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Poetics of Resistance: object, word and image in the literatures and visual arts of Iraq and Palestine

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2015

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Abstract

The relationships between ‘states’ are no longer based on notions of national sovereignty, but rather on interconnected networks of continuous and porous circulations. The visual arts and literatures of the new globalising world must now be understood in light of this new reality. They breach by now out-dated models informing our understandings of word, image and object, and transgress the boundaries of established literary and artistic traditions. The visual artists and writers studied are today creatively fashioning a new vision for their respective societies. Through positive engagement and active resistance, their practices and artistic products embody new relationships with the new global order of power and cultural politics. Resisting both the projected new global order and the old national priorities, their works represent new aesthetics that bring their works into the twenty-first century.

This thesis examines comparatively the literary writings and works of visual art from the two decades at the turn of the twenty-first century by carefully chosen Iraqis and Palestinians and locates their new aesthetics in their response and resistance to globalisation. It focuses, through their engagement with ‘attendant memory games’, on the intricate ways these writers and visual artists challenge various political and cultural power structures, old and new, without necessarily abandoning their commitments. Material objects, word and image serve as potent sites where new memories may be developed and legacies alternative norms formulated and circulated.

Despite the continuous displacement and relocation of traditional aesthetic and epistemological paradigms by these contemporary creative figures, ‘memory’ – a combination of collective and individual – is a site of rivalry between those who want to hold on to old power structures, and those seeking new ways of strengthening social solidarity through inclusion and pluralism.

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A note on translation and transliteration

I have used published translations of Arabic and Turkish texts, referring to the original texts when the published translation does not satisfy the need of specific points. The appendix provides the full Ibn Zaydun poem in Arabic with Sieglinde Lug's translation.

Arabic texts appearing in the main body of this thesis have been transliterated without diacritical marks. However, I have preserved the 'ayn and hamza in all cases as set out by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*.

Names of authors and books are translated and/or transliterated according to their English publication details (e.g. Khedairi rather than al-Khudayri), or according to *IJMES* where no translation is available, without diacritics. Where a name has a standard form in English or is included in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, these forms have been used. Authors and texts which are not my primary texts are neither transliterated nor translated, unless necessary.

3

FROM THE WRITTEN TO THE VISUAL: DEPOPULATING THE MYTHS OF PALESTINE IN STEVE SABELLA'S PHOTOGRAPHY

Palestinian Memories

Complicating memories and disrupting linear narratives based on literary and scriptural canonical texts, Darwish opposes the hegemonies of globalisation, the affirmation of the Israeli state, the notion of a unified and singular Palestinian nation. Peace for Darwish can not only begin when the present is read in terms of memories, whether embodied in literary, political or scriptural narratives. These memories, which contribute to dichotomous constructs of identity, must be questioned by creating new metaphors to communicate problems beyond the political. By employing such new metaphors, his poetry became a form of resistance against memories and found a new freedom to contemplate existential issues.

This change in approach to the cultural productions is not only seen in Palestinian writers. Visual artists began to take the a similar approach in their relation to Palestine. One such figure is Steve Sabella. Sabella works towards the 'complication' of redundant visual symbols circulating in the media of Palestine and Palestinians.

Sabella's photography exhibits a resistance both to new global order of communication that depends on the fast circulation of photographic images. He is critical of how these amount to what Bauman calls 'imagined totalities', the creation of new fixed memories of Palestine and Palestinians in the imagination of consumers

of media, reflecting old national priorities, which in turn project reductive and totalising visual models of what constitutes Palestinian and Israeli individuals.

Similar to Darwish's literary metaphors, Sabella's photography produces a new aesthetics that brings a twenty-first century understanding of how to communicate visually through depopulating images of 'imagined totalities' inherent in globalist and national stereotypes. Unlike Darwish however, Sabella was not canonised whilst in Palestine. His emergence on the cultural scene depended on his affiliation with Western institutions, especially given his Christian identity.

Although born to a large Christian Palestinian family he lived in a Muslim neighbourhood in the Old City of East Jerusalem. He studied art and photography in Jerusalem (1997 - 2000), New York (2007) and London (2008 - 2009). Hence Sabella's education started local and later became increasingly 'glocal'. As I will discuss later, Sabella's works demonstrate an ambiguous relationship with the international art market, insisting on creating artworks relevant to him, rather than commercially marketable.³⁰⁶

This resistance to the art market, with its own hegemonies to exert onto visual artists, as I will discuss below, demonstrates Sabella's deep engagement with the Palestinian cause. Through understanding the politics of the international art market (facilitated by his MA at Sotheby's), Sabella is able to play one political game, in order to access a wider cultural audience, especially given the fact that he was marginalised in Palestine (unlike Darwish who was celebrated there). He uses his

³⁰⁶ Much literature has been written on this issue. For more see Timothy Cone, 'Regulating the Art Market', *Arts Magazine*, 64.7 (1990), pp. 21-2; *Economic Engagements with Art*, ed. by Neil De Marchi and Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s* (London: Verso, 2001).

ability to manoeuvre in international art circles to questions the myth and memories empowering the national constructs of Israel and Palestine.

Entering the powerful authoritative world of galleries, dealers, auction houses, museums and collectors is one way to gain a wide audience. For Sabella, being aware of art market politics is necessary in order to increase audience participation in deconstructed myths of Palestine.

This critique as an adult began early, having grown up in an increasingly dissatisfied Palestinian society and only twelve years old when the First Intifada (1987 – 1993) erupted.³⁰⁷ Disillusioned with notions of Arab unity and aid, ‘the uprising demonstrated decades of humiliation and fierce repression of the native population by the Israeli colonial project’³⁰⁸, Sabella resented and rejected this attempt to create singular, ‘imagined totalities’:

He rebelled and, instead, fashioned for himself a fictional (or hyper-) identity, located in the liminal space between belonging and not belonging. Whilst this permitted him to move freely across the city with his camera, it ultimately engendered an unshakable feeling of alienation. To visually illustrate – and mitigate - this sense of disaffection, or ‘mental exile’, has been in the forefront of Sabella’s practice since his emergence as an artist in the mid-1990s.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ The First Intifada (1987 – 1993) marked the first time in which Palestinians took it upon themselves, without the call for assistance from the international community, to demand their rights. It was ‘violently countered’ by the Israeli authorities, killing over 1,000 Palestinians, and over 100 Israelis died. What was ironic about this Intifada, was as well as having a common ‘enemy’, the Israeli usurping authorities, there was tension amongst the Palestinian community to fish out collaborators with the Israeli state. Thus, the several communities of the blanket term Palestine were starting to be fragmented, with increasing importance placed on religious, political and national affiliations. Identity as defined by religion, national allegiance, and political and sectarian domination were to become evermore important in a chaotic fissuring society where the craze to track down ‘traitors’ of the cause reached unprecedented heights, causing Palestinians to spy and even kill each other.

³⁰⁸ Christa Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, ‘Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11’, <<http://www.theemptyquarter.com/newsletters/Beyond%20Euphoria-Christa%20Paula.pdf>> [Accessed 4 December 2014].

