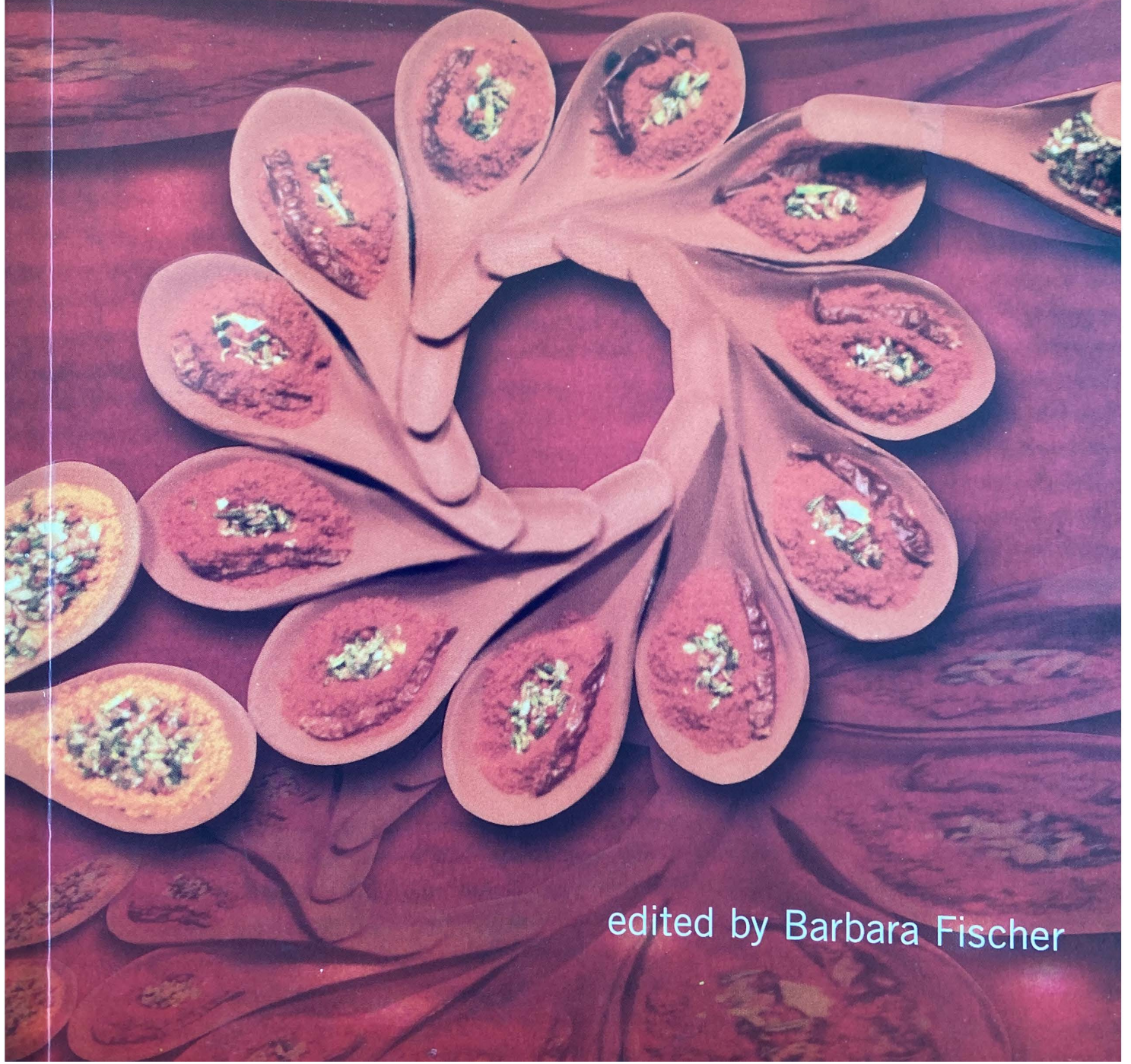


FOODCULTURE

Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art



edited by Barbara Fischer

Recipes for the Cube

Aromatic and Edible Practices in Contemporary Art

Jim Drobnick

If you don't like garlic, you can't understand modern art.

—Alexander Archipenko

So, metaphysics: tautology; religion: tautology; everything is tautology, except black coffee because the senses are in control!

