

AN AESTHETICS OF DIS/PLACEMENT: STEVE SABELLA'S 38 DAYS OF RE-COLLECTION¹

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Steve Sabella's *38 Days of Re-Collection* (2014) suggestively conveys the thrust of the idea of displacement. As metonym, "displacement" signifies the actual movement from place to place, and as metaphor it refers to comparable acts of movement from one place to another. Most importantly, the concept of "dis/placement" can be understood to evoke out-of-placeness, especially when, in absentia, the presence of a place is mediated through memory, narration, and representation.

The basic material of Sabella's re-collections—B&W photo emulsion spread on swashes of color paint scraped from the walls of houses in Jerusalem's Old City—is composed of fragments gathered from several sources and now "housed" within spaces of art collection. The stand-alone materiality of each piece, literally extracted from a wall, conveys a layered history through palpable layers of paint. The scraped paint, with its several strata of color, forms a literal palimpsest, testifying as it were to the various hands that had painted each one. The turquoise in particular evokes the greenish shades of the wall paint color commonly preferred by indigenous communities of the region (whether Muslims, Christians, or Jews) to protect against evil spirits. Scraping thus becomes both an act of excavation of the buried substrata of forgotten lives, as well as a means to visualize lives once again intermingled.

At the same time, the colors (the turquoise, the brown and the beige), in conjunction with the jagged shape of the fragment, generate a strong impression of a map. As objects of visual representation, maps are premised on some correspondence to the "real," the physical land and sea and so forth. Yet the shape of the "map," in this instance, portrays a country nowhere to be found.

Here the map becomes a signifier without a referent, a simulacrum of simulacra, a token of power-

lessness and the arbitrary nature of maps. In a kind of premonition about the overpowering force of maps, the scraped fragment evokes both roots and routes.

The partially discernible colors of the fragment re-present the adorned walls that wrapped generations of the living in a modicum of continuing at-

home-ness. Sabella's artwork in this sense inhabits at once the present (the actual paint-piece) and the past (the inter-generational layers of paint). Similarly, the superimposition of the image of the kitchen—the window and hanging pots and pans and even a decorative cat figure—on the scraped paint suggests quotidian domesticity. The kitchen becomes the privileged site of food preparation both as digestive necessity and culinary tradition, while also redolent of sensuous delights and communal rituals. But in contrast to the materiality of the scraped paint, the black-and-white kitchen has the immateriality of a superimposed image, thus forming a simultaneous presence-absence that inscribes a quotidian life haunted by a ghostly past.

The black-and-white kitchen image in this sense evokes all that was left behind in the lives of those displaced, wandering across land and sea. The kitchen superimposed on the "map" also suggestively turns routes into a form of rootedness, as the dishes are passed on and forge home-ness even in-transit. At the same time, the paint fragment and the black-and-white kitchen together register a vision of scattered lives, while underscoring a possible state of exile even when literally at home. The artwork suggests a displacement of a place and particularly of Jerusalem as "a city exiled," in Sabella's words, "from itself." The black-and-white image, furthermore, is reminiscent of archival footage—of the photos and films associated with Jerusalem dating back to the 19th century. And this archive, which today is circulating in digital space, has become a visual testimony to a Palestinian existence prior to the "settling in" of a new order. The fragment-object is a remainder but also a reminder of the kitchen's nourishing role, that of preserving and transmitting sentient life.

By literally interweaving two spaces—paint extracted from one house and the image of the kitchen of another—Sabella's artwork itself condenses and displaces, precisely the processes that psychoanalytic theorists find typical of the "dream-work."

In this sense, the artwork captures the desire for at-homeness for those experiencing alienation, fragmentation and estrangement.

The same paint-fragment that facilitates the coming-into-existence of the (memory) of the kitchen is now transposed into a hospitable space of creativity. "Re-collected" memories come to form aesthetic objects, now resignified as "art" in their new home. Old paint from walls is recycled to generate new forms of beauty, expressive of a desire to escape a claustrophobic situation. The out-of-place fragment now becomes an aide-mémoire for Jerusalem, an object that has literally crossed from the Middle East into Europe, and in this sense, it is reminiscent both of the displaced artist himself and of diasporized communities in general. Physically dislocated from Jerusalem, shorn of its functional beauty, the fragmented paint/ kitchen now reflexively bears witness to exile, carrying unspoken tales of border-crossing.

