

Lionel Sabatté, or the Art of Giving Shape to Being-Together

“Here I am among you
You who hate me because I am gentle
And I rub against you
Metro molecule
Cell which no longer thinks
Stellar speed
Projects me outside myself
I obey the curves of the rail
I suffer the law of hunger
Pile of flesh
Dust of dust”¹

“Miss Ellen, pour me the Tea
in the beautiful Chinese cup,
where goldfish pick a quarrel
with the frightened pink monster.”²

Lionel Sabatté is a chameleon-like artist using many different practices, media, and forms of matter. He came to notice, in particular, with his pack of wolves made between 2006 and 2011 and exhibited in 2011 at the Natural History Museum in the Jardin des Plantes, during the International Contemporary Art Fair [FIAC]. The life-size wolves, as impressive as they were mysterious, were patiently made using “dust harvests” carried out in the Paris Metro, at the Châtelet station, one of the capital’s nerve centres, at the rate of one wolf a month. Commentators greatly emphasized the artist’s appetite for organic materials deemed to be vile and abject, such as dust, dead skin, and fingernail clippings, and stressed his ability to sublimate them as poetic elements containing a contemplative and metaphysical charge: a reminder of the transitory and ephemeral nature of everything, the inevitable dovetailing between life and death, and the capacity of matter to perpetually transform and renew itself.

Over and above this philosophical and, one is tempted to say, alchemical dimension of Sabatté’s work, a dimension which he shares with other subtle magicians such as, for example, the artist Patrick Neu of Lorraine, it is as well to stress the economic and social component of his oeuvre, which is less immediately perceptible, but which nevertheless runs through much of his output. In it, the motifs of *exchange*, *transaction* and *relation* in fact occupy a

central place and contribute to that *secret matter* made up of several layers of narrative and History, which deeply inform and run through Sabatté's works.

Brotherhood, Togetherness, Reparation

The fact that the flesh of the wolves in *La Meute/The Pack* has come from the metro is significant.³ As daily users of the metro, in the wake of the poet Pierre Béarn, we are accustomed to associating this transport with the nine to five routine of work and bed,⁴ without necessarily noticing how this underground architecture, which swallows us up and spits us out in thousands every day, can be likened to an urban Baal, a cruel and chthonic beast whose insatiable thousand mouths represent so many ways of gaining access to Hell. Whether “Entrails of a subterranean worm”, according to Ossip Zadkine,⁵ or “Metro Styx” according to Ivan Goll,⁶ the metro lies at the heart of a mythology and bestiary of the city which Lionel Sabatté's dust sculptures rekindle and fuel, as if they represented its prolongation and succession. Sabatté brings forth from the depths of the metro, that modern well of unconsciousness, creatures which he spills onto the surface, thus freeing entities which haunt our collective imagination. The wolves, which fill popular tales, imbuing them with terror and dread, symbolize, according to the artist, our fear in the face of a carnivorous age, ending up by devouring everything, and reducing everything to dust.⁷ But, according to the popular adage bequeathed by Thomas Hobbs, the wolf also and above all represents the inhuman part of man, when this latter turns into a predator with regard to his brothers, not hesitating to crush other people in the name of his own interests. The metro possibly represents one of the most dazzling incarnations of the de-humanization which is affecting our society, with its infernal pace, its dreaded rush hours, its users who ignore and jostle one another, because they are “dashing to conquer nothing [...] and returning home in the evening with their hearts heavier than in the morning”,⁸ and above all with its “shipwrecked castaways”⁹, which is what tramps and dropouts are, disconcerting presences which we can only get used to by closing our hearts. The stuff of Sabatté's wolves comes from this mechanical ballet and this inhuman frenzy. Pun *oblige*, these wolves come from the sheep of dust which the flocks of anonymous passengers—“the *moutonnements* or fleecy clouds”, as Alain Robbe-Grillet would say²⁰, create and push along as they travel. For all this, the artist is not casting a cynical or disillusioned eye over our day and age: quite to the contrary, through a law of reversal which is dear to him,