—Marcel Duchamp

Beauty will be edible or will cease to be.

—Salvador Dalí

Painting is walking, running, drinking, eating and fulfilling your natural functions. You can say I'm disgusting, but that's just what it is.

—Arthur Cravan¹

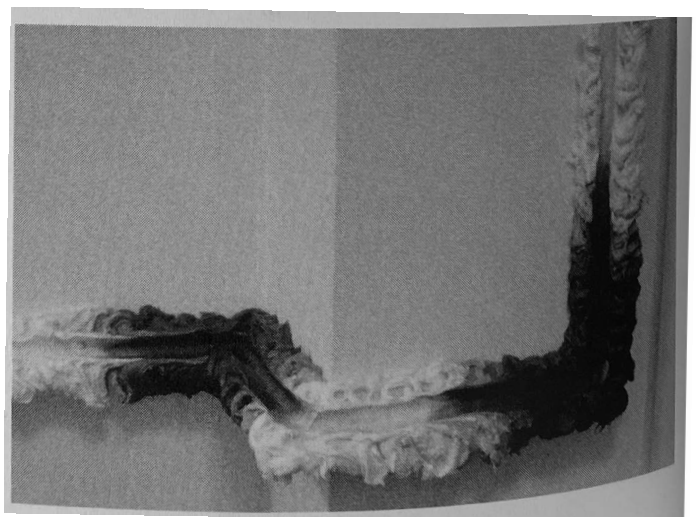
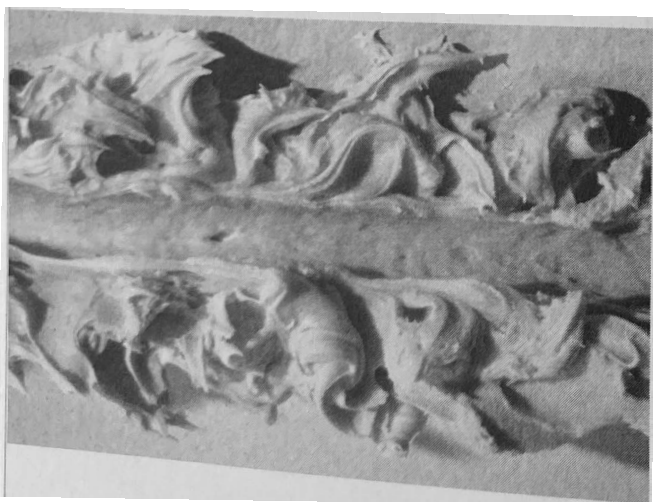
Taste and smell share a striking non-place in the visualist histories of modern art. Cooking and perfumery belong to those ostensibly “minor” arts, like textiles or interior design, accorded lesser status because of their reputed compromise by commercial, domestic or ephemeral traits. Turn of the century anthropologists, psychologists and psychoanalysts consigned oral and nasal faculties to the pre- and uncivilized realm of existence: that of the primitive, infantile and animalistic, even the neurotic and perverse.² The performative