³⁰⁹ Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, ‘Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11’.

The exilic character of Sabella's oeuvre is therefore not simply based on his alienation from his lands of origin, nor on the lack of status it or he as its quasi-citizen has, but rather in finding himself in exile even amongst people who are supposedly of his own 'kind', of what Paul Ilie calls 'inner exile'³¹⁰. When in the presence of the majority Muslim Palestinian community, Sabella's sense of alienation increased, as he was always questioned how he could be 'Palestinian' with a name like Steve Sabella.³¹¹ As I will show below, even his art avoided using circulating visual signs.

Faced with the double pressures of identitarian politics, Sabella's visual vocabulary steers away from portraying experiences of 'Palestinians' in their identitarian garb, which necessitated the circulation of their image as solely victims of Israeli oppression. Like Darwish, Sabella, in addition to questioning what or where Palestine is, is also concerned with challenging prevalent and reductive media representations of Palestine and Palestinians. When I asked him why he doesn't photograph the violence of occupation, he replied, 'I will leave it to others'³¹².

This leads us to start analysing his photography in light of the different forms of resistance it exhibits against first, the Israeli occupation, founded on memories of scriptural promises to the Children of Israel by God; and second, the global art market which, like the global literary market, relies on 'myths and stereotypes' that drive forms of consumption premised on the 'urge to identify' (an urge essential to exoticism), which 'often comes at the expense of *knowledge* of cultures/cultural groups other than one's own'³¹³; third, the pre-defined and singular cultural

³¹⁰ Paul Ilie, *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

³¹¹ Steve Sabella, 'Dare to Question My Identity or Where I Come From', *YouTube* video recording, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26430T-Kyk0>> [accessed 10 May 2014].

³¹² Sabella, Private conversation, 19 May 2016.

³¹³ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*, p. 16.

constructs of Palestine and Palestinians; and lastly symbols of collective identities which proliferate in all the three mentioned above.

In order to battle against these forms of hegemony and traditions, Sabella locates the memories which these authorities are based on. In doing so, he depopulates his photographs of memories which perpetuate the violence by recirculating constructs of an ‘imagined totality’.

Visual images of biblical sites and the Israeli occupation

Before photography of the Middle East emerged, a long tradition of European material and visual arts depicting the ‘Holy Land’ was already in existence. For example, Crusader art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ‘was meant to identify and glorify the holy places and to serve the pilgrims who came there’³¹⁴. Even further back in time, Christian Rome attempted to incorporate images of Jerusalem in its material and visual cultures.³¹⁵ By the time photography had developed, it initially came to the Middle East with Western pilgrims needing to provide truthful, iconic images of the ‘Holy Land’ in order to confirm the Bible’s truth³¹⁶.

³¹⁴ Jaroslav Folda, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land: From the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre, 1187-1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 512. For more on art of the Crusades see Katja Boertjes, ‘The Reconquered Jerusalem Represented: Tradition and Renewal on Pilgrimage Ampullae from the Crusader Period’, pp. 169-189; and Hanneke van Asperen, ‘“As if they had physically visited the holy places”: Two Sixteenth-century Manuscripts Guide a Mental Journey through Jerusalem (Radboud University Library, Mss 205 and 233)’, pp. 190-214; both in *Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. by Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, Wouter Weijers (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³¹⁵ Sible de Blaauw, ‘Translations of the Sacred City Between Jerusalem and Rome’, in *Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. by Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, Wouter Weijers (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 136-165.

³¹⁶ Stephanie Stidham Rogers, ‘American Protestants and Palestine’, in *Inventing the Holy Land: American Protestant Pilgrimage to Palestine, 1865-1941* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 52. Issam Nassar studies the image of the Jerusalem city-scape in the early photography of Palestine. For more on this see Issam Nassar, *Photographing Jerusalem: The Image of the City in Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1997), pp. 25–30.

After the invention of the daguerrotype (1839), a rush of visitors came to document those same biblical sites for themselves. Thus the image of Palestine remained an imagined one, mediated through scriptural narratives and biblical memories. Depictions of lands associated with biblical narratives moved from the sole sphere of theologians and travellers to historians, relegating Palestine's significance to the singular importance of its relationship to religious narratives.

Given the fact that photography of Palestine emerged at a time of European colonial expansion, it was inevitable that photography was to become a tool to depict, justify and articulate the colonial projects of European powers.³¹⁷ The space of Palestine was turned into an ideologically constructed space. When Zionist travellers came to document the land, their photographs were used to formulate the Zionist myth: images of the land were taken showing Zionists ploughing the countryside, promoting the perceived benefits of Zionist control of Palestinian lands.³¹⁸ Contributing to the creation of a culture of myths and memories, Zionist photography later became a cultural tool by supporters of an Israeli state.

Thus, as a form of counter-hegemony, early forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation and campaign of obliteration were supported by visual imagery, and as such strongly influenced the history of photography in Palestine. Beginning as a form of social documentary repertoire and a mode of self-representation in defense of Palestinian existence, the first Palestinian photographer, Khalil Ra'ad, set up his own studio in Jerusalem in 1890. Rather than focus on cityscapes and monuments, Ra'ad's photographic subjects were ordinary people going about their daily tasks, streets not

³¹⁷ Issam Nassar, 'Photography as Source Material for Jerusalem's Social History', in *Transformed Landscapes: Essays On Palestine and the Middle East in Honor of Walid Khalidi*, ed. by Leila Tarazi Fawaz, Walid Khalidi, and Kamil Mansur (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), p. 138.

³¹⁸ Ruth Owen, 'Zionist Photography, 1910-41: constructing a landscape', *History of Photography*, 19.3 (1995), pp. 201-9.

desolate but bustling with people, craftsmen carrying their loads, workers stacking Nablus soap bars and villagers at work in the olive fields. Documenting folkloric and ethnic scenes this way acted as a counter narrative to the one being dispersed by the Zionists and colonial European travellers.

These materials were hidden after 1948 to suppress the representation of a people termed 'Palestinian'. But such an attempt was like trying to plughole an oceanic tide. A rich collection of materials that have eluded destruction are photographs that document Palestinians and their society.³¹⁹ For example, helping to construct a national narrative, photographs of the Nakba have become 'a Palestinian event and a site of Palestinian collective memory'³²⁰ in a wider intellectual endeavor to produce knowledge pertaining to a pre-1948 Palestinian existence, and to document Palestinian resistance to the creation of the state of Israel. Books of photographs combined with testimonial account include *Jaffa the Perfume of a City*, Sara Graham-Brown's *The Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946*³²¹ and *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876-1948* by Walid Khalidi³²² are examples.

By concretizing the event in memory, these scholars have managed to save themselves from 'alienation and self-estrangement'³²³. Thus, these 'books of memory [...] gain significance because they aim to preserve some kind of pure or intact

³¹⁹ Part of the Arab Studies Society, founded in 1979 in East Jerusalem, is the Document Centre which holds a large collection of photography of Palestine and Palestinians. For more on the photography collection here see Nur Masalha, *Palestine Nakba*, p. 146.

