

TRANSLATION

[pp. 162–163]
Metamorphosis. Detail. 2012.
Lightjet print on diasec
+ 3.5 cm aluminium box edge.
160 x 160 cm.

[pp. 164–165]
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Lightjet print on diasec
+ 3.5 cm aluminium box edge.
160 x 160 cm.







In Transition, 2010.
Lambda print on diasec.
Three 205 x 44 cm triptychs
hung in a grid.
Euphoria & Beyond
exhibition at Empty Quarter
Gallery, Dubai, 2011.

If we understand irony as a riposte or a horror on the part of a counterpart, a negation embracing the existing and employing the affirmation of the existing, then the irony in the appearance of the image results in, as Sören Kierkegaard puts it, the “appearance not being the essence but the opposite of the essence.”⁵⁴ Kierkegaard’s understanding of irony is apt for describing Sabella’s singular use of the palimpsest. The expression of irony, as the “infinite absolute negativity” (and any addition must by its essence be understood as a negativity), is engaged in negation and thus “[irony] destroys the given reality by means of that very given reality.”⁵⁵ The 2014 work *38 days of re-collection*, begun a year after Sabella’s exile in 2009, is the result of a process of multiple imprints, like *Till the End* and yet quite different. The work adheres to a strict principle; it is subject to a compulsion to bring things together that construct history in its very breaches, of life, of suffering, of distortions, and hopes. It is not about the reconstruction of history but about the act of photographing as disaster, following Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* and its central statement: “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.”⁵⁶ In 2009 Sabella rented a house in Ein Karim in Jerusalem, which a Palestinian family had abandoned, to secure themselves, when they heard about the

Deir Yassin massacre in April 1948. He stayed in it for thirty-eight days, taking photographs of objects—utensils, walls, pictures—visually frisking the history of the place. Then, in his parental home and in other houses in the Old City of Jerusalem, he removed pieces of walls, little bits of painted plaster, or just of stained chalk. The color photographs were copied onto black-and-white film, and the pieces of fresco, flayed bits of wall, were covered in an emulsion, and the negatives from the house he lived in projected and fixed on that emulsion. Because of the different colors of the carrier, the black-and-white images take on a mysterious, dreamlike presence that really belongs to no place and no time. They look ghostly; are the absence of presence and the presence of absence, and it is hard to decide which place or time they belong to. The carrier, the fresco, is no thinner than photographic paper yet much more fragile, like a dried piece of parchment, and can be regarded as something that can disintegrate just by being touched.

The national disaster, the “Nakba,” destroyed the homeland of the Palestinians in May 1948. More than seven hundred thousand Palestinians were forced to leave their houses and not permitted to return to them.⁵⁷ As we are all aware, this dislocation had catastrophic consequences for the people of Palestine, who over the subsequent decades would be dispersed, ghettoized, imprisoned, or exiled. The wars, the settlement policy, and the intifadas have caused unbearable sacrifices. In one of his poems Mahmoud Darwish describes the visit made by Edward Said to a place near the house in Jerusalem in which he was born:

... I STOOD LIKE A BEGGAR AT THE DOORSTEP.
DO I ASK PERMISSION,
FROM STRANGERS WHO SLEEP
IN MY OWN BED, TO VISIT
MYSELF FOR FIVE MINUTES? DO I
BOW RESPECTFULLY TO THOSE
WHO RESIDE IN MY CHILDHOOD DREAM?
... WOULD THEY
SAY TO ME: THERE’S NO PLACE FOR TWO
DREAMS IN ONE BED?”⁵⁸

54 Sören Kierkegaard, “Über den Begriff der Ironie: Mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Sokrates,” in collaboration with Rose Hirsch, trans. Emanuel Hirsch, in *Gesammelte Werke*, part 31 (Regensburg: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1961), p. 251.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

56 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

57 See also Ilan Pape, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

58 Mahmoud Darwish, “Counterpoint: For Edward Said,” in *If I Were Another*, trans. from the Arabic by Fady Joudah (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2009) p. 189.

