

The Meaning of a Limit: Amparo Sard's Fragile Aesthetics

What exactly can be understood by the word "limit", that term whose diversity of meanings is so irreducibly complex? Why have elusive underlying concepts always played such a key role in philosophical speculation, intercepting its reflections on the passage of time, experience, knowledge and, more generally, human existence itself?

The philosophical definition of a limit is widely known to be a legacy of Aristotle, according to whom «the limitless (*peras*) cannot be exhaustively represented in our minds and is thus unfathomable »,¹ a concept revived in Kantian Critique, which takes the form of an authentic "philosophy of the limit"; that is, an interpretation of life that poses the finite nature of its possibilities. More specifically, limits are inherent «in every single instant of our lives, in the most profound facet of man's destiny. Man, as a being, is a being on the limit. In any form and at any level of reality, the purpose of a limit is to create limitations: in subjective recognition, in the immediate realization of all singular, authentic limitations», as Andrea Gentile ingeniously stresses.²

On the other hand, limits always hint at an absence, a denial, a flaw, or lack of something: being limited means being flawed or, failing that, being devoid of something. It somehow means admitting our own inadequacy, our own fragility.

As with the concept of a limit, fragility is also something inherent in mankind. It represents his most hidden magmatic core. It is imponderable if we understand it in *the sense* of a limit. It is a sensation that unveils or reveals each one's vulnerability. It is a condition of danger; a *vulnus* that must be hidden in contrast with Western anthropocentrism's vitalist ideal. Oskar Becker even claims that aesthetic experiences in themselves are characterized by their fragility, a *phenomenologically* noteworthy characteristic that is also reflected in other experiences (*Erlebnisse*) without ever being repeated with any surety:³ in this way, the fragile transitory power of aesthetics manages to make itself felt to our human dimension.

It is within this context that I pose the idea of the artistic and existential pathway trodden by Amparo Sard, characterized by investigations that evoke vague memories or small everyday gestures, leading to a series of mini-tales based on an ethical and aesthetic paradigm whose poetic strength lies in subtle nuances. It signals the restoration of intimacy and the emotions, the acceptance of fragility and the ephemeral, a reappraisal of minor details, and the recognition of diversity. Amparo Sard does not create from absolute zero. Instead she resorts to the invisible; she recalls a series of symbolic remembrances that she elicits, reworks, and selects, evoking archetypes and patterns, and sparking off suggestions, empathies and feelings that merge in a kaleidoscope of emotions, rotating around a sphere of inter-subjective relations. Her evanescent work has always evoked the idea of fragility to me, beginning with her unmistakable stylistic code: perforated drawings, which the artist creates through meticulous almost obsessive work, pricking the surface of the sheet with needles. The never-

¹ P. Zellini, *Breve storia dell'infinito*, Adelphi, Milan, 1993, p. 17.

² A. Gentile, *Ai confini della ragione. La nozione di limite nella filosofia trascendentale di Kant*, Studium, Rome, 2004, p. 133.

³ O. Becker, *Della caducità del bello e della natura avventurosa dell'artista*, translated from Italian into Spanish by V. Pinto, Guida Editori, Naples, 1998.

fully-defined surface seems to take on movement to our eyes. It seems to take shape amid barely identifiable hints, built up through the materialization of an inner journey that gives rise to changeable perceptions, leading to the emergence of an image and yet, in reality, concealing. Her papers evoke landscapes that are almost lunar, where the details' miniaturist precision, the characterization of physiognomies and even interplay between light and shade confirm the originality of a *modus operandi* that is immediately recognizable and coherent in its development and transfer from one medium to another. At the same time, it also reminds me of art history's palatial tradition: Donatello's *stiacciato* relief, which Amparo Sard revives in subtle delicate style, while also meeting the same expressive requirements, achieving a kind of pact between both dimensions by aspiring to give a two-dimensional surface the illusion of depth. In these drawings, Amparo Sard openly reveals her emotional observations and her empathic approach to reality, doing so with great sensitivity and with a touching fragility and poetic intimacy. The artist's images are gradually built up through an endless multitude of pinpricks, giving rise to somewhat fragmented individuals whose volumes, lacking in physicality or corporeity, are produced through a multitude of dots. In subtle intimate style, devoid of any pathos, Amparo Sard reveals an almost imperceptible, poetic, melancholic present where the fragility of her diaphanous figures evokes the transitory nature of the present reality, the disappearance of the present, and the fragility of memory. The silences, pauses and immobility immediately create the idea of a temporary suspension—when we perceive the images as being images from our present, they have already become part of the past, inevitably transformed into memories. They are evocative, delicate, fragile images transformed into simulated memories of our uncertain present.