Today, the word "displacement" conjures up news of the obliteration of cities, towns and villages, as refugee camps make old refugees new refugees all over again. Camps in the Middle East, camps in Europe; past dislocations resonate with the present, simultaneously foreshadowing and reflecting back. Displacements become each other's ghosts. The memory of life projected on the wall is now superimposed on the ghost of the home, the kitchen, the quotidian that is no longer. The series interweaves various lives, as each paint-fragment is taken from a different place, and as each black-and-white image represents another fragment of a home—tiles, floors, windows, curtains, etc. In this sense, the various fragments fused together enact an imaginary threshold encounter of the living and the dead, of those who remain and those who have departed, thus blurring the boundaries between times and places. Off-balance, the photographed artwork, furthermore, provokes a sense of disorientation—or, perhaps, reorientation—in the

viewer/ reader. In its metaphorical dimensions, "displacement" is, after all, a way of seeing, reading, listening and re-membling.

In the context of Sabella's work, "displacement" is associated most obviously with the Palestinians whose lives are pieced together in a series of fragments. But the word "displacement" also evokes other historical dislocations that led to the dispossession of Palestinians, those in the wake both of European anti-Semitism and of colonial lines-in-the-sand. And as Palestinian lives were shattered and dispersed in the wake of the partition and the establishment of Israel, the lives of Arab-Jews were ruptured, leading to their dislocations, including to houses once inhabited by Palestinians, whether in Jerusalem, Jaffa, or Haifa. Nationalist revolutions in the Middle East, meanwhile, engendered their own demographic dislocations both within and outside regions while also "displacing" previous senses of belonging.

The series also reverberates with some other connotations of the word "displacement." An argument in support of displaced Palestinians, for example, is answered with displacement of discourse, a decoy, with a bad-faith riposte about displaced Arab Jews. In a different instance, among some on the Arab side, meanwhile, the condition of the Arab Jews is treated with a kind of defensive skepticism. But the fragments of the houses in Sabella's artworks testify to a space of old Jerusalem in which Palestinian Muslims and Christians, as well as Palestinian Jews, used to co-inhabit. In contrast to the nationalist Israeli reading that makes an exclusivist Jewish claim for the Old City, Sabella's re-collection project allows the viewer to recollect a different memory of a convivial past. The fragmented house décor, now pieced together side-by-side, testifies to a regional aesthetic that had been shared by neighbors of different religions.

The notions of "the diasporic" and "displacement," in sum, offer a prism through which nation-states can be viewed in terms of their own expulsions, repressions and denegations. Within colonized or dominated spaces, those who remain are "out of place." The material landscape itself also undergoes wounding displacements—of destroyed houses, uprooted trees, sliced pieces of land. And the environment is displaced through language, exiled through renaming.

¹ This essay is based on the introduction to the forthcoming book by Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements. Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (London: Pluto Press, 2017)

The concept of “displacement,” in its many meanings, suggests a method of reading as a way of “unsettling” the settled political landscape.

“Dis/placement” can also, paradoxically, become a trope for multiple belongings—a posture that accepts the fact of departure, and the holding-on to the memory of the evacuated place, but also the reality of disjointed emotional attachments to various places. Varied forms of out-of-placeness, furthermore, can become a new kind of place, opening up the possibility of multi-perspectival awareness, and, hopefully, of compassionate inter-community identifications.

A rich intersectional past of Jerusalem, with its shared aesthetic of house and home by neighbors belonging to various religious and ethnic communities, is conjured up through Sabella’s fragments. Within a multi-chronotopic perspective, the series takes the viewer on an imaginary return to a disappeared time and place. But by actively joining fragments from different houses, the artwork remixes the old fragments into new neighboring aesthetic units. From the remains, new possibilities are composed. Perhaps only through such acts of vivid recollection of places/times, of “plurilog,” can a reimagined conviviality be pieced together anew.



Steve Sabella. 38 Days of Re-Collection. 2014. 13.2 x 6.1 cm. Unique. (Detail)