

A TRIBUTE TO LIFE IN THE POLAR REGIONS

ANTARCTIC

Michael Poliza



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teNeues

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Fragile Beauty

When you spend weeks or months at both poles of the Earth, taking hundreds of photos a day, how can you choose a single photo that most intensely embodies the experience for you? Which photo do you keep in your head as a souvenir—what etches itself indelibly on your memory? And what sort of feelings linger in your heart that let you tie a tidy ribbon around this globe-spanning journey from the northern Arctic to the southernmost continent of Antarctica? Michael Poliza, who is just moving back to Hamburg, Germany after seven years in Cape Town, South Africa, a world of vivid and varied hues, finds that the specific palette of colors is what his mind's eye sees first when he recalls his last great odysseys of discovery. "There's this almost monochromatic palette of white (snow) and black (rocks) that seems very limited at first, but as time passes, you slowly awaken to its rich nuance. Add to that a tremendous spectrum of watery blue tones that dominate everything. And in between, there are these sprinkles of color in the wildlife—little splashes of yellow, green, purple, and red—yes, red like the eternal, seemingly never-ending sunrises and sunsets." Poliza, a pragmatist through and through, doesn't mind when people attribute a "certain sense of the romantic" to him, although his mission, the fire in his belly that has kept him trotting the globe for many years now, couldn't be farther removed from self-indulgent narcissism. Ever since his "Starship Millennium Voyage" around the world from 1998 to 2001, Michael Poliza has taken on an urgent concern: raising awareness about the state of our planet. "It's obvious we need the critical status reports we're getting to create awareness." However, he himself would like to approach it from a positive angle and show "all of the simply incredible beauty that still exists in this world, things that we can continue to preserve and protect, or move decisively to protect before it's too late."

He seeks out flora and fauna at their most pristine and primordial, and thus most "wonder-full," observing them with everything from super-wide angles to count-every-hair close-ups. He wants his work to push people into a sense of personal responsibility, to touch each and every individual, "motivate them and give them the courage" to save our world. He feels emotion is the best way to accomplish this. "Because nowadays, something has to really grab your heart to get your undivided attention, your energy—and then, just maybe, that will turn into a commitment." Poliza says that if his photography "contributes one iota" to this process, it would be enough to make him very satisfied.



Michael Poliza

Photo: Dennis Fast

After the enormous success of his first two major works for teNeues, *Africa* and *Eyes Over Africa*, Poliza decided to take his camera to the parts of the world most seriously threatened by global warming. Nowhere else on Earth is the progress of climate change as rapid and serious as in the Arctic and Antarctica: two areas that are "white dots on a map" in the most literal sense of the word, where zooming in on Google Earth yields a blurry gray-white nothingness. The names of both poles come from the same Greek root—*arktos*, meaning "bear." However, this has nothing

to do with one of the polar regions' main residents; *arktikos* actually means "the land under the constellation of Ursa Major." The North Star is almost directly above the North Pole and is one of the stars in the constellation of Ursa Minor. At this location in the Arctic, the ocean is a good two and a half miles deep, and like the entire High Arctic, it is (still) covered in snow and ice year-round. Only to the south, at the northern edges of the continents of North America, Asia and Europe, is there a summer thaw that reveals the pingos (rounded hills atop a core of ice) typical for the region. Summers in such places are almost pleasant—which is why nearly a million people, most of them Inuit, have settled in the Arctic. However, there are very few mammals and fish to keep them company. Birds are the only creatures that flock to the edge of the permafrost; the Arctic Ocean produces an enormous algae bloom in summer, providing plenty of food for a short food chain with sea birds nibbling at the top of it. During the breeding season, migrating birds from all over the world love to stop in for a visit as well.

In both the Arctic and Antarctic regions, there is an unimaginable amount of ice and snow, glacial fissures, and brutal temperatures as low as -75 degrees Fahrenheit (-60 degrees Celsius), dropping to record lows of -126 (-89 degrees Celsius). So if it gets a few degrees warmer due to climate change, Joe Q. Public thinks, "So what? You'd think the polar bears would be happy!" "Popycock! The polar bear is *exactly* the one most threatened by warming temperatures!" Poliza explains, and we delve into the underlying "biological basics."

