

THE AESTHETICS OF THE SARDINE: CONTEMPORARY OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract: In what way does the figure of the sardine invite aesthetic reflection in the digital age? From the real to the imaginary, starting with the definition of the word ‘figure’, we examine what a sardine is, with the expressions (in French) associated with, and the symbolism of this famous fish. Singular and significant cases are taken into account, a painting by Goya, the perpetuation of the sardine carnival in the Mediterranean world. After introducing the notion of ‘device’ (Agamben), the artistic expressions of Zined Sedira, Mounir Fatmi, Adel Abdessemed, Franck Scurti offer a critical reflection on history and contemporary emergencies through the figure of the sardine and its aesthetic, which is an invitation to travel and a political alert. How does digital technology bring works of art and images together? The sardines of the Internet embody a people of available images, faces with the force of reality. The figure of the sardine is emblematic of the individual in the collective, fluidity, artistic research today, in the age of AI. The threats posed by global warming and the economic, political situation in the world today need to be carefully considered, the arts are one way of highlighting current and future perils.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Creative Process; Exile; Imaginary; Sardine.

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1. Introduction: From Reality to Imagination

One of the definitions of the word ‘figure’ in French, it is the external shape of one object, a visual representation (a picture), in other words an appearance, a symbol, a sign. In English, we would say *figure, shape, image...* The figure of the sardine, it’s not its *face*, but its appearance, its symbolism and also its plasticity.

The history and characteristics of this ‘blue fish’ provide elements for undertaking an exploration of aesthetics issues that mark our changing times, in the era of dangerous climate change.

So, what is a sardine? A species of small migrant animal in the family Alosidae, which has different names depending on the country, region, a delicious dish that is eaten fresh or canned, in all kinds of tasty culinary arrangements and preparations in Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Italy, Greece..) and elsewhere. Its name probably comes from the observations of the Ancient Greeks: sardines abounded around the island of Sardinia. Tapered shapes, silvery bellies, bluish backs, they move in tight shoals offshore, breed on the high sea all year round, are fished a lot in the Mediterranean (*sardinelles*) and in the Atlantic, since Prehistory. This fish, rich in beneficial properties, can be preserved in oil, lemon, tomato sauce, for decades inside packaged metal cans, in glass jars. Intensive sardine fishing ensured a lucrative cannery or sardine industry (Morocco, the world’s leading production, Mauritania, Brittany, Spain, Portugal...). The vulnerable sardine is a source of prosperity, joy, it embodies humility, modesty, agility, collective resistance, resilience. It is a ‘proletarian’ fish, defenseless (hence the grouping in shoals), a national symbol (Portugal) and popular culture. In Marseille, tasting sardines together means knowing how to get together, interact in a friendly manner, and share common values of tolerance and openness. The figure of the sardine evokes travel, simplicity, the pleasures of life, abundance. But the threat of extinction really exists.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Resistances

In Italy, the anti-fascist Sardines movement (*Movimento delle sardine*; “everyone can be a sardine”) brings together compact crowds (*stretti come sardine*) crowding into public squares from 2019 to demonstrate a massive refusal of the far-right ideology. To be in a hurry, packed like sardines in a can is a common expression in French which means to be reduced to not being able to move, compressed by a high density of people. The group becomes oppressive and forces immobility which may not be consented to, with a loss of freedom of movement. In this aspect of the figure of the sardine, the dependence of the group limits action or even prevents it, but in the case of Italian Sardines, the group forces action, expresses cohesion in the struggle, in a consent shared by all. Images on the internet bear witness to this particular context.

In the figure of the sardine, a fast and graceful fish, there is a modest beauty and an affirmation of resistance. What would the aesthetics of the sardine be? A delicacy combined with the strength of the collective, with mobility, with the need to be free and to show it.

And sometimes a comic heroism is present, like the famous sardine that blocked the port of Marseille, popular expression dating from the 18th century, at the time of the Franco-British War and French support for American Independence. This expression meaning false story, exaggeration, comes from distorted facts: the frigate *Sartine*, unfortunately sank in the channel of the Old Port of Marseille, preventing other ships from entering. From *Sartine* we moved on to *sardine*.

