

Free-Falling Into the Future: In Conversation with Steve Sabella

Madeline Yale Preston

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.

– Jacques Rancière¹

Photography is a strange and powerful beast. Shortly after the artist Louis Daguerre invented the first-known method of ‘fixing’ an image, writer Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed daguerreotypes as mirrors with a memory, ‘faithful witnesses’ of reality.² Fast-forward to nearly two centuries later: the flawed assumption that a photograph can be synonymous with reality has only evolved a short distance. The photograph not only serves as an apparatus of representation today,³ it has been a corroborator in sculpting historical record.

In recent decades, counter narratives in the humanities have helped shift the way we look at historical events. The widespread use of photography in digital crowdsourcing, considering the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ as an example, has expanded debates about the authority of visual representation. Yet, the photograph remains an important instrument in opaque systems of power, which helps structure how we perceive the world around us and our roles within it. John Tagg describes this well: ‘What lies “behind” the paper or “behind” the image is not reality – the referent – but reference: a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action.’⁴

For Steve Sabella, a Palestinian artist who has spent more than half of his life growing up in occupied Jerusalem, his national identity has been tethered to particular images that are circulated the world over. Mainstream media regularly depicts Palestinians as a traumatized or violent population, living in exile or under occupation, at odds with Israelis in the pursuit of land. There have been many efforts to ‘rescue’ this image of Palestinian identity, yet perhaps the most difficult perception to re-write is an internal one—what Sabella refers to as a ‘colonization of the imagination’.⁵ ‘Once we are locked inside the images of ourselves, these images take on a life of their own. ... [They] often outlast

us and can replace us as the “remembered” reality.’⁶ Liberation from the burdens of these ‘mental images’⁷ necessitates a manipulation of the imagination.

Sabella has freed himself from the psychological entrapment of exiled displacement. He describes this achievement as akin to, ‘dancing in the air, the core ignited ... It’s a spark. But to do that, I had to break my bones, to become more malleable to change.’⁸ A visualization of this process is first apparent in his series *In Exile* (2008), where the artist cathartically destroyed and assembled symbols of entry and exit. While it is not necessarily a sequential narration towards the attainment of mental freedom, *Euphoria* (2010) may propose an autobiographical remapping of the artist’s relationship to his homeland. Its repetitive, fragmented structures can symbolize a detachment from associative images of border and exile. *Beyond Euphoria* (2011) is likewise a series of splintered assemblages, its three-dimensional source material flattened, distorted, and restructured in two dimensions. All of these intended ‘dissolutions of forms’⁹ challenge photographic veracity, their abstract compositions far removed from any perceived mirror of memory.

Unlike the aforementioned fractured constellations, *Independence* is viscerally and deceptively whole. It is a new visual experience, wherein the only borders lie on the images’ edges themselves, and the outlines of the figures contained within them appear intact. The two females – one appearing young, the other older – could be floating or flying. Some of the images in the series are monological, though most portray the characters engaging in an intimate gestural dance. On closer inspection, fragmentation emerges. What could possibly be parts of bone or metal appear on or beneath the surface of their diaphanous skin. Lacking any facial detail, they are stripped of characteristics that could convey expressions, left with the sole sense of touch. Amidst a dark void, they appear in blurred obscurity, like anonymous forms suspended *in extremis*.

As theorist Roland Barthes implied, every photograph is of a dead moment.¹⁰ Whether we philosophically perceive a photograph to be of an experience that is

‘real’ or ‘imagined’, it is a tangible reproduction, which is by nature a cunning distortion. A photograph is a ghost of the image that once was, which is a ghost of the real. Even in the absence of the information before it, the camera still registers light on the surface substrate, effectively ‘inventing’ information, subjectively characterizing matter. If a photograph has the ability to define how reality is represented in the form of an image,¹¹ *Independence* can be read as a critique of the slippages between life and what is constructed in the mind.