The **polar bear** (*Ursus maritimus*) is the largest land carnivore on Earth; although he lives on land, he is also excellently equipped for life in the water, thanks to his partially webbed feet and his excellent insulation—a fat layer up to four inches thick and fur with hollow guard hairs. He can easily swim 60 miles or more in two or three days; however, he has to catch his food on land or ice, because seals are the main dish on his menu. Since he weighs between 660 and 1700 pounds (lower end for females, higher end for males), he is much too slow to catch a seal in the water. So he stalks his favorite prey as it relaxes or catches a breath on icebergs and ice floes. And he does it with considerable wile and cunning, because polar bears are also quite intelligent. Adults reach a size of ten or 13 feet long, and the bear's paws are so large that both of Michael Poliza's heavily insulated size 10½ winter boots fit handily inside a single bear footprint. However, it doesn't matter how smart the bears are if the ice is melting two weeks earlier and freezing a whole month later than normal—all thanks to global warming. No ice means no food, and no food means no polar bears! Their fate is as simple as that. The average weight of female polar bears in Hudson Bay has dropped by 25% in the last 30 years, and fewer and fewer polar bear cubs even survive their first year.

So it's no wonder that the "King of the North" made it onto the cover of *AntArctic* as "the epitome of threatened." The fact that he is showcased so magnificently against a field of purple flowers was one of Michael Poliza's singular dreams that came true precisely as he had envisioned it. In 2005, he had visited Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, the "polar bear capital of the world." Churchill is a legendary village of 600 people whose population swells by up to four thousand tourists during the summer season from the end of July to the end of October, all because Churchill is a favorite place for the white-haired bears with the black skin to gather by the dozen and take a long, lazy summer siesta. They hardly eat at all, choosing instead to live off their fat reserves as they wait for Hudson Bay, their preferred hunting ground, to freeze over.

In August, the so-called "fireweed" blooms in abundance along the coast. "Catching a polar bear in this lovely, luminous ocean of purple flowers" had long been a dream of Poliza. Canadian Mike Reimer, owner of the Seal River Lodge about 60 miles north in the no-man's-land of Churchill, was tapped to provide the setup for "this almost grotesque scene." In August 2008, "bear hunter" Poliza, armed with his trusty camera, took up residence in his own special custom-built camp at the so-called Hubbard

Point: two tents surrounded by an eight-foot tall chain-link fence, equipment tents with extra security for the completely airtight storage of food, and another electric fence surrounding the entire compound. It's important to note here that polar bears are predators who are both exceptionally curious and blessed with an extraordinary sense of smell—and have a hankering for human flesh instead of its normal food during its summer-time dieting phase. "Compared to the polar bears, the lions in Africa are, to put it mildly, sweet little house cats," explains Poliza, who then turns to the story of how he got one of his favorite shots. The truth? It was nothing more than a simple urge to relieve himself that made him carefully pull back the tent wall at quarter to four in the morning, and lo and behold, "Not 30 feet away, under this overcast dawn sky that reflected the light so wonderfully... a polar bear amid this heavenly field of purple! Quietly, quietly, I woke my friend Richard, and quietly, oh so quietly, we pulled out our cameras..."



The camp at Hubbard Point. Of course the team broke it down and cleaned it up completely afterwards.

The **beluga whales** (*Delphinapterus leucas*), also known as white whales, are the second reason why Churchill is awash in tourists every summer. The whales give birth to their young by the hundreds there and even gamely allow themselves to be used as an adventure attraction. Thanks to the unfused vertebrae in their necks, these whales, who live exclusively in the Arctic and range from ten to 20 feet long, can move their heads in "aw"-inducing ways, change their facial expressions, and even pull the corners of their mouths up or down for communication purposes. Since they turn their noses up at eating humans, preferring to subsist on fish and small crabs, they get a kick out of palling around with our species now and again. This is why you'll see brave tourists stuff themselves into dry suits and snorkels, tie a rope around their feet, and allow themselves to be towed backwards through the frigid water by a rubber boat. Touching the belugas is part of the all-inclusive package.

