

## Decolonizing the Imagination: Steve Sabella's *Parachute Paradox*

Dr. Lily Kelting

Exile is not only a form of division, but of multiplication. Edward Said, in his "Reflections on Exile," expresses this multiplicity in aesthetic terms: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home. Exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal." Not just contrapuntal, but *collaged*: Said uses a musical metaphor, but for artist Steve Sabella, this is a visual reality. In his abstract, photographic collages, Sabella gives visual form to this "awareness of simultaneous dimensions." In a 2008 series, *In Exile*, for example, Sabella collages images of thin, European windows—fragmented and superimposed, these windows are not a transparent frame through which to view an outside but a flat surface, dense, rhythmic, decentered, pulsating and opaque.

These basic precepts which orient Sabella's collage practice—fragmentation, repetition, no center, elimination of visual clutter—are the same which structure his first book-length writing project, *The Parachute Paradox* (2016). A memoir might be the last thing one expects from an artist who has so adamantly expressed his frustration with labels. Literally—Sabella has shown recent works without identifying information or explanatory texts. More figuratively, Sabella steers away from questions of identity in interviews and written works. The Israeli-Palestinian context make even introductory questions like "Where are you from?" charged—Sabella often responds that he is a citizen of planet Earth or a temporary visitor from outer space. *Parachute Paradox* describes the toll taken by a lifetime of questioning from the state and individuals alike—

And if it hadn't happened already, then came the question I hated most,

But why is your name Steve? That's not a typical Palestinian name.

But this particular memoir doesn't attempt to narrate Sabella's life from birth to the present, nor to provide explanations for his work based on a series of biographical causes. If the memoir is a collage, the material, then, is exile. Having lived through two Intifadas and the settlement of Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem's Old City, Sabella writes eloquently on the condition of living in exile in the city of his birth. Living abroad in Europe, Sabella found himself doubly exiled. But the central exile that the *Parachute Paradox* addresses is mental exile—alienation and depression that haunts Sabella through the end of the book. In tracing the interweaving of these mental and physical journeys from alienation to wholeness, Sabella uses, as he must, the tools of the exiled: polyphony and collage. Thus the de-centered and non-linear narrative creates a vivid and detailed document of Sabella's life and work. That chopping up and reassembling of the text provides a more distinct portrait of Sabella's process than a straight-forward telling of his life story is a paradox, yes, but a fitting one.

All this may make the book sound less approachable than it is. These jump-cut fragments make the *Parachute Paradox* a fleet read. Each section begins with a story about Sabella's relationship with his long-time partner, Francesca. Some of these episodes are quite charming—like Sabella's strategy to woo his partner with thirty expressions of love on her thirtieth birthday, or ten carefully orchestrated goodbye gestures when they split briefly. Though towards the end of the text, inclusions of Sabella's other romantic entanglements become a bit gratuitous, it's important that the *Parachute Paradox* is as much a love story as it is a political testimony. Foregrounding his personal relationships gently pushes back against the burden of representation—that as “a Palestinian” (as though that were not already a heterogeneous category) Sabella must speak to certain political experiences and ideologies. Of course memories of lemon trees and love notes and lost wedding bands are as important to the texture of a person's life as any violence. The first chapter concludes, “Francesca became my Jerusalem”—as Sabella makes peace with leaving or rather, as he says, being left by Jerusalem—he draws a new conclusion, “for me, home has always been where Francesca is.”

There are other juxtapositions as well—stories about casual racism and airport ID checks that demonstrate the rigidity of identity in an Israeli-Palestinian context are separated by a small symbol like a neuron or root structure from sections describing Sabella's attempts to find an aesthetic language to understand these identities on his own terms. His kidnapping, for example, as part of his work as a photographer for the U.N. and certainly the most sensational episode, is given no more weight within the *Parachute Paradox* than his misunderstandings while interviewing former Israeli-army soldiers willing to strip to their underwear in London for a work called *Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian*, commissioned for the Mathaf contemporary art museum in Doha, Qatar. Sandwiched amid these is a letter of apology from his kidnapper, printed as a stand-alone spread in English and Arabic. Here it's also worth noting that the book is a handsome physical object, with a fold-over cover which opens to expose sewn signatures along the side.

Like a good collage, there is not only juxtaposition but repetition. The following episode is excerpted as the preface—the reader comes across the full segment later, with the context that the recently-kidnapped Sabella has narrowly made his flight after a series of interrogations and remembers another flight. The episode showcases Sabella's relentless drive for freedom and his vocal awareness of the costs of occupation and exile.

Up in the air, I traveled to the time I went skydiving in Haifa. On the tarmac, the plane looked like it hadn't flown since the 1967 war. After takeoff, the engine roared as if it could fail any second, shaking wildly as it reached the sky. When the time came, I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned out the open door against the strong wind. Without much thought, I did it. I let go. I was flying in the air. I felt light, less burdened by what was happening below. I felt identity-less, free from all the labels and classifications, free from all the racism and discrimination, free from the Israeli occupation I was born into.

But I didn't open the parachute. I was in a tandem jump, attached to an Israeli. Over the years, I've come to see this situation in the air as a metaphor for what it means to be a Palestinian living under Israeli occupation. Life under occupation is like the reality of a Palestinian attached to an Israeli in a tandem jump. There is an Israeli on the back of every Palestinian, controlling all aspects of life—the Israeli is always in control. This impossible reality places the Palestinian under constant threat, in a never-ending hostage situation.

At the end of the book, Sabella's daughter Cecile offers wisdom which is both childlike in its naiveté and central to the intervention of the memoir: "Imagine if it was the other way around, that dreams were reality and reality was a dream." Sabella, too, is interested in the relationship between dreams and reality, the imagination and the image. In an interview for NPR Berlin, Sabella described the book in five words: "the decolonization of the imagination." Taking dreaming seriously might seem foolish, ungrounded. But of course to be in exile is to be ungrounded. A view of the whole—a holistic view of even one's self—comes not from the "objective" vantage of a bird's eye view, but rather from the additive multiplicity of a vantage that is fragmented, prismatic. Such is the jagged journey of healing that the *Parachute Paradox* traces.

Sabella has written elsewhere about the importance of liberating images back to those who use them—"The Egyptians in Tahrir Square were fighting for the liberation of their image. That was the real triumph. They managed to defy the system and force the world to look at them with different eyes." In the *Parachute Paradox*, Sabella reclaims not only his own image but his own images as an artist—contextualizing them within his own life experiences and personal philosophy rather than external, even interpellated, identity categories. Because it defies questions such as "where are you from?" and "what is your name?", the memoir can, at times, seem to float—as Sabella's daughter Cecile floats in the Adriatic in the final scene of the book. Sabella is, like his daughter, obsessed with the thin membrane between dreams and reality, as taut and immaterial as the surface of a calm sea. Perhaps, he suggests, once the imagination is finally free, there is no difference between the two at all.