

FROM THE PROLEGOMENON OF STEVE SABELLA. PHOTOGRAPHY 1997 – 2014

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If we understand irony as a riposte or a horror on the part of a counterpart, a negation embracing the existing and employing the affirmation of the existing, then the irony in the appearance of the image results in, as Søren Kierkegaard puts it, the “appearance not being the essence but the opposite of the essence.”¹ Kierkegaard’s understanding of irony is apt for describing Steve Sabella’s singular use of the palimpsest. The expression of irony, as the “infinite absolute negativity” (and any addition must by its essence be understood as a negativity), is engaged in negation and thus “[irony] destroys the given reality by means of that very given reality.”² The 2014 work *38 Days of Re-Collection*, begun in 2009, two years after Sabella’s physical exile, is the result of a process of multiple imprints. The work adheres to a strict principle; it is subject to a compulsion to bring things together that construct history in its very breaches, of life, of suffering, of distortions, and hopes. It is not about the reconstruction of history but about the act of photographing as disaster, following Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* and its central statement: “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.”³ In 2009, Sabella rented a house in Ein Karim in Jerusalem, which a Palestinian family had abandoned, to secure themselves, when they heard about the Deir Yassin massacre in April 1948. He stayed in it for thirty-eight days, taking photographs of objects—utensils, walls, pictures—and visually frisking the history of the place. Then, in his parental home and in other houses in the Old City of Jerusalem, he removed pieces of walls, little bits of painted plaster, or just of stained chalk. The color photographs were copied onto black-and-white

film; the pieces of fresco, flayed bits of wall, were covered in an emulsion. The negatives from the house he lived in were then projected and fixed on that emulsion. Because of the different colors of the carrier, the black-and-white images take on a mysterious, dreamlike presence that really belongs to no place and no time.

They look ghostly; are the absence of presence and the presence of absence, and it is hard to decide which place or time they belong to.

The carrier, the fresco, is no thinner than photographic paper, yet much more fragile, like a dried piece of parchment, and can be regarded as something that can disintegrate just by being touched.

The national disaster, the *Nakba*, destroyed the homeland of the Palestinians in May 1948. More than seven hundred thousand Palestinians were forced to leave their houses and not permitted to return.⁴ As we are all aware, this dislocation had catastrophic consequences for the people of Palestine, who over the subsequent decades would be dispersed, ghettoized, imprisoned, or exiled. The wars, the settlement policy, and the intifadas have caused unbearable sacrifices. In one of his poems, Mahmoud Darwish describes the visit made by Edward Said to a place near the house in Jerusalem in which he was born:

...

I stood like a beggar at the doorstep.

Do I ask permission, from strangers who sleep in my own bed, to visit myself for five minutes? Do I bow respectfully to those who reside in my childhood dream?

...

...Would they

say to me: There’s no place for two dreams in one bed?⁵

1 Kierkegaard, “Über den Begriff der Ironie: Mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Sokrates,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, part 31, transl. Hirsch and Hirsch (Regensburg: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1961), p. 251.

2 Ibid., p. 267.

3 Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, transl. Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

4 See also Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

5 Darwish, “Counterpoint: For Edward Said,” in *If I Were Another*, transl. Joudah (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), p. 189.

The *38 Days of Re-Collection* bring about transferences. Sabella’s own house has become an image superimposed by images of an occupied house. The retrieved objects are exhibited in display cases, like archaeological items, historical excavations, finds belonging to two eras, one placed upon the other, each with its own duration.

These are splinters of time, splinters of existence, and in their fragile materiality they carry within them proximity and distance, at one and the same time.

It is as if, contrary to all physical laws, moments in time and space had found themselves again, and now a moment carries half of a century into our time as a result of the mere touch of light, just as the moment, the instant, donates its own present to the past again. Sabella collected the moments, gathered them up like Baudelaire’s rag-and-bone man gathered together the image of history into a constellation of the present from fragments, residues, what had been abandoned and picked up. The original pieces of wall, the frescoes, determined the place; they were the place from which they were removed to be infused with another time. The palimpsest-like amalgamation of the colorful frescoes and the black-and-white photographs developed on them convey the impression of a present simultaneously appearing and disappearing. It is as if the light were spread carefully over the fragile plane with a brush, as if to preserve the latency of the image in all its potential and also to see it as an image. “The true image of the past flits by,” writes Benjamin on the concept of history, and, “The past can be seized only as an image, which flashes up at the instant it can be recognized and is never seen again.”⁶

The *38 Days of Re-Collection* bring about an updating of history that still awaits its correspondence here,

in thirty-eight vedute, fragmented and ruined accumulations of time. This work of art turns the bitterness of exile into the sensuality of the search. In these superimpositions, where images, periods of time, and material combine, a work of mourning is carried out that at the same time has an aesthetic and epistemological element. “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present or what is present its light on what is past, rather the image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.”⁷ Benjamin is referring not to the continuous time between past and present, but to the “erratic” dialectical time-jumping from “what has been to what is now.” What the medium of photography does is bring about this constellation of encounter and riposte, operating against time, as it were, and against the agenda of photography.

The artistic work of Steve Sabella undertakes its process of translation not so as to produce similarities or a mimesis of approximation, but to reflect on the inherent conditions of pictoriality (*Bildhaftigkeit*) and its historical sediments—truly it is an imagology of dissemination.

6 Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19, ed. Raulet (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), p. 95; *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255.

7 Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk,” Part 1, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), pp. 576–77; *Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project*, transl. Rodger Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000), esp. pp. 85–159.



Steve Sabella. 38 Days of Re-Collection. 2014. B&W white film negative (generated from a digital image) printed with B&W photo emulsion spread on color paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's Old City house walls. 31.5 x 45 cm. Unique.



Steve Sabella. 38 Days of Re-Collection. 2014. 15.5 x 20 cm. Unique.



Steve Sabella. 38 Days of Re-Collection. 2014. 21.5 x 27.5 cm. Unique.







Steve Sabella. 38 Days of Re-Collection. 2014. 47 x 27 cm. Unique.