

UNLOCKING VISUAL CODES

STEVE SABELLA

Part of the April 2015 tour



IN THE DARKROOM WITH STEVE SABELLA

FILM SCREENING

Short film directed by Nadia J. Kabalan

Selected for the Aljazeera International Documentary Film Festival 2014 & Berlin Independent Film Festival 2015

STEVE SABELLA - PHOTOGRAPHY 1997-2014

MONOGRAPH BOOK LAUNCH

Texts by Kamal Boullata & Hubertus von Amelnunxer

Hatje Cantz and Akademie der Künste Berlin Publication

Book Design by Onlab

UNLOCKING VISUAL CODES

ART TALK

Film Screening, Art Talk, Monograph Launch and Q&A events
with the artist at the following locations:

JERUSALEM

At the Institut Français Jérusalem with The Educational Bookshop and Palestinian Art Court—Al Hoash
April 4, 2015 at 6 pm

BETHLEHEM

At the Auditorium of the Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts & Culture
April 7, 2015 at 4 pm

RAMALLAH

At The French-German Cultural Center with The A.M. Qattan Foundation
April 8, 2015 at 6 pm

HAIFA

At The Arab Culture Association
April 9, 2015 at 5:30 pm

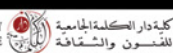
GAZA

At The Eltiqa Group for Contemporary Art with Windows From Gaza for Contemporary Art
April 11, 2015 at 4:30 pm



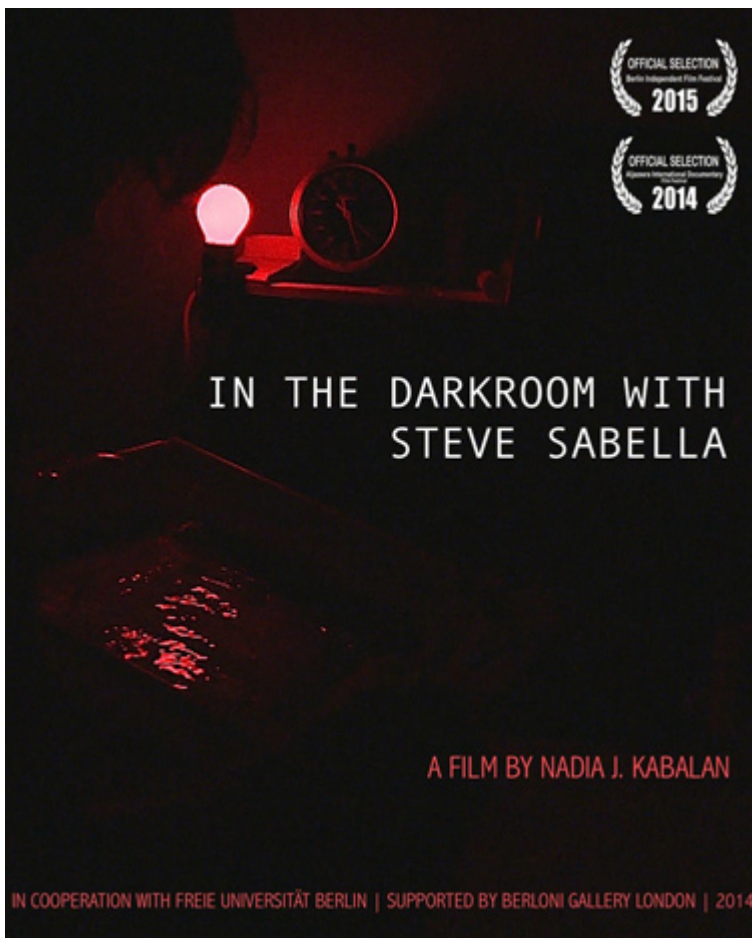
Monograph Launch supported by the Goethe-Institut

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For a deeper understanding of some of the artwork mentioned in the following talk and to learn more about Sabella's practice, please feel free to watch *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella* on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/108255363>



Directed and Produced by
Nadia J. Kabalan
2014

Official selection at the *2014 Aljazeera International Documentary Film Festival* and the *2015 Berlin Independent Film Festival*

This documentary is a sensitive portrait of Steve Sabella, one of the most thriving artists from Palestine today. *In the Darkroom with Steve Sabella* gives an insider view of the artist's practice, in which photographic technique and material experiments become a necessary tool of introspection and visual investigation of the past. While the series *Metamorphosis* (2012) reveals Sabella's transformation after an inner and outer conflict based on his experience of occupation, *38 days of re-collection* (2013-2014) documents the excavation of a forgotten and re-imagined history of Jerusalem. In dark, fluid and deliberate images, personal narratives come to light in the darkroom – the womb that brings images and imaginations to life.

“When you are in the darkroom, you don't speak with anyone. The only thing you speak with is ... art.”

“We need pictures to create history, especially in the age of photography and cinema. But we also need imagination to re-see these images, and thus, to re-think history.”

