

Barbara Fischer, ed., *Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 1999, 208 pp., 23 colour and 42 black-and-white illus., \$22.95

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litique. Ses luttes pour la conservation du paysage l'inciteront à se concilier la bienveillance du Prince plutôt qu'à lutter contre l'Empire.

C'est au chapitre trois que l'auteur du livre « revisite » les principaux lieux dépeints par Rousseau pour en dégager la signification au sein de l'œuvre. Le terme « revisite » n'est pas ici pure métaphore, puisque Thomas rajoute une expérience concrète des sites à l'étude des tableaux et à l'examen documentaire de rigueur. Partant du postulat que toute élaboration paysagique relève bien davantage de la culture que de la nature à l'état brut, il se demande ce que pouvaient avoir en commun les motifs que le peintre a empruntés à des régions aussi diverses que le Jura, le Berry et les Landes, régions qu'il a fréquentées avant de se fixer à Barbizon. Quelques constats s'imposent alors. Rousseau se désintéresse progressivement du pittoresque et du sublime pour s'attacher au coin de campagne anonyme et retiré, dont les seuls traits distinctifs se résument à une sorte d'activité chimique et biologique élémentaire. L'exaltation des cycles naturels trouve cependant sa contrepartie obligée dans l'industrialisation progressive du territoire, que la vision naturaliste suppose sans la montrer, et dans la circulation généralisée des biens et des personnes qu'elle met en branle. Thomas reprend à son compte la réflexion sur le tourisme qui s'impose à toutes les recherches actuelles concernant le paysage moderne; il a lu les guides de voyage du temps, en plus d'avoir consulté les manuels de géographie: son peintre est bien cet allié du bourgeois citadin qui transforme la campagne et ses habitants en objets de consommation visuelle. Cette démarche va, sous l'alibi écologique, trouver son point d'achèvement à Barbizon.

Derrière l'écologie, une économie ... C'est bien dans cette intention de contextualiser la démarche de Rousseau, intention annoncée au précédent chapitre, que se développe la dernière partie du livre de Thomas. Des considérations sur les habitants de Barbizon, petits propriétaires terriens, employés agricoles, boutiquiers et ouvriers des carrières, dressent le décor social que le peintre, contrairement à Millet, a choisi à peu près d'ignorer.

La forêt, qui retient par contre son attention, est aussi la scène de transactions humaines dans lesquelles Rousseau jouera cette fois un rôle actif. Propriété d'État que l'Empire, après la Monarchie, exploite comme territoire de chasse et comme ressource naturelle, la forêt de Barbizon constitue une sorte d'espace réservé où l'accès à des zones de pâturage et de cueillette des fagots demeure fortement réglementé. Des intendants en assurent la maintenance et contrôlent tout particulièrement la coupe du bois, dont l'accélération commence à inquiéter certains « défenseurs » de la nature, parmi lesquels il faut compter les peintres. Ce n'est cependant pas au nom d'une démocratisation du lieu que Rousseau adresse, en 1852, une pétition à Napoléon III visant à protéger de toute forme d'exploitation (y compris les projets de reboisement) certains secteurs particulièrement improductifs, tel le Bas-Bréau. Il veut d'abord et avant tout préserver intacts des motifs de tableaux. L'attachement particulier que Rousseau, indifférent à la représentation de la figure humaine, porte au chêne, ce symbole de la France auquel ses œuvres confèrent une touchante expressivité, sied bien au chef de l'école nationale de paysage.

Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France est donc un ouvrage qu'on consultera avec beaucoup d'intérêt, ne fût-ce que pour les liens établis entre les dispositifs formels des œuvres et leur dimension idéologique. On peut regretter, étant donné l'effort consacré aux premiers, que les reproductions en petit format et en noir et blanc ne permettent pas toujours d'apprécier la justesse de l'argumentation. Le type de réflexion que nous propose l'auteur demande une longue fréquentation des tableaux. D'autre part, et comme toute interprétation, le point de vue exprimé ne fera pas nécessairement consensus. Mais l'exercice auquel s'est livré Greg M. Thomas marquera pour longtemps la fortune critique de Rousseau et comptera parmi les bonnes études consacrées récemment au genre du paysage.

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Barbara Fischer, ed., *Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 1999, 208 pp., 23 colour and 42 black-and-white illus., \$22.95.

Is there any subject left that can be broached from an assumption of common understanding? Sensuality? No. Sexuality? Definitely not. But food, one thinks, possibly yes, since "we all have to eat" and all got started in roughly the same way (breast, nipple or eyedropper) before the first round of calamities (not-quite-good-enough mothering, polluted water or weaning) cut universality short and pushed us grazing and gazing onto the fields of *foodculture*.

Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art is a lively collection of essays edited by Barbara Fischer to complement an exhibition entitled *foodculture* presented at the ArtLab of the University of Western Ontario. Fischer alludes in her acknowledgment to a competition which was part of Ontario's participation in Canada's Year of Asia Pacific. To what degree this special year sparked, or sponsored, the project is not explained, though the most cursory glance at the list of artists and table of contents confirms a strong interest in the cross-currents of Asian-Canadian and Asian-American practice. The exhibition included Millie Chen, Ron Benner, Kulwinder Bajar, Jamelie Hassan and Elaine Tin Nyo whose works are represented in

Foodculture, the book. Incorporating critical essays, prose poetry, philosophical statements, reproductions and recipes, the collection aims “to contextualize the representation and material use of food in the visual arts in a broader history,” especially as this multifaceted activity (*foodwork*) comments on and redefines matters of taste.

As the book unfolds, some interesting contradictions come to mind. Food as subject-matter in art is often expressed as bounty: food is both beautiful and plentiful; it, in fact, symbolizes plenty, and its representations in art (images of production and consumption) have also been plentiful, if not always appreciated as the highest form. Therein lies the first rub, for the under-acknowledgment of food and its sensory appreciation – or more precisely, its under-theorization – is a problem to be redressed by the authors, who fulfill their mission in various ways. Jennifer Fisher’s relentless production of food metaphors draws her reader’s attention to the hegemony of vision in the framing of art historical discourse, though she can be successful only to a point. These conventions are stubborn: “describing,” a word in which visual and literary biases meet, somehow seems more accurate than “laying out, buffet style” or “tasting, blending, timing and intuition,” culinary borrowings employed by Fisher with relish. One of Fisher’s guiding lights is the British cultural lexicologist, Raymond Williams, who makes the link between taste and consumption but also lays out what he calls a “popular sub-critical vocabulary directly associated with food – *feast, on the menu, goodies, etc.*” which supports the assumption that “the viewer, spectator or reader is a *consumer*.”¹

All art is consumable; some art, namely *foodwork*, is more fatally consumable than most. The representation of food may be of sufficient longevity to be called permanent, though its fame be a flash in the pan. Material *foodwork* is conceived in planned disappearance; its transience relates it to sound, which is evanescent, and performance, which is finite. Neither oral nor corporeal forms of art can be preserved without degradation. *Foodwork* is more fragile still, in that it cannot be preserved at all, and may even be accused of passive-aggressiveness, as it attracts insects and other vermin to the sanctuaries of art.

Food is universally appealing because it is necessary to survival; the same rule makes the representation of food or its material use interesting to both ends of the economic spectrum, those who overconsume and those who go hungry. That said, we seem to lack the tools (should I say “utensils”?) of language and experience to savour and digest these works, and some people lack respect, though with postmodern irony still ascendant, this lack may be counted as a virtue. Still, whether sensorial satisfaction can co-exist with virtue is another problem to gnaw on. *Foodwork* insists on entry-level pleasure, even if the aftertaste is bitter, or the experience of the art rises in the throat.

For the unsuspecting visitor, “the material use of food” is probably the most startling manifestation of *foodculture*. Just as innovative, however, and perhaps more broadly influential, is the attempt by Fischer and her contributors to review and reframe the visual representation of food. Their arguments return quite logically to Renaissance and Baroque paintings whose complex programmes foreshadow the iconography and synaesthesia of Romanticism and Symbolism. Jennifer Fisher and Corinne Mandel are the designated historians in the group; other writers make reference to precedents, Andy Patton most disarmingly in his essay on Ron Benner and Jim Drobnick in his examination of Late Modernism. Mandel takes an iconographical approach to unearthing and interpreting a family of cucumbers in a closely observed and scholarly reading of Renaissance religious art, especially that of Crivelli. She seems very much at ease in this area; her notes demonstrate a long and fruitful engagement with this type of motif, as well as up-to-the-minute research. Mandel’s essay, while specific, was an important addition to the book in general, for she demonstrates that the representation of food – its evocation of taste and its hidden meaning – is not virgin territory for artists and art historians, though there is clearly interesting work to be done.

New, or at least refreshed by new-art-historical approaches, is the desire to place all sensory experience on an equal footing with that greedy paradigm, *visuality*. Fisher unmasks what she calls “epistemological coercion” – the word is a bit strong – Kant’s force-feeding of visual connoisseurship, a single-point philosophical position that paradoxically seems only to grow stronger in an era of inclusiveness. However many different perspectives are included in the Great Conversation, we are still, according to Fisher, in the thrall of the visual. Instead of replacing one visual system with the Other’s, Fisher urges us to break the visual habit. Her recommended mode of critical reception is taste in the gustatory sense, which can be taken in a series of “bites,” or provisional judgements, one bite leading to the next. Here the choice of words is a bit unfortunate, for “bites” as units of knowledge are an all-too-familiar phenomenon, though delivered to us through another of the senses as sound-bites, pre-packaged aural truffles designed to satisfy our need to know. Fisher’s appeal to the Indian concept of *rasa*, as “immersive and interrelational experience,” seems a more promising approach, one which would be interesting to encounter in broader application. Her programme is ambitious, and it leaves me hungry for more, which is not necessarily a bad thing. I want to know how this alternative (to me) system might be applied to cultural analysis, not just to *foodculture*, but to other forms of expression. I guess I want the steak, not just the sizzle: a radical new framework of interpretation.

