

»We have the power to change every structure we've created on this planet«

Interview with Steve Sabella

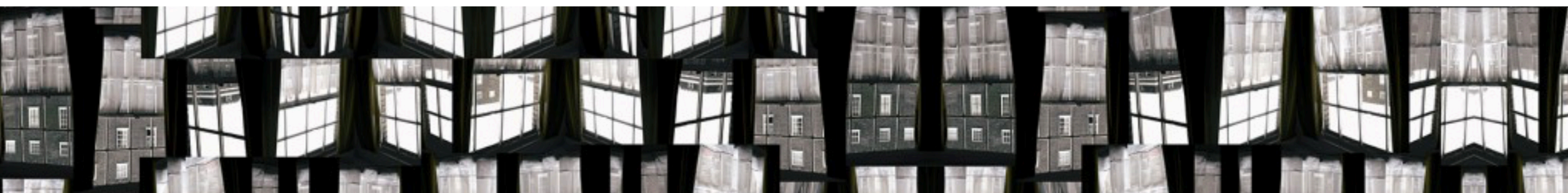
Artist Steve Sabella's website offers links to a long list of documentaries with him as their subject, from 1998 to date; a relatively long list for someone born in 1975. Sabella is arguably the perfect protagonist: his art and writing are at once very personal as well as political and universal; his monologues are passionate, while leaving room for question marks.

Journalistic convention dictates that an informative paragraph should follow here, allowing readers to place Sabella within certain mental drawers before they continue reading: where he is from, his descent, when he arrived to Berlin, and further details that usually pave the way for our attention. Sabella would rather avoid these. He attests to having »divorced« the narratives he formerly attributed to his art. Having spent years accompanying his artistic endeavor with commentary, his last solo exhibitions included neither texts nor titles.

»It frees viewers, allowing them to focus on the image and see what it makes them feel. I was the kind of artist who would talk about his work, anchoring its meaning, but I developed and learned since, and when I felt it was time, I let go of it.«



Steve Sabella © Lindsay Tunkl



However, given the context of our conversation, his participation in the panel discussion of Language Beyond Borders at ID Festival's opening event, he does not enjoy the luxury of being a world citizen. As a Palestinian growing up in the Old City of Jerusalem and participating in an Israeli-German event that delves into issues of identity, he simply cannot leave politics and labels out of the conversation.

»I was born under the occupation, but in my mind, I'd always been free, and eventually managed to let my mind take over my reality. I managed to rid myself of all the residues the occupation had deposited in my veins. When I left Jerusalem and moved to London in 2007, I still felt the occupation to be dwelling in my body and consciousness. Israel has been 100% successful in colonizing the imagination of the Palestinian people, instilling this belief in us that no matter what we do, we'd always be inferior and under occupation. This mental defeat is felt throughout Palestine – we've come to the point where Palestinians can no longer imagine themselves living in liberty. And if they can't imagine it, how can they set themselves free? On the other hand, Israelis can't live fear-and-paranoia-free, it's their binding factor. Take away this fear – and the State of Israel is gone.

They take the occupation for a fact of life. But it isn't! All structures can be taken apart. We have the power to change every structure we've created on this planet. I was as depressed as one could get, and repaired my consciousness with no medicines. There IS a way out.«

An account of this way is found in his book, The Parachute Paradox, out in English this year at KERBER Publishing House.

»I think my book could allow Israelis to look themselves in the mirror and see what they're doing, while in turn helping the Palestinians to see that there's a way out of this impossible state in their consciousness and reality.«

Sabella decided to participate in the festival despite having little to do with Israelis in Berlin. »I find Israeli society to be very sick. I realized that even with Israelis who purportedly oppose the occupation, you'll always get the »but...« I have a problem with that. Can you imagine me being friends with anyone who tolerates rape, slavery, or torture? I always had Israeli friends back in Jerusalem, but over here in Berlin, I can choose not to be friends with someone who justifies the occupation. I don't have to bother, it's not my job to make them right.«



»So why did I agree to participate after all? Because when I was working on my book, I met with Elad [Lapidot – curator of the festival's panel discussions] and confronted him with ten questions. I couldn't believe it, but after 41 years on this planet, Elad was the first Israeli I had met – the first ever! – who wouldn't justify the occupation in any way. So I'm in the festival for him – not for Israel, nor for Germany or for any other bullshit. I want to be in dialogue with a person of such ethics, knowing as I do that I'll probably have criticism hurled at me for this participation. You could say I'm a kind of symbol in Palestine, despite my purpose being to keep doing my thing, not to represent anyone.«

Although writing has become a significant part of his work, art for him is the main contestant to the throne of »Language beyond Borders«.

»Art is this powerful, because its codes are unclear for politicians and for most people. Its workings are really odd: art says whatever it wants to say without saying it. That's why it transcends borders. And occasionally, when someone from the system wises up to it, censorship kicks in.«

Sabella does not view art that has its roots in a single sphere, »with a single ideology and a single symbolic sphere,« to be true art: »It's an illustration. The best way for art to breach geographic borders is by breaching the borders of your own personal consciousness. Therefore, I also think you can't be an artist if you're religious. If you've got a pre-determined god, it's going to set you back.«

In order to open up his consciousness, Sabella decided that each day he would read an online newspaper from a different country.

»You have to be exposed to different perspectives if you are to find your truth. There isn't any one single truth out there, only variations on it, and let's not forget that these too keep changing. I don't believe in anything that is black and white, except the issues that I've mentioned before: rape, slavery, torture, and occupation.«

The next stepping stone for Sabella on his way to become a world citizen is set for roughly another six years, as soon as his daughter Cécile finishes school. Together with his partner of 20 years, Francesca, he plans to travel the world, staying nowhere for more than six months.

»In order to be able to claim yourself to be »from planet earth«, you must first uproot yourself, and look at stuff from the outside – then you may choose where you want to live and foster a universal worldview and a sense of justice. It doesn't go to say that I renounce where I came from. It's a fact of life and I'm very proud of it. But when you've spent years in different places, the question of where you're from becomes an ever-smaller part of your life.«

Interview with Steve Sabella (Language Beyond Borders), prepared by Tal Alon (Editor of the Spitz Magazine Berlin)

You can also find the Hebrew version here: spitzmag.de