-Georges Didi-Huberman



To make the series *38 Days of Re-collection*, I subleased a house in Jerusalem from an Israeli family—one of the countless houses that was taken in 1948 to make room for Israeli settlers. I lived there for thirty eight days, and I immediately found myself searching for traces of the original Palestinian owners. I photographed every possible detail. Later, I collected the pieces of paint peeling off the walls of Old City houses, including the home I was born in. The digital photographs I made in the occupied house were then converted into black and white negatives. In the dark-room, I spread light sensitive photo emulsion onto the paint fragments and printed the images from the negatives on them.

38 Days of Re-collection (2014)



38 Days of Re-collection (2014)

This work explores the relationship between two realities—one being Israeli colonization and the other being the Palestinian Right of Return. This is the story that emerges on the surface of the work. Yet, if we look carefully at the fragments we can see that they have several thin layers in different colors and shades. The formal experiment in this work transformed a digital image—that can be copied infinitely—into a one time original, a unique work of art. When I left the darkroom and saw the result I believed I had cracked a visual code. But, it turned out to be a visual dilemma.

I traveled to London to show *38 Days of Re-collection* to Dr. Venetia Porter at the British Museum. She said that I needed to make sure that the fragments don't break because they were so fragile to the touch, or to use her words, "They almost fall part when looking at them." I left the museum and just after using my oyster card to exit the underground tube station, one of the boxes slipped from my hand and the piece I cherished the most (image below), shattered into pieces. This piece no longer exists, but digital images are the evidence of its existence, and are the only verifier of its past materiality. This challenged me, because once the artwork existed, it became part of my personal art history. In the end, the image won, because the only proof that the artwork ever existed is through its image. Thus *38 Days of Re-collection* became an exploration into the genealogy of the image.



38 Days of Re-collection (2014)

Each piece is an unfolding visual palimpsest. The traditional definition of palimpsest is a manuscript where text has been removed to make room for new text—layer upon layer of content and meaning. Each overlapping layer holds within it information as well as the erasure or removal of information, thus revealing new or hidden readings. New context and layers are fixed onto what appears to be an archaeological artifact, raising questions about history and origin, and about the genealogy of the image.



The Archimedes palimpsest is a 13th century prayer book containing half erased texts from several centuries earlier, including two treatises by Archimedes. The image on the left shows the pages as they would appear to the naked eye, the image on the right reveals the hidden layers of text beneath the surface.

38 Days of Re-collection explores not just the history of the house in Jerusalem, but also the history of the image itself. Photography conceals many hidden realities. My understanding of this has developed over the years through my work, in the form of visual research.

In *Search* (1997) infrared film was used to record light that goes unseen by human eyes. The blue sky became pitch black, the grass is white. The tree glows. Even if we cannot see something, that does not mean it doesn't exist.



Search (1997) 20.5 x 13 cm

In *End of Days* (2003) I looked back at some images I had made for a previous body of work, including the 2002 project *Identity* in particular. Through this process, I was able to see through them, and see that they were hiding other realities.



Identity (2002) 70 x 50



End of Days (2003)

