

Free-Falling Into the Future: In Conversation with Steve Sabella

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The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.

– Jacques Rancière¹

Photography is a strange and powerful beast. Shortly after the artist Louis Daguerre invented the first-known method of ‘fixing’ an image, writer Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed daguerreotypes as mirrors with a memory, ‘faithful witnesses’ of reality.² Fast-forward to nearly two centuries later: the flawed assumption that a photograph can be synonymous with reality has only evolved a short distance. The photograph not only serves as an apparatus of representation today,³ it has been a corroborator in sculpting historical record.

In recent decades, counter narratives in the humanities have helped shift the way we look at historical events. The widespread use of photography in digital crowdsourcing, considering the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ as an example, has expanded debates about the authority of visual representation. Yet, the photograph remains an important instrument in opaque systems of power, which helps structure how we perceive the world around us and our roles within it. John Tagg describes this well: ‘What lies “behind” the paper or “behind” the image is not reality – the referent – but reference: a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action.’⁴

For Steve Sabella, a Palestinian artist who has spent more than half of his life growing up in occupied Jerusalem, his national identity has been tethered to particular images that are circulated the world over. Mainstream media regularly depicts Palestinians as a traumatized or violent population, living in exile or under occupation, at odds with Israelis in the pursuit of land. There have been many efforts to ‘rescue’ this image of Palestinian identity, yet perhaps the most difficult perception to re-write is an internal one—what Sabella refers to as a ‘colonization of the imagination’.⁵ ‘Once we are locked inside the images of ourselves, these images take on a life of their own. ... [They] often outlast

us and can replace us as the “remembered” reality.’⁶ Liberation from the burdens of these ‘mental images’⁷ necessitates a manipulation of the imagination.

Sabella has freed himself from the psychological entrapment of exiled displacement. He describes this achievement as akin to, ‘dancing in the air, the core ignited ... It’s a spark. But to do that, I had to break my bones, to become more malleable to change.’⁸ A visualization of this process is first apparent in his series *In Exile* (2008), where the artist cathartically destroyed and assembled symbols of entry and exit. While it is not necessarily a sequential narration towards the attainment of mental freedom, *Euphoria* (2010) may propose an autobiographical remapping of the artist’s relationship to his homeland. Its repetitive, fragmented structures can symbolize a detachment from associative images of border and exile. *Beyond Euphoria* (2011) is likewise a series of splintered assemblages, its three-dimensional source material flattened, distorted, and restructured in two dimensions. All of these intended ‘dissolutions of forms’⁹ challenge photographic veracity, their abstract compositions far removed from any perceived mirror of memory.

Unlike the aforementioned fractured constellations, *Independence* is viscerally and deceptively whole. It is a new visual experience, wherein the only borders lie on the images’ edges themselves, and the outlines of the figures contained within them appear intact. The two females – one appearing young, the other older – could be floating or flying. Some of the images in the series are monological, though most portray the characters engaging in an intimate gestural dance. On closer inspection, fragmentation emerges. What could possibly be parts of bone or metal appear on or beneath the surface of their diaphanous skin. Lacking any facial detail, they are stripped of characteristics that could convey expressions, left with the sole sense of touch. Amidst a dark void, they appear in blurred obscurity, like anonymous forms suspended *in extremis*.

As theorist Roland Barthes implied, every photograph is of a dead moment.¹⁰ Whether we philosophically perceive a photograph to be of an experience that is

'real' or 'imagined', it is a tangible reproduction, which is by nature a cunning distortion. A photograph is a ghost of the image that once was, which is a ghost of the real. Even in the absence of the information before it, the camera still registers light on the surface substrate, effectively 'inventing' information, subjectively characterizing matter. If a photograph has the ability to define how reality is represented in the form of an image,¹¹ *Independence* can be read as a critique of the slippages between life and what is constructed in the mind.

Throughout histories of images, the human form has been exploited in search of its character, soul, and spirit. In its early days, photography greatly aided the European-led practice of physiognomy, the pseudoscientific measurement of internal character and personality by observing outward appearance, particularly in studying facial features. While we have long since moved beyond this essentialist system of representation and its associative fields of phrenology and pathognomy, it is an example of how visual symbolism has been co-opted as a method of social control.

Moving inside the body's cavern, the development of x-rays in the late nineteenth century transitioned our perception of what lies beneath the surface of the skin. For several decades, foetal imaging has, for many parents, been the first memory of their child's existence. These scans of life before birth are metamorphic, impassioned with parental uncertainty and anticipation. They are digital *mineral* memories, to use Umberto Eco's term, which precede their *organic* memories made of flesh and blood.¹² For most of photography, however, the skeletal substrate, veins, nerves, and organs are only usually implied. Portrait photographer Richard Avedon describes his unrequited desire to delve deeply into his subjects' being: 'You can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter ... The surface is all you've got.'¹³ Such are the limits of the image; thoughts and emotions cannot be photographed, just insinuated.