³²⁰ Ahmad H. Sa'di, 'Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity', *Israel Studies*, 7.2 (2002), p. 177.

³²¹ Sara Graham-Brown, *Palestinians and their Society 1880-1946: A Photographic Essay* (London: Quartet, 1980).

³²² Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinian 1876-1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984).

³²³ Ahmad H. Sa'di, 'Catastrophe, Memory and Identity', p. 184.

past'³²⁴. The function of photography in these cases thus becomes one which aims to fossilise an idealised memory to project a more positive outlook on the future.³²⁵

Images surrounding the conflict in Palestine circulating in media outlets do not serve to complicate images of Palestine or its inhabitants. Memories of the past still dictate how images are reproduced and consumed. In order to resist the colonisation of the imagination by memory, Sabella transgresses the binaries prevalent in historical documentation of Palestinians and Palestine in colonial European, Zionist, Israeli, Palestinian and global visual media cultures.

Without miscontextualising sites of national and biblical memories, draining the space of its inhabitants, or narrating a collective national identity through customs and traditions, Sabella fashions a reconstructed, demythologised 'shift from ubiquitous views of 'Nostalgia''³²⁶ and shows a less sentimental and emotional set of images surrounding the debate over the lands of Israel and Palestine. In the photographs reproduced below, the subject of identity of the land is simultaneously avoided and emphasised in a challenging way.

This more critical approach is true for Palestinian art photography in general after the Oslo Accords of 1993.³²⁷ Along with the increased building of settlements, the building of the Wall, many Palestinians from the Diaspora returned to the West

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³²⁵ Issam Nassar, 'Familiar Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers' in *History and Memory*, 18.2 (2006), pp. 139-155 is another scholarly attempt to 'draw attention to a number of photographers who have so far been ignored and, almost more importantly, to carve a place in the history of photography in Palestine for what I have called a local photographic tradition', *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³²⁶ 'SETTLEMENT - Six Israelis & One Palestinian' International Gallerie Magazine, 2009 <http://stevesabella.com/settlement.html>

³²⁷ For more on Palestinian politics after Oslo, please see Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics After the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 2003) and Geoffrey R. Watson, *The Oslo Accords: International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreements* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Boullata also dedicates a chapter to art being produced as a result of the tensions being built up in response to the failure of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. See Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, pp. 277-287.

Bank. Simultaneously, this came with new relatively relaxed Israeli travel restrictions on Western-passport holding Palestinians from the Diaspora, the withdrawal of Israeli military control over urban Palestinians' daily life and a heightened interest for all things Palestinian. The establishment of foreign news agencies in Jerusalem, the establishment of visual arts and cinema festivals as well as exhibitions on Palestine in Europe, influx of foreign donor funds and the opening of several arts and cultural establishments such as galleries and centres³²⁸ in the West Bank, as well as the establishment of art competition awards were soon to follow.³²⁹ This newfound cultural engagement with global flows of capital and the tunneling of Palestinian culture and identity outside its immediate borders³³⁰ meant a need to move away from the representations of an 'imagined totality' of Palestinian people, rooted in the nation-state paradigm, a

representational paradigm in contemporary Palestinian culture: The abandonment of previous political problematics for a centering on the individual's private mythology: The body, memory, experiences of the individual, where the political/ collective is mediated through individual experience. Specifically, revolutionary or romanticised representations were replaced by irony, self criticism, the exploration of subaltern identities, nihilism, and self narration.³³¹

Since memory plays an intrinsic part in cultural dynamics, cultural identities can only continue and be preserved if memories are reshuffled in words, images and objects.

³²⁸ Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, 'Arts, identity, and survival: Building cultural practices in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35.4 (2006), pp. 28-43.

³²⁹ For more on the art scene in Palestine and Israel see Carla Baum, 'Palestinian and Israeli Art Scenes: Grasping the Differences', *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics & Culture*, 20/21.4/1 (2015), pp.164-166.

³³⁰ Michael Walling, 'Achilles Comes to Palestine: Border Crossings' *This Flesh is Mine*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 31.3 (2015), pp.252-262.

³³¹ Laïdi-Hanieh, 'Palestinian Landscape Photography', p. 120.

Yet, if artists want to challenge the narrow definitions and projections of cultural identities, then a battle must first be played out with memories. Thus, imaginings of collective identities can only be interrogated if the individual is represented without reference to reiterated and circulating symbols. As Petersen has demonstrated in her article on the identity politics inherent in the global artworld, there is a need to

disentangle the understanding of ‘cultural identity’ of individual artists from the emphasis on national and ethnic identities at work in the current political discourses in the West and in institutional multiculturalism³³².

Avoiding using visual symbols which may lead to a reading of his work based on national and ethnic identities, Sabella’s *Search* engages in the new call for an aesthetics to depict more than representations of the land and stereotypical people; the photographs in this series also include figuration or depictions of individuals, which are conscious photographic attempts to narrate the political through the lens of the individual subject. However, unlike Laïdi-Hanieh’s argument that

Palestine [sic] photography is still very much in the direct exposing mode, not the introspective, ironic or self criticism [sic] mode of literature, cinema and other visual arts³³³

I will argue in the following that Sabella’s photography critically engages with the construction and articulation of the land. He has abandoned simplistic representations of the land, to more nuanced readings of the Palestinian landscape.

Photography after His-memory: counter-imaging Palestine

³³² Petersen, ‘Identity Politics’, p. 204.

³³³ Laïdi-Hanieh, ‘Palestinian Landscape Photography’, p. 121.

In order to understand how Sabella resists the reductive images of Palestine and Palestinians, through framing the photographic image with text confirming an ‘imagined totality’ of ethnicity or nationalism, I will turn to look at Sabella’s photographic series *Search* (1997). The photograph below is untitled, does not show any landmarks of Jerusalem, nor its ‘characteristic’ people, nor give any other indication of where the place may be in terms of road signs, or otherwise ‘just’ natural landscape.



Figure 2.1
Steve Sabella
Untitled
‘Search’ series
1997
13 x 20.5 cm
Black and white infrared photograph

The images steer the viewer into depopulated landscapes beyond its city walls, offering glimpses of harsh beauty and superficially integrated alien objects. Light, in different spectra, is significant and is utilised to create an imaginary reality, a promise of relief in a world beyond the visible. The yearning for escape is

palatable. Importantly, these early works incorporate aspects of fragmentation and re-assembly as well as the digital manipulation of the photographic image, prescient of Sabella's mature formal vocabulary. [His works] focus on Jerusalem and comprise a thorough investigation of the dialectic between place and perception.³³⁴

Search is comprised of black-and-white infrared images. In them, Sabella shows us no pictorial signification of Israel's occupation, prevalent in the images by global media giants such as CNN, Fox, BBC and Aljazeera. Unlike Darwish's early voice of infuriation, Sabella's first images are serene, showcasing images of natural beauty from Palestine, photographing trees, branches and natural landscapes.