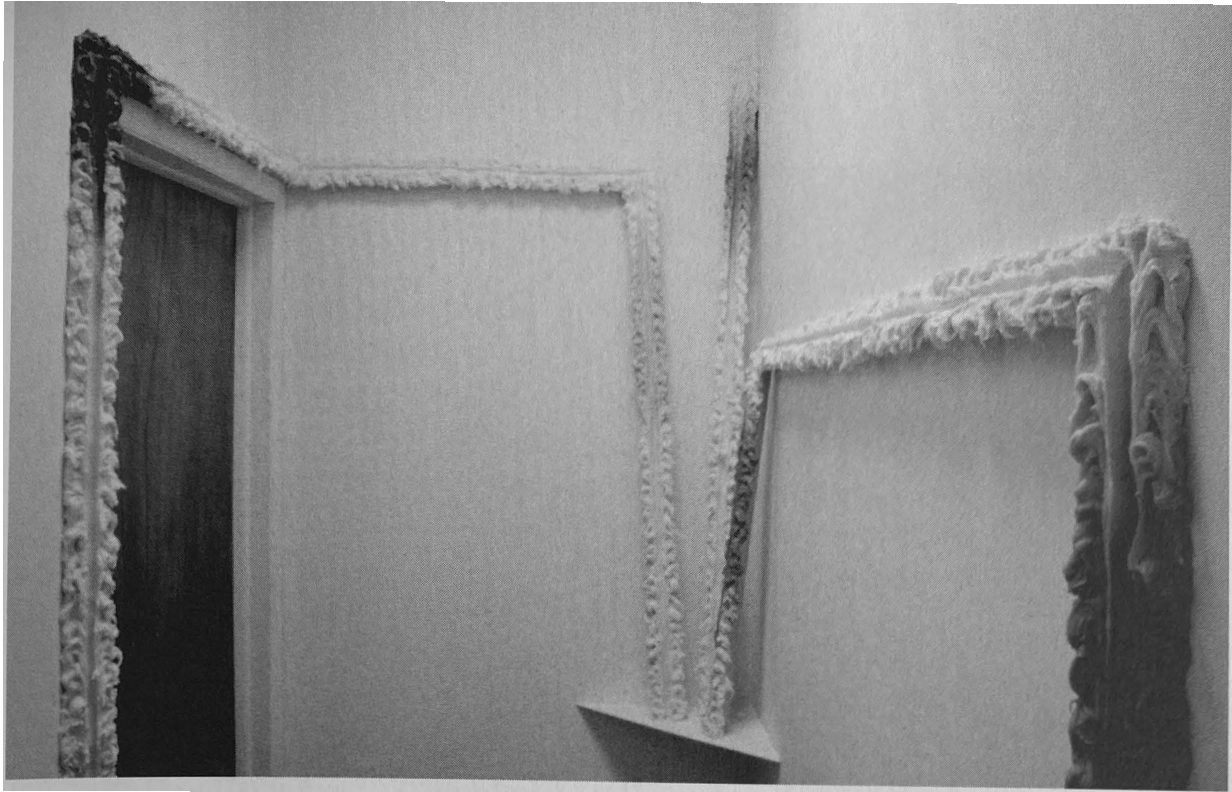
Thomas Zitzwitz,
*Ma che simpatico ...
quel pescecane*,
1998. Installation
with audio, video
projection and
synthesized smells.
Photo: courtesy
the artist.

nature of the creations of cuisine and fragrance generates little for collectors and historians to chew on and sniff after the initial moments of their creation and experience. And in terms of aesthetic debates, philosophers have contrived a number of arbitrary and dubious rationales for excluding flavour and scent, such as their solely “biological” utility, their inability to “represent” or their lack of an “objective vocabulary.”³

Despite the ocularcentric bias against the aesthetic potential of the non-visual senses, an interest in the savoury and aromatic suffuses the lives and writings of modern artists, serves consistently as a subject matter, as well as being featured in actual artworks, demonstrating that vanguard artists never had a problem with their “edible complexes” or “nasal stages.”⁴ Whistler’s famous “Sunday breakfasts,” Toulouse-Lautrec’s collection of recipes, *The Art of Cuisine*, and Marinetti’s *The Futurist Cookbook* are only a few of the examples of the so-called “lower senses” being given heightened aesthetic consideration by visual artists.⁵ Whether the interest is of a sensualist orientation (demonstrating the sybaritic possibilities of the “art of living”) or embodying a strategy for the socio-political intervention (seeking to change the ideology infusing the everyday realm of diet and ambience), the gustatory and olfactory senses became more than just an eccentric diversion, they became a means to create and perceive art. Once the schism between art (visual) and life (multisensory) had been bridged, however, both the sensuous and the abject, aliment and excrement, were equally available as genres of work. The pursuit of vivid experience and pedantry-clearing sensation, voiced by

Doug Hammett,
Finger Licks (detail),
1992. Cake frosting.
Photo: courtesy
the artist.