What might we reasonably expect from “gustatory aesthetics?” How significant is *foodculture* compared to other revisions

of the culture? *Foodculture* is a paradigm shift, a possibility opened up by feminism and post-colonialism. Feminism can be traced through the diversification of media, the embrace of the vernacular, and the admission of the personal into public debate. Post-colonial analysis has heightened our awareness of internal hybridity and external controls – we find these issues embodied in *foodculture*'s voices of experience, of feeling. Disinterested scholarship holds little interest for us now, while criticism leavened with memories seems as natural and satisfying as a harvest meal. In *Foodculture*, personal anecdotes, family histories and other appeals to memory lead us into Bill Arning's redefinition of art, Deborah Root's deconstructions of food marketing, the multi-media production of Jamelie Hassan, the collaborative film criticism of Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy, Patton's discussion of Benner, You Ching's appraisal of recent Asian-American film, and Elaine Tin Nyo's performance of her mother's egg curry (sorry – available here in photographic reproduction only). Autobiographical content and convivial performances distinguish current *foodwork* from the uses of food in socio-political and conceptual artworks of the sixties and seventies. Jim Drobnick revisits this history in "Recipes for the Cube." He reminds us of a period in which the personal, while doubtless alive, tended to be eclipsed in public works of art by collective radicalism; the spectatorial mind was outwardly engaged, and most of the artworks produced were the opposite of tasty. Adrian Piper's *Catalysis* (1970–77), including her urban strolls in rancid-smelling clothes, is a case in point. Though contemporary *foodwork* appeals to the same senses, it no longer offends. Indeed, as Drobnick suggests, there are other important precedents in the artist-run restaurants, cafés and feminist network dinners – places and events in which food and drink have created "spaces of affiliation." In a *foodculture*, the work is both medium and pretext for meetings over difference. Eliciting spectatorial engagement through human transaction surely must be the intention behind works that are by nature consumable and collectible only in memory. If *foodwork* equals artwork, then we really are all artists, and Joseph Beuys's utopian vision has been realized.

Anne Brydon's grim appraisal of our prospects within a global economy, "Cultivating Collapse," is a fast-acting antidote to such optimism. Brydon is an anthropologist, and she writes with the chilling authority of a social scientist, though here regrettably without scholarly apparatus. There is no bibliography, and her single endnote in an article stuffed with statistics and projections is a reference to an Adam Gopnik piece in *The New Yorker*. This hardly inspires confidence. Still, the article is a much needed, sobering addition to the book, combining raw facts about biotech agriculture and economics with oh-so-human blind spots and equivocations. She approves, for exam-

ple, of the *foodculture* project, even as she recognizes that "the dismantling [of] each life-nurturing system provided us" is being met with "nostalgic yearning for 'simpler' times, pastoral idylls and authentic cuisines that television daily delivers." Brydon's observation is general; she does not include the artists and writers of *foodculture* in the same net, while I do, and interested readers will, as well. When *Foodculture* arrived to be reviewed, I was right in the middle of a three-day recipe, the feverish construction of an authentic cassoulet. I wanted to please my guests, of course, but I also wanted to stun them with excess, the richness of the dish and the extravagance of my culinary performance. My response to Brydon's objectivity is subjective, closing the circle on her article, the *foodculture* project, and this subject-medium of art.

Foodculture represents a community of artists and critics who have become attentive to this subject-medium. Theirs is still a small piece of the cultural pie. Patton's informative essay on Ron Benner's work makes no grandiose claims, despite the economic implications and geographical reach of Benner's work; on the contrary, Patton implants Benner in the London area, a community inspired by the memory of Greg Curnoe whose attachment to the local is projected by the next generation, Benner and Jamelie Hassan, onto the world stage. It is telling, I think, that Patton refers to Benner by his first name. A work that is "grown," rather than "made," does not yield to immediate consumption. The spectator must wait and, during that time, might strike up a conversation with the gardener-artist. After several readings, I am still impressed with the measured pace of *Foodculture* as a whole, which is not to say that the book is dull, but rather that it cultivates knowledge, rather than delivers it.

As a production, the book is a bit disappointing. One wishes for more luscious illustrations and a little more attention to detail. As a contribution to knowledge, the book is limited by its lack of bibliography. A collective bibliography in a book of this type is as important as any article, offering an immediate impression of the complexity and direction of the research. As a reader, I would have been helped by a list of illustrations. These unpleasant things said, *Foodculture* remains an interesting, thought-provoking read. I think that I am still the same visual-oral being, but I now have a map for the road not taken.

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Note

- 1 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn (New York, 1983), 315.