STAGES OF TRANSITION: VISUALIZING "EXILE" IN THE WORK OF STEVE SABELLA

An extensive body of scholarship within the various fields of the humanities has worked to broaden the definition of the term "exile," though the implications of the word itself remain unclear. Definitions range from an inescapable perception of the world as a "foreign land," where all of us are estranged and alienated, to a narrower intended meaning of the displacement of a person from his or her homeland.

The term is commonly used in a wide variety of rhetorical formulations, and not always with the acknowledgement of the inherent differences among usages. In these various contexts exile is usually described with connotations such as exclusion, displacement, estrangement, dis-familiarity, translocation, and translation. The referent may be ambiguous: when are we talking about exiles, and when are we talking about nomads? When is the displacement voluntary? These differences lead to further questions, including what constitutes cultural and national identity, and when do these identities begin to overlap with multinational or even global identities, which play increasingly significant roles in a globally linked society. Where one nation alone is no longer home to a person, the question of exile may not necessarily become obsolete, but most certainly becomes more complex.

Even the most comfortable scene may become exotic and strange due to a lack of shared cultural forms or artifacts. Where we enter a transnational or postnational approach to art, we need to acknowledge that art criticism may not match the multinational identity underlying each work: an author's or art critic's linguistic or cultural background may not allow him/her to fully grasp the coded language underlying an art work. How permeable is art and its meaning when described in words? How translatable does it remain?

Palestinian-born artist Steve Sabella has addressed his own personal experience of exile in his works since the mid-1990s. Born and raised in Jerusalem, he encountered a sense of estrangement and uprooting from an early age. In 2006, he began a consecutive series of photographic works to document his experience of exile in its various stages of adjustment and emotional perception, using two disparate forms to address this issue. One, entitled *Exit* (2006), is a series of hands—aged, twisted, without any further identity—that paralleled Sabella's own state of mind and feelings of alienation and estrangement right before his departure from Palestine. The other, *Jerusalem in Exile* (2005–), is a conceptual project in which the artist invited Palestinians from around the world to share their personal views

and mental images of Jerusalem. The project gained international attention, leading to its production as a documentary film of the same name in 2007. By pursuing this investigative form of art making, Sabella found evidence that the city was so fragmented in its own residents' perception that it could no longer claim a unique, uniform identity—the city itself was drawn into exile.

Sabella completed a BA in Visual Arts at State University of New York Empire State College in 2007, followed by two master's degrees in England, one from the University of Westminster and the other from Sotheby's Institute of Art. With a clear impetus on documenting the leave from his homeland, Sabella's work raises the question of where the space for exile is actually located. And, in turn, it suggests that exile may begin on native soil.

In London, Sabella continued his work on exile with four photocollage series: "In Exile" (2008), "In Transition (a photographic work created with vigorous hand movements while taking the image)" (2010), "Euphoria" (2010), and finally "Beyond Euphoria" (2011). The titles clearly indicate the emotional stages in which the artist found himself, but reveal—in conjunction with the actual artwork—an aspect more linked to the process of each work: the more euphoric the artist became, the more he aimed for a dissolution of forms. The titles serve almost as a closing remark to an ongoing process of arranging forms and elements—sometimes with a repetitive layout of similar forms and visual elements, and at other times using distortion and fragmentation of color and shapes. The artist points out that his method of making photocollages is more like painting than documenting a state of being or photographing a particular moment. This long, elaborate process of arranging and distorting forms is only indicated by the title as a reflection of the inner state of being, the emotional condition of artmaking—a personal archeology. To give exile a form means to reveal a sensitive, personal experience, and to acknowledge at the same time the inescapability of these

Above
Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian (2008–10) by Steve Sabella; courtesy the artist

circumstances, the complexity of definitions and conditions under which exile is experienced by the tormented individual.

Taking into consideration that his works are the final result of a long, almost painterly process of arranging, the question remains as to how much can be retraced and what the most important part of his art is. Is it the elaborately arranged layers of the actual art object, or their inherent reference to a previous act of capturing his own state of mind? "You'll understand my life through my work," the artist claims.[1] This statement is true in a double sense: first, because of his intimate portrayal of his emotional state of being; secondly, because Sabella, for the most part, documents his immediate surroundings. His oeuvre is thus a continuously growing diary and portfolio of his own life's documentation.

The series "In Exile" uses a metaphor ubiquitous in Western art: the window. Windows demarcate a permeable boundary between inside and outside, between private and public. The boundary can be crossed by looking through the window from either side; it stands as both entry and exit. Its translucent character suggests voluntary exposure, and comfort with being unmasked to the Other's gaze. In contradiction to this seemingly comfortable exposure stands the arrangement of the work: Sabella's collage collects a seemingly endless number of windows, pointing in all directions with no clear arrangement or structure—a disquietude in opposition to the common perception of a window.