Throughout histories of images, the human form has been exploited in search of its character, soul, and spirit. In its early days, photography greatly aided the European-led practice of physiognomy, the pseudoscientific measurement of internal character and personality by observing outward appearance, particularly in studying facial features. While we have long since moved beyond this essentialist system of representation and its associative fields of phrenology and pathognomy, it is an example of how visual symbolism has been co-opted as a method of social control.

Moving inside the body’s cavern, the development of x-rays in the late nineteenth century transitioned our perception of what lies beneath the surface of the skin. For several decades, foetal imaging has, for many parents, been the first memory of their child’s existence. These scans of life before birth are metamorphic, impassioned with parental uncertainty and anticipation. They are digital *mineral* memories, to use Umberto Eco’s term, which precede their *organic* memories made of flesh and blood.¹² For most of photography, however, the skeletal substrate, veins, nerves, and organs are only usually implied. Portrait photographer Richard Avedon describes his unrequited desire to delve deeply into his subjects’ being: ‘You can’t get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter ... The surface is all you’ve got.’¹³ Such are the limits of the image; thoughts and emotions cannot be photographed, just insinuated.

The aesthetics of Sabella’s *Independence* gesture towards a new visual code that has emerged in the last few decades in art photography. Digital photography, camera phones, and social media have introduced what some would describe as a ‘low-brow’ design into the genre, characterized by traits such as pixilation, variations in exposure, dramatic colour casts, and flash-induced blown-out highlights. Defined by artist and critic Hito Steyerl as a practice that has dissolved the pre-existing boundary between non-art and art,¹⁴

the pervasiveness of these popularized aesthetics has been met with polarized reception. For some, there still exists a hierarchy of images, where sharpness and resolution are given primacy. Photographic artist and writer David Bate suggests this may be due to anxiety and uncertainty about the digital processes behind so many images that circulate globally.¹⁵ Whether or not the images in *Independence* are made by digital or analogue means is a debate of little importance. Rather, it is the artist’s philosophy lying beneath the series’ abstracted aesthetic that is up for interpretation—a questioning of photography’s status quo.

Sabella describes his work as illusions that are ‘only meant to act as imagined bridges, map-like structures that connect us to our past with an eye to the future.’¹⁶ Framing this as a rebirth of visual thought, ruptures in the recorded histories of photography come to mind, specifically Surrealism’s evolutions desire to subvert systems of reason towards the achievement of new states of being. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Surrealists jettisoned the fashionable ‘straight’ style of photographing reality, often creating otherworldly compositions born from explorations of the subjective and unconscious. Within the movement, the woman was an obsessional subject and important metaphor. Critic Rosalind Krauss describes the relationship between the Surrealist photograph and female form as likewise constructed ‘figures for each other’s condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct’¹⁷ Sabella is no doubt duly aware of these theoretical symbols.

If we consider the Surrealists’ philosophy of the image as a point of departure into the imagination, Sabella possesses a similar avant-garde desire. This is perhaps one of intended collaboration between the artist and spectator. *Independence* reminds us that the experience of looking is subjective, informed by our own visual libraries, and there exists no common key to unlock its visual language. The series’ labyrinthine title – one of the artist’s few indexical cues – symbolically bookends the spectrum of interpretations that lie waiting for us.

There are multiple possibilities for the presentation and curation of *Independence*, including two-dimensional images on view at Meem Gallery and projected three-dimensional installations.¹⁸ They are part of what could be considered transmedial experiences that Sabella is creating—varying serial and contextual arrangements of his work that explore how images can be read, interpreted, re-read, and re-interpreted.

Arguably, Sabella is not a photographic artist expanding into other genres such as installation, but instead a visual investigator who is decoding visual syntax, exploring how to ‘unfix’ images so as to set us free from the power they hold in our lives.¹⁹

Madeline Yale Preston (MYP): *Independence* was born on an annual summer road trip that you take, which recalls for me the legacy of the photographic road trip in America following World War II, such as Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958), Stephen Shore’s *American Surfaces* (1972–73), and even Ed Ruscha’s conceptual *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). These bodies of work describe the sociocultural conditions of a specific nation—one whose principal ethos is regularly positioned as ‘independence’. The abstract visual forms in your series *Independence* seem divorced from these modernist photographic references. Is there a relationship between the history of photography, specifically the canonical photographic road trip, and this work? Is it a visual liberation from it?