Michael Poliza has to back up a bit further to tell his story about the **walruses**. The problem they posed was primarily a logistical one, because the few expeditions to their arctic homes are booked up years in advance. And it was only thanks to the aforementioned Mike Reimer, who found an Inuit in Coral Harbour with a "supposedly comfortable and safe boat for a multiday trip" at the north end of Hudson Bay, that the multi-stage journey to these creatures could happen at all. Walruses are enormous members of the seal family, often weighing more than a ton, and live only in the Northern Hemisphere. The Latin name for the walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) comes from its monstrous, almost absurd-looking tusks, which can grow to 20 inches long. The stubbly-faced, thick-skinned walrus uses them not only for defense, but also to stir through the bottom of shallow waters looking for clams and crabs. Walruses, both bulls and cows, also use their tusks to position themselves with respect to gender, age, and social status.

However, before doing special shoots like these, Michael Poliza first had to face the ongoing challenge of mastering the art of traveling itself. If possible, he doesn't want to check his camera bag and backpack containing a good 180 pounds of equipment at the counter. Instead, he just carries it "laid back" over his shoulder, even though he's always "scared that I won't be able to get the cameras on board." Helpful stewardesses who want to stow his bag in the overhead bin for him are rebuffed oh so gently with a charming, "Oh, don't worry, I'll get that!" And passenger Poliza makes it look effortless as he maneuvers his monstrously heavy bags into the bin.

Thankfully, Poliza had his friend and fellow photographer Richard Voliva with him to share the load on his flights to Denver, Winnipeg, Churchill, and the last three-hour leg to Coral Harbour. But their Coats Island adventure didn't truly begin until they boarded the 43-foot aluminum ship belonging to Captain Joe, the Inuit. "This ship was the most dilapidated, poorly equipped, dangerously unseaworthy vessel I have ever encountered in my entire life as a globe-trotter!" recalls Poliza, who continues by telling how he and Richard rolled out their sleeping bags on two platforms made of banana crates, and how they had to grab hold of the flammable propane bottles whenever there was the slightest patch of rough water; the bottles constantly rolled back and forth from starboard to port with every move the ship made. The icing on the cake was a storm warning that Poliza was able to pick up with his portable Internet satellite antenna while on an island beach. "One of the biggest storms of the summer was headed straight for us; the nearest coast guard station was a good 2,000 nautical miles away, and we were well off the beaten path. I saw this single dark red warning box on the computer, and to be honest, I was rather scared." The entire expedition was suddenly at risk. We decided to seek shelter and return home, only to later risk a four-hour detour to another small potential walrus island. "And the gods smiled on us! The walrus lay there as if they'd been ordered—lining the shore by the dozen like they were expecting us." Ninety minutes of rushed and intense shooting later, Poliza had most of his "walrus" photos in the can, and late that evening, the three guys made the lifesaving port of Coral Harbour on the last of the tide—just ahead of the huge storm that had been forecast. It raged for three days, cutting off any means of transport by sea or air.

Michael Poliza's photography trips to the **Antarctic** went much more smoothly. *Antarktikos* (Greek) simply means "the opposite of the North Pole." It constitutes its own continent whose nearest neighbors to the north are Cape Horn, at the southern tip of South America, Cape Agulha in South Africa, and the islands of Tasmania and New Zealand. Starting around 1820, the world's foremost explorers tried to systematically study the "white spot on the map." James Cook is believed to be the first person to cross the Antarctic Circle in 1773, but pack ice kept him from actually seeing Antarctica. Robert Falcon Scott's first Antarctic expedition (1901–1904) came within 480 miles of the South Pole. "...wild as any other land on our globe, it lies, unseen and untrdden," commented Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian whose expedition was the first to reach the South Pole on December 14, 1911. Amundsen won the race to the pole over Scott, who perished along with his entire party in a snowstorm as they headed homeward. For a long time, the conquering of this last unknown spot on Earth was a metaphor for the triumph of imperialism—or for outstanding athletic achievement. This explains why the record-chasing Reinhold Messner followed up his ascent of Mount Everest in 1978 by crossing the Antarctic—which he and Arved Fuchs successfully accomplished in 1990. Incidentally, one of the few people to cross both poles is the young British adventurer, ecologist, and head of Adventure Ecology, David de Rothschild.