Sabatté turns these wolves into symbols of humanity. As he himself explains, his work with materials regarded as repellent and dirty must be understood as an endeavour involving care with regard to these forms of matter, which he saves by granting them his attention, and by revealing their unsuspected potential of beauty, just like the rag-and-bone man dear to Baudelaire, who picks up “the debris of a day of the capital” and who collects “everything which the great city has rejected, everything that it has lost, everything that it has disdained”.¹¹ What is involved is giving these materials back their quality as *semiophores*, meaning bearers of meanings.¹² From this process, the artist himself emerges transformed and well-kempt, because of the concentration and meditation which he has to provide throughout the operation.¹³ Lastly, it is befitting to add society to the beneficiaries of the undertaking. In fact, the dust which Sabatté collected day after day, brush and plastic bag in hand, in the Châtelet station which is used every day by more than 700,000 people in a hurry, is formed by all the matter which individuals shed: skin, hair, scraps of fabric... So this dust presents something like a DNA concentrate with a very varied provenance, of every kind of origin, in other words like a tremendous intermingling of humanity. As an element through which life begins and ends, dust, furthermore, represents the common denominator of all beings; a material which reminds us that we share one and the same origin and one and the same future and that we are all, quite literally, *autochtones* (natives, coming from the same earth). Lionel Sabatté’s dust wolves can henceforth be seen as works repairing a tattered human and social fabric, works which, over and above everything else, stress the possibility of a human community. Sabatté brings together that which, by definition, is destined to be scattered and borne away, dust, and he turns it into a *welded, united* body. The crazy jungle of the metro is replaced by totem-wolves, children of thousands of passengers, given birth to by the artist-shaman.

A similar attention to unity and togetherness underpins the installation devised by Sabatté in 2017 for the Museum of Hunting and Nature in Paris, titled *La sélection de parentèle/The Selection of Kinship*, made up of three sculptures: a tree, a quadruped animal and a human silhouette. The title makes reference to the biological theory developed in 1964 by William Donald Hamilton to describe the cooperative processes between genetically related organisms and individuals, making it possible to improve their respective survival and reproduction.¹⁴ By the way this theory illustrates forms of altruistic behaviour, it is precariously incorporated with the famous Darwinian notions of competition and natural selection. Sabatté thus stresses

what likens and brings individuals together, and puts his art at the service of a dynamics of the bond.

The vocabulary of reparation, is, moreover, central with this artist: the two series *Réparation métissée/Hybridized Repair* and *Sombre reparation/Dark Repair* are made using damaged butterfly wings retrieved from entomologists, which he has turned into protective envelopes and winged extensions of fantastic beings—elves and fairies—composed, for their part, of dead skin. Not only does the hybridization between species make it possible to give back life, and a poetic life, to dead organic materials, or materials considered to be dead once they are detached from the organism to which they belong, but it also offers the possibility of repairing a painful history. As the adjective “*métissée*” (cross bred) suggests, these works are possibly underpinned by the history of slavery, the oppression of one alleged race by another, a segregation and a wound which mixed unions and interbreeding are helping with time to recover from and heal. The delicate work carried out by Sabatté to take care of these damaged butterfly wings, in order to give them back their ability to fly and their freedom, can from now on be perceived as a reparatory operation of history. As is often the case, these references to the past only appear discreetly in Sabatté’s oeuvre, because his subtle poetry and his wealth of evocation would be ill-suited to any message that is too strongly and too heavily driven home; but they still constitute an essential dimension. The history of slavery lies at the heart of another work, *Le Phoenix rouge*, made in 2015 on the Route des Esclaves/Slave Route, on the island of Mauritius. To design this sculpture representing the mythological bird capable of being reborn from its ashes, in other words of getting over the worst ordeals, the artist used a volcanic rock which he found at the foot of the Morne, a mountain where escaping slaves took refuge. By turning the heavy stone into an aerial animal, Sabatté suggests its possible flight, reversing the process of the fall which caused it to land where he found it, and thereby echoing the gesture of the slave who stands upright to win his freedom. This liberating movement is evoked in one of the artist’s oil paintings *Sève hurlante, souvenir du Morne*, produced in 2016, where the explosion and the flows of paint, tossed furiously onto the surface, serve a painting-cry, as with Francis Bacon, the cry of life rediscovered and sap renewed.

Exchanging Values

In addition to the volcanic rock, the *Phoenix rouge* sculpture included 3000

five-sous coins, welded beneath the bird's wings. This is not the first time that the artist had worked with small coins which he incorporates in the frame and structure of his animals, be they crocodiles, snakes, birds, or fish. Sabatté's bestiary is fuelled by these one-cent coins which he patiently collects, like a modest treasure, during evenings spent in bars, those coins which nobody wants, because they are worthless. It is precisely this infinitesimal value, this non-value, which catches Sabatté's attention, just like dust, that "disparaged value", to use the words of Jean Dubuffet, who tried to rehabilitate those ordinary materials, "removed from people's eyes", "which people do not think about firstly because they are too vulgar and close, and seem unfit for anything whatsoever."¹⁵ The fact is that these pieces, literally abandoned, reveal, like dust, formal visual properties for anyone who knows how to look at them, which is to say for anyone who sees them for what they are, and not for what they represent. In fact the one-cent coins provide Sabatté's compositions with sparkle, dazzle, and coppery hues which call to mind the molten gold of alchemists. Above all, in the artist's eyes, these coins which have virtually no monetary value should in reality be perceived as extremely rich materials because of their human *load*. The real exchange value does not reside where you think it is. Having passed through thousands of hands, if not millions, from the poorest to the wealthiest, with every new exchange and every new circulation these coins are nurtured by the energy and history of the individual giving or receiving them. As if enlarged and magnetized by all these successive contacts, they intermingle and convey thousands of particles coming from people with extremely diverse histories and itineraries. Lionel Sabatté's animals made of cents are thus fed by a fantastic concentrate of humanity—with the word totem once again being dictated in their regard.