I suggest that Sabella wanted to show how the beauty of the natural land has been sterilised by the Israeli occupation. As the image is emptied of visual clichés, we are presented with a nostalgic scenery of lifeless nature, a paradox recurrent with the state Palestinians live in within the Occupied Territories and Israel. A friend once suggested that these trees are in fact solitary figures, representing people. If we are to assume that these trees are in fact representative of people, it could be suggested that the singular trees depicted indicate a desire to be alone and outside the framework of identitarian collectivities which discourses of the global depend on. The solitariness also suggests abandonment, as if beyond the reach of memories.

In not portraying memories, Sabella does not depict a 'documentation of a vanishing rural Jerusalem'³³⁵. His images are always staged, fictionalised and distant, to deconstruct traditional nostalgic approaches to land, homeland, nation, and self. This goes against what architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti observed:

³³⁴ Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, 'Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11'.

³³⁵ Laïdi-Hanich, 'Palestinian Landscape Photography', p. 121.

Palestine was overdetermined by media images of a landscape of violence and destruction that obliterates the reality and voices of the people themselves.³³⁶

Sabella works his way around this. To complicate the hegemony of media images of violence and destruction, Sabella taps into the very epistemological frameworks that enable such images of violence and destruction to circulate and perpetuate. Sabella's photography is a visual transformation of Palestine where earlier, historical images in film and literature constructed a

fundamental expressive form in the creation of national icons such as [...] national symbols from the natural landscape of Palestine such as the olive tree and the orange grove.³³⁷

Although mostly relevant to Sabella's early photography, images of the land are profuse in his artistic expression. His engagement with the Palestinian landscape takes suggests that his art is undivided from his immediate environment and political realities. It is essential for this approach to impose the political status quo of Palestine on the art works. But at the same time once should understand how the visual images of Sabella's art communicate resistance against established modes of expression and pressures to create works of art which can be identifiable and thus institutionalised.

Search is where Sabella is nostalgically searching for that land, now buried under the debris of conflict. All the images are of natural objects: trees, leaves, rocks, wild marshes, a flower and leaves. There are also images of what seems to be abandoned spaces. The images are pervaded with nostalgic solitariness: the image of

³³⁶Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti quoted in Jean Fisher, 'Voices in the Singular Plural: 'Palestine c/o Venice' and the Intellectual Under Siege', *Third Text*, 23. 6 (2009), p. 789-801.

³³⁷Rasha Salti, 'From Resistance and Bearing Witness to the Power of the Fantastical: Icons and Symbols in Palestinian Poetry and Cinema', *Third Text*, 24. 1 (2010), p. 39.

the flower looks almost lonely, as do those of all the trees. Adding diversity to this singularity the series includes images of fields, with much detail: the texture of the grass, the play of light and darkness, shadows, the texture of the rocks and bricks as well as the teasing occasional feature of a human figure or hand. Looking pathetic, these inanimate objects form part of the photographer's search for an alternative, self-constructed world.

In using infrared photography, the photographer is looking for the hidden reality behind the visible. Escaping from the horrors of his own reality as a Palestinian, there seems to be a search for the hidden homeland, far and distant from the existing space which he inhabits. This homeland is constructed from the existing one, but those same images are taken out of their context, in an attempt at spatial neutrality. There is also something quite claustrophobic about these images though. Many of them are of enclosed spaces, or of images indicating confinement and enclosure.

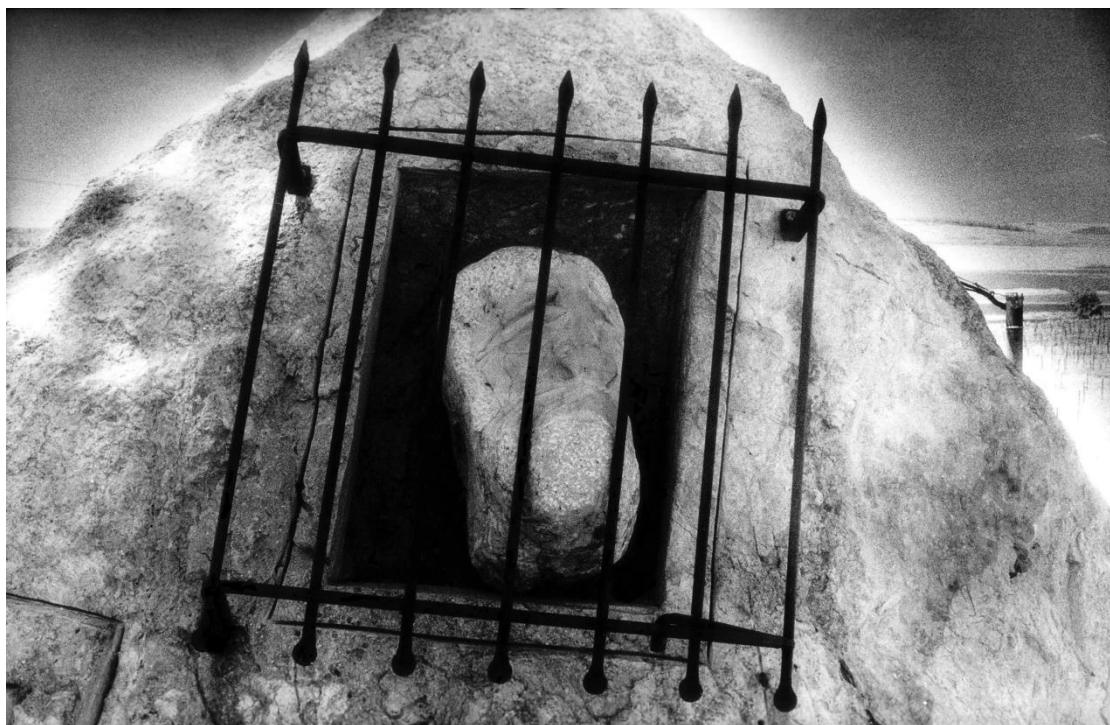


Figure 2.2
Steve Sabella

Untitled
 'Search' series
 1997
 Black and white infra red photograph
 13 x 20.5 cm

The image of the grill in the photograph is iconic because it portrays what was photographed. This iconic image indexically points to the idea that something is being shut off, or enclosed. This then creates further symbolic connotations of a political siege or imprisonment, such as that imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli occupation, or a mental siege that may have been imposed on one by tradition or dogma. In this particular series, we are told that '[Sabella] resented the social pressure caused by the religious denominations that strove to convert an individual's religious affiliation into a national one'³³⁸. The siege for Sabella goes beyond the physical siege iconically represented in the image, to become a symbolic metaphor for the socio-political siege he finds himself in within the city of Jerusalem.

Not just an index for a prison, the grill can also function as a symbol for the imprisonment of the landscape within larger sites of fossilised cultural memory. The rock in the image is shown behind a dark background, with the grill overlaying it also black. This could indicate the effort to capture the 'light' and the possibility for the land to be liberated from mediated memories which are selected and reorganised to produce historical truths and presents. These memories develop and continue cultural identities which can become extremely exclusive and lead to antagonism and violence as groups with alternative memories find themselves shunned from the enclosed 'imagined totalities'.