Michael Poliza wanted his new photographic documentation, or better, *interpretation* of the Antarctic, to be retracable by a discerning adventure and nature lover. Poliza's desire and his quandary of "How can I cover as much ground in the Antarctic as possible on the one hand, while having access to the best possible work environment to observe the lives of the

animals and to capture them in their respective habitat on the other hand?" were resolved positively on the *MS Bremen*. This cruise ship also allowed Poliza to fulfill an "ancient dream" of finally including South Georgia and the Falklands on an Antarctic trip, a "detour" he warmly recommends to any South Pole buff. Poliza found a very accommodating partner in Hamburg's Hapag-Lloyd Cruises. He was promised his own cabin on the comfortable cruise ship's "soft expeditions" to the Antarctic region, and a special working photographer status alongside the onboard science and expedition team. "At least, that was the well-intentioned message from the main office in Hamburg," Poliza chuckles. "Once I was on board, on the high seas, the only thing I got initially was the stoic, mistrustful resistance and the infamous Hanseatic cold shoulder." At least until Captain Daniel Felgner "sorted things out with an act of elegant diplomacy—he pounded his fist on the table." Poliza then had to prove to the crew that he was a team player, and most importantly, a trustworthy and reliable conservationist. And after he gave a few lectures on photography, the ice was finally broken, and Sailor Michael and the crew "developed wonderful teamwork." Poliza says he made "friends for life" on these five cruises in 2007 and 2008 to the Antarctic Peninsula. The photographer got his daily 4 a.m. wake-up call from the bridge with the latest weather and status reports. Many times, Poliza would go straight from his cabin to the upper deck, where a crane obligingly lifted him and a rubber zodiac overboard à la *Titanic* and lowered them into the icy water. There were only two conditions placed on his extracurricular work: "I had to remain within radio distance, and follow the rules—but other than that, sweet freedom! Oh, it was beautiful!"

When Michael Poliza is alone in and with nature, he floats "in high regions of bliss." He loses himself as he breathes with the elements and concentrates on composing a photograph. It's the supremely patient waiting to see what chance has to offer up, combined with a constant state of heightened, crisp vision and the instant readiness of the shutter finger, that produces the graphic structures, reflection effects and geometries that are so characteristic of his work. It's when the interplay of sun, water, cloud, and light set the stage perfectly. And through careful observation, he can raise nature's creations to the level of photographic art.



Michael en route to a photo shoot with the *MS Bremen* first officer Maggi Ettlin. Photo: Marina Korskowa

And so he pressed the shutter as they steamed by the tabular iceberg, the iceberg that many futuristic water supply visions see being towed to Africa as a freshwater reservoir. And let loose a flurry of click-click-clicks when the inhabitants of one of the world's lushest ecosystems gave him a window into their "fantastically coordinated communal life": birds, fishes, whales, squid, sea lions, seals, penguins...indeed, Poliza was especially taken with the diminutive "masters of the island" in their streamlined tuxedos. Time and again, he marveled at the Adélie and king penguins' antics—highly entertaining lessons in group dynamics that continued

merrily on at temperatures far below zero. Thanks to the absence of land predators like the polar bears of the Arctic, this flightless family of sea birds has no fear of humans; over the course of their evolution into a mass population, they never needed to learn how to flee. Their chumminess, caring social structures, and every facet of their family lives were on display in a series of delightful Poliza tidbits posted as an online blog on the *Stern* magazine website from November 2007 to March 2008.