What is more, because their value is close to nothing, these coins acquire a paradoxical status, which keenly questions this strange and magical operation at the origin of currency, which consists in establishing a correlation between a given quantity of a material and a quantity of labour. This operation, which we carry out without thinking too much about it, seems, on reflection, all the more surprising and dizzy-making because it is entirely based on a pact of trust, and a mechanism of belief. Through the absurdity which they incarnate, due to their negligible value, the one-cent coins remind us of everything that currency, a central factor of our society, may contain in terms of arbitrariness and irrationality.

Lastly, in the act of collecting these coins, we must see a reflection, on

Sabatté's part, about the extinction of *cash*. In recent years, several European countries have in fact suspended the manufacture of one- and two-cent coins, because of the excessive cost represented by this manufacture in relation to the coin's usefulness. In due course, these coins deemed undesirable might therefore well disappear. Sabatté incorporates these cents in the structure of animal creatures which he represents as themselves being threatened by disappearance. Everything happens as if these animals had swallowed all that shiny metal, which has become part and parcel of them, until it suffocates and kills them, which is suggested by their dying postures. A powerful metaphor of ecological catastrophes leading to the destruction of fauna and flora, caused by plastic and heavy metals ingested by living organisms, but also an arresting image of the insatiable thirst for money which petrifies and fossilizes everything, lending a chilling topicality to the myth of King Midas and his gold. The absurdity of this insatiable appetite is masterfully illustrated by *Serpent*, a 2014 sculpture which depicts a snake made of coins biting its own tail and destroying itself, Capital-Ouroboros, which calls to mind the skeletons of reptiles imagined by Huang Yong Ping. With his art, Lionel Sabatté is trying not only to alert us to man's capacity to wreck his environment, but also to give life back to vanished species. He has thus devoted several works, sculptures and drawings, to the dodo, that emblematic bird of the island of Mauritius popularized by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*. Having, over many generations, lost its ability to fly because of the absence of predators, the dodo became extinct once and for all in the 17th century, following the discovery and colonization of Mauritius by Europeans a century earlier. It thus represents a supreme symbol of man's capacity for meddling with regard to nature.

Circulation Turned into Matter

The sad fate of the dodo is part of the history of encounters between civilizations and their effects. This is another aspect which particularly attracts Lionel Sabatté's attention. In addition to dust and coins, the artist in fact displays a liking for materials loaded with history, and more precisely with economic history. So he does not hesitate to produce sculptures and drawings of animals, incorporating in them spices, foodstuffs whose "temptingness" greatly contributed to forging the history of international trade.¹⁶ With these travelling spices, linking continents to one another, Lionel Sabatté once again makes the history of circulation and exchange his artistic

matter. A history which not only connects people at a given moment, but also people between different periods, in such a way that Sabatté's works are kneaded by time, which contributes to their wealth and power. Among the spices he is fond of, turmeric has a special place. Originating from India, its many different beneficial powers for health were described in texts as ancient as the *Atharva-Veda*. Its medicinal properties and its intense colorant strength made it a spice extremely sought after by Europeans who imported it from the 18th century on. Sabatté makes use of the bright orange colour of the spice in his sculptures of dodos and unicorns alike. For the artist, it is not just a matter of colouring his sculptures but also, like a shaman holding ancestral recipes, of galvanizing the vital force attributed to turmeric to give life to beings which only exist in the imagination and the memory. Sabatté often mixes turmeric with saffron, with which it has sometimes been mistaken because of their similar colouring powers. Today, saffron is one of the most precious and expensive spices because of the care and considerable time which has to be devoted to the crocus flowers from which it comes, whose cultivation is essentially manual. The meticulousness that it calls for and the time factor involved thus link it to ancient traditions: alchemists, incidentally, worked a lot with saffron, their "red gold". Sabatté's "spicy" sculptures and drawings are part and parcel of the tradition of this know-how, presupposing patience, and lending an ear to nature.

In other respects, the artist has developed a great interest in tea, another foodstuff with a rich history, which was used, like spices, as a trading currency, and which, as such, was the object of fierce power struggles between nations, with many a bloody sacrifice made in order to ensure its production.¹⁷ But tea is also synonymous with an agent which binds people together, a marker of hospitality and warmth shared in societies as different as Japan, India, China, Russia, and Britain, etc., where its preparation and tasting give rise to many different rituals, invariably aimed at strengthening the sense of community, including, at times, in its link with the divine. Tea, furthermore, presupposes a harmony between man and nature, because all the elements are involved in its preparation: water, fire, air and earth. Similarly, prior to its consumption, the fermentation process of tea necessary for its production requires that man have a subtle knowledge of nature, as well as a close observation of it.