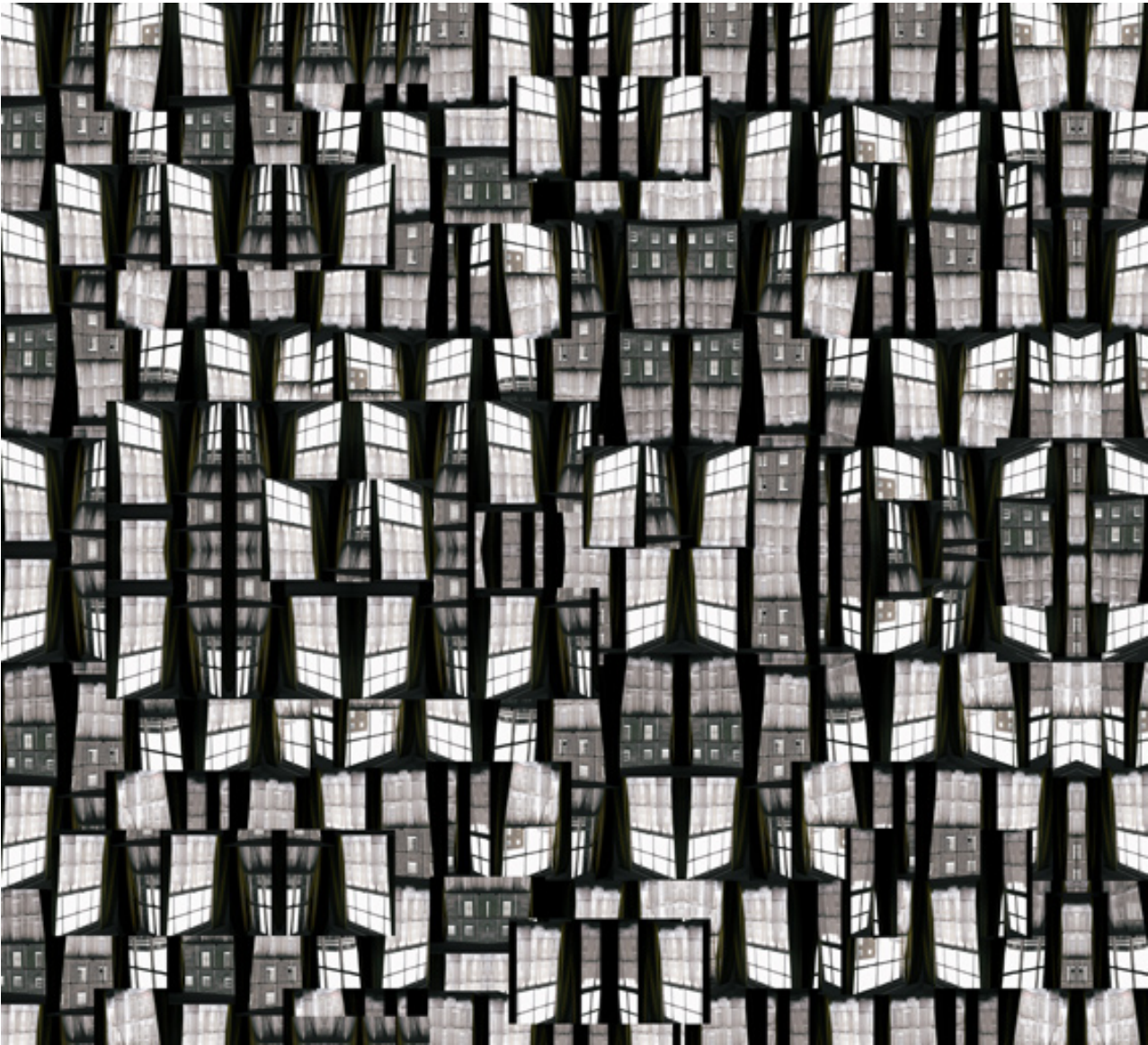


Photo of children playing in Palestine from Sabella's archive



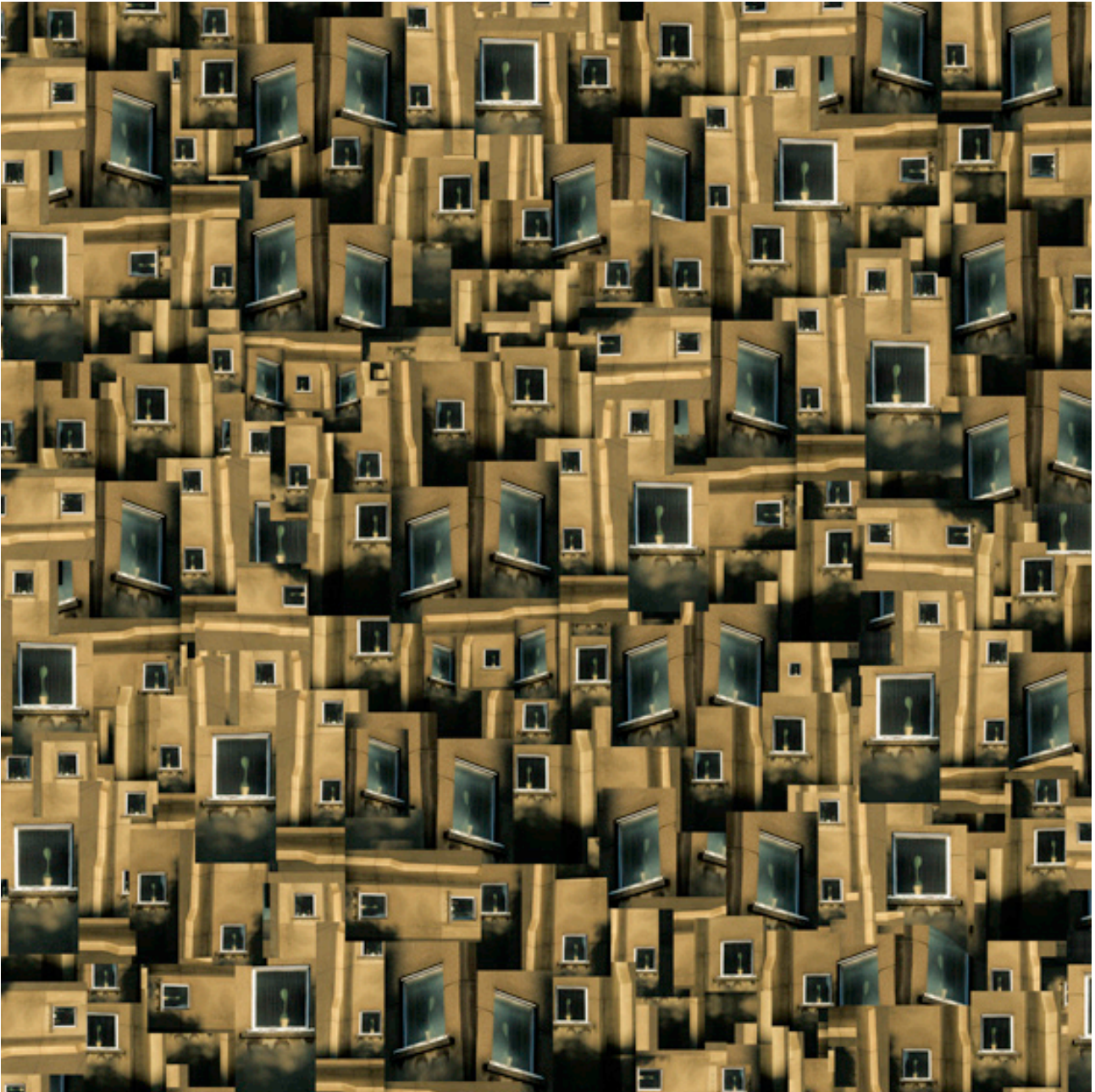
End of Days (2003)

