

BEYOND FINITUDE: STEVE SABELLA'S 38 DAYS OF RE-COLLECTION

T.J. DEMOS

How does one materialize the grief of geopolitical dislocation and historical injustice—in this case, that of the occupation of Palestine—into a mode of sensibility, one that isn't captured by its own melancholic negativity?

With *38 Days of Re-Collection*, we glimpse scenes of aesthetic plenitude, just beyond reach. Beyond reach because the images are flattened, obscured, fragmented, blurred and discolored. Their supports are irregular, each being singular, being ripped from walls, ripped from time, opening layers of the past. They are portals to the past, peeled-away strata, archaeological traces. In some, arabesques appear, whether on actual fragments of wall decoration or delivered via photographic images printed on such fragments, showing interiors with tiled floors, which speak of simple ways of turning a house into a home. We see designs of geometrical patterns, floral arrangements, simple ornamental compositions such as images of intertwining ribbons, diamond- and star-shapes and -patterns—compositions that allude to the pleasures of overcoming natural imperfection and arbitrariness. These designs indicate an order of logic, mathematical and spatial regularity, predictable patterns that undoubtedly would continue on beyond these fragments if they were not cut off from their sources. They imply forms of continuity and control over one's environment. As well, they intimate the privilege of being in a position to beautify one's home, betraying an assumed security of a desire for more than creaturely subsistence, an assumption of style and even domestic comfort. These are traditional patterns of

Jerusalem, their recognizability owing to the fact that they are familiar and common local designs, thus part of a longstanding collective culture, if of diverse religions. They allude to a time, in other words, of now-longed for relative communal security and comfort, of being part of a stable social environment stretching through time without limit.¹

Domestic images of objects like pots and pans, cooking knives hanging on a wall, also appear in these image-fragments. Their very connection to a kitchen indicates a stability and privilege that is itself a precious thing, one denied to the displaced and homeless. Similarly, on other fragments, framed photographs of individuals and family portraits appear as blurred images with spots and stains, faces only just legible, interrupted by tears, textural irregularities, and gaping holes in their support structure. As Ella Shohat observes, the series' process of scraping away layers of walls, on which Sabella prints his photographic depictions, constitute "both an act of excavation of the buried substrata of forgotten lives, as well as a means to visualize lives once again intermingled."² These faces consequently assume a ghostly presence, situating the images between appearance and disappearance, within the realm of the hauntological—the realm of the haunting of being as much as the being of haunting.³ What is this haunting?

On the one hand, we know that this project, *38 Days of Re-Collection*, concerns the work of an artist who has extensively transformed the anguished personal and collective experience of Palestinian political and geographical displacement into aesthetic sensibility. He has done so across a number of artworks, offering ways of sensing the complex emotions that have accompanied that experience of dislocation and the denial of one's home, which for Palestinians began in 1948 with the Nakba: the catastrophe of Israel's violent expro-

1 In an extended analysis, one might productively compare these fragments with the images reproduced in Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora. A Photographic History Of The Palestinians 1876–1948* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2004).

2 Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements. Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (London: Pluto Press, 2017)

3 For more of the Derridean aesthetic implications, see Demos, *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

priation of Palestinian territory and the forced exile of approximately 800,000 people from their homeland. That disaster also continues to this day, via collective and post-memory (by the descendants of the originally traumatized), as well as with the ongoing occupation of Palestinian lands, including the militarized regimentation of artificial geographies of separation and inequality, producing scenes of everyday violence, together with the continual refusal of homecoming to multitudes of Palestinian refugees. The aesthetic plenitude glimpsed in these objects of *38 Days of Re-Collection* remembers and re-collects the prehistory of that trauma, a time before the trauma, as well as offering a promise of hope for the future—perhaps one day the wholeness of life, the secure connection to one's homeland and the aesthetic privilege it might afford, will be available again.

But of course the images also make apparent the violence of loss, manifested in material, aesthetic, and phenomenological terms. What we have here are allegories of appearance and disappearance, a cycle that translates the pain of loss into the memory of possession, the trauma of fragmentation into the relief of completion, and vice versa.

