

STEVE
SABELLA

Photography
1997–2014

With texts
by Hubertus von Amelunxen
and Kamal Boullata

HATJE
CANTZ

FOREWORD

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It is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye.

WALTER BENJAMIN, *LITTLE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY*, 1931

In 1839, when photography's invention was introduced in Europe, the French history painter Paul Delaroche allegedly declared, "from today, painting is dead." By 1890, when Khalil Ra'd, Palestine's first Arab photographer, opened up his studio outside Jerusalem's city walls, it heralded the birth of secular painting at the hands of Christian Arab iconographers whose workshops were concentrated within the Old City. Employing traditional tools and tracing methods of copying icons, budding painters who continued their inherited trade, albeit to another end, began replacing their Byzantine models with Ra'd's photographs.

Meanwhile, as the use of the camera was becoming widely popularized, painting continued to flourish throughout Europe. In fact, during the twentieth century the history of modern art in the West was predominantly a history of painting. Pioneering artists like Man Ray, who expressed himself in both media, once explained, "I photograph what I do not wish to paint, and I paint what I cannot photograph." By 1968 John Berger observed in his essay "Understanding a Photograph," "it looks as though photography . . . is going to outlive painting and sculpture as we have thought of them since the Renaissance."

The present book is about the work of a visual artist who was born and raised in the Old City of Jerusalem: Steve Sabella. Over the last decade he has been using his camera as a painter uses his brush. Far from the abstraction of his predecessors' icons, he refers to his own abstractions as "mental

images." Like the earliest pioneers of photography who experimented with different surfaces including glass, pewter, and leather on which they captured their images, Sabella has dabbled with variable methods to summon his own. The surfaces he has explored to print on include stones from the city of his birth and fragments of peeling wall paint from the house in which he was born.

If photographs have traditionally been considered mementos of time, in Sabella's experimental work time and memory assume an unprecedented bodysaturated in abstraction. The essay by Hubertus von Amelunxen in the present volume elucidates how the role of personal memory and a lived moment of history are enmeshed in the artist's abstract photography. In the process he points out the way in which the local and the global overlap in the photographer's work to reflect what Vilém Flusser describes as the experience of "groundlessness."

A few decades ago, that is, long before globalization permeated all fields of cultural expression in our world, I wrote on the evolution of Palestinian painting following the country's national catastrophe in 1948. I documented how painters living at home or as refugees in proximity of the homeland have universally employed a representational language of expression. The further away they lived, the more they engaged in abstraction. At the time, I never imagined that such a phenomenon could possibly manifest itself in the field of photography. Observing the evolution of Steve Sabella's photographic work over the last decade, however, disclosed a curious revelation.

In 2002, as a member of the jury for an exhibition of works by finalists in a young artists' competition mounted in Ramallah, I encountered Sabella's photographs for the first time. They were all of local landscapes. By the end of his second year following his move to London in 2007 he created his first series of abstract compositions, which he titled *In Exile*. In this series Sabella shifted from what Susan Sontag calls "a photographic way of seeing" to one of cubistic imagining. As such, he shot multiple images of

fenestrations and of his daughter by a window, taken from different angles. Each shot ends up like a mere unit within a larger composition that interlaces the different shots in a tessellation of a monochromatic pattern, which recalls the structuring of the arabesque. In his essay von Amelunxen discusses this key series to denote the artist's abstraction.

Since the birth of abstract painting at the turn of the twentieth century, the history of photography has disclosed a wide variety of abstract trends that evolved inseparably from the broader development of abstraction in modern art. Since the advent of the digital age, photographic experimentation has offered a wide range of new techniques and visual effects, freeing photographers altogether from the binds of representation. Consequently, confronted with the lure of technological manipulations now possible in photographic processing and printing, the experimental photographer has been frequently seduced by pure form, a matter that in many instances is simply the product of coincidental operations. In such cases, since the subject of content in art has continued to be associated with representation it has generally been overlooked. In this volume, however, as the abstract works by Steve Sabella infer and the essay by von Amelunxen dissects, content in art is viewed as the generator of the very structure of form. After all, it is not form that creates thought, but thought that creates form.

And yet, in contemporary abstract experimentations, only rarely has a photograph's content strived to capture the experience of loss and absence, the passing of time, and what von Amelunxen calls in Sabella's work "the condensation of a presence." It seems that certain abstract photographers living in the West and coming from a cultural tradition beyond the Western canon of pictorial expression share common experiences that instinctively drive them to retrieve a different sense of time in their art. It is a sense of time that alludes to the restructuring of a forsaken place of memory or a time that is often replayed in the very process of creating their art. It is the living at a remove from their home countries that leads the thoughts of such photographers to emerge in ways that mirror traits associated with their cultural roots.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's earliest series of photographs offer an instructive illustration. It was in Los Angeles and New York that the Tokyo-born photographer conceived his seminal series *Theaters* (1978) and *Seascapes* (1980). Using exposure times that extended over hours, his photographing of the

length of an entire movie resulted in the absence of any of the film's images; the cinema screen is depicted as simply flooded with whiteness. Photographing the duration of time and concluding with emptiness is not far from the qualities that Zen Buddhists bestow on the concept of the void and the experience of time's evanescence.

