

## COLLECTING NOTES TO AND FOR THE FUTURE

NAT MULLER

Brittle shards of wall enshrined in vitrines mix with a colorful, contemporary take on Arabic illuminated manuscripts. There are timeworn chess pieces and mirrors too.

**Time seems to ping-pong between and around these objects: carrying them from the past into the future, pausing in the present, and back again.**

Always there is anticipation. Time is a marker and a vehicle for what is exhibited in *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future*: it is sliced up, cobbled back together again, rendered playful and less precious—or, conversely, monumentalized. If anything, time is activated in such a way to remind us that all collections, and ultimately all exhibitions, amass and stretch time. By showing Steve Sabella's *38 Days of Re-Collection* (2014) and Rebecca Raue's *Kalila wa Dimna* series (2017) together with objects from the renowned Bumiller Collection of Islamic Art—11th-century Persian chess pieces and 17th-century mirrors, in this case—the exhibition is as much about the politics of collecting as it is about collecting as an artistic strategy. Indeed, the latter is not only a gesture that catalogues and preserves cultural heritage from the past, but one that is generative and produces imaginaries for the future as well. Both Sabella's and Raue's projects, though very

<sup>1</sup> Despite the courageous and necessary work of few revisionist Israeli historians such as Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim and Benny Morris—the so-called “New Historians,” who view the Palestinian dispossession as central to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948—Palestinian collective and individual memory, as well as their historical narrative and presence, remains very much underrepresented.

<sup>2</sup> Literally “catastrophe” in Arabic, designating the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the forced displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes.

different in aesthetics and approach, can be viewed as rooted in the act of collecting. It is an accumulative act that, as the artists show through their respective works, is always one that is coming into being and is incomplete. An act that suggests the whole

to be more than just the sum of its parts, and therefore pits the individual piece against the larger entity that is the collection. It is perhaps an apt societal metaphor for how to address the position of the individual vis-à-vis the collective, in terms of narrating memory, history and demonstrating agency in the state of the future.

At the heart of *Fragments from Our Beautiful Future* lies not only a complication of who the “we” is in our beautiful future, but also who holds ownership over the future's fragments. Collections, every collector or conservationist should remind us, are never innocent. Whether subject to institutional curatorial policy, the obsessional desire of a collector, the market's logic, or, more grimly, the history of lucrative spoils resulting from war and empire, collections can be seen as ephemeral homes for displaced objects. It is through the lens of temporal and geographical displacement, the meaningful confusions and transformations it creates in the work of Sabella and Raue, that I wish to read this exhibition.

In 2009, for thirty-eight days, Palestinian artist Steve Sabella took up residence on the outskirts of Jerusalem, in an old Palestinian house in Ein Kerem, which he rented from an Israeli family. Combining a real-time durational experience of living there with the meticulous photographing of what he found inside the house in an attempt to chronicle the traces of history of his surroundings, Sabella himself became

<sup>3</sup> For Sabella's take on archaeology and the image, see “Unlocking Visual Codes” (April, 2015). Retrieved from <http://stevesabella.com/Unlocking-Visual-Codes-Steve-Sabella-Palestine-Art-Talk-2015.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sabella's memoir *The Parachute Paradox* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2016).

a time capsule mediating the temporal limbo of the Palestinian condition. Palestinians are still largely denied their place in history;<sup>1</sup> by corollary, this makes claims on the present, let alone the future, extremely challenging. Now Ein Kerem is a picturesque dwelling for well-to-do Israelis and a much-coveted Airbnb location, but it was once a thriving Palestinian village that was emptied of its inhabitants during the *Nakba*.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore telling that Sabella chooses as a subject the ultimate symbol of Palestinian dispossession—namely, the home. Moreover, focusing on the house's contents rather than its outward facade suggests that we as viewers become privy to that which is usually kept from sight, is untold and unseen. Palestinian grief and loss haunts these occupied houses. Subtly Sabella unearths this. His strategy is a paradoxical one though, and in its own terms, one of displacement. For the same project he carefully removes painted plaster from the walls of houses in the Old City of Jerusalem, including his parental home. Located in contested territory and subject to Israeli occupation since 1967, these houses are under continuous pressure of being confiscated by Israeli settlers. The shards are printed with his black-and-white photographs of what he documented in Ein Kerem. It is as if he is scraping history and presence away in order to prove it and reconstruct it later.

