest variably as border securitization, maritime interception, and indefinite detention.

In the optic of crisis, the migrant appears as a *vector of, or vectoralized, risk*—an improper intentionality, an unwanted willfulness, a suspect directionality. Such an optic assumes and demands a here and a there, a point of origin and a destination, a clear set of intentions (whether economic, humanitarian, criminal, or terroristic) that motivates the passage between the two, and firm boundaries to be protected. Sedira's images suggest, however, that much more churns just below the surface of things. More is in motion, more circulates, than just those who cross, and that those who cross do so in ways and for reasons as littoral as they are literal. Things cannot be made quite so tidy. These circulations, again as Sedira's images suggest, are profoundly unstable; coalescing into some coherent form or pattern here and now, only to dissolve or distend a moment later. As *SeaPath* disaggregates "See Path" into a series of fluid interfaces between the machinic and the natural, wake and wave, licit and other-than-licit, alternative modalities of movement bubble to the surface, ways of moving and crossing that do not resolve into the cartographies of crisis.