Colonization of the Imagination

By Steve Sabella

Introduction

The following essay was written few years ago at a time when there was a sense of total frustration and defeat in the Arab World. It seemed back then that people were entrapped and subjected to a new form of colonial power that did not seek to physically occupy the 'space' and people, but rather it aimed at conquering their image, leading in effect to a New World Order. In other words, what we were witnessing was the conquering and the colonization of the imagination. This, in my opinion, subjects people to a severe mental and physical paralysis that restricts development and obliterates all notions of personal freedom. Having lived in occupied Jerusalem for the largest part of my life, I suffered from this colonization to the extent that I needed to uproot myself in order to re-conquer my imagination, until I reached my states of Euphoria (2010) and Beyond Euphoria (2011). Yet, in 2010, the Arab World started to witness an awakening, a rebirth, which we all hope will lead to liberation. The power of the change stems from the people's ability to finally realize that they needed to break free from psychological and mental barriers. I have decided to publish this essay now because it is crucial to understand how political change in today's world can never be complete without a thorough understanding of image formation or construction. The American election campaigns, in my view, are nothing but a fight of the image. Our understanding of North Korea is mainly based on the images the regime produces there. One cannot forget the theatrical exaggerated scenes of people when they were mourning the death of Kim Jong-il. Many of these images, according to media reports, were staged and there were reports that some people were punished for not adhering to the constructed image the regime wanted to portray to the world and to their own people. Hence, the Arab nations are now fighting for the liberation of their image and the formation of a new one. This is not an easy task and the path is full of visual obstacles that constantly bombard and clash with the newly formed images. We all watched the Egyptians with anticipation in their eighteen-day fight for their liberation. The real moment of triumph was not when Mubarak left, but when the world saw how the Egyptians changed, in a record time, through their peaceful demonstrations, the distorted image that the 'system' had generated for them. It was a fight for their visual liberation. They managed to defy the system and force the world to look at them with different eyes. This essay has two parts, the first dealing with image/photo theory and the second with how this theory influences our daily lives to the extent that one needs to be aware of it to live in today's world.

Part 1 – God, Art and Walter Benjamin

At the Basilica of the Resurrection in the heart of the Old City of occupied Jerusalem – a few hundred meters from the house where I came to life – I was photographing painted icons for a study the Jerusalemite artist Kamal Boullata was working on. Over centuries, pilgrims from all over the world flock to the Basilica to feel the aura of Christ in the location many believe is his burial place. It is also believed that the skull or bones of Adam are buried there. Standing in the middle of the Basilica, I was always intrigued by how people kneel down in utter humility to feel the aura of the Sepulcher. Looking today at one of the photographed icons I did, I started to wonder about the aura that is usually painted around Christ and its denoted message. Let us take, for example, Bartolomé Esteban's, The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities, 1681-82 (figure 1). The painting depicts what has been constructed through a long history in iconography an image of Christ, God, angles, St Mary and Joseph(1). Many people believe that these depicted 'figures' exist, and that they are 'authentic references'. Christ is surrounded by an aura, which in the Christian religious context signifies the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, all of which denote the ONE(2). Even though no one has seen God, it remains a question of faith, or possibly a matter of imagination, to believe in him(3). In view

of that, one can associate the debate about God with the 'aura' of a work of art, for any debate about God or art, especially photography, is also a debate about truth, authenticity, reality and imagination. If the reference is imagined, as it is in the case of Bartolomé Esteban's photographed painting, then it can be argued that imagination acts as a substitution, an exchange system, or even a replacement for what is supposed to be a 'real' or an 'original' reference. As Walter Benjamin asserts, the reproducibility of art that was triggered mainly by photography has withered its 'aura', which in return has reflected on its uniqueness and originality(4). In the Chinese language, the characters for the word photography are Sha, which means, 'to reflect' and Shin, which means 'truth', hence, 'to reflect the truth'(5). This leads one to think about what 'truth' in essence means. There is also a natural connection between the concept of the 'truth' and the concept of the 'original'. 'Truth' may lead to or give rise to the original and vice versa. Photographic history and theory are always on hand to ensure that the medium of photography is safely harnessed to the real (6). The word 'real' is ambiguous and our understanding of it constantly requires re-examination, especially because of continuous technological advances. Photography, has transformed our understanding of reality because photographs are constructions and not reflections of reality (7). The fact that a photographic image has a casual relationship with the object it represents (photography's indexical nature) has caused people to believe it is more a reflection of reality. This is where the difficulty or confusion is when photography is discussed or debated. To illustrate, Jeff Wall creates a space that does not exist which causes one to rethink what is real and what is not (figure 2). By piecing images together, discussions that place photography as a form of reality representation are irrelevant. What he is trying to communicate surpasses debates of authenticity or reality and, in a way, evokes a debate that our understanding of photography should be reconsidered. A key question to ask therefore is whether a photograph reflects the world or whether the photograph contributes to the construction of the world(8)? The second notion requires clarification. Any representation, even a photographic, results in the loss of the real because representations construct an image-