The aesthetics of Sabella's *Independence* gesture towards a new visual code that has emerged in the last few decades in art photography. Digital photography, camera phones, and social media have introduced what some would describe as a 'low-brow' design into the genre, characterized by traits such as pixilation, variations in exposure, dramatic colour casts, and flash-induced blown-out highlights. Defined by artist and critic Hito Steyerl as a practice that has dissolved the pre-existing boundary between non-art and art,¹⁴

the pervasiveness of these popularized aesthetics has been met with polarized reception. For some, there still exists a hierarchy of images, where sharpness and resolution are given primacy. Photographic artist and writer David Bate suggests this may be due to anxiety and uncertainty about the digital processes behind so many images that circulate globally.¹⁵ Whether or not the images in *Independence* are made by digital or analogue means is a debate of little importance. Rather, it is the artist's philosophy lying beneath the series' abstracted aesthetic that is up for interpretation—a questioning of photography's status quo.

Sabella describes his work as illusions that are 'only meant to act as imagined bridges, map-like structures that connect us to our past with an eye to the future.'¹⁶ Framing this as a rebirth of visual thought, ruptures in the recorded histories of photography come to mind, specifically Surrealism's evolutionary desire to subvert systems of reason towards the achievement of new states of being. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Surrealists jettisoned the fashionable 'straight' style of photographing reality, often creating otherworldly compositions born from explorations of the subjective and unconscious. Within the movement, the woman was an obsessional subject and important metaphor. Critic Rosalind Krauss describes the relationship between the Surrealist photograph and female form as likewise constructed 'figures for each other's condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct ...'¹⁷ Sabella is no doubt duly aware of these theoretical symbols.

If we consider the Surrealists' philosophy of the image as a point of departure into the imagination, Sabella possesses a similar avant-garde desire. This is perhaps one of intended collaboration between the artist and spectator. *Independence* reminds us that the experience of looking is subjective, informed by our own visual libraries, and there exists no common key to unlock its visual language. The series' labyrinthine title – one of the artist's few indexical cues – symbolically bookends the spectrum of interpretations that lie waiting for us.

There are multiple possibilities for the presentation and curation of *Independence*, including two-dimensional images on view at Meem Gallery and projected three-dimensional installations.¹⁸ They are part of what could be considered transmedial experiences that Sabella is creating—varying serial and contextual arrangements of his work that explore how images can be read, interpreted, re-read, and re-interpreted.

Arguably, Sabella is not a photographic artist expanding into other genres such as installation, but instead a visual investigator who is decoding visual syntax, exploring how to 'unfix' images so as to set us free from the power they hold in our lives.¹⁹

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¹ Jacques Rancière, 'The Intolerable Image,' in *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2010), 103.

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,' *The Atlantic*, June 1859, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

³ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

⁴ John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 100.

⁵ Steve Sabella, 'Colonization of the Imagination,' *Contemporary Practices* 10 (2012): 28–33.

⁶ Steve Sabella, 'Hostage,' in *Steven Shore: From Galilee to the Negev* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 105.

⁷ Sabella, 'Colonization of the Imagination.'

⁸ Steve Sabella, 'Dare to Question My Identity or Where I Come From' (TEDx Marrakesh 2012, 19 October 2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26430T-Kyk0>.

⁹ Steve Sabella in Dorothea Schoene, 'Stages of Transition. Visualizing Exile in the Work of Steve Sabella,' *Afterimage* 39, no. 6 (2012): 11–14.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000).

¹¹ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 6.

¹² Umberto Eco, 'Vegetal and Mineral Memory: The Future of Books' (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 1 November 2003), http://www.bibalex.org/attachments/english/Vegetal_and_Mineral_Memory.pdf. See also Anna Reading and Richard West, 'Memory and the Cloud,' *Source* 78 (Spring 2014): 18–19.

¹³ Richard Avedon, 'Borrowed Dogs,' in *Performance and Reality: Essays from Grand Street*, ed. Ben Sonnenberg (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 17.

¹⁴ Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' *E-Flux* 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

¹⁵ David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 156.

¹⁶ Evrim Altug in conversation with Steve Sabella, 'Palestinian Tragedy Through the Eyes of the Artist,' *Cumhuriyet*, 27 July 2014, <http://www.stevesabella.com/newspaper-reviews.html>.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' in *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (Washington D.C. and New York: The Corcoran Gallery of Art and Abbeville Press, 1985), 95.

¹⁸ An installation of *Independence* is on view in a retrospective exhibition of Sabella's work at the International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri in Verona, 8 October–16 November 2014.

¹⁹ Sabella, 'Hostage.'