We know from countless Palestinian and Israeli theorists, historians and critical commentators that the violence of the occupation of Palestinian lands is nothing less than a severance of subject from home. It produces a state of exile that represents an "unhealable rift between a human being and a native place," a rift that separates one from "the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography," as Edward Said has described its effects.⁴ Such a severance has in fact been part of a longstanding process of what the dissident Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has termed "ethnic cleansing"—a goal of the total resettlement of Palestinians to land outside Israel (including its Occupied Territories), encouraged by economic pressure, land appropriation,

settler-colonial pressure, and military violence.⁵ It correlates to what Baruch Kimmerling has argued is the Israeli project of subjecting Palestinians to "politicide," referring to a process that covers a wide range of social, political, and military activities whose goal is to destroy the political and national viability of a people and thus deny them the possibility of genuine self-determination.⁶ In existential terms, the result of this regime produces a dread of disappearance, as described long ago by Said: "The destruction of Palestine in 1948, the years of subsequent anonymity, the painful reconstruction of an exiled Palestinian identity, the efforts of many Palestinian political workers, fighters, poets, artists, and historians to sustain Palestinian identity—all of these have teetered alongside the confounding fear of disappearance, given the grim determination of official Israel to hasten the process to reduce, minimize, and ensure the absence of Palestinians as a political and human presence in the Middle Eastern equation."⁷

It's nothing less than this existential condition of the threat of erasure—as well as, importantly, the determined attempts to retain connection to the material traces of the past, the homeland, and one's historical people—that Sabella translates into an aesthetic experience with *38 Days of Re-Collection*.

In doing so, Sabella adds to an expansive history of artistic and cultural negotiations of this dialectic of geopolitical loss and remembrance, subjective dislocation and reconnection. Other notable Palestinian artists

4 Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Granta* 13 (Autumn 1984), p. 159.

5 Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

6 Kimmerling, *Politicide. Sharon's War Against the Palestinians* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 3.

7 Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. xx.

8 See my chapters on Ahlam Shibli and Emily Jacir in T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image. The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). In *Palestine Inside Out. An Everyday Occupation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), Saree Makdisi writes: "What draws me to Palestine, then, is neither nationalism nor patriotism, but my sense of justice, my refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice" (p. xvi).

and photographers, such as Emily Jacir and Ahlam Shibli, have also approached this dynamic through their work in recent years, each in distinctive and singular ways.⁸ These approaches not only offer personal negotiations of the life-determining history of Palestine and the country's subjection to past political oppression, but also contribute to the collective refusal to remain silent in the face of ongoing injustice, dispossession and colonial violence. That is, even if an explicitly political agenda may not be evident in Sabella's photographic and sculptural allegories, operating as they do between the visuality of remembrance and the unattainable material whole, between the migrant image and the dislocated object.

On the other hand, *38 Days of Re-Collection* moves beyond, without forgetting, the particularity of Palestinian experience, and touches on the very phenomenology of loss that affects everyone. For these pieces, ripped from the past, and which reference both time (measured in days, but extending to years and decades) and space (gathering material expanses that have been collected and re-collected), offer a poetic meditation on the condition of impermanence and finitude that determine the very truth of existence. Of course that truth, unveiled in Sabella's creatively hybrid medium, itself the materialization of a resonant in-between-ness, is one that has been remarked upon before from various theoretical vantage points—from photography's relation to death to archaeology's connection to loss.

Brought together in his work, it offers an allegory that mediates between the painful destruction of the past and the creative but ultimately futile attempts to mitigate its pain and continual displacement.

Isn't that what *38 Days of Re-Collection* proposes—an aesthetic construction that, through fractured images and material fragments, offers an affective experience of that dialectic of loss and redemption, one so poignant and of such complex nuance that its very unspeakable power demands nothing less than a poetics of

allusion and necessary incompleteness? That poetics generates an aesthetic zone where the particularity of Palestinian geopolitical displacement, one entered through the traces of Sabella's own personal experience, meets the universality of that dialectic of loss and redemption. For it's precisely because we all experience and negotiate that general condition that we can each relate to, and at least begin to comprehend, the ongoingness of a longstanding and collective political injustice. With these affective fragments, empathy may lead to solidarity, and the vagueness of phenomenological insecurity can find specificity in a situation that has no necessity, that can therefore be transformed.



Steve Sabella. *38 Days of Re-Collection*. 2014. 10.3 x 16.7 cm. Unique. (Detail)