In my project *In Exile* (2008), I took photographs from several different angles and then I created collages to bring forth new forms. When making these pieces, I wondered whether I was creating or unveiling something that was already out there, waiting to be discovered.



In Exile (2008) 136 x 125 cm

I have found that collage allows for endless experimentation and discovery. I am intrigued by cut images, because they can reveal hidden realities or 'mentalscapes' based on the imagination. My goal in my work has been to reveal a visual that had never been seen before.



Metamorphosis (2012) 160 x 160 cm

Now I have started revisiting and re-seeing my work, and getting rid of all the text, thoughts and concepts that have been fixed to it. I am learning how to unveil new readings beyond the original intentions of the works—intentions that had more to do with context rather than the images themselves. Thus, I started to perceive the work in the form of a visual palimpsest, where what is hidden is far more than what is visible.



38 Days of Re-collection (2014) - Installation in *Archaeology of the Future* at the International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri, Verona, Italy, 2014

The layers in 38 days of recollection echo collage. Here, black and white images of the home that I lived in are printed with black and white photo emulsion onto colorful paint fragments. If an archaeologist were to look at the pieces, he or she might assume that they are found objects, or unearthed artifacts. Yet, upon careful inspection, the archaeologist would find that these fragments are created by an illusion.



Installation in *Layers*
Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait, 2014



Installation in *Fragments*
Berlioni Gallery, London, 2014

Decoding these pieces would require a new approach to traditional archaeology, since the 'artifact' came to light through a photographic process. To decode this artwork requires us to understand images. But our understanding of images, their origins, formation and perception is still at its infancy.

What came first, the world or its image? In order to answer this question, we are led towards the genealogy of the image, and by that I mean the origin or source of the image. If the world has always been an image, as philosophers have stated time and again, then our search reaches to infinity. But, we can solve several visual puzzles along the way.



*Cave painting in Sulawesi, Indonesia
dating back 40,000 years*



*Cave paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France
dating back approximately 32,000 years*

The first cave images were probably our early known attempts in being able to image and eventually decode the images we imagined of ourselves. Studying them is visual archaeology. Perhaps it was then that we discovered our first visual genome. Its genes contained DNA made of light—or mirrored from light.

By drawing on stones, we fixed the illusion of sight perceived in our imagination. A few millennia later, we fixed this light on paper and metal plates—photography came into existence. The still images shocked the world. They bore the greatest resemblance to the illusion our eyes were able to see, yet they had nothing to do with reality. They created a world of their own.



Untitled - This is not cave art, it is a work that came to light in the early 1990s

Because pictures create their own consciousness of the world, I wonder if the time has come to stop focusing on the connection between images and the 'real world.' Maybe we need to explore the visual components of the world by looking into the image itself—just like in scientific research. We need to study images, their characteristics, the connections between them and especially their origins by looking at them directly and not in constant comparison with reality. This may allow us to discover the infinite possibilities that are hidden in images.

Furthermore, the archeological study of images cannot look at time in a linear way, but instead as if it has multiple dimensions. And that is why, any work that researches images can simultaneously explore the past, the present, the future and beyond.

In my work I explore decoding fixed systems that are constantly at work to entrap people in bordered spaces. Over time this investigation led me to see the bigger picture. Each series I have created began with a search for a means to explore and exit the state of mind I was living in. As you may know, exile and alienation were my focus for many years.



Exit (2006) 70 x 62 cm



Exit (2006) - Installation in *Layers* at Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait, 2014

I transformed this state of mind into a visual dilemma or a question, which, once solved, would lead me to a new state with a new visual challenge. Looking back at my work, I see that I was unfolding visual palimpsests that explore the multiple layers of my past, and the influence perception had on my 'reality.' Today, my images gain their independence from my narrative. The original narrative might still be there, but it will unfold itself in a different way. Now, I leave it to the spectator to unearth previous layers of meaning that I fixed on my work.

My perception has changed. It is time to engage further in the process of looking, where meaning resides only in the mind of the viewer, and in his or her imagination. This is what makes the process of viewing art an intriguing experience, and why we sometimes find ourselves immersed in a work of art. As Lawrence Wiener stated, "The work has no metaphor, and because it does not, you leave it open to people to use the work to suit their needs and desires. Art is about showing not telling."