King penguins with the *MS Bremen* lying at anchor at Salisbury Plain, South Georgia.

Poliza was especially fond of using the comical **king penguins** (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*) as models in his photographs. Standing three feet tall and weighing up to 33 pounds, king penguins may be only the second-largest penguins on Earth, but they are definitely the most colorful. They live on subpolar islands such as South Georgia rather than Antarctica itself. King penguins return to their home colonies to breed in October and lay just one precious egg. The partners are appropriately vigilant in incubating the lone egg, keeping it on top of their feet for 55 days and rolling it back and forth. The chick is a true "homebody" in every sense of the word and needs about eleven months to become self-sufficient. Poliza had the good fortune to be able to visit South Georgia on several occasions and shoot one of the largest colonies extensively. He felt much like an opera conductor amidst a one-of-a-kind concert of plaintive cries from thousands of hungry chicks' throats, framed by a "truly breathtaking backdrop of mountains and glaciers."

Poliza felt equally fortunate to visit a breeding colony of albatrosses and take a peek at the nesting areas of the **black-browed albatross** (*Thalassarche melanophrys*). With a wingspan of seven feet, this species is actually one of the smaller albatrosses, but its aerial prowess is nothing short of gigantic. Without a single flap of their wings, these birds glide above the waves looking for fish and squid, covering up to 600 miles a day. Due to these lengthy food-gathering expeditions and their extremely long incubation and chick-raising periods, albatrosses also lay just one egg and can often breed successfully only two or three times a year. "None of this would really be a problem for the species if it weren't for longline fishing," Poliza says with concern. Industrial fishing in the Southern Ocean has become the number one cause of death for the albatross. The United Nations conservation organization, IUCN, has classified all albatross species as "threatened"—a sad record among the world's 146 known families of birds.

And what moved Poliza himself the most during his travels to the world's polar regions? "The fragility!" he blurts out. "The ingenious, even phenomenal, ability of animals to adapt to conditions that seem so inhospitable at these extreme corners of the earth. The variety of life, this veritable explosion of life, at temperatures we cannot imagine in our coldest dreams. The wonderfully functioning ecosystems where millions of animals interact with the seasons and natural conditions." "The subtlety of coop-

eration" deeply impressed him—and made him so painfully aware of the environment's fragility and vulnerability. And all of this continues to drive Michael Poliza, the wandering photographer, to point his lens at both the

Vita

Encouraged by the enormous success of his first two photography books *Africa* and *Eyes over Africa*, Michael Poliza, the self-made man and pioneer of a new style of nature and wildlife photography, just started to officially consider himself a professional photographer. Winner of the USA's prestigious International Photography Award and the 2008 Deutscher Fotobuchpreis, Poliza, a late bloomer behind the lens, seems to have found his true calling—if only because this is clearly the medium in which he can express himself, how he sees the world, and what moves his heart in the best and most beautiful way.

Self-expression was also the focus of a young Poliza's very first career. After a lucky break that resulted in a film role at the tender age of twelve, Michael, born and raised in a middle-class family in Hamburg, Germany, became an overnight teenage sensation. He appeared in over seventy feature films, shows and TV series. His last role was in the miniseries based on the Walter Kempowski novel *Tadellöser & Wolff* in 1975. Not keen on pursuing his acting career, Poliza then went to the United States as an exchange student, where he discovered his new passion for the emerging PC industry and took his first classes in photography and black-and-white lab work.

He returned to Hamburg and began studying computer science in college, which prompted his equally meteoric rise to a 22-year-old boy-genius CEO of a computer start-up with 130 employees and a 70-hour workweek. Despite the considerable success his company enjoyed, at the age of 27, Michael Poliza decided to make the first "big cut"—a radical departure from his earlier life. He found that higher sales did not translate into greater happiness, and the big question of what would truly fulfill him loomed even larger in light of his company's success.