The memory of the 'imagined totality' of the historical communities of Palestine could be represented as protected by the grill. As ancient heritage is used in

³³⁸ Steve Sabella, 'Statement' <<http://stevesabella.com/search.html>> [accessed 15th August 2013].

narratives of cultural memory, with objects sometimes protected in the museum space. Here Sabella is showing us an alternative way to protect heritage through staging visual productions of the landscape, where there are already attempts to preserve heritage and cultural identity. Thus, this particular image could be read in two ways: it could either be a critique of the colonisation of the image and heritage by various political hegemonic factions – as Pamuk discusses and Khedairi characterises through the figure of Abu Ghayib - or it could be read as a deconstructive way of thinking about cultural memory and heritage without making the geopolitical location clear.

As the photographs in this series avoid any direct reference to Palestine or Jerusalem, Sabella is responding to the problematic visual representations of the Palestinian landscape. Despite the fact that Sabella was attempting to build his ‘new world’³³⁹, he does so using shrapnelled images from the actual landscape of Palestine. Just as Darwish wants to build a Palestinian homeland from rubble in his poetry, in which poetic beauty (the rose) must grow from the fists of people who struggle to achieve a political liberation, as discussed in the previous Chapter, so is Sabella still photographing scenes in Palestine, while notably avoiding clichés and scenes which correspond to cultural memory.

Sabella tries to formulate a new visual vocabulary in his next series ‘Identity’ produced five years later in 2002. No longer using infra-red photography, but colour transparencies, the high resolution images are sharp and vivid in colour and detail. The sadness evident in the photographs of ‘Search’ is an extension of the collective pain of Israeli occupation. A progeny of historical images of Palestine, albeit without reference to a specified place, Sabella exhibits an attachment to the place. In ‘Identity’ he exhibits a hope without the shadows of reshuffled and articulated memories.

³³⁹ Steve Sabella, Artist statement, <<http://stevesabella.com/search.html>> [accessed 15th August 2013].

Although in the photographs a kind of solitude is to be found not completely unfamiliar to what is found in the 'Search' series, the brightness of the pictures is in contrast with the black and white images of 'Search', resulting in a hopeful tone. In Figure 2.3 one can find comfort in the clear blue sky that acts as a backdrop for a ladder resting against a naked tree.



Figure 2.3
Untitled
Steve Sabella
'Identity' series

2002
70 x 50 cm
Colour transparency

Looking at the images presented in the photograph semiotically, which are iconic, but also symbolic and indexical, there is a union between the visual-actual interpretant³⁴⁰ (what the viewer actually sees and interprets) and the intended interpretant (what the artist intended for the audience to see). Yet these visual icons – a tree and a ladder, symbolically point to a third index, a sign that is intended through the physicality of the photograph and the positioning of the photographic subjects.

In positioning the icons as if they are pointing towards the sky, there is the indexical sign that suggests that the photographer is looking beyond the immediate. In this photograph, a number of signs are used to communicate that the photographer is beyond the struggle of rooted memories which cultivates collective identities, possibly symbolically represented here by the tree and its various branches. The ladder symbolises a vehicle liberating one from memories, histories and mythical narratives and genealogies.³⁴¹ In climbing out of the trees' roots and into the sky of freedom, the ladder becomes a symbol for the constructive movement from a narrative of defined *roots*, to a narrative of planetary *routes*.

³⁴⁰ According to Peirce an interpretant of the sign is 'the *object* of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object'. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, p. 13.

³⁴¹ It may seem that the sky, usually associated with heaven in religious texts, it does not take that religious role in Sabella's works. In fact, Sabella refrains from any iconic imagery that may make reference to religion. This may in fact be part of his artistic oeuvre: to use icons that may indicate religion if combined with other icons. Rather, Sabella secularises religious symbols, and frees them from religious conventions.



Figure 2.4
Steve Sabella
Untitled
'Identity' series
2002
70 x 50 cm
Colour transparency

Just like the mattress in the photograph above has been torn into shreds, Sabella's 'Identity' photographs call for a move away from constructions of a past utopia to face a dystopia of the present. Softness and comfort of childhood dreams are ripped into pieces; there is no place for unity and wholeness here. From here on, Sabella's photographic imagery is defined by constant pulls away from hegemonies of the memories of a bitter-sweet past.

Going against the nationalist grain

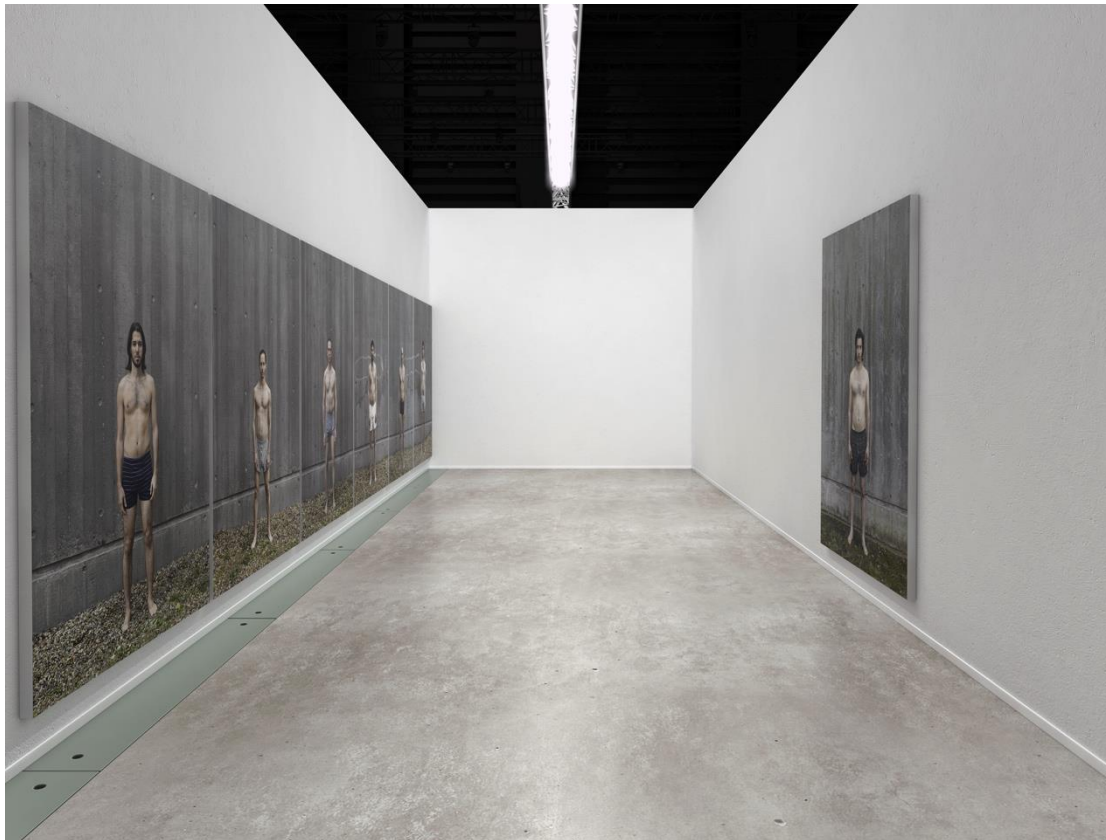


Figure 2.5

Installation Shot at Mathaf Museum, Qatar

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008–2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