P169→ The *38 days of re-collection* bring about transfer-
ences. Sabella’s own house has become an image
superimposed by images of an occupied house. As
←P23 in *Till the End*, the retrieved objects are exhibited
in display cases, like archaeological items, histori-
cal excavations, and finds belonging to two eras,
one placed upon the other, each with its own dura-
tion. These are splinters of time, splinters of exist-
ence, and in their fragile materiality they carry
within them proximity and distance, at one and
the same time. It is as if, contrary to all physical
laws, moments in time and space had found them-
selves again, and now a moment carries a half a
century into our time as a result of the mere touch
of light, just as the moment, the instant, donates
its own present to the past again. Sabella collected
the moments, gathered them up like Baudelaire’s
rag-and-bone man gathered together the image of
history into a constellation of the present from
fragments, residues, what had been abandoned
and picked up. The original pieces of wall—fres-
coes—determined the place; they were the place
from which they were removed to be infused with
another time. The palimpsest-like amalgama-
tion of the colorful frescoes and the black-and-
white photographs developed on them convey the
impression of a present simultaneously appearing
and disappearing. It is as if the light were spread
carefully over the fragile plane with a brush, as
if to preserve the latency of the image in all its
potential and also to see it as an image. “The true
image of the past flits by,” writes Benjamin on the
concept of history, and,

“THE PAST CAN BE SEIZED
ONLY AS AN IMAGE, WHICH
FLASHES UP AT THE IN-
STANT IT CAN BE RECOG-
NIZED AND IS NEVER SEEN
AGAIN.”⁵⁹

59 Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ed. Gérard Raulet (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), p. 95; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255.

The *38 days of re-collection* bring about an updat-
ing of history that still awaits its correspondence
here, in thirty-eight *vedute*, fragmented and ruined
accumulations of time. This work of art turns the
bitterness of exile into the sensuality of the search.
In these superimpositions, where images, periods
of time, and material combine, a work of mourn-
ing is carried out that at the same time has an
aesthetic and epistemological element. “It is not
that what is past casts its light on what is pres-
ent or what is present its light on what is past,
rather the image is that wherein what has been
comes together in a flash with the now to form a
constellation. In other words: image is dialectics
at a standstill.”⁶⁰ Benjamin is referring not to the
continuous time between past and present, but to
the “erratic” dialectical time-jumping from “what
has been to what is now.”⁶¹ What the medium of
photography does is bring about this constellation
of encounter and riposte, operating against time,
as it were, and against the agenda of photography.
The artistic work of Steve Sabella undertakes its
process of translation not so as to produce similari-
ties or a mimesis of approximation, but to reflect
on the inherent conditions of pictoriality (*Bildhaft-
igkeit*) and its historical sediments—an imagology
of dissemination. The work on the *38 days of re-
collection* lasted from the first year of his exile
in 2009 to this year, 2014, and hence embraces the
other works done during that period.

In 2010 Sabella created the work *In Transi-
tion*, a tableau of nine color photographs of trees, ←P101
which as in *Euphoria*, have the sky as their hori- ←P113
zon; that is to say, they are taken from a diagonal
vertical angle, the head turned to the firmament
and without a view of the body. The firmament
thus flashes into view behind the treetops twirling
in the dizziness of the gaze. The different move-
ments in the nine photographs, arranged in three
horizontal sequences, put the viewer, me, in a state
of delirium. The circular movement, in which the
world rises and falls as if in serpentine, stopped
in each individual image and dynamized again in
the correspondence between the images, seems to
cast off any burden in the frenzy, like a wet dog
shaking to dry himself. Dancing images, albeit a

60 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5: *Das Passagen-Werk*, part 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), pp. 576–77, published in English as *Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project*, trans. R. Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000), esp. pp. 85–159.

61 *Ibid.*

P.169 → dance macabre. But it can also be a euphoric dance; both border on delirium or longing. The “erratic” constellation of time in the *38 days* of re-collection emerged as a spatial constellation in *In Transition*, as if there was no back to be concealed, no past to be encountered.

AND SOON THERE WILL BE
A NEW PRESENT FOR US.
IF YOU LOOK BACK YOU WILL SEE ONLY
THE EXILE OF YOUR LOOKING BACK...⁶²

Whereas the horizontal gaze also has a gaze toward the back, demands a looking back, the vertical gaze frees itself of this temporal bond. The earth, the ground, does not look back, nor does it have leniency (*Nachsehen*). Art truly dissolves the boundaries of life, and the heavenly perspective signifies a “delirium of evacuating” (*Räumen*) that applies solely to the “here,” the undivided “on site,” the presence beneath the trees. Conversely, the back stands for a non-place and for death. In the short novel *Pompes funèbres* (Funeral Rites, 1947–53) the narrator Jean Genet searches for the place where Jean was shot by a collaborator. He can only see and refer to the place “designated by the here,” and asks whether it is true “that the philosophers doubt the existence of things that are behind them?” What speed is required in order to see the *behind in the here*? The revolution of an airplane propeller? “Then you would notice that the things have disappeared, and oneself with them.”⁶³ *In Transition* actually marks a transition and negotiates, as it were, between the temporal constellation of one’s own biographemes of presence and absence, dwelling and exile, identity and loss, and the spatial constellation of possibilities, of alterity.