How often do we go to an exhibition at a museum or gallery and look at the didactic text, the context and theory, first thing? What about looking at the art first, after all it is visual art. Art needs to be freed from text. Any statement I wrote about my art in the past is already irrelevant today. Can you imagine its relevance one hundred years from now? The same applies to all artists' statements. Exhibitions with minimal text trigger the viewer's imagination. Reading text first temporarily loads the artist's intentions into the artwork, but those intentions are only important to the artist. When an artist creates an image, it becomes divorced from any intention the moment it becomes apparent to the eye. It has a life of its own, and its meaning depends on the visual literacy of the observer.

In the 1930s Walter Benjamin said, "The illiteracy of the future, someone has said, will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography." Nearly a century later this statement could not be more true.

The question is: Does the context behind art matter? If a musician was inspired to compose a piece, does the listener need to know about that inspiration? In music we seem to have a clear understanding of this concept, but somehow it gets lost in the appreciation of visual art. We ought to be looking at art, engaging with our eyes, rather than trying to find meaning in related texts. In other words, we should look like we hear. Enjoy what comes, disregard what we do not like, and go deeper into the rhythms and layers of what we see and take pleasure in. This is the visual journey I often refer to.

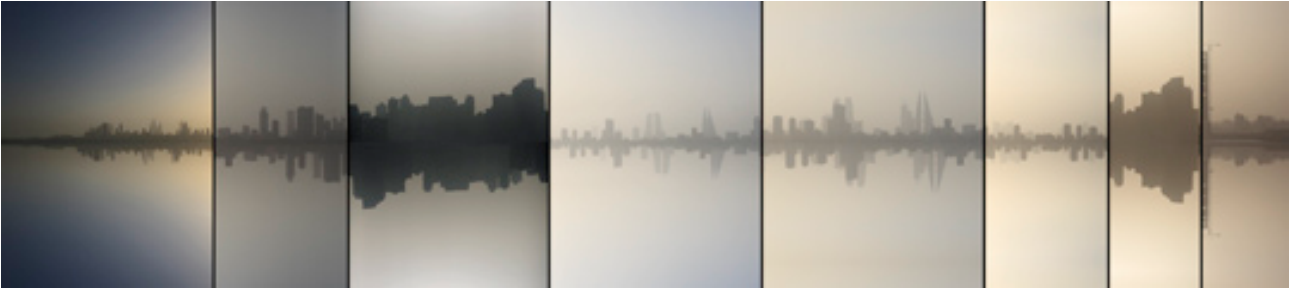
In 2014 I created Sinopia for a commission by the Bahrain National Museum. By definition, sinopia is the preliminary sketch found on a layer of its own on the wall underneath a fresco. I see sinopia as the invisible or hidden layer, evoking the palimpsest from a different angle.



Example of sinopia, revealed after the top layer of paint chipped off. The fact that we could not see this layer underneath the paint, did not mean that it did not exist.

I photographed Manama from every angle, from 360 degrees. Then I flattened these views of the city. What emerged was a rhythm, an audio frequency, representing what I see or hear when interpreting Bahrain. Then I commissioned the Khoury Project to transform that visual into audio.

To listen visit: <http://stevesabella.com/sinopia-II-.html>



Sinopia (2014) 270 x 60 cm

For the next piece in *Sinopia*, I photographed the graffiti of Bahrain.



Graffiti in Bahrain censored by the police from Sabella's archive



Graffiti in Bahrain from Sabella's archive



I layered the graffiti together, and then started erasing it (unlike my previous collage making where the collage was formed by adding layers). The more layers I erased, the more layers I discovered. I saw it as a process of reaching deeper and deeper to the core. This process of revealing continued the search for hidden and undiscovered visual palimpsests. Given that the photographs of graffiti were layered and erased, thus rearranging their visual syntax, I continued my search for meaning through unfolding visual palimpsests through erasure rather than the addition of layers. (Also, the words in this case, just like in palimpsests are not erased, but are hidden. However, they had their visual syntax rearranged)



Sinopia (2014) 270 x 180 cm

The result was the sound of the people, transformed into a rhythm—a visual explosion.

Everything around us is a construct, and the system's codes go unquestioned by the majority of people. By chance I grew up in a region known for its difficult codes. My struggle was to break free from that system, which by default, labelled me as a person under Israeli occupation.



