

THE PARACHUTE PARADOX

AN ARTIST'S LAW OF RETURN

By Almút Sh. Bruckstein

On the occasion of the artist talk and book launch of Steve Sabella's The Parachute Paradox at the ICI - Institute for Critical Inquiry in Berlin, October 18, 2016.



Steve Sabella, artist, thinker, writer, film-maker and photographer, is a son of the Old City of Jerusalem. His roots are spread heavenwards, and he signs his books as a citizen of planet earth. We celebrate his latest work, *The Parachute Paradox*, a mesmerizing life story, designed by the book maker Verena Gerlach.

We want to speak about this captivating black book tonight, *The Parachute Paradox*. A book about home, about Jerusalem, about the effects and after-effects of the occupation, the occupation of Palestine, of the self, of Jerusalem, about the hijacking of tradition, the hijacking of the image, even the image of Jerusalem, and most importantly about what the artist calls the colonization of the artistic imagination. This meticulously produced book is about exile, not only that of the artist, but even of Jerusalem, the city of prophets who so miserably betrays her promise to act as a secure haven for all its citizens. It is a book about the artist's exiled mother tongue, about alienated speech and failed communications, about exiled dreams, and most disturbingly, about the haunting experience of the protagonist's imagination being locked-in by the politics of separation, by the violation of human rights, in other words: by the conditions of life dictated by the Israeli occupation.

One of the liberating features of *The Parachute Paradox* is the fact that it starts off with a very simple premise: just as there is no question about rape being unjust, so there is no question that living under occupation cripples life. "I am not pro-Palestinian, I am pro-justice"—these words by the political theorist Norman Finkelstein are fully endorsed by the artist, and they are so naturally presumed by the author that the pros and cons of this question are of no concern to the book. The question of *The Parachute Paradox* is, rather, how to break free, how to rescue the artistic imagination and the author's life from the grip of its colonizer. The author Steve Sabella, in a brilliant dramaturgic move, in the end breaks free from the fate of his protagonist, inspired and supported by precious literary and real life collaborators, most importantly his love Francesca, his

daughter Cécile, and a handful of his closest artist friends, some of whom honor us with their presence.

Introducing a deliberate divorce between Steve Sabella, the author, and Steve Sabella, the protagonist who finds himself trapped inside the haunting maze of the occupation, *The Parachute Paradox* is also a book about liberation, freedom and return. The artist Steve Sabella gives the parachute metaphor an even more radical edge, as he is breaking free from the shackled body and mind of his mirror image by a deliberate act of separation from the protagonist artist. With staggering courage, and acute self-inspection, the author confronts his shadow, and in so doing produces ever-new artworks, each tackling a specific life problem by turning it into a visual dilemma. Observing his protagonist-double entrapped in the tiring loops of repeated frustration tied to the hysterical obsessions with identity issues produced by the apartheid system: Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your name? Why is your name Steve? Are you an Arab? Arms up! Lie on the floor! Don't move!, and much worse. The artist teaches us ways of escape from the deadlocks of visual codes inspired by the power of the imagination. Steve Sabella takes the entire world for an imagination within the imagination—in alliance with 13th century mystics who develop this vision in order to develop their characteristic poetry and art.

The Parachute Paradox is therefore also a book about the transformation of the self, about freedom, about liberating the image of Jerusalem from her ideological confinement, about the power of love, and about the artistic imagination breaking free. Steve Sabella creates windows of exile in his art, faithful to Jerusalem as the eternal capital of artistic imagination. How does he do it? How do exiled Jerusalemites from Palestine who live in Berlin build new Jerusalems in their works, in their art? What are the techniques of opening windows of exile in their mind?

We are about to watch the film “In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella” about the work “38 days of recollection.” In a dazzling inversion of exile, the artist, in fact, went back to his birthplace in Jerusalem. He set out to physically remove, recover and reclaim layer after layer of the old house's inner walls, in order to then re-imprint on them in a photo-technique process all his own new images. Images of houses in occupied Jerusalem, in which he was staying as an international artist whose Palestinian identity has become fluid. In this old-Jerusalem-house-wall project, Steve Sabella works through layers of paint, layers of life, layers of memory, and layers of injuries, quite materially taking down, inverting, and reversing the occupation. This way, Steve Sabella literally inscribes into his work his own specific law of return.

*This talk was given by Almút Sh. Bruckstein at ICI Berlin on Oct 18, 2016 at the book launch of *The Parachute Paradox* by Steve Sabella. The launch included a screening of "In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella", reading, discussion with Alya Sebti, director of ifa-Galerie Berlin, moderated by Dr. Bruckstein, Q&A and signing. It was presented in cooperation between ICI Berlin, Steve Sabella & Friends, ifa-Galerie and Taswir Project. © Almút Sh. Bruckstein*