2.2 Art History

Let's look at Francisco de Goya y Lucientes's painting (1746-1828) on the internet, an oil on wood measuring 82 x 60 cm, entitled *El Entierro de la Sardina* (*The Burial of the Sardine*), dated 1814-1816, kept at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (RABASF, Madrid, Spain). In the Christian religion, Ash Wednesday, in Madrid, last day before Lent, close the carnival with a grotesque procession and a tall mannequin to which a small sardine is attached (*sardina* derivation from *cerdo*, *cerdina*, meat buried before Lent, so purification of sins), then buried on the banks of the Manzanares, a river that crosses the city. This unique painting depicts a chaotic and shimmering carnival scene with great freedom. The large, agitated crowd drinks and dances around the banner which represents the figure of Momo, the king of the carnival, incarnation of joy, madness, excess (probable allusion to the Greco-Roman god of irony, ousted from Mount Olympus after mocking the Olympians, at the origin of this Dionysian festival). In a preparatory drawing kept at the Prado Museum (Madrid), we can see the sign 'MORTVS', with an imprecise shape that could evoke a sardine, attached to a skeleton, first idea of the painter, under the hilarious face of Momo. Underlying violence despite joy - excess causes tragedy – announces the *Pinturas negras* (1820-1823) in the *Quinta del Sordo*, at the time outside Madrid where the artist lived before his exile in Bordeaux (France) in 1824. The scene would be a reference to the end (death) of Carnival, Lent is symbolized by the fish (also symbol of Christ in the Christian religion). Army, religion, morality are depicted in grotesque forms and the painting turns out to be a criticism of the repressive Spanish regime at the time and a celebration of popular jubilation, with its excesses, overflows. Carnival is the overthrow of the established order, the authoritarian order of King Fernando VII, whose policies Goya condemned and who has banned these unbridled demonstrations. But ultimately, popular vitality transcend the tragedies of war and absolutism. The world of the sardine burial is a happy world, certainly for one day, an ephemeral moment.

This end of carnival, a parade parodying a funeral procession with the cremation or burial or even the throwing into the sea of a symbolic figure (a sardine), continues in particular in Spain and Latin America. The end of the carnival marks the return to order, and variations are observed in Murcia, Barcelona, Cadiz or Tenerife and elsewhere...

These images from the internet, the exploration of occurrences that allow for deeper research, constitute knowledge, a tool for reflection to understand the complexity of the figure of the sardine, a symbolic form, which transcends the consumption of its flesh to become an image, a simple, recognizable form, free or enclosed, an escape too.

3. Methodology

3.1 Apparatus: Views on some Contemporary Artistic Expressions

In a famous text, entitled in French *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif ?* (*What is an Apparatus?*) the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1942) shows from the first page that "la terminologie est le moment poétique de la pensée (terminology is the poetic moment of thought)". An to quote Michel Foucault (1926-1984), dealing with the apparatus, a power game, strategy manipulating power relations. Hence the apparatus, according to Agamben, this heterogeneous network of elements, inscribed in power relations, relational mechanisms, resulting from a genealogy that the philosopher traces. Considering the dictionary definition, Agamben shows that the system is primarily a matter of law (decision in a judgment), the technology (mechanism, device), means responding to a military plan. There is, in the apparatus, in the writings of the philosopher Michel Foucault, recalls Agamben, a practice strategy, of thought. Inherited from Christian theology, the apparatus achieves a way of governing, of setting up an economy and therefore a set of practices, knowledge, measures which serve to manage, to administer, to control, to guide "les comportements, les gestes et

les pensées des hommes (behaviours, gestures and the thoughts of human beings)”. Among these devices, Agamben includes navigation, computers, mobile phones, writing, philosophy... language. The apparatus is deeply linked to hominisation. And in the age of global capitalism, how can we escape surveillance, control and so on? “ À la racine de tout dispositif, se trouve donc un désir de bonheur humain, trop humain et la saisie comme la subjectivation de ce désir à l’intérieur d’une sphère séparée constituent la puissance spécifique du dispositif (At the root of every system is a desire for human happiness, all too human, and the seizure and subjectivation of this desire within a separate sphere constitute the specific power of the device)”. And as a result: “La stratégie que nous devons adopter dans notre corps à corps avec les dispositifs ne peut pas être simple. Il s’agit en fait de libérer ce qui a été saisi par les dispositifs pour le rendre à l’usage commun (The strategy we need to adopt in our hand-to-hand dealings with the devices cannot be simple. It’s a question of freeing up what has been sized by the devices and returning it to common use)”. In the light of these analyses, we might think of the figure of the sardine as a form of resistance to the strategies of power, through its fluidity and the energy of its collective movements, which federate attitudes and gradual shifts in order to escape the external systems that repress freedom.