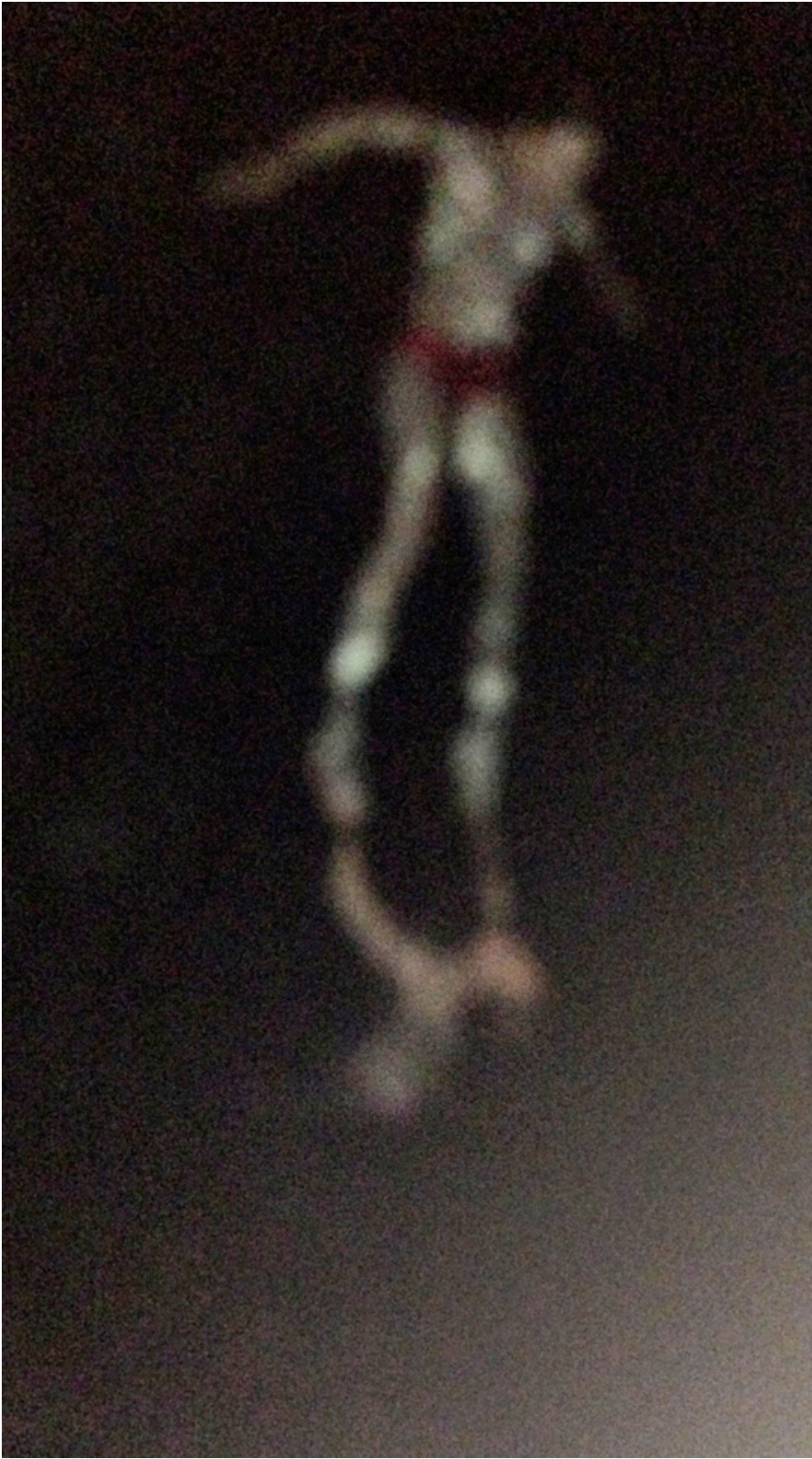
Settlement—Six Israelis and One Palestinian (2008-2010) 230 x 164 cm each

Early on, I asked myself what was stopping me from feeling free. What was stopping me from standing alone? My research on the origin and function of images helped me find my freedom. I did liberate myself from occupation and the consequent exile, or the image of occupation and exile by resorting to images—the imagination. There is no 'freedom council' that determines who should be granted freedom and who should not. All we need is the imagination to find who we are and what we are searching for. It is the responsibility of the individual to stand up and free him or herself from the new form of colonization that people are affected by yet are unaware of, the colonization of the imagination, where systems use images to penetrate and influence our minds.

Palestinians do not need the UN, the EU, the United States or any other country in the world, and especially not Israel, to declare to them that they are free. We are all born free.

However I soon realized that I became entrapped in other images, for example the image of the artist. And then I found myself in a journey of freeing myself from art. Life is an endless process of liberation. We need to find all those systems that occupy our thoughts or imaginations, so that we can think and imagine in our own way.