Bartolomé Esteban, The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities, 1681-82.

idea of the real(9). The photograph is not the referent of the real. Mark Cousins, in his explanation of signifier and signified, points out that language and photography share a particular semiotic system. However, this system has no direct contact with the so-called 'real world'. It is especially confusing in the case of photography because of its indexical nature. He writes, "Of course photography gives rise to strong fantasies about the so-called real world". It is important to understand that a photograph is an effect of photography. "It signifies what is internal to photography(10). Attempts to connect these referents to the real world will always lead us to question issues that are outside the photographic medium, such as the authentic and the original and so on. Based on the above reasoning, one could speak then of the construction of a fictional archive that is constantly expanding. The continuing act of photography on a daily basis, in all its different forms, contributes to the construction of this fictional archive that continuously influences our perception of life. However, where are

Jeff Wall, A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai) 1993. transparency in lightbox, 229x377cm, Courtesy of the artist.
This image is actually a montage constructed of many images, yet, it appears as a reflection of reality. Further more, Wall uses a painting as a reference to construct his image.

these references located today and how do we find them? If the world is mediated through images, and our reality is hyper-real, are we to delve into images to understand who we are and where we come from? If the world has been replaced by its image as Jean Baudrillard theorizes, then an understanding of how reference works in this replacement (or neo-reality) is crucial. It is necessary to understand the relationship between photography and its referents. In order to photograph something one first needs a thing, and this thing is an object found in the world. On the other hand, new technologies allow for the generation of realistic images out of nothing, using only numerical codes as their referent. An example would be the simulated 'photograph' of a fighter jet plane which crashed in Finland, and which was constructed based on eyewitness descriptions (11). Does this mean that the images help construct the referent; help construct a certain form of reality that is based on the absence of things? It can be argued then that the referent in photography is fiction(12).

Fiction immediately implies imagination. To further clarify the role of imagination in acting as an exchange system, reference to movies is necessary as many people described their visual experience of the September 11 attack as movie-like. The reference is already based on images seen in disaster films, which were all based on fiction, and given that fiction implies imagination as stated above, when the real thing happened, the only real reference had to be imagination-oriented.

Consumer society, according to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, is a society that consumes images. The world is saturated with images(13). He explains how we live in a "socially constructed hall of mirrors with no external points of reference … the real is no longer what it used to be(14)". The theory of simulation is the replacement of the world by its image (15). Given that we live in a world that has an excess of information, or an abundance of references, ironically, due to their large scale, the human ability to absorb the references has declined, leading us to live in an epoch categorized

by images shaping our lives. In many ways, these images are appearing to control our perception of life, as people understand 'reality' through them(16). Furthermore, Baudrillard asserts that if there is one characteristic of the universe of simulation, it is surely the loss of the referent and of reference, both of which act as linkages to meaning. When there is nothing to which we can compare and refer to, it can be suggested then that all references can only be imagined(17). If my analysis was fruitful so far, then one can understand that there is a link between the reference and the imagination that has substituted for the loss of the reference or the 'original'. However, it can be argued that it was the loss of the reference (original) that led Benjamin to also write about the aura of a work of art. Accordingly, there is a connection between the reference and aura. In Baudrillard's simulated, possibly even imagined, world, it is inevitable to notice the human desire to adhere to concepts of the original, especially in a world where such concepts have been exiled to unknown dimensions. In this world of simulation (loss of references), there tends to be an obsession in the imagination with creating a virtual, yet tangible, original.