In artistic strategies, we can observe the return to the public of what has been separated by power and which would have broken with common usage, i.e. the awareness of the freedom necessary to exercise one’s critical spirit and to share experiences and knowledge, in short to rediscover tangible, human, direct relationships. The figure of the sardine can be found as a more or less discreet key, a high point in a variety of works that question our responsibility.

3.2 Contemporary Art

For example, Zined Sedira (1963, Paris, France), a Franco-Anglo-Algerian artist, in an installation entitled *Can’t You See the Sea Changing?* (2002-2003) placed a tin of sardines in a studio bookcase. The artist uses photography, film, video and installation to explore her personal history, her relationships with France, the UK and Algeria, and questions of identity, language, migration, individual and collective memory, transmission and encounters between cultures. This exhibition “Can’t You See the Sea Changing?” took place in two galleries of the De La Warr Pavilion (Bexill-on-Sea, East Sussex, UK). Transnational trade, geopolitics, migrants, the fascination of the sea, post-colonial issues and exile are recurrent themes in Sedira’s work, which combines autobiography, fiction and documentary. The artist, who describes herself as a “gardienne d’images et de mémoire” (custodian of imagers and memory) explore archives, places, what is invisibilised, what may disappear, what is discreet, modest, but significant. In this installation, in a library of various objects all related to the sea – a replica of the one in the artist’s studio – we discover a tin of sardines with an image representing the opening of this tin, an illusion of depth. In an interview from 2023, Sedira talks about her interest in the sea from the 1950s to the 1960s. She collects objects from those years, as shown in the images in the exhibition and in her studio. Born in the early 1960s, she has brought together a wide range of objects relating to the sea and the environment, what changes, is destroyed, in danger. The death of migrants at sea and the memory of slavery feature in her work, which is both political and poetic, when, among other pieces in this exhibition, she recounts her meeting with a lighthouse keeper, an endangered profession. And metaphor is sometimes more effective than hard facts in ensuring that sharing the message produces something, that free will and awareness are exercised and developed. Sedira questions these “spaces where mobility expires”. “The sea has always been a geopolitical space”, Sedira explains, “Terrible things happen there, yet it is also calm... There is always a binary: the beautiful side and the scary side. It’s open and cruel. It can be a barrier, depending

on where you're standing. And it's becoming much more complex. People don't want to deal with the problems anymore”.

The can of coloured sardines, with its recognizable image, placed among other objects in the studio, appears as a piece caught in a network of memories and reminders, fixing the mobility of time as it passes and structuring the creative space. It is part of a constellation linking the past, history and future prospects.

Mounir Fatmi's works (1970, Tangā, Morocco), often use material that have become obsolete (cables, old typewriters, etc.), reflecting the collapse of industrial society and a critique of consumerism in crisis. Unlike Sedira, archives, memory, images, ideologies and the media are all part of his creative process; language, drawing and writing are important (verses from the Koran), as are architecture and technology. In 2011, the artist took over the Ghislaine Hussenot Gallery in Paris with an exhibition entitled “Between the Lines”, a kind of technological chaos of cultural confrontations (Goya, Goethe, Duchamp, Chaplin), to raise awareness of alienation. In *Et pourtant elle tourne! Révolution #1*, Fatmi contrasts an Arabic calligraphy with a reproduction of Goya's painting, *El Entierro de la Sardina*, cropped in tondo, as mentioned above. The clash of cultures brings out what is hidden in the images. And for Mounir Fatmi, the Koran is also a History book.

Adel Abdessemed (1971, Qacentina, Algeria) presented the exhibition “Description d'un combat” at the Wilde Gallery in Geneva in 2020, comprising some thirty paintings, in reference to a short story of the same name by Franz Kafka published in 1909 (*Beschreibung eines Kampfes*). For Abdessemed, it expresses his connection with the world, a reflection on death and immortality translated into painting. The *Cocorico Paintings* cycle, begun in 2017, is made up of cans of toxic products (found in the streets or rubbish dumps in Fez, Morocco, where the artist has a studio) and other non-toxic products such as cans of oil, sardines and tomatoes, which are therefore opposed to dangerous products. These preserves are transformed into paint to create large, colorful metal panels - *Peuples (People)*, 100 pieces in the shape of guillotine cleavers, evoking the world's minority languages. “Une fois collectés, ces emballages métalliques sont découpés en bandes étroites, ensuite assemblés par des artisans couleur par couleur pour constituer des peintures, soit par le tissage, à la manière des tapis – comme les fabriquait la grand-mère de l'artiste – soit par la soudure. (Once collected, this metal packaging is cut into narrow strips, then assembled by craftsmen colour by colour to form paintings, either by weaving, in the manner of carpets – as the artist's grandmother used to make them – or by welding)”.