It is all these layers of meaning that Sabatté summons when he uses tea, essentially the Pu'er variety, to produce his majestic sculptures of billy goats. Sabatté's goats, herbivorous animals, are literally formed by plants, based on

a poetry which calls to mind the inspired art of Giuseppe Penone, who has also worked with tea. Sabatté's sculptures very powerfully evoke the animal shapes of prehistoric rock paintings, which have endlessly fascinated the artist since his boyhood. Everything happens as if Sabatté had pushed to its limits the relief of those rock and cave images, in order to turn them into three-dimensional works and thereby give life back to the animals which were depicted. Sabatté thus creates an encounter between the binding dimension of tea and the ritual and magical component of prehistoric art, nurtured by the symbiosis between man and his natural environment. Through their kinship with prehistoric paintings, Lionel Sabatté's tea sculptures lead us to an ancestral dimension common to one and all, and thus *infuse* his works with a universal dimension.¹⁸ The magic of Sabatté's work lies in this capacity to rekindle the links which connect us not only to our contemporaries, but also to our peers in time, including in ancient and immemorial times.

Lionel Sabatté's art can from now on be defined as a celebration of a being-together, over and above different ages and despite the vicissitudes of history, in other words as a poetic and always vibrant reminder of our humanity.

- 1-Ivan Goll, "Molécule", *Métro de la mort*, Paris, Les Cahiers du Journal des poètes, 1936, p. 29.
- 2-Théodore de Banville, "Le thé", *Les Exilés. Odelettes, améthystes, rimes dorées, rondels, les princesses, trente-six ballades joyeuses*, Paris, Charpentier, 1899, p. 311.
- 3-As such, Sabatté's approach is strictly the opposite of Stéphane Thidet's, author of a *Meute*, too, in 2009, but in the form of real wolves set free in the grounds of the Château des Ducs de Bretagne in Nantes. Sabatté starts from the urban element, the dust of the metro, to obtain the wild animals that the wolf is; Thidet, for his part, imports the wolf, symbol of nature, into the urban space.
- 4- "Métro, boulot, bistrot, mégots, dodo, zero", Pierre Béarn, "Réveil" (1951), *Couleurs d'usine*, Paris, Seghers, 1951.
- 5-Ossip Zadkine, "Métro", *Sic* n° 48, 15 and 30 June 1919.
- 6-Ivan Goll, "Métro Styx", *Métro de la mort, op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 7-Valérie Duponchelle, "L'expo en peaux mortes de Lionel Sabatté", *Le Figaro*, 17 October 2011.
- 8-Ivan Goll, "Les honnêtes gens", *Métro de la mort, op. cit.*, p. 15.
- 9-Patrick Declerck, *Les Naufragés. Avec les clochards de Paris*, Paris, Plon, coll. Terre Humaine, 2001.
- 10-Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Dans les couloirs du métropolitain", *Dans le labyrinthe*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1959, p. 253.
- 11-Charles Baudelaire, "Les Paradis artificiels", *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, pp. 327-328.

12-“When an object stops taking part in an exchange, when, which comes down to the same thing, it loses all meaning and, possibly, too, all usefulness, it becomes waste. On the other hand, for as long as it remains the element of a collection, it has a meaning, a *semiophore* ».

Krzysztof Pomian, *Des saintes reliques à l'art moderne, Venise, Chicago, XIIIe-XXe siècles*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, p. 154.

13-“Lionel Sabatté. Tectonique des mutations. Conversation entre Lionel Sabatté and Inge Linder-Gaillard”, *Lionel Sabatté, Résidence Saint-Ange*, 2016 :

http://residencesaintange.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Sabatte_Catalogue_Light.pdf

14-Edward Osborne Wilson, *La Sociobiologie*, trans. Paul Couturiau, Paris, Le Rocher, 1987.

15-Jean Dubuffet, “Empreintes” (April 1957), *L'homme du commun à l'ouvrage*, Paris, éd. Gallimard, 1973, p. 231.

16-Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, London, Harper and Collins, 2004.

17-Paul Butel, *Histoire du thé*, Paris, Éditions Desjonsquères, 1997.

18-The infusion process has an important place in Sabatté's work : he has produced a series of paintings which he has called *Infusion*, which he executed by pouring paint with the help of a teapot. The infusion is not only the liberation of the active principle of a plant in a liquid, an operation of transformation and transmission of a power, therefore, but it is also the unforeseen factor and the freedom with which the plant's colour spreads in the water, a joyous and inventive ink.