The chipped-off absences the artist creates in the Old City houses not only echoes the ongoing displacement of Palestinians from their homes, but also the historical amnesia coupled with the latter event. In that sense, the act of carefully harvesting—or collecting, if you will—these wall fragments is one of re-appropriation that re-instates memory. Though this is a defiant gesture against erasure, it also shows the difficulty of Palestinian memory being preserved at the *locus delicti*. Sabella has to first transform these shards of wall into objects of the past and undo them from their current ontology as functioning walls. In fact, by peeling the plaster off the wall, he cuts short their timeline. No longer do they stand witness to history; now they have become history. It is a reversed archaeology of sorts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, photography, which is Sabella's medium of choice, captures and freezes a moment in time. By collaging the temporality of the wall plaster with that of the photographs, as well as Palestinian ownership with Israeli occupation, the artist hybridizes in one object its origin and passage through time. The

layers are displayed in an almost suspended manner, fragilely yet monumenally in their vitrines. In these objects, it is difficult to see where one image's layer ends and another begins: what is wall paint, what is photograph and what is the wear and tear of time? The result is what the artist calls a “visual palimpsest,”<sup>4</sup> in which the timeline of the image and the image of time become one spectral material object, and something entirely novel.

Excising the painted plaster from its original context makes these fragments strangely mobile and autonomous—a wry nod to the exilic reality many Palestinians face, yet simultaneously a plight Sabella has come to embrace as one that propels his creativity.<sup>5</sup> It is here that notions of possession, dispossession and transformation come into play by means of an archive that is both deeply personal and collective. True, Sabella's image-fragments are material objects, however, they materialize the memory (or the absence thereof) of his own lived experience, and that of many other Palestinians sharing similar or worse fates. By collecting and *de facto* appropriating slivers of walls of old Palestinian houses and images of the interiors of dispossessed homes, he not only claims his own and fellow-Palestinians' place in history, but more broadly insists on visually representing this through an aesthetic that is ambiguously captivating as much as it is political. *38 Days of Re-Collection* unfolds through a dynamic of collecting and recollecting—in other words, through accumulation and remembering. Fragmented and ruptured as it is, this story is not linear, but still it is one that yields and unfurls the more we look.

Whereas Sabella collages the sensibilities of belonging and (forced) alienation of what he finds in his immediate surroundings, Rebecca Raue's collages seem based on estranging that which at first glance seems removed from her culturally and in time. Somehow, she magically makes it her own, confusing common notions of provenance. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the genealogy of *Kalila wa-Dimna* itself, one of the most renowned books of animal fables in the Arab world, reads as a multi-tiered amassment of origins. First written in Sanskrit in the 4th century CE and then translated into Old Persian, then Arabic, then Spanish and so on and so forth, the book has travelled across continents, in time and in language. With each translation and new iteration of the manuscript's

illustrations, *Kalila wa-Dimna* has been modified. In a sense, Raue honors this tradition by creating textual and painterly palimpsests of her own, using printed scans of an 18th-century Egyptian or Syrian version sourced from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's digital archive of medieval manuscripts. In other words, for this project, as with previous ones, Raue has worked with an existing collection—carefully browsing the folios and then selecting those to be transformed. As such, her strategy is almost that of a museum conservationist annotating objects, albeit with a rather radical streak of the hand. Indeed, there is a poetic and at times ironic violence in Raue's series, however, the "original" is never obliterated. To the contrary, in her "cataloguing" it is emphasized.