The artist sees himself as the “messenger du minimum (Messenger of the Minimum)”, in a world in peril. He denounces and fights violence. He considers man to be the most ferocious of animals.

In 1995-2000, Franck Scurti (1965, Lyon, France) created a huge sardine tin transformed into a bed (painted steel, foam, sheets, 180 x 240 x 43 cm, Paris, Centre Pompidou, MNAM) for the “Be Seeing You” exhibition in 2000 at the Centre d'art contemporain de Brétigny-sur-Orge (France). This monumental, staged room, which is empty but can accommodate two people during openings, is accompanied by a drawing of a fantastic landscape with breakfast. The work is a critique of consumerism, and if the lid of the box is closed, the two people will be plunged into another world. For Scurti, the hybrid, standard objects, the heterogeneous, the banal and representations are all part of his critical practice, which plays with the functionality of things and social codes and behaviours.

3.3 Reflections on History and Contemporary Emergencies through the Figure of the Sardine

Global warming, migration issues, the wars that are tearing the world apart, the persistence of utopias, post-colonialism, all give the figure of the sardine a special function: a warning, linked to its fragility, with the possibility of collective actions. Let's start with the case of SardineCoin in the world of the liberal economy, crypto-currency created by Mysardines.com. a Luxembourg start-up founded in 2018, which raised funds through ICOs (Initial Coin Offerings) to buy cans of vintage sardines, which were then stored. Each unit corresponded to a digital token: the SARD (SardineCoin). A new team has now acquired MySardine.

“Nous sommes bien sûr déterminés à préserver et valoriser l'héritage des sardines millésimées, tout en surfant sur la vague des crypto-monnaies. Nous prenons le large, montez à bord et suivez-nous vers de nouvelles eaux, où collectionneurs, fournisseurs et professionnels pourront expérimenter le mélange unique de la tradition et de la technologie. (We are, of course, determined to preserve and enhance the heritage of vintage sardines, while riding the wave of crypto-currencies. We're setting sail, climb aboard and follow us to new waters, where collectors, suppliers and professionals can experience the unique blend of tradition and technology)”.

The recuperation of tradition to establish a lucrative system represents the fluidity of contemporary practices, far removed from the critical aesthetics that the figure of the sardine could embody. Exploring the web, typing in 'sardine' (*Sardine de l'espace* de Guibert et Sapin, Sfar, 14 albums since 2002), songs, dreams of sardines, long and ancient traditions, exiles, movements, the history of the industrial revolution and revolts by sardine fishermen at the beginning of the 20th century in Douarnenez in Brittany... and also impressive quantities of sardines devoured by large predators, the journey of huge, spectacular and magnificent shoals of sardines. An then a sale at Sotheby's in 2023 of *Boîte de Sardines* (1972) by François-Xavier Lalanne, made for Jane Holzer, a friend of Andy Warhol.

Encountering works of art on the internet is like looking at images on a screen. Should we stick to the images? Clearly, physical encounters with certain works of art, installations, performances, etc., take us elsewhere, and highlight the materiality of forms, their weight, texture, lighting, space and time. The figure of the sardine, a kind of signpost, links its organic materiality with its symbolism, i.e. its image. We could think of the sardines visible on the web as a population of images available to internet users, which they can also appropriate to create stories, forms and artistic situations. As a reservoir of forms and ideas, albeit framed by the screen, the internet is a potential process, but it is necessary to sort, to make choices about the possible fictions, about the fakes, the quality or mediocrity of the representations. Low definition is a way of playing with indecision, of erasing the subtlety of textures, in favour of the emergence of a whole that may not be recognizable.

4. Conclusion

The digital sardine is a metaphor for signs sent by reality, an invitation to travel, which would have somewhat lessened the force of reality, always elusive, to propose other universes. The aesthetics of the digital sardine, odourless, untouchable, of variable dimensions, subject to all sorts of combinations, nevertheless remains, it seems to me, a figure of exile, of what attempts to cross borders, at the risk of one's life. The aesthetics of the sardine is the refusal to forget, leaving a mark, a trace of a passage, probably with the feeling of an irretrievable loss. Adopting the behaviour of the sardine means managing to slip, alone or in a group, between lines and borders, and digital worlds can perhaps restore this solitude and the memory of the distant, buried homeland, by arranging images and illusions to create other worlds of resilience and perspectives, salutary escapes.

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