Steve Sabella (SS): To answer you I need to briefly take you through an earlier ‘road trip’ through exile and my liberation from it. I was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, and started my visual journey from there. My project, *Jerusalem in Exile* (2006), led me to conceive that Jerusalem exists in an image state, especially because everyone has constructed differing and overlapping mental images of it. When I realized that I lived in the image of my city of birth, I felt entrapped, or to use my previous terminology, I felt ‘in exile’. I understood then that my struggle was to understand images in order to be free. Ultimately I liberated myself from exile, or the image of exile to be more precise, by resorting to the imagination. However, I soon realized that I became entrapped in other images too, such as the image of the artist, which I had to liberate myself from as well. Life is an endless process of liberation. We need to identify all systems and images that occupy our thoughts and imaginations so that we can think and imagine in our own way.

Road trips present to us the notion of the linear progression of images. Ed Ruscha’s gas stations are one good example. *The Americans* by Robert Frank is a look at life and the meaning generated by the symbols we associate with it. Stephen Shore’s work looked at

the photographic image itself and offered criticism of photographic discourse. Photographers go out and hunt for images or hunt for the opportunity to transform people or things into visuals. But what if everything is already in an image state, and our hunt is actually a process of isolating images and differentiating them from others?

I do not perceive the world in a linear way. My stations are random and my quest is to understand images, their origins and their function in decoding the visual puzzle: the world we live in.

MYP: Several of your series’ titles – *In Exile*, *Metamorphosis*, *Euphoria*, *Beyond Euphoria*, to name a few – suggest states of being that are interconnected in sum. One interpretation is that these ‘states’ are autobiographical, referring to your own evolutionary psychological framework, largely in response to living in occupied Jerusalem for the majority of your life. The title *Independence* – also a state of being – is a leading one. What is it independence from?

SS: In my catalogue essay for the *Archaeology of the Future* exhibition in Verona (October 2014), I ask whether we can break ourselves free from our image. 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 of how to explore and exit the state of mind I was living in. I transformed this state 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 narrative might still be there, but it will unfold itself in a different way. There are hidden layers in images that change perception all the time. It is time to engage further in the process of looking, where meaning resides only in the mind of the viewer.

MYP: Since you began the series in 2013, the argument over who should control Gaza and the West Bank has once again erupted in horrific violence. Have the events in Gaza since July 2014 redefined your relationship to *Independence*?

SS: It seems inevitable that we feel inclined to tie the notion of independence to life events because of the meaning the word generates. During this war I declared my independence and wrote, '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. 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. Every Palestinian should wake up today and say, 'I am a free person'. Freedom is not something that is granted; freedom is something felt. There can be no set date for the independence of Palestine. That independence day is today. Everyone should declare it. In this way, the recent events do not redefine the work, however, they present yet another context highlighting the urgency of self-liberation.

MYP: What is your perspective on Palestine's recent actions to regain its sovereignty?

SS: In my opinion, the Palestinian struggle for independence shifted from one that aimed to free occupied land to one that aimed to free the self. Israel has never before exerted such enormous control over the lives of Palestinians, causing them to constantly feel physically and psychologically occupied. I have understood for a long time that we need to differentiate between our struggle to liberate the land and our personal feeling of freedom. Colonizers always aim at making the occupied feel inferior, trapped and that his/her destiny is tied to the occupier's decision. Therefore differentiation between land and personal freedom is necessary. We are all born free and we should all feel free. Achieving this will inevitably lead to the liberation of the land.

MYP: You have long since experimented with photographic abstraction. While the compositions are abstract representations of human forms in *Independence*, they are remarkably different from the fragments and collages that came before and after this series. One could argue that *Independence* is a turning point in your artistic practice. How do you perceive it in relation to your other bodies of work?