In the drawings from the series *Spacing the space* (2010), the artist seems to take a more intimate tack, using a more private, inward-looking, reserved approach. I might almost say *human, too human* when Amparo Sard finally displays her weaknesses, with no mediation whatsoever, shifting the diaphragm between the work and the artist, subject and object, art and life.

Her imperceptible delicate signs breathe life into a diffuse microcosm of events that give rise to inter-subjective situations. Her self-portraits, as Derrida would say, bring into play «the *autos* of the self-portrait: the idea that the *autos*, the self, is identity channelled into a defined unit of meaning.»⁴ Amparo Sard becomes the protagonist of her own tale, an existentialist tale, ensnared by her own obsessions, entertained in apparently irrational acts. We might discuss the link between art and life that is most urgent in the artist's investigations or even the oneiric connections with a certain decline in surrealism, or even better with a Kafkian metamorphosis. However, what I would most like to highlight is the idea of the *doppelgänger* that the artist fosters in these images, with a surprising self-analytical capacity and catalytic psychological introspection. «As always, the artist faithfully respects an established code, in this case that of individual identity, the rule of the ego. But she only does this in order to dismantle it, to discover a dual identity between classical myth and psychoanalytical lessons».⁵ *I is another* (Rimbaud), since «duplicating and splitting into two is tantamount to looking at one's reflection in a mirror», points out Boatto.⁶ Amparo Sard's impassive gaze evokes eyes staring at themselves in a mirror. The drawing becomes a means of duplication, portraying itself from the outside. It is a basic element of communication, a crack between inner and outer. Gazing into a mirror and then moving away from it is a form of self-realization, in addition to the realization of one's own condition. It is also a way of seeing oneself in a different light, finding one's physical and psychological alter ego. The idea of inner and outer self-contemplation,

⁴ A. Trimarco, *Post-storia. Il sistema dell'arte*, Editori, Riuniti, Rome, 2005, p. 57.

⁵ A. Boatto, *Narciso Infranto. L'autoritratto moderno da Goya a Warhol*, Laterza, Bari, 2005, p. 193.

⁶ *Ibid.*

embodied in the metaphor of the mirror, can be found again in the video *Salva Vidas* (2012). A mirror is perhaps the most disturbing visual surface: paradoxically it is easily interpreted as a symbol of truth and deceit. The star of Western visual culture, it has inhabited art history since its origins through to today: sometimes as an instrument, sometimes as an optical device for achieving a simultaneous insight into different viewpoints, and other times as an actual image in a work. Today it is construed, above all, as a kind of screen and, by extension, as a diaphragm that acquires added meaning in the world of virtual reality.

A mirror is thus a pictorial surface, a building material and an optical device. It has the power to transform spectators into an image, converting them into an integral part of a work. It evokes the dual nature of beings, the disturbing proximity between beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty, and life and death. The theme of the *doppelgänger*, the mask and the resulting alter ego all play a key role in the world of images. Concealments are incessantly reproduced, truths multiplied, and identities hidden or duplicated in an endless game of mirrors.

An attractive and yet disturbing presence, mirrors are a symbol of an open gateway to *the other self*, to the subconscious that gazes out and allows our acknowledgement and that of others. Lacan clarifies this when he talks about the split between *Je et Moi*⁷; that if this split is not rectified through the so-called “mirror stage”, it will leave the mind separated from the body, leading to a divided personality and future scenario where this lack will become evident.