← P.101

38 DAYS OF RE-COLLECTION

2014

Steve Sabella. *38 days of re-collection*. 2014.
B&W white film negative
(generated from a digital image)
printed with B&W photo emulsion spread
on color paint fragments collected from
Jerusalem’s Old City house walls.

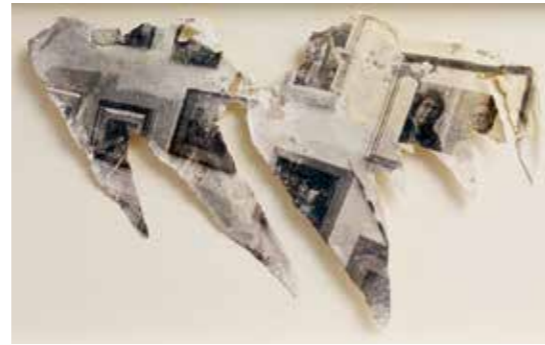
[I]—Diptych → 8.9 x 6.8 cm 9.9 x 6.7 cm	[VI] 24 x 48 cm	[XI] 27 x 17 cm	[XVI] 27.5 x 29.6 cm	[XXI] 16.5 x 11.5 cm
[II] 45 x 31.5 cm	[VII] 47.8 x 27.4 cm	[XII] 15 x 20 cm	[XVII] 14 x 19 cm	[XXII] 27.5 x 21.5 cm
[III]—Tetraptych → 9 x 7.1 cm 9.4 x 5.1 cm 7.7 x 6.9 cm 5.3 x 8.1 cm	[VIII]—Triptych → 19.1 x 12.2 cm 13.1 x 11.3 cm 8.2 x 8.2 cm	[XIII]—Tetraptych → 8.5 x 8.9 cm 6.5 x 7.9 cm 6.9 x 5.8 cm 5 x 14.3 cm	[XVIII] 20 x 15.5 cm	[XXIII] 21.2 x 16 cm
[IV] 13.5 x 20.3 cm	[IX] 33 x 21.5 cm	[XIV] 27 x 23.6 cm	[XIX]—Diptych → 8 x 5.4 cm 12 x 9.8 cm	[XXIV] 7.3 x 5.6 cm
[V]—Diptych → 10.5 x 10.2 cm 12 x 12.2 cm	[X] 10 x 23 cm	[XV]—Triptych → 9.6 x 16.7 cm 16.6 x 12 cm 8.8 x 13.4 cm	[XX] 6.1 x 13.2 cm	[XXV] 28 x 18 cm
				[XXVI] 16.7 x 10.3 cm
				[XXVII] 15 x 45 cm

⁶² Mahmoud Darwish, “We Were Missing a Present,” in Darwish 2007 (see note 53), p. 5.

⁶³ See Hubertus von Amelnunxen, “Reproduction and the Revenant Derrida and Genet,” in *Symbolic Imprints: Essays on Photography and Visual Culture*, ed. Lars Kiel Bertelsen et al. (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1999), pp. 162–79.



[I]



[II]



[XIII]



[XIV]



[III]



[IV]



[XV]



[XVI]



[XVII]



[V]



[VI]



[VII]



[XVIII]



[XIX]



[XX]



[VIII]



[IX]



[XXI]



[XXII]



[XXIII]



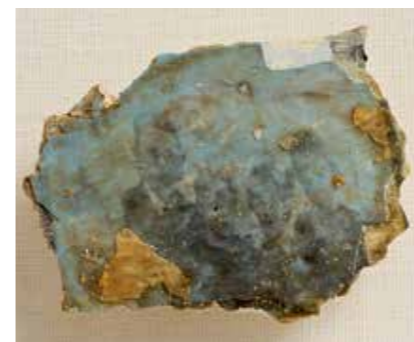
[X]



[XI]



[XII]



[XXIV]



[XXV]



[XXVI]



[XXVII]