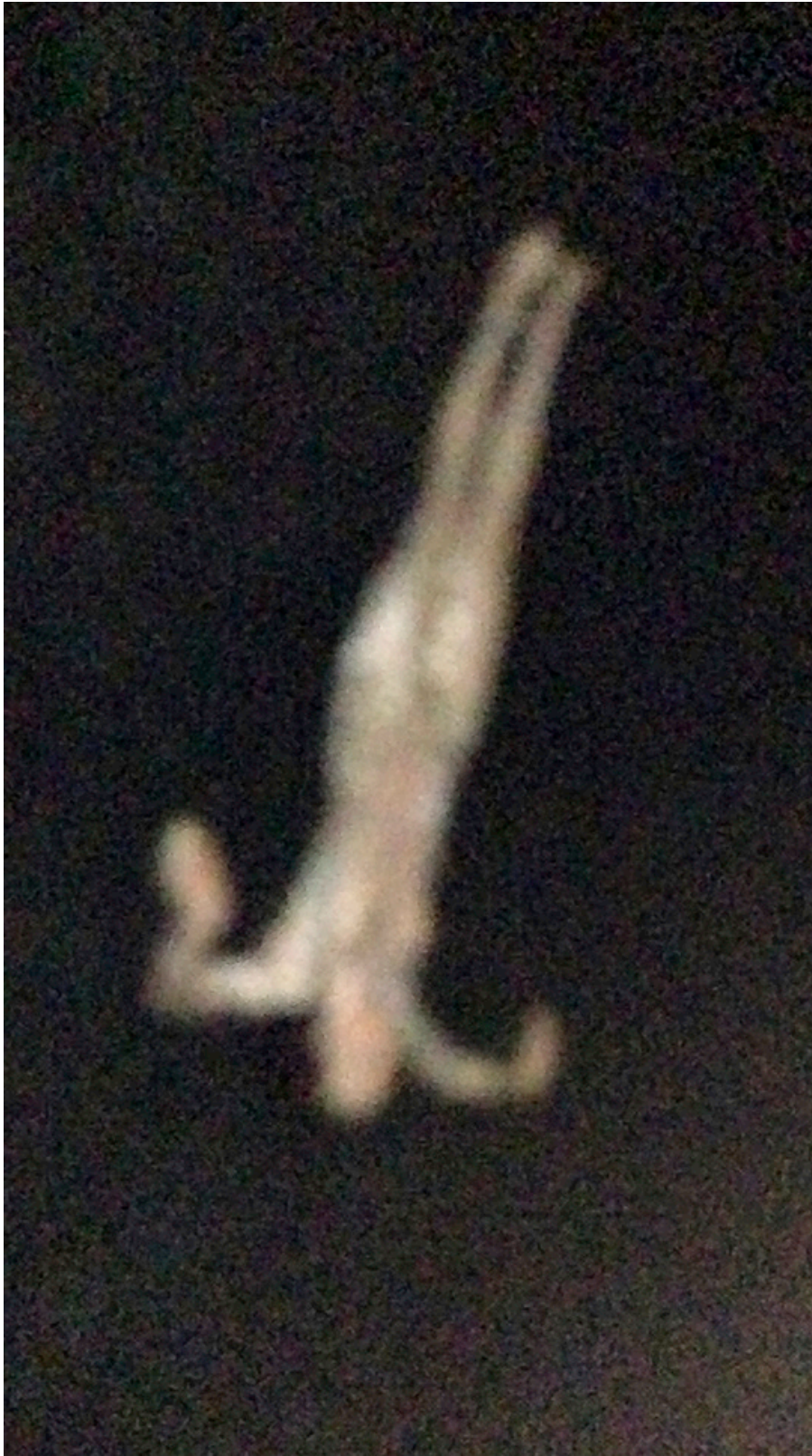
In 2012 I embarked on a road trip from Berlin to Croatia, and for the first time I found myself engaging in art without a concept or idea in advance or even a 'professional camera'. "Independence" was created in the moment. For me, this is freedom—when we relinquish control from technique and apparatus, and think of art mainly as a process of image making.



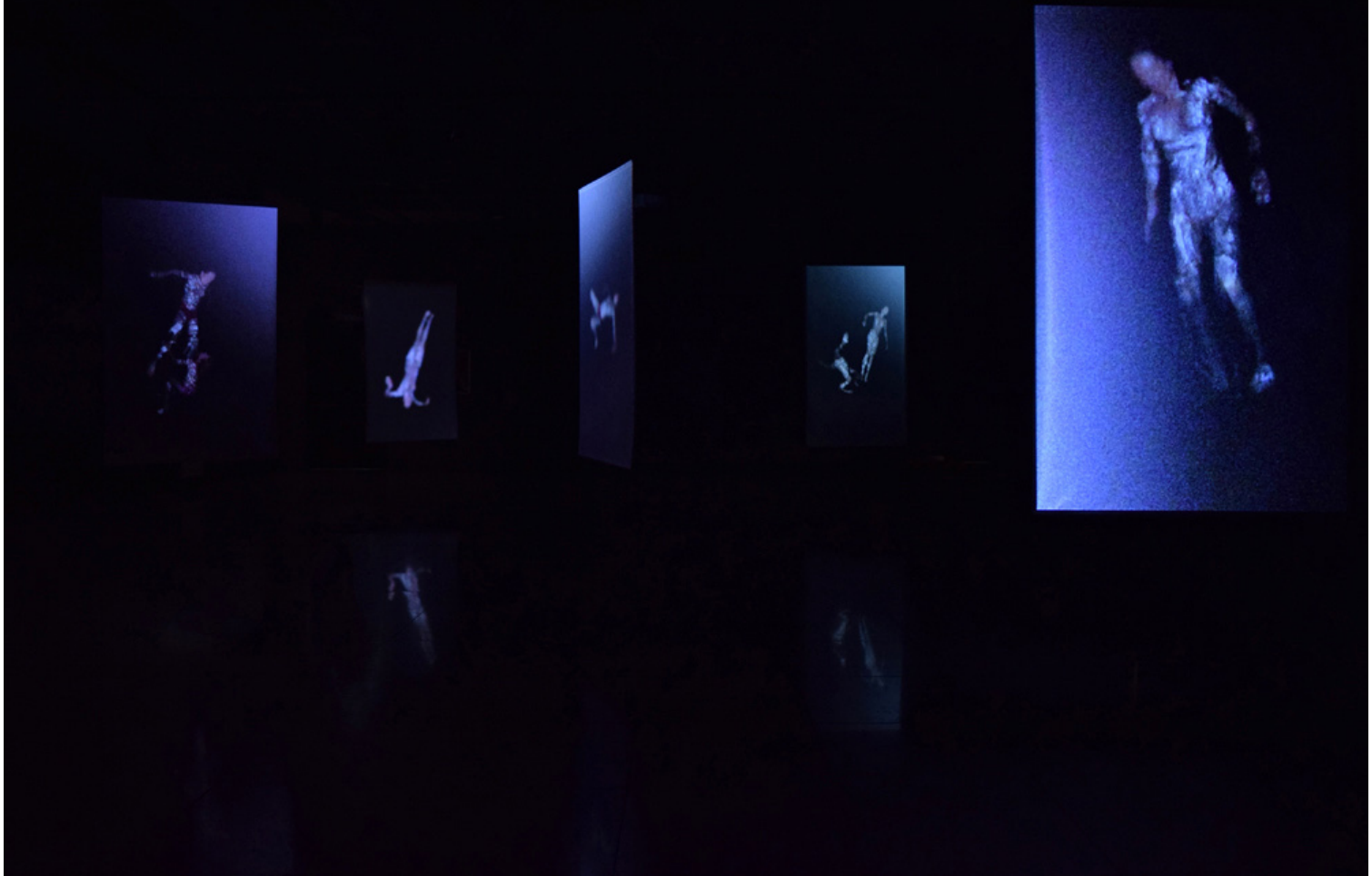
Independence (2014) Prints: 81 x 45 cm
Installation: Projection of images on six screens 200 x 111 cm in a dark room