SS: Collage allows for endless experimentation and discovery. I am intrigued by working with cut images because they can reveal hidden realities or 'mentalscapes' based on the imagination. Though its form represents a departure from collage, *Independence* is interconnected with my other works. Just like my collages, I aimed at revealing a visual that had never been seen before. The choreography needed to create *Independence* reminded me of the way I have thrown cut images together on my canvases to unveil unique visuals. To avoid getting entrapped in one way of looking at the world, I found a need to explore other ways of looking and researching. I liberated myself from medium and technique. People assume that I only do collage, but collage is just one form I explore the world with in order to discover hidden realities. I need to look at the world through other forms and in the future I intend to create works that have nothing to do with the photographic medium.

MYP: Distortion is central to *Independence*. Pixilation and 'noise' are constant. This makes me think of Hito Steyerl's concept of a 'bad image', which describes the materiality of a low resolution internet file in motion; an image that increasingly distorts and deteriorates with each reproduction. In this series, is deterioration symbolic of the quality of visual imagery today, in an era of information sharing?

SS: Even bad images have an aesthetic. What intrigued me about these images was their unique grain that looked neither like noise or pixilation and when seen up close exposed a whole mesh of colours.

Usually an artist develops a concept, searches for its form and then implements it. The images of *Independence* came from a moment in time, before the concept. For this work in particular, the visual came first. What you describe above is your legitimate interpretation. Anyone should feel free to develop and imagine concepts for the work.

MYP: The faceless human forms appear to be floating, sometimes in gestural conversation. It makes me think of a mother and her youthful daughter. Are these images representations of your personal memory?

SS: Memory is not on my mind. After I finished this work, and especially since I divorced my narrative from

my art, I always referred to the people in the images as figures. In Abed Al Kadiri's text on my work in the catalogue for *Layers*, he mentioned that my wife and child were depicted. I asked him if it was possible to simply use the word 'figures' instead. His reply ended the argument when he said, 'Why do you refuse, when in the past you never hesitated to expose your life, including your family members' lives?' He was right. A few years ago, I would have turned this story into a work of art. I would have fixed other mental images to my *Independence* images. But these are my mental images! What about the images you as a spectator want to fix to the work? This is what makes the process of viewing a much more intriguing experience, and why we sometimes find ourselves immersed in a work of art. This can occur when the artist has left room for interpretation and imagination.

The journey of life is a journey of images. Some images and works of art affect us deeply because at that exact moment in time they mean something to us. The viewers feel a connection with the images because other images seem to pop out from their own visual libraries. Our memories make up part of the visual language by which we interpret new images.

MYP: Photography has an overburdened and fraught relationship to reality and representation. You have said before that photography conceals more than it reveals. Can you expand on this?

SS: Photographs represent a turning point in our visual history. However these images become problematic when we begin to focus solely on rationalizing their indexical relationship with reality. Pictures create a consciousness of the world of their own. We need to jump into that world and experience it from within. This may allow us to discover the infinite possibilities that are hidden in images.

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 (another) medium that creates endless visual palimpsests. Think of the photographic image as a shining star in our galaxy that has not yet been explored but seen from a distance. All that we

know about the star comes from our interpretations of its shiny surface. 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.

MYP: The field of art photography increasingly requires artists to qualify their work with words, and historically more so in comparison to other mediums such as painting. I think this is a double-edged sword. You have spoken about the construction of meaning relative to much of your work. In a recent interview, you mentioned a desire to release your art from the written word. You have deliberately chosen not to accompany *Independence* with a statement (other than this dialogue). What is your philosophy behind this decision?

SS: 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 sometimes. 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 mainly 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.

We must separate the old narrative from the image, and start looking from multiple angles, from our own unique vantage points. Consequently we need to create our own personal interpretations of the world.

I am learning how to unveil new readings beyond the original intentions of my works (intentions that had more to do with context rather than the images themselves). I started to understand that my work, like other images, is a visual palimpsest, where what is hidden is far more than what is visible.