Apart from working on the folio scan with her distinctive use of text that is scratched rather than written, and her thick amorphous blotches of paint, Raue also adds her own interpretation to the Metropolitan Museum's folio titles. For example, *The Captive Peasant with his Two Wives* becomes *Reconnect to Female Power—The Captive Peasant with His Two Wives*. In this feminist version, the poor peasant is increasingly blotted out by thick black paint and disappears into the margins, while his two wives gain more presence in the image. Phrases like *reconnect to female power* and *bringing in fruits of life*, and words like *blood* and *bleeding* dance all over the page, accompanying the wives' now blood-red colored breasts. And then there are the little childlike sailboats Raue has dotted across the page. All together, it is a raw but layered declaration of the power of women. There are also more philosophical takes, such as in *The Fish and the Fisherman*, which becomes *Emptiness / Trying to Touch the Soul—The Fish and the Fisherman*. Gone is the blossoming tree of the original, the pond holding the fish, as is the division between land and water. The fishermen seem to be floating in a void of blue together with their fish. The descriptions found in the Metropolitan Museum's digital archive state quite factually what can be discerned on the folios. Raue's additions take even a dry description like "fish and fishermen" into altogether different realms. It is an interesting take on how we approach cataloguing metadata and object classifications of collections, as Raue scrambles up everything—from name, geography and date, to medium and provenance. In a sense, she has de-sacralized a historical collection and has catapulted it into the present. This

is an artistic and political gesture, but one that can also be read in terms of institutional critique, drawing attention to how collections are constructed and mediated. If anything, Raue unflattens fixed time and hurls its potentialities to the viewer.

Seen through *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future*, time appears to be in the eye of the beholder. This is quite poetically brought to the fore by exhibiting metal mirrors from The Bumiller Collection. These oxidized looking glasses have lost their reflective surfaces and thus their ability to mirror what is in front of them. Like Sabella's wall fragments, they have lost their functionality as utensils and have become something else. This loss opens up other possibilities in which we do not exactly see our own image, but something else diffracted in time and space, akin to Raue's very personal renditions of *Kalila wa Dimna*. It is a fitting metaphor for any exhibition, and particularly fitting for this one: a mirror wherein the reflection of our own image is suggested, but is altogether not offered.

### The chess pieces from the 11th to the 13th century allude that we are perhaps part of a game we cannot fully play.

They form a *pars pro toto* for the exhibition at large in which—like in a game of chess—tactics and a sequence of moves follow each other while never fully disclosing themselves. It is in this imaginary space that the various ontologies of the works brought together in *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* reveal themselves to us rather as possibilities of the past and of the future. And it is in this very possibility, in times that have become cynical and dark, that beauty must reside.



Rebecca Raue. *Silent Light / The Essence – The Merchant Listens to the Workman Playing Cymbals* (folio from a *Kalila wa Dimna*, 18th Century, Syria or Egypt). 2017. Acrylic, coal, crayon, pastel, balsa wood and paper on paper mounted on aluminum composite panel. 64.5 x 49.5 cm. (Detail)



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. 5.6 x 7.3 cm. Unique. (Detail)

## MOTTO ADAPTED FROM “PALESTINE: THE NOMADIC CONDITION”

ABDUL-RAHIM AL-SHAIKH

The nomadic space is a radical one both in its poetics and politics. The heterotopian nature of the nomad’s “smooth” space (rather than the State’s, which is “striated”) endows it with an anarchic distribution that makes conformity a tasteless joke: temporality and movement are the only ruling principals.

Contrary to the relation that might be drawn between *logos* and *polis* to produce a pre-structured command, one to rule citizens in the city, the two defining principles of the act of nomadism—temporality and movement—suggest that the “modern” nomad—whether living on the periphery of the city, passing through it, or dwelling in a non-structured smooth space outside of it—is a defiant citizen par excellence. Nomadic citizenship, then, should be the only natural mode of allegiance that escapes the lethal nature of national citizenships lamented by every humanist intellectual from Schmitt to Said.

The aesthetic radicality of the “nomad knowledge” was praised by Deleuze in his work on Marcel Proust, in which he demonstrated that art should be more than a medium of expression through mimetic means, but rather a non-descriptive, progressive vehicle of inquiry that examines aspects of temporality, desire and memory within the *espace quelconque*. At this point, the artist becomes a creative manipulator who dreams of being: an *mutawahhid* of Avempace, a Baudelairian *flaneur*, a Deleuzian nomad, and a Foucauldian intellectual destroyer.

The nomad’s lines of flight provide a wide venue that maximizes what art can do: blow apart strata, cut roots, and design new connections within any given assemblage.

Nomadic art is a poetic and political alternative to national art that was betrayed and turned against itself, and most certainly it is the only mode of art that would salvage our inhuman condition in this century. He who does not become a nomad in his heart will neither understand nor live freedom.