Independence (2014)



Independence (2014)



WATCH here a short video to see the installation, and the double sided screens.
<https://vimeo.com/125236888>



One of Jerusalem's Old City Caves

For my next work, I will project the image of Jerusalem onto a wall in one of its Old City caves. I will effectively transform the cave into a darkroom by spreading light sensitive photo emulsion onto one of its walls and projecting the light of the image of Jerusalem onto its surface. Even after fixing the image using a chemical process, it is bound one day to disappear. Perhaps after many years the emulsion will dry out, wither and peel off. Yet, even though it will physically disappear from the cave, it will survive in other endless imagined forms such as photographs, films, memory and consciousness. Everyone of you has already formed this image in your minds. The image never dies, it simply changes form.

We need to research what came before the cave—go into the genealogy of the image. The visual history of the image in the cave, began long before my projection of it on the wall. Let us try to trace back where that image came from. The projection is an image. The source of that projection is a photographed image of Jerusalem. Did what the image depicts ever exist in a physical form? What guarantees that Jerusalem is not an image that was created or revealed, just like the one on the cave's wall? What is the source of all these images? Image and perception are multilayered, and we might be living in a world with an infinite number of visual palimpsests.

Furthermore this project does not require me to physically go and seek out this cave in Jerusalem and turn it into a darkroom. I might. The imagination has already materialized the project and made it a reality. These written words give it legitimacy. We can already speak about the project's connotations and meanings. It is already layered. People have already reacted to the project regardless of its manifestation. The mind can explore location without location. This is the archaeology of the future. It is an expedition through image and imagination.

We are still at the very beginning of discovering the power of photographic images. When we disassociate what we see from what has been photographed, we engage in a more profound way of looking. If every person on earth looked at the same image and offered their interpretation of it, the list would literally be endless. Photography is a medium that creates endless visual palimpsests. Think of the photographic image as a shining star that has not yet been explored in the far reached our galaxy. All that we know about the star only comes from our interpretations of its shiny surface — just like photography. But there is so much more to see and discover. In brief, my relationship with the image is like being on a space odyssey, in search of understanding image formation. And since an image is part of the imagination, unlocking the visual code will allow us to see beyond our own reality.

The journey of life is a journey of images. The study of history is the study of images, in all their different shapes and forms.

Photography must be uprooted from the original concepts that surround it—the human desire to fix images and the obsession with accurately recording the world in images. Maybe we have entered an era where images can be un-fixed, bound no longer to paper or screen, liberated from time, floating freely in our imaginations.



38 Days of Re-collection (2014)

In conclusion, I came to terms with my exile after a process of self interrogation and introspection. As Vilém Flusser writes, “Émigré become free, not when they deny their lost homeland, but when they come to terms with it.” I did not want my DNA to change, I would always come from Jerusalem, but what could change is consciousness and perception. By examining exile from different angles and perspectives, I was able to dig deeper into the relationship between images and the reality they create. I freed myself.

My research has lead me to believe that our world is made of an infinite number of visual palimpsests, hidden within fixed layers. My struggle is to create art with a connection to visual history. My illusions are imagined bridges, map-like structures, that connect us to our past with an eye to the future.

It is time to engage further in the process of looking at the connection of images to visual history. We should stop thinking of time and history in a linear way. Images can transport us to the past, present, future and beyond. We create our own journeys, journeys into the imagination where everything we imagine becomes a reality.