MYP: Considering the discourse of art photography as a discreet entity, albeit one that often functions within the related fields of visual art, journalism, and anthropology,

it has been argued that the history of photography is now dead. In the last decade, the singular model of a history, as it was constituted in the West, has become pluralized to *histories*. This has been in consideration of the global underrepresentation of both emerging and established photographic practices from regions once framed as subaltern, like the Middle East, in both critical and commercial contexts. Relatedly, the study of photography has been rebranded as the study of visual culture or visual studies.

Perhaps idealistically, I would like to think this is a desire to embrace the notion of multiple realities, but I do not think we are there yet. What is your perspective on these recent shifts in photographic discourse? Do you think it is possible for the discourse to become untethered to its hegemonic foundations?

SS: I can relate to why some would argue that the history of photography and by extension that photography is dead, but I believe this way of thinking may be too chronological and linear. Photography is not dead; in fact I believe photography is still in its infancy. As long as we keep connecting photography to life, the medium will continue to be static. We should explore photography from within and see how images generated by photography add to our understanding of the world we live in. Perhaps the quote by Georges Didi-Huberman is the new world order: '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.'

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 unfixed, bound no longer to paper or screen, liberated from time, floating freely in our imaginations.

MYP: What trajectories do you propose for the future of the image?

SS: Human consciousness has always been obsessed with image and imagination. In my essay for *Archaeology of the Future* I mentioned my next project, which I think theoretically sums up this interview well. I intend to spread light-sensitive photographic emulsion onto a wall in one of Jerusalem's Old City caves, and

project an image of the city onto it. I will use a chemical process to fix the image to the wall, but one day the image will most likely wither and peel off. Even though the image will physically disappear from the cave, it will survive in an infinite number of alternative forms such as photographs, films, and even in memory. The image never dies; it simply changes form.

We need to research the genealogy of the image by asking what came before the cave. The visual history of that image did not start with my projection of it on the cave wall. 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.

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.

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¹ Jacques Rancière, 'The Intolerable Image,' in *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2010), 103.

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,' *The Atlantic*, June 1859, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

³ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

⁴ John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 100.

⁵ Steve Sabella, 'Colonization of the Imagination,' *Contemporary Practices* 10 (2012): 28–33.

⁶ Steve Sabella, 'Hostage,' in *Steven Shore: From Galilee to the Negev* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 105.

⁷ Sabella, 'Colonization of the Imagination.'

⁸ Steve Sabella, 'Dare to Question My Identity or Where I Come From' (TEDx Marrakesh 2012, 19 October 2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26430T-Kyk0>.

⁹ Steve Sabella in Dorothea Schoene, 'Stages of Transition. Visualizing Exile in the Work of Steve Sabella,' *Afterimage* 39, no. 6 (2012): 11–14.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000).

¹¹ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 6.

¹² Umberto Eco, 'Vegetal and Mineral Memory: The Future of Books' (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 1 November 2003), http://www.bibalex.org/attachments/english/Vegetal_and_Mineral_Memory.pdf. See also Anna Reading and Richard West, 'Memory and the Cloud,' *Source* 78 (Spring 2014): 18–19.

¹³ Richard Avedon, 'Borrowed Dogs,' in *Performance and Reality: Essays from Grand Street*, ed. Ben Sonnenberg (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 17.

¹⁴ Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' *E-Flux* 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

¹⁵ David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 156.

¹⁶ Evrim Altug in conversation with Steve Sabella, 'Palestinian Tragedy Through the Eyes of the Artist,' *Cumhuriyet*, 27 July 2014, <http://www.stevesabella.com/newspaper-reviews.html>.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' in *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (Washington D.C. and New York: The Corcoran Gallery of Art and Abbeville Press, 1985), 95.

¹⁸ An installation of *Independence* is on view in a retrospective exhibition of Sabella's work at the International Center for Photography Scavi Scaligeri in Verona, 8 October–16 November 2014.

¹⁹ Sabella, 'Hostage.'