COLLECTING NOTES TO AND FOR THE FUTURE

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

Time seems to ping-pong between past and future: it is sliced up, cobbled back together. Conversely, monumentalized. If anything, time is activated as a vehicle for what is exhibited in the realm of 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 the collection 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 obsessive 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 and meaningless transformations it creates, that the collection becomes one spectral material object, and something more than just the sum of its parts, and therefore 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.

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 meticolous photography of what he found inside the house in an attempt to chronicle the traces of history of his surroundings, Sabella himself became a time capsule mediating the temporal limbo of the Palestinian condition. Palestinians are still largely deprived, if they are not liberated from war and empire, collections can be seen as large entities that are 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 haunt these occupied houses. Subtly Sabella underlines this. His strategy is a paradoxical one that, 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 chopped-off absences the artist creates in the Old City houses not only echoes the ongoing displacement of Palestinians from their homes, but also 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 loci delecti. Sabella has to first transform these shards of wall into objects of the past and undo them from their current context and (forced) alienation of what he finds in his immediate environment. As Rodrigo Kuno points out in his essay, Sabella’s strategy is a paradoxical one that, 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.

1 Despite the courageous and necessary work of few revisionist Israeli historians such as Ilan Pappe, Hila 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—Palestine’s collective and individual memory, as well as their historical narrative and presence, remains very much underrepresented.

2 Literally “chaos theoretique” in Arabic, designating the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the forced displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes.


4 Ibid.

5 For Sabella’s memoir The Parachute Paradigm (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2016).


7 For Sabella’s memoir The Parachute Paradigm (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2016).


9 Ibid.

10 For Sabella’s memoir The Parachute Paradigm (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2016).

11 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 traveled 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 conservator 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. 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.

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

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**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)
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.