Unlike the two series, photographs of which are shown above, Sabella's later photography becomes more confrontational with the issue of Israeli occupation. Using text to refer to the Palestinian issue rather than the visual image, Sabella exhibits a frustration with the politics of the region, and displays an inability to remain playfully ambiguous with textual signs as he previously did. This awareness that remaining neutral is impossible is discussed by Sam Bardaouil:

With this, [Sabella] wants us to realise that assuming any neutrality within the charged space that he has built is simply not feasible. We are forced to constantly

navigate from one side to the other to maintain a complete physical detachment. Paradoxically, constant action becomes the symbol for no action, a metaphor for an eternal state of exile.³⁴²

Just as Darwish was frustrated with Palestinian identity being in opposition to Israeli identity, Sabella is similarly questioning the dichotomous constructions of identity in Palestine and Israel. Looking at the images of the photographic installation of *Settlement* above, the figures are seen to stand outside a grey wall, indexically signifying the Iron Wall of Israel. This index could also symbolise nationalist-driven identity politics, where the figures standing *outside* the wall suggesting a transgression of both a physical and psychological boundary. This could lead to an assumption that the figures are in ideological exile. As boundaries are confused here, notions of ‘home’ (if the home lies behind the wall) and ‘exile’ (if we are to take the new space inside the walls as a place of exile) are blurred, nullifying nationalist tendencies to reduce people to either insiders or outsiders. As nationalist authoritative discourses depend on the appropriation of memory, Sabella is depopulating the visual image of charged cultural symbols that locate memories of a people within memories of a space.

In order to effectively divorce the image of individuals from the memories of collective identities and ‘imagined totalities’, it is only the title in this work which acts as a signifier to who the Israelis are and who is the Palestinian. The installation interrogates and challenges the common notions of identity, binary divisions, and even the English word ‘settlement’³⁴³ all rooted in memories.

³⁴² Sam Bardaouil, ‘The Transmodern Artist: The Use of Time as a Compositional Element in the Work of Contemporary Artists’, in *Told Untold Retold: 23 Journeys Through Time and Space* (Milan; Doha: Skira Editore, 2010), p. 45.

³⁴³ May it be noted that all, save one (*Kan ya Makan*), of Sabella’s works are titled and discussed by Sabella in English.

The word settlement could be used to denote: i. the illegal destruction of Palestinian homes and the building of Israeli settlements on those lands, ii. an agreement to settle the conflict, iii. a legal arrangement whereby property passes through a succession of people as dictated by the settlor, or iv. a subsidence of the ground or a structure built on it.

Conflating these different meanings of the word *settlement*, Sabella interrogates nationalist discourses which affirm the one group's right to sovereignty, preferring a peace deal which confronts the injustices of land confiscation and human torture. Regardless of the fact that Palestinian and Israeli identities are often noted to be binaries, the exposure of the mythical legacies that construct a collective identification collapses such apparent 'dichotomies'. Sabella engages in a discourse of identity politics which is more complex than state rhetoric demands. There is a common humanity to the two, devoid of violence and military prowess.

Instead of using symbols relating to preconceived memories of aggression, Sabella constantly challenges and debates ideologically and socially devised paradigms of visual signs: when dressed, the human body is being covered in clothes which designate symbolic meaning.³⁴⁴ Even when not dressed in traditional attire, and the choices of dress which we make inevitably denote a culturally framed projection of the self, dictated to the public by the fashion industry, religion and ethnicity.

The images show us human beings liberated from the confines and definitions which apparel necessarily communicates, as such constructing memories of imagined identities. These memories of collectivities based on dress and other cultural signifiers circulate in society and orient perceptions of individuals based on memories of

³⁴⁴ Fashion statements and ways of dressing and undressing the body construct and reproduce cultural paradigms. For more on dress as carriers of symbolic codes, see Malcolm Barnard, 'Fashion Statements: Communication and Culture', in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Barnard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 170-181.

‘imagined totalities’. By undressing the body we are moving on to the deconstruction of fashion traditions, which rely on reconfigurations of cultural memories, and look solely at human existence.

In reversing traditions and memories of collective identities, Sabella is resisting the projection of collectivity onto individuals, which deny the individual the right to frivolity and apoliticisation. In other words, in addition to top-down processes of belonging to an imagined national community through ‘the creation of national cultural canons and national heroes’³⁴⁵, there is also a bottom-up system working in tandem with it which exists separate to national institutions, archives and sentiments, and is expressed in the “restoration of the individual’s subjectivity”³⁴⁶. It is the individual which finds itself at the centre of this system, rather than the metanarrative of the nation. By using the memory of individuals to stitch together a larger national discourse, Sabella distorts attempts of identity construction through manipulation of collective memories.

Precisely because the larger totality cannot be used to define the individual, Sabella exposes the arbitrariness of the relationship between symbolised national identity and the icon of the individual. It is not just the act of naming that is arbitrary and coincidental, it is moreover the visual signifier of ‘Palestinian-ness’ that is also arbitrary. Such signifiers of the Palestinian include the checked scarf *kufiyya* which is a symbolic aspect of Palestinian material culture. The signifier of the *kufiyya*, black and white checked fabric worn on the head, for example signifies Palestinian national

³⁴⁵ Ahmad H. Sa’di, ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity’ in *Israel Studies*, 7.2 (2002), p. 176.

³⁴⁶ Sa’di, ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity’, p. 176.

identity.³⁴⁷ It in turn signifies a concept purely abstract. Images of Yasser Arafat, the former leader of the PLO, always wearing the *kufiyya* have served to reinforce this signification.

Because memories use objects as well as words to perpetuate and develop cultural identities, the *kufiyya* is also adopted by Israelis to claim cultural authenticity and relationship with the land of Palestine.³⁴⁸ Material culture is thus appropriated by negotiators in the fields of nationalist discourse which have robbed the object of its neutrality. Now it is firmly positioned within an ideological framework to give credibility to one paradigm against another. Even Darwish's early poem 'Identity Card' uses the national motif of the *kufiyya* in the line 'there is a *kufiyya* above an *'iqal* on my head'³⁴⁹ to declare the existence of a community that tries to construct itself through cultural codes such as dress.

Just as Darwish strips his later poetry of nationalist images and symbols, Sabella strips the bodies of his photographic subjects of the historical accidents which have created the association of Palestinianness with the *kufiyya* to generate meaning outside the sign-signifier-signified triangle.³⁵⁰ He deconstructs this triangle of sign, signified and signifier by stripping it from signifiers that symbolise ideology, ethnicity, nationality or race.