Part 2 - Jerusalem in Exile, 2005
Born in the Old City of Jerusalem under the Israeli occupation, I grew up in an environment where Israel worked determinedly to demonstrate authority on the ground. During the Second Intifada, Israel entrapped and suffocated the city with the construction of an eight-meter wall (some areas nine) that stretches from Jerusalem to the West Bank. The length of the system – already built, under construction, or in planning – is 709 kilometers(18). Accordingly, access to Jerusalem has been restricted for Palestinians living in Jerusalem and elsewhere. For clarity, the wall dissects Jerusalem itself. Even though I consider myself a non-religious person, I get very exasperated with the ongoing Israeli policies forbidding by physical force native Jerusalemite Christians (including those who live in the Old City) and others, during Easter to enter the Old City and participate in the religious activities(19). As odd as it reads, I was often locked out of the Old City gates during the festivities with no clearly stated reasons why. The police, escorted by hundreds and even thousands of soldiers, block entry to all of the city gates and grant access to a selected few—ironically to Jewish people and foreigners. This is most relevant to me and to Christians during the Holiest Day of Jerusalem —'Sabet il Noor', or the Holy Fire, which is the day when Jesus Resurrected. In the beginning of the millennium, the Jerusalemite artist Kamal Boullata (an artist who lives in exile), in an article about my artistic experiences, pointed out that he considered me an 'artist in exile' even though I lived in Jerusalem. This was indeed a 'reality' I lived in but was, however, unaware of. It took me some time to become conscious of the essence of his words. I realized that I was not physically in exile, but rather, I was going through a process of mental alienation leading to a unique form of 'mental exile'. I felt I was exiled in my own city of birth, which I started to perceive and see as a foreign land. Yet, this was unsatisfactory to explain a state of fragmentation, dislocation, and confusion that 'true' exiles go through. It more had to do with a 'reality' on the ground that triggered my state of mind. It could only be explained that I was somehow no longer living in Jerusalem. I was not physically in exile; it was rather Jerusalem that was exiled. Consequently, all those who live in Jerusalem have to feel out of place and alienated. Ironically, when people are forced to live in exile, there is usually another country that accepts their 'temporary' residence. The question is where do cities reside when they are in exile? No other country has accepted Jerusalem to become a new city in its borders. It seems that Jerusalem has either found refuge in the minds of the people who remember it, who imagine it, or Jerusalem has 'returned to the Hands of the Divine'. This has led to the birth of the art project, Jerusalem in Exile. The project, which I executed with poet Najwan Darwish, explored and searched for the visual images of Jerusalem in the minds of Palestinians globally. The project was based on the assumption that Jerusalem existed as a city in 'exile', where Palestinians were forbidden access. Once in exile, it is inevitable and natural that Palestinians form a mental image of the city. A brief understanding of mental images is necessary as we often describe events resorting to images stored in our minds. When we remember things, we tend to remember them in the form of an image. Mental images are agents of memory(20), which undergo stages of

editing in which some details are dropped or changed over time. Our reality becomes entrapped or defined by images. It is natural that we tend to forget the presence of mental images because of their quantity, but when we are confronted with a need to remember something, memories flash back and stored images are resurrected with their details transmitted. We live in a world of images, and often, factual images (which we see in 'real' time) interact with mental images because of similarities, in effect, triggering the process of memory. A journey to unravel one of the images (when we decide to remember something) will make this particular image stronger than other ones. It will become a thought suspended. In essence, Jerusalem in Exile was interested in these suspended thoughts and the meanings they created.

The project dwelled for years on these transmitted mental images and sought to transform and liberate them into photographic images. The artistic effort intended to construct a renewed perception of Jerusalem. The project also sought to liberate Jerusalem from clichés and slogans, and to reconstruct a relationship to it that is more alive. In this project, Palestinians shared and explored through texts different views on Jerusalem, identity and exile; in effect, enticing people to share their original experiences. The project was meant to photographically 'materialize' the various mental images Palestinians had of Jerusalem in their memories and imagination. Jerusalem has been photographed, probably, more than any other city in the world and there is hardly anything new a photographer can add. Yet, I think we have reached a stage where Jerusalem needs visual liberation. In order to achieve this, a new dimension needs to be added to the photographs and this exists in us, deep in the imagination. Reaching that dimension requires a deep look, a journey into the minds of many people; where they will all unite to 'rebuild' and 'reconstruct' a different form of Jerusalem.

Four Years After the Project Was Initiated

In Jerusalem in Exile, we learned that the image of Jerusalem is constructed and may not necessarily reflect the truth. What do we consider to be real? The mental image could have been passed from one generation to another, the last of who has most likely never set foot in Jerusalem. As a child, one of the participants thought that Jerusalem exists on the seashore! The mental image inevitably mutates by time. It reflects a truth which is only true to the person who is keeping that image. Often, the mental image had been developed through a reference which is image-based and triggered by devices such as television, books and postcards, to mention a few. The two main intentions of Jerusalem in Exile in its initial stages were to question the visual pollution in Jerusalem and to visually liberate the city. If human bodies could be stopped, the idea that thoughts and mental images could penetrate concrete and physical walls was liberating. Yet, through time the project enabled us to see the bigger picture. It is not only human beings who are forced to live in exile, but also cities, and accordingly the idea that we all belong to a certain space is shattered. To compensate for the loss of the original, human construct a new virtual 'home' that is often coated with numerous nostalgic layers. This has led me to start thinking that human beings live in imagined cities and that the condition of Jerusalem as an exiled city is not in itself unique, but rather similar to many other cities in the world that have been transformed into an image and lost their point of reference. Yet, there is one major difference. The transformation of other cities has been mainly due to the 'natural' fictional archive that has managed to act as a substitution system, yet the transformation of Jerusalem was mainly due to a colonial Israeli or Zionist ideology that worked to mutate Jerusalem's image. The term ideology is used in Marxist tradition as well as in social sciences to describe a illusory form of thought which departs from a criterion of objectivity. It has also been described as an imaginary relationship with reality. Currently, it seems that one side has managed to assert some control over this fictional archive and to steer it to its benefit, while trying to constantly construct in the 'Western' world consciousness the ideal that the Arab image is a defeated one. The way I see it, Palestinians or Arabs need to understand image formation and the mechanisms that manage to change global perception. At a time where conquering the world physically is no more considered a viable option, it seems that conquering the image of the world is becoming, or has become, the New World Order. In other words, what we are witnessing is the conquering and/or the colonization of the imagination.