The artist, looking back on this time, describes his state of mind as one of "locked-in syndrome," which he tried to capture in the order of his collages. For Sabella, arriving in a different country and finding himself in exile meant an uncertain and unclear outlook, for which the artist found a simple but powerful visual translation. While "In Exile" has a rather constructed, fixed geometry, its sharp angles are replaced by a more fluid layout. Sabella, finding an accelerated comfort with abandoning previous artistic and emotional constraints, created the series "In Transition." Here the artist uses images of natural elements such as grass and trees. Standing for growth and movement, yet also something that was rooted, these are used to indicate a first step in coming to terms with his state of uprootedness. His next series, "Euphoria," followed immediately; indeed, Sabella began the series just a week after finishing "In Transition." Ultimately, the aesthetic aspect of each piece became increasingly important. While the title still reveals a personal impulse and a reflection of emotional state, the examination of beauty and aesthetics has become a more prevalent part of the work. The last of the series, for now, is "Beyond Euphoria," about which the artist states:

> While working on "Euphoria," I felt that there was something beyond, and this is when "Beyond Euphoria" came to light. The form had to look more abstract. The work might resemble paintings but this was never the goal. In fact, what makes it stand out is probably when people realize that the collage is made up of photographic images. That is, the work resorts to photography to achieve its effect. Photography has that unique artistic quality that can create an immediate connection with the viewer. It has to do with the image that has an uncanny resemblance with the world. After years of working with the photographic medium, it seems that my images lost that uncanny resemblance and are now pushing for a newer understanding of the exhausted photographic image.[2]

The artist suggests here that not only has the topic come to a provisionary end, but so too has his previously preferred format and medium.

These series—mappable phases of his personal life—convey his perception of photography as a tool for symbolic documentation. Defining and, more importantly, understanding one's self, the artist suggests, is the key to liberation—an approach he finds applicable and helpful for understanding the events of the Arab Spring. A question remains, however: is this a way of coming to terms with, and accepting the world as foreign land—*mundus totus exilium est*, as in the twelfth-century quotation by Hugh of Saint Vincent—or is it a way of bringing an end to feelings of estrangement and displacement? What comes "beyond" or "after"

Above
Exit (2006) by Steve Sabella; courtesy the artist

euphoria, when one calms down and returns to contemplation? Is acceptance of exile then a dissociation of the exile status from its negative characteristics and connotations, such as loss and loneliness? Is it a process of overcoming nationality as the primary defining moment of one's own identity as well as the ground of perception for the other?[3]

Sabella's work, then, almost literally serves as an illustration for Edward Said's seminal essay on the subject. In "Reflections on Exile" (2000), Said argues that critical insight and perception of exile produce a "pleasure" that may surmount the "grimness of outlook" of those actually experiencing exile. This does not mean, however, a satisfaction with the situation: "Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure."[4]

This comparison also holds due to the fact that Sabella does not use iconography that would link him stylistically to his native homeland or region. Trees, grass, windows, and textile patterns can all be considered a "global" formal language. Thus he creates a small space or gap between his own biography and the artwork in which viewers can place themselves in an undefined moment for self-positioning. This use of photography beyond a journalistic, documentary depiction is nothing new and has been reevaluated in recent scholarship. In his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), for example, Michael Fried argues that artists have turned photography into an accomplished medium—by the 1970s, photography had become equal to other artistic media based on how museums collected or displayed it. Once photography was no longer limited to the printed page of a book or journal, where only one or two people could view it at a time, and once it was enlarged and elevated onto the wall, a new relation was forged between artist and viewer. If we acknowledge that none of Sabella's collage elements are placed by coincidence, we accept at the same time a carefully choreographed invitation to read and contemplate. Curiously, none of the pieces from his series related to exile seem to be properly framed on the sides, bottom, or top—they may as well be details from a much larger piece. So if neither size, nor iconography, nor visual narrative within the arrangement, nor order of segments or parts matters, then what does? The title, the date (in relation to the artist's own biography as well as historical and political events he may be affected by and consciously respond to), and the message as a portrait of the artist's inner state of being all take on new significance.

Ultimately, this gap between the message/intention and the actual artwork is what allows viewers to position themselves in full recognition of the heterogeneity of circumstances, modes of perception, and potential personal experiences of exile and estrangement. Could one then argue that Sabella neglects and resists the documentary impulse? Yes and no. Strictly speaking, his series related to the consecutive stages of the experience of exile neglects a documentary approach. In a 2009 commission for the opening of the Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, the artist surprised viewers with an exceptional piece. The exhibition featured works of twenty-three contemporary artists with roots in the Middle East, who each proposed a different narrative of identity and history. As the curators stated:

