



Steve Sabella: Photography, 1997–2014

With texts by Hubertus von Amelunxen
and Kamal Boullata

“We cannot be defined by our relationship, positive or negative, to Israel,” Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine’s de facto national poet, once insisted. Darwish’s vision is both borne out and tested in the oeuvre of Jerusalem-born Palestinian photographer Steve Sabella, who has lived under occupation and as an émigré. This monograph surveys Sabella’s astonishingly rich body of work, whose formal diversity shatters the illusion of a monolithic Palestinian experience just as its abstractions speak of the shared realities of oppression and resistance.

Several cycles of work from the past seventeen years are illustrated here, each aesthetically distinct from the others. These include *Search* (1997), a stark, rigorously composed early black-and-white series; *Till the End* (2004), fragmentary, evocative colour images of Jerusalem, fixed to the surfaces of irregularly shaped stones; *Exit* (2007), a clinical inventory of bony, wrinkled hands that suggests both endurance and the gradual wearing-out of the body; *Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian* (2008–10), oversized prints presenting standardized, quasi-ethnographic portraits of denizens of the conflicted territory facing one another, mirroring the region’s demographic ratio; *In Exile* (2008), fractalized images of glossy, hypermodern buildings that conjure up the artist’s life as an expatriate; and *Independence* (2013), painterly, lyrical images of figures suspended in a velvety, fluid space.

Darwish’s words punctuate meditative essays by media theorist Hubertus von Amelunxen, who turns to myriad sources – from the sixth-century poet Tarafa Ibn al-‘Abd to Franz Kafka, and favouring especially the work of Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said – to draw wide-ranging historical, cultural and philosophical connections between the artist’s works. A thoughtful foreword by Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata contextualizes Sabella’s work within the history of photography in addition to offering biographical details. Absorbing images and texts’ deep engagement with them compensate for the volume’s slightly clumsy typesetting and design and an occasionally awkward translation. – Kate Steinmann