NOW

Hence, the state of exile of Jerusalem is different than the state of exile of other cities. In many ways, it conforms to the state of exile Palestinians have been forced to experience. Living in the city for the most part of my life, I effortlessly experience the dislocation and fragmentation exiles go through. This mental exile is in fact a 'real' exile – one that is created by force, regardless if the Palestinian lost his/her home as happened mainly in 1948 and 1967 and as is still happening gradually as Palestinians are evicted from their homes in Jerusalem in particular. Given that Jerusalem has been transformed to an image, it suddenly occurred to me that the Jewish people have been misled. They think that they have returned to their 3000 year-old city, when in fact what they have returned to is an image of the 'original' place. The aura of the 'Jerusalem of Gold' as referred to in the Jewish tradition, is not radiating from Jerusalem. The 'aura' exists in the mind and not in the place. I remember a friend going to see the original priceless Mona Lisa and expressing disappointment with its size. He remarked, "I like and enjoy my poster much more!" Hence, where does the aura reside, in the object or in the mind? Similarly, we do not need physical grounds and an original Jerusalem to be able to enjoy its radiating aura. Given that Jerusalem has been transformed into an image, and that our understanding of life is constantly developing, I can accept living in an image of my own city, however, this city not only needs visual liberation, but also requires an enormous effort of visual correction. This maybe explains why in my artwork, I try to build a New Jerusalem.

About the Writer
Steve Sabella, born in Jerusalem, is a Berlin based artist. Sabella was one of the commissioned artists for the inauguration of MATHAF Arab Museum of Modern Art. Sabella's artworks have been collected by the British Museum in London, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha and leading collectors in the Middle East including the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. A monograph is currently being prepared on his art and will be published next year through the support of the Akademie der Kunste in Germany.

End Notes
1 - I have photographed the painting from a book in order to further elaborate on the complexity of references.
2- The One being the trinity in the Christian context.
3 - There are many discourses that connect imagination and faith. The journal of Modern Theology published an article, entitled 'Imagining the World Scripture Imagines' that states, "Imagination is an essential feature of theology, and it fosters faith in God." Luke T. Johnson, 'Imagining the World Scripture Imagines', Modern Theology, no 14/2 (1998), p165.
4 - Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts ed. David Goldblatt and Lee Brown, (Prentice Hall; Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1996), pp 72-76.
5 - Mark Cousins, '2007-03-13T11:20', Reference Book (London: Royal College of Art 2007), p. 38.
6 - Martha Langford, 'Movements Towards Image' Image & Imagination (McGill-Queen's University Press ; Chesham : Combined Academic [distributor]; Montréal, 2005), p. 5.
7 - Andy Grundberg, 'Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974 (Aperture; New York, 1999), p. 216.
8 - Olivier Richon, 'Photography and Reference', Reference Book (London: Royal College of Art 2007), p. 8.
9 - As Sarah Kember explains "a photograph of the pyramids is an image-idea of the pyramids, it is not the pyramids." Sarah Kember, 'The Shadow of the Object', ed, Liz Wells, The Photography Reader (Routledge; London, 2003), p202.
10 - Mark Cousins, '2007-03-13T11:20', p. 38.
11- Sarah Kember, 'The Shadow of the Object', ed, Liz Wells, The Photography Reader, pp 205-206.
12 - Olivier Richon, 'Photography and Reference', pp 6-12.
13 - Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery, Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers (Berg; Oxford, 2007), p 158.
14 - Andy Grundberg, 'Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Crisis of the Real, p. .224.
15 - Rex Butler, Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real (Sage; London, 1999), p. 23.
16 - W. J. Thomas Mitchell, What do pictures want?: The Lives and Loves of Images, p. 313.
17 - Jean Baudrillard and Mike Gane, Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews (Routledge; London, 1993), p. 156.
18 - Info taken from the Israeli human right organization btselem http://www.btselem.org/separation_barrier
19 - Similar restrictions are enforced regularly on Fridays forbidding Muslims entry to the Dome of The Rock. Entry is based on age & often to those who hold Jerusalem ID cards.
20 - Havcrkamp, Anscim. "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes And Augustine On Photography." Comparative Literature, 45 (Summer, 1993): 258-279.