³⁴⁷ Loren D. Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine: The Struggle Between Islamism and Secularism in the Occupied Territories* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 24.

³⁴⁸ Eric Silverman, 'Straps, Fringes, Snails, and Shawls', in *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 156-7.

³⁴⁹ Mahmoud Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', <<http://www.adab.com/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=64761>> [accessed 11 November 2014], l. 42.

³⁵⁰ Kilbum Kim, 'Where Some See Fashion, Others See Politics', *The New York Times*, 11 February 2007, section Fashion & Style/ Fashion Show <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html>> [accessed 30 November 2012]. This article is particularly interesting to note how a piece of fabric is locked in a system of meaning generation, used to signify the Palestinian national identity. In an interview, Sabella has noted how problematic it is to be locked within a sign system, especially in the Palestinian case.



Figure 2.6

Portrait of one of the six Israelis

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

The absence of culturally significant realia attests to cultural materials' involvement in a 'hyperreal' (a 'model of the real without origin or reality'³⁵¹), construction of identity. This hyperreal mimetic imitation without an origin has great implications for the role of cultural memory in selecting and mediating elements of the past to fashion a meaningful present. As material culture has an intrinsic connection to the signified notions of cultural identity, but these notions are rather arbitrarily associated, all national identities can be designated as hyperreal.

But Sabella does not stop here, as for him in this photographic installation, the hyperreal also implies very grave realities. Further complicating this relationship between the symbolic nature of the identified body and the term of identification of the 'Palestinian', is the fact that the actual subject which existed in real-time and space, referent or the 'physical thing' photographed, is Sabella the photographer himself, as shown in Figure 2.7.

³⁵¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

**Figure 2.7**

Detail – Portrait of the Palestinian

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

The installation intricately plays with the symbolic relationship of the image of a man which the title signifies as being a Palestinian, and the iconic relationship of the referent of the image with the photographic installation. The image becomes at once a quasi-autobiographical installation, an image of the self which refrains from explicitly stating the iconic connection between the artist and the image, preferring instead to locate the self within a larger symbolic struggle between words and image. Although the hyperreal is rooted in imagination, there are instances where the hyperreal actually did exist in reality. On this particular notion of the actual existence of the photographed, Barthes states

In Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been* there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography.³⁵²

Photography's essence or 'noeme' is precisely that the referent's existence cannot be denied. The subjects in the photographs are referents which must have existed in real space and time. Nonetheless, the condition of the referents' existence is contested. These real objects are necessarily fictionally staged. How the perceivers, both the executer of the image and the outside observer, construct the significance of the image of the real will therefore be artificial and subjective. The very act of framing an object is itself a manufactured construct; objects, things, places never exist in the way that they do in a photograph.

³⁵² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 76–7.

So although we cannot deny that the person existed in real space and time, the *conditions* in which that thing or person existed are indeed contested. How we come to *know* that thing or person is conditioned by the very medium of photography. Our knowledge of something that is depicted in a photograph is necessarily partial, incomplete, fragmented. What Barthes calls a ‘superimposition [of] the past and reality’, would be more accurately called a superimposition of a *part* of the past and reality.

The photographed bodies in *Settlement* did exist in reality. They were actually standing in that specific location, undressed and with neutral facial expressions. The reality could be a theatrical-fictional one, where the people consciously engage in an act of dramatizing something for a specific end, in this case possibly Israeli searches of Palestinians before crossing the Wall, or an actual one, where the bodies are found to be half naked.

This *personalisation* of globally and nationally constructed localities puts the individual in the centre of the tension field between global media representations and national narratives, both functioning as a result of mediated and reconstructed memories. What we are left with is not a confrontation between

members of “imagined totalities” [...] entities a priori separate and self-enclosed as well as holding antagonistic and principally irreconcilable interests locked in reciprocal competition and inclined to beget mutual hostility and suspicion³⁵³.

Hence, we are not left with ‘an anonymous and interchangeable, stereotyped specimen of an abstract category’ but rather with the picture of what could be a

³⁵³ Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, p. 3.

‘personal friend or enem[y]’³⁵⁴. Thus, Sabella is not only challenging identity formulated by the nation-state, but also identity formulated by globally constructed signifiers of human identity. What we have is a play of words which suggest a nation-state, even though Palestine does not exist as a state, and a play of local or personal images.

This demonstrates that words and images can be products of cultural memory. It is on these grounds that Maggie Awadalla’s argument that poetry and painting are unified ‘not through subject and sign – but rather as an expression of the imagination’³⁵⁵ is refuted. It is precisely this idea of the ‘expression of the imagination’ which depends on signs. The difference between poetry and painting, or between word and image, is that in the former case the sign exists as a verbal construct, a word, whereas in the latter the sign is a visual construct, an image. In both cases, they switch back and forth from verbal to visual, and from visual to verbal to express this imagination. Hence, the imagination needs signs, both verbal and visual in nature, to ‘be’.

Going back to Sabella’s installation, the referents are real bodies which have been placed before the camera. Hence, they are real human beings. But there is no relationship between the iconic nature of the images of the referents and the verbal signifier. The photographs here complicate our reading of reality in the way that such ‘reality’ is constructed in the installation. Using verbal symbols to describe iconic images which themselves are free from signifying symbols, questions the whole signification process.

³⁵⁴ Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, p. 3.

³⁵⁵ Maggie Awadalla, ‘Painter in Poetry/ Poet in Painting: The Language of Images in Experimental Poetry and in Adly Rizkallah’s Watercolors’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 11 (1991), p. 155.

We can see how Barthes' experience of 'anguish of an uncertain filiation' is translated in this visual text. Sabella's association of the image with his 'self' is certainly 'uncertain'. Although it cannot be denied that the body photographed is his, there is a willingness to have this stated in the title, suggesting a process of 'othering'.

Barthes definition of photography as 'the advent of myself as other, a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity'³⁵⁶, offers an interesting way to think of how the installation generates meaning. Sabella has consciously chosen to disassociate his consciousness from identity in a complex way. Although the referent of the image cannot be refuted due to the iconic nature of photography, the signification of Sabella's consciousness is attested.

Resisting Memory of Trauma/ Trauma of Memory

One of the most widely circulated memories of collective trauma in global discourses is the Holocaust. It is an historical event that has been remembered, appropriated and represented at various levels in Western cultures, symbolizing the penultimate memory of collective suffering. Additionally, the Holocaust has been remembered and mythologised in Israeli policy. The reshuffling, reshaping and negotiation of the memory of this historical and collective trauma has been discussed profusely in academic circles.³⁵⁷ In the words of Robert S. Wistrich,

Israel as the guardian and heir of the Holocaust

³⁵⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 12.