After a brief stint in the multiplex movie theater industry as an investor and cofounder of the CinemaxX chain, Poliza, always eager to travel and learn new things, discovered that nature and wilderness were the ideal environments for him—places where his racing, multitasking mind could find peace, and Poliza could center himself and concentrate. Finding an answer to the question, "What does my heart really want?" became a new priority for the now 30-year-old Poliza, and his discovery of the beauty of the flora and fauna, of unspoiled nature, became his new source of "genuine, heartfelt happiness."

After several diving expeditions and months-long adventure trips to Australia, Papua New Guinea and other exotic locales, at the turn of the millennium, Poliza promptly came up with the idea of a "Starship Millennium Voyage," won *Stern* magazine as a major media partner, and signed several sponsors to finance the ambitious project. His ship's three-year voyage around the world, journeying to the most remote corners of the planet—with daily online updates and web reports—became a global snapshot of the Earth whose protection and preservation he subsequently declared to be his life's work. "Raising awareness" became Poliza's new ambition, and the book covering the "Starship" voyage became a best-selling smash. However, in 2001, Michael Poliza himself reflected once more on where he was headed to ensure he did not succumb to the omnipresent "more, better, faster" mentality.

On his way to Madagascar, Poliza fell head over heels in love with the Cape of Good Hope and made Cape Town his new home and base camp. His friendship with one of the founders of Wilderness Safaris in Africa was the third great twist of fate in his life: he found his new passion on the black continent, in the bush and observing animals in the wild, and stayed at all 55 award-winning lodges and safari camps in Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, and South Africa.

famous and the unseen treasures of Mother Earth. It pushes him to travel on and decipher nature's secrets, to document one continent after the other in Poliza-style. Cause for expectations, that's for sure.

His private photos and notes on his bush trips "started out with no plan at all, just something I sincerely enjoyed as I went along," but they quickly found the right Africa-friendly publisher, and the "new kid on the block" published his first voluminous work of photography with teNeues in 2006. *Africa* was a huge success. Poliza impressed both the media and the public with his unique observations of the animal world, his unusual perspectives on nature, and above all, his signature eye for graphic structure and image composition—creating a whole new dimension of nature photography in the process.

"Poliza has taken wildlife and landscape photography to a new level," the *Cape Times* raved in September 2006. And the *New York Times* wrote: "It is unlikely to change the way you think about Africa. But it might change the way you think about photography." In Great Britain, the *Daily Express* commented: "If ever a book could take your breath away, this is the one." And on *Good Morning America* on ABC-TV, the verdict was: "*Africa* was voted one of 'The Best Coffee Table Books of 2006.'"

Shortly thereafter, Michael and his friend, Stefan Breuer, came up with the idea to fly from Hamburg to Cape Town in a helicopter to get an exclusive bird's-eye view of both continents; the result was Poliza's next oversize photo book, *Eyes Over Africa*. And once again, his work spawned a wave of acclaim and delight. "A monument you can page through!" pronounced the *Welt am Sonntag*. "Unique images of a continent the world has yet to see." "Spectacular!" gushed *Stern* magazine; in December 2007, it published the magnificent bird's-eye photos on a total of 35 pages—the most extensive *Stern* photo essay in two decades.

While the world basked in the beauty of his books, Poliza had long since moved on to sit with the Adélie penguins of Antarctica, where he marveled at the sun's ability to float for hours on the horizon, delaying its setting in the most dramatic and glorious fashion imaginable. And as you read these lines, Michael Poliza is most likely hiking with the Aborigines of Australia around their holy mountain of Uluru, the legendary Ayers Rock, and thinking about the new perspectives he can bring to us from one of yet another continent's greatest monuments.

—Uta Gruenberger

Uta Gruenberger lives in Vienna and Anif, where she recently developed an art magazine all about the Salzburg Festival called *salon*. As a freelance writer, she has written for magazines including *Stern*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Park Avenue*, *SZ*, and *Qvest*. She was the camera operator and director on three documentary films. She is currently preparing a relaunch of the cult magazine *The Manipulator*.