> Today's artists are in constant transmigration across a diversity of cities and locations, yet never escaping redundant geographical labels through which their work is misconstrued. They are in perpetual metamorphosis, in a state of "in-betweenness." These journeys occur not only in place, but also in time. When you move and leave things behind, you remember, recollect and reconstruct, but you also reorient and redirect yourself. These are all acts into which time is intricately weaved. This explains why time is often a significant formalistic component within contemporary artistic practice.[5]

Sabella's contribution was again one of a self-investigative portrayal. He installed six large photographs of Israeli citizens on one wall, and a single photograph of himself centered on the opposite wall. The subjects are unarmed, half naked—yet in self-confident poses. While again putting himself in the midst of the work's narrative, this time he doesn't operate with symbolic or abstract forms. Showing himself as outnumbered by Israelis directly critiques the political situation in Palestine, and showing all figures undressed down to their boxer shorts simultaneously points to the vulnerability of both sides. The installation forced visitors to walk between the two opposing walls, placing the viewer in the midst of the piece, as if taking part in an actual event. What links this work back to Sabella's other series is again the importance of the title: "Settlement—Six Israelis & One Palestinian" (2008–10). These numbers, as the artist explains, are not coincidental:

> The work is highly coded. One of the obvious symbols could signal to the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust and how the Israelis are always afraid of the "one" Palestinian who is going to blow things up. The installation will create a visual unresolved tension, especially because of the uneven number, where there is no clear indication of who is winning. This installation, which could also be considered an act of introspection and interrogation, creates a clash between the two words "Identity" and "Identification." The spectator who will stand in the middle of the installation cannot see both sides at the same time. The spectator must make a critical choice. The endless war of emotions and representation must stop and must be replaced by resorting to the essence, hence that might be one reason why we are stripped.[6]

As one of the most prominent contemporary photographers from the Middle East, Sabella has revealed in his work not only his autobiography, but also a symptomatic portrayal of an entire generation of exiled and displaced artists from the region. As recently as a few years ago, curators could still make such claims as, "In terms of contemporary art, the Middle East is off the map. It may even come as a surprise . . . that contemporary art is being produced there."[7] But this no longer holds true. Contemporary art from the Middle East has gained worldwide attention and

appreciation, not only because of recent political events, but also because of its tremendous success on the art market. Along with this attention has come a diversification of approaches and modes of understanding. Yet Western scholarship cannot, so far, claim to have fully grasped and understood the heterogeneity of cultures, contexts, and identities at play in contemporary art from the Middle East. Addressing concepts of collective memory and the archiving of its own history, the region's art scene has begun to catch up with its own research, scholarship, and analysis of material memory. Interestingly, this development goes hand in hand with an attempt by contemporary artists to overcome their national background as a defining characteristic of their work. As Nada Shabout, guest curator at the Mathaf Museum in 2010, stated at the opening press conference: "Most contemporary artists of the Arab world reject the term 'Arab' because they are convinced that they belong to a global world that accepts them as artists per se, a category in which identity is not a factor."[8]

Sabella, in his use of non-Middle Eastern iconography, most certainly fits into this description. However, his self-referential works still retain strong evidence of where he is coming from and what has inspired him. Given the growing self-confidence of contemporary Middle Eastern artists, we will likely continue to see both artists who strive to overcome nationality and ethnic background as defining elements of their practice, and those who re-emphasize it for both personal and political reasons.

DOROTHEA SCHOENE *is a Berlin-based art historian, writer, and curator. She is a recipient of Fulbright, DAAD, and Getty grants for her studies in contemporary Western and Middle Eastern art, provenance research, and museum architecture and history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

NOTES ***1****. Statement by the artist in a personal conversation with the author in January 2012.* ***2****. "Steve Sabella in Conversation with Sara Rossin,"* The Changing Room: Arab Reflections on Praxis and Times*, catalog of the exhibition at Spazio Qubi, Torino, 2011, http://stevesabella.com/Sabella-in-conversation-with-Sara-Rossino-Turin-Sept-2011.pdf.* ***3****. Saint Vincent quoted in Erich Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," trans. M. and E.W. Said, in* Centennial Review *13, no. 1 (1969): 17.* ***4****. Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in* Reflections on Exile and Other Essays *(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.* ***5****. The Art Reoriented Curators' Statement on their website; see http://www.artreoriented.com/told_untold_retold.html.* ***6****. Statement by the artist in a personal conversation with the author on February 2, 2012.* ***7****. Palestinian curator and artist Aissa Deebi on the occasion of the 2004 opening of the exhibition "Arab Contemporary" at Detroit's Tangent Gallery; see "Arab Contemporary: ACCESS brings Arabic art exhibit to Tangent" at www2.metrotimes.com/archives/story.asp?id=6340.* ***8****. Statement by curator Nada Shabout at the press conference on the occasion of the Mathaf museum opening in December 2010; see also "Richard Holledge: Painting the Middle East With Too Broad a Brush?" in* The Wall Street Journal *(March 2, 2011).*