³⁵⁷ Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Eran Neuman, *Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); Janet Jacobs, *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide and Collective Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

memory has steadily gained ground as a new unifying myth, alongside religion and nationalism. Paradoxically, as the distance from the traumatic event itself has increased so too have the trends towards mythologizing it – whether from a secular or a religious standpoint³⁵⁸

As I have demonstrated so far, scriptural and nationalist myths have been challenged in the photography of Sabella. In addition to this, another form of hegemony is the memory of the Holocaust, which has become a selective, organised cultural negotiation of a historical event. This cultural negotiation, which is projected from the present, reconfigures past events to become useful and meaningful in the present. In the words of Idith Zertal ‘the Holocaust and its millions of deaths have been ever-present in Israel from the day of its establishment and the link between the two events remains indissoluble’³⁵⁹. Thus, the death of six million Jews has turned from historical event into a negotiated cultural memory, circulating in cultural and political discourses.

Sabella installation interrogates the transformation from event to memory to culture, by playing on the word ‘six’, titling his work ‘Six Israelis and One Palestinian’. The visual icons of six men on side of the installation become the signified for the signifying words ‘six Israelis’. The role of photography in shaping cultural and collective memory is unraveled as the works denote how the Holocaust has become a defining ‘event’ shaping the creation of a politically independent state of Israel.

³⁵⁸ Robert S. Wistrich, ‘Israel and the Holocaust Trauma’, *Jewish History*, 11.2 (1997), p. 19.

³⁵⁹ Idith Zertal, ‘Introduction’, in *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

The role of the archive cannot be under-estimated as cultural projects both home and abroad have taken up the Jewish suffering in the twentieth century as a symbol for global ethnic cleansing.

Norman Finkelstein has been a particularly active supporter of the view that the Holocaust was exaggerated to serve the Zionist project of colonisation and settlement in Palestine.³⁶⁰ Whether or not this is true is not what is at the heart of Sabella's works, rather his art opens up the debate as to the psychological repercussions of the Holocaust and the trauma of memory which has created a culture of paranoia within Israel. This paranoia has meant that Israel, despite being a powerful state, still fears the outnumbered Palestinian who, despite taking part in active armed struggle, is relatively weak.³⁶¹

One only has to look at the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli casualties to see Israel's military might. In using the ratio 6:1 there is a visual realisation that the Palestinian is outnumbered, that the paranoia is unfounded. All subjects look helpless, like 'adult-infants'³⁶², but what is interesting is that the similarity of their dress treats each individual as an uncanny part of a collective. This is especially so for the Israelis who are lined up on one side of the wall, resulting in a physical experience in which there is no room to take the *individuality* of each person into account. Sabella artistically tries to deal with this paranoia on both the side of the Palestinians and on

³⁶⁰ Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London; New York: Verso, 2003).

³⁶¹ It must be noted that paranoia as a term has been avoided in Israeli discourses until very recently. Other terms have been preferred such as 'siege mentality' in Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, 'Beliefs about Negative Intensions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality', *Political Psychology*, 13.4 (1992), pp. 633-45. Although there seems to be an attempt in this study to locate Israeli psychological approaches to Palestinians, the writer does not refrain from stating that 'the terroristic attacks on Israeli Jews and Jews in general by Palestinian organisations' have contributed to 'Israelis Jews [...] belief that the rest of the world is against them', p. 635.

³⁶² Sabella, 'Interview for a German Magazine' <<http://stevesabella.com/settlement%20-interview-question-and-answer-session.pdf>> [accessed 10 September 2013].

the side of the Israelis, projecting the psychological make-up on both sides of the conflict.

Just like Darwish's poetic voice tells the soldier that he would have remembered his mother in the gas chamber³⁶³, so too is Sabella trying to construct an image of human suffering divorced from canonised and institutionalised photographic images of the Holocaust where the textual narratives that frame the photographs designate memories of Jewish suffering in the 1930s and 1940s. Like Darwish, Sabella is constructing a photographic image that distorts and interrogates historical metanarratives. Through playing with icons and symbols, he is challenging how

science and popular culture have played a vital role in shaping historical, geographical, political, and cultural identities and identifications. As a product of science, the camera, for example, acquired an ethnographic aura, actively producing knowledge about non-European spaces.³⁶⁴

Creating a new photography which questions these constructs of identity, Sabella creates a space where the outer walls are the grey walls of the photographs. In front of these walls we see the photographic subjects, separated by a corridor where bodily interaction with the images can take place. This creates a visual and physical space to question the cultural identifications processed by memory games. Unlike the actual Wall constructed by Israel, which encourages forgetfulness of one memory, and consolidation of another, the installation brings to the forefront that these people exist as individuals before their appropriation by myths of the Holocaust, nationalism and scriptural narratives. As Sabella informs us,

³⁶³ Darwish, *State of Siege*, p. 130.

³⁶⁴ Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, (London; Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. xix - xx.

the wall segments in the art installation unite together to form another massive wall, psychological reactions are perhaps unavoidable. For decades we live on the same land, yet, ironically we are ignorant of each other. It is as if, we live on foreign lands. Israelis manage to disregard the millions of Palestinians living on the other side, especially by the construction of the Separation Wall. Artificial hills are built to hide it, and sometimes it is painted in the color of the land to disguise it. But can one really ignore who lives behind that Wall?³⁶⁵

The Wall physically separating the Palestinian Territories and Israel recreates a psychological barricade, stops the two sides from coming together at the negotiation table. As such the fence becomes deeply entrenched in psychological complexes of confusion, paranoia and suspicion on both sides. Because neither can physically see the other, a mental blockade has taken place where mythical constructs fueled by memory games fill the vast expanse of emptiness. *Settlement* as such becomes a physical space of a settlement for Palestinians and Israelis to co-occupy as *individuals*, a space in which they must come to terms with collective paranoia, state propaganda and ideologically motivated cultural politics.

Summary

This Chapter has explored examples from three series of photographic works by Sabella. The discussion above has brought out various forms of resistance through a semiotic engagement with the images and words of the works. It has become apparent that Sabella, like Darwish, challenges the authoritative epistemes of global media images are impersonal, instead perpetuating the idea of self enclosed 'imagined

³⁶⁵ Sabella, *Zenith Magazine*, 2009 <<http://stevesabella.com/settlement-interview-zenith-magazine-2009.pdf>> [Accessed 10th September 2013].

totalities': the Israeli occupation which strips Palestinians of their basic rights; biblical narratives which have become a source of hegemony for the history of photography of Palestine; Palestinian and Israeli nationalist constructs of self enclosed identities enabling a reciprocal hostility between the two sides; and the official circulation of the memories of the Holocaust in present real cultural and political articulations.

What all these forms of authority have in common is that they rely on creating myths through regurgitating, recreating and reshuffling memories of the past. These memories are articulated in the present to very real effects.

Sabella's poetics of resistance of ideologically motivated memory articulations involves a variety of strategies involving carefully thought out treatments of word and image. In his photography he avoids making photographs similar to already circulating images, which correspond to a negotiated, reshuffled, re-mediated memory of stereotypes of people and land. In doing so he de-populates his images of clichéd symbols. In addition to this he uses photograph titles to toy with outdated memories and modes of thinking about the present using the past and as such displaces traditional aesthetic paradigms.