In contrast, *Hauptpunkt* (*Esencia*, 2013)—a video that inspires reflections on time, generating a sense of pantheist unity and coherence—is based on nature’s more transcendental facet, in search of the unattainable “sublime”. Contemporary ecological thinking ties man in with nature, the landscape and his environment in order to explore the inextricable links between human vicissitudes and the life of the planet in terms of its ecosystem, ecology and sustainable development. From Thoreau through to Clément, the idea of an active form of nature emerged, seeking the achievement of a harmonious global ensemble identified on the planet, not a defined or finished space but an entropic potential. In Thoreau’s case, it was a transcendental reflection on the inhabitation of space in the sense of a relational experience. In Clément’s case, today it is a question of looking at the *third landscape* or *planetary garden*: terms that involve broader concepts of humanity and an observatory of the living, where nature takes on an uncontrolled growth that cannot be managed by humans, more closely tied in with a primordial idea. An analysis of the stylistic code of *Hauptpunkt* and Amparo Sard’s work in general implies taking note of these assumptions and embarking on a journey with careful attention to the hidden impenetrable nature, and even to interaction between man and nature (also present in *Salva Vidas*), to the anthropized space, to geographies that emerge from intimately reworked images, and to the concepts of the realization and interpretation of what we see. In both the aforesaid works, the search for and reconstruction of places entails careful reflection on the fragility of what is portrayed. The anthropized space and ideal geographies cross over with our interpretation of what we see; an interpretation formed through excess, in the concentration of outlying spaces; places that are both natural and fantastic. At the same time, «the reality of the third landscape is a mental one»:⁸ Nature takes on a dimension that is always borderline, beyond human control, where protagonists who would otherwise be invisible emerge in macroscopic form.

⁷ J. Lacan, *Lo stadio dello specchio come formatore della funzione dell’io*, in “Scritti”, Einaudi, Turin, Vol. I, 1974. pp. 87-94 (translated into English as *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*).

⁸ G. Clément, *Manifesto del Terzo paesaggio*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2005, p. 25 (translated into English as *Manifesto of the Third Landscape*).

Despite the intrinsic closeness of the themes, Amparo Sard's approach to her work must be acknowledged as being driven by a "medial interest", in search of a possible overflow from one *medium* to another. According to Rosalind Krauss, a *medium* is not just a technique, support, or material used to make a work. It is a set of rules, a "generative matrix" of conventions derived from (but not identical to) material condition, a kind of *disciplined space* of possibilities opened up for the artist.⁹ Rosalind Krauss reminds us that, in its most tenacious core, art is subversion, a challenge and recognition of options. And, by extension, it is an act of contempt for prohibitions; a dismissal that releases the repressed, raising the possibility of unexpected correspondences between perception and thought.

From this viewpoint, Amparo Sard moves easily from one *medium* to another: the perforated technique that finally leads to a third dimension, with the boat that emerges like some kind of celibate contraption in terms of its unusability (the *Spacing the space* series, 2010). For instance, the duplicated arms that pursue one another and finally link up are a combinatorial motif found in the perforated drawings of the same series. In conjunction, they form a kind of diary of Amparo Sard's obsessions, serving at the same time in an almost instrumental way as a graphic script for *Salva Vidas* and finally materializing in a big fibreglass sculpture (**título, año**): a monumental transposition of the copy of the artist's arms and her obsessions. This potentially endless system of correspondences, exchanges and breakdowns also leads to a constant change of perspectives: the drawn landscapes can include the line of the horizon or they can become kaleidoscopic video-visions over which no form of control is possible, so that they become realms of indecision and *indefiniton*, as Clément would say. Amparo Sard's research moves midway between chaos and shape, and abstraction and representation, based on the physicality of drawing; its intrinsic uncontrollable energy that emerges from the subconscious. A deep sensitivity and subtle emotiveness characterize the fragility of the artist's personal world, guaranteeing the images' emotional charge. And these images find the beginnings of truth in an inner dialogue between the work and the artist, in a polysemous value which might occasionally acquire the familiarity of a dream in which the spectator is able to find his own code of interpretation in order to express the universal through the personal, the intelligible through the sensitive, and the infinite through the finite.

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⁹ Cfr. R. Krauss, *Reinventare il medium*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2005.