Similarly, in Sugimoto's hours-long exposure of photographing the sea at different times of day and night, it is through the infinite tones between white and black that the mystery of the ancient blue surges to embrace all bodies of water since time began. Acting like a subliminal connotation of the yin and the yang, the simplicity of dividing his image vertically with the horizon line into sky and sea may share compositional affinities with Mark Rothko's last paintings. But the fathomless void in Sugimoto's world of air and water invites a meditative reflection that memorializes the life of the photographer, who first saw the light by Japan's sea. In contrast, it is sheer despair that settles in Rothko's monotonic paintings executed the year preceding his suicide.

Abstraction in the Japanese master's work comes to mind here, neither because it bears any resemblance to the younger Palestinian's art nor because they both happen to work in series. In fact, apart from the degree of artistic maturation in the oeuvre of each—the vertical depth in the former versus the restlessly horizontal explorations of the latter—abstraction in the works of the one remains worlds apart from that of the other. What is more, when it comes to aesthetic sensibility, technique, and intention, each speaks a diametrically opposed language. And yet, Sugimoto's early work serves as a comparative example simply because its abstraction, like Sabella's, had its start in a foreign land. Subsequent to moving away from his homeland, each of the two photographers seems to have become more sensitized to his cultural roots. Moreover, the abstraction in their work was further enhanced when each of them remained free to travel periodically between their chosen places of residence and the countries of their birth.

After Sabella opted to move from Jerusalem to London and later on to Berlin, each of his photographic abstractions have seemed to float amid a space that lacks the gravity of a focal point. In their highly defined details all of the compositional components call for equal attention. The eye roams from one place to another, and its roaming ultimately leads back to the first place. The absence of a focal point and the allure invoked

by the unfailing exactness of each detail are features that have long characterized the aesthetics of Islamic miniatures.

Sabella's abstraction similarly recalls components of the arabesque in its regard for the repetition of a simple unit enlivened by the illusion of movement across a space whose borders are arbitrarily defined somewhere, anywhere, within the visual field. The differences between one arabesque and the next, however, are profound. Space in the traditional arabesque is organized in terms of order, proportion, and mathematical precision. By contrast, Sabella's arabesques come to life by way of the artist's intuition, and all of their components derive from photographic montages of fragments repeatedly characterized by discontinuities. Furthermore, the one fundamental difference between the two are the centrifugal forces of symmetry found in the arabesque's traditional structure as well as the two-dimensional space that it fills and the lack of these elements in Sabella's arabesques.

There are no symmetries in Sabella's arabesques, just as there are no symmetries in the two worlds he lives in. In his photography it is metaphor that replaces the role of symmetry in the traditional arabesque. In the cubistic nature of his vision it is between the "here" he moved to and the "there" he came from that his metaphors manifest what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard called "the dialectics of outside and inside." It is no wonder that it was out of photographing fenestrations, barriers, brick walls, and skies that Sabella entered into his world of abstraction.

The slick surface and the state-of-the art production in Sabella's photography appeal to a contemporary taste and temperament. But that is only the threshold of Sabella's work, as suggested in von Amelunxen's analysis. Sabella's abstraction is all about displacements and the restlessness of living at a time stirred by chaos and ruin.

In his incessant attempts to mend together pieces of a world that no longer exists, Sabella's process of recollection subsequently emerged in the fragility of fragments of wall paint where the photographed past shatters like a mirror in one's home. Here, a poetics of time unravels in the fleeting moment, photographed such that the fragment resembles a chip of pottery from an archeological site. Time is no longer frozen in order to detail a narration. Rather, it is implied by the means of the very process used in the creative act, be it in the repetition of the photographed image or in the act of layering and erasing

images that were previously photographed. Repetition, like layering and erasing, implies time. This is a time beset by chaos, a time devoured by ruin.

How could an outsider mourn a ruin called Palestine? Where does he begin to write, from his distance, on the aesthetics of chaos, restlessness, and perpetual displacements? Which path to take, and for whom to write and why?

From his distance Hubertus von Amelunxen forges his own path. To begin with he ushers in Edward Said's writing to illumine the way, as the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish punctuating his text never ceases to flicker like a mirage in the distance. Throughout, von Amelunxen remains fully aware of the pitfalls in that distance beyond, from which Sabella's imagery comes.

In the course of maintaining his liminal position, he proceeds by summoning questions raised, in different periods and cultures, by poets and composers, historians and photographers, physicists and psychologists, novelists and philosophers, polymaths and playwrights, artists and cultural critics, to thread together an alphabet with which to articulate what his eyes read and where his mind leads. A flaneur par excellence presiding over the realm of the tangential, von Amelunxen is capable of building bridges between Heidegger and Darwish, between Kafka and al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham, and between Freud and Tarafa Ibn al-'Abd. In the process his text echoes the meanderings, discontinuities, and cubistic patterns that are characteristic of Sabella's art. But throughout the essay, it is the author's gaze that operates like a compass, enabling von Amelunxen to chart the trajectory of his own vision.

Since the third century, when Philostratus was recorded to have been the first to describe pictures he claimed to have seen in a gallery, writing on visual images has continued to call for the writer's imagination and knowledge to bridge the divide between visual and verbal expression. By penetrating into the interstices between image and language, painting and photography, poetry and prose, Hubertus von Amelunxen allows his reader to see what at first glance appears to be untranslatable to the eye. It is through his philosophical vision of photography that we can begin to trace the roots of originality in Sabella's work. Inspired by its contemplation, he presents us here with a personal ode to contemporary photography. Von Amelunxen's essay is as enlightening to read as Sabella's photographic images are a dream to discover.