Archipenko and Duchamp above, is also paralleled by the thematics of disgust, articulated by the scatological and coprophilia-minded Dalí and Cravan. Contemporary artists operating at the intersection of the oral and the olfactory continue these preoccupations, especially as they interrogate issues surrounding materiality, ecological awareness, affect, simulation and sociality – issues that will guide my discussion of oral/olfactory artworks here.⁶

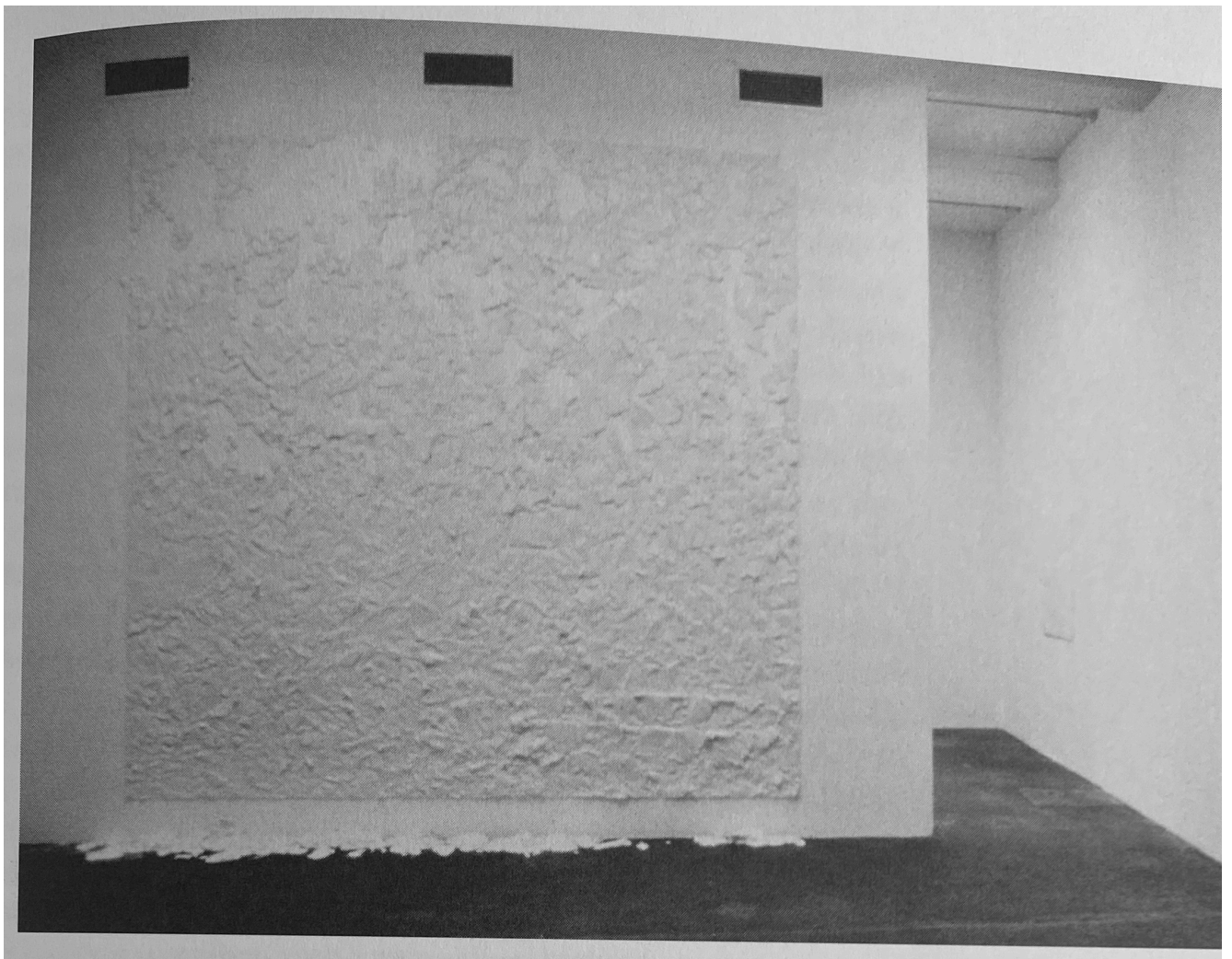
The materiality of food, as opposed to its role as a nutritional and life-sustaining necessity, is a temptation for artists dealing with the politics of the everyday. As journalistic responses to Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) and Les Levine's *Corn Flakes* (1969/1999) evidence, diverting food to aesthetic ends is deeply troubling to mainstream conceptions about the proper function of comestibles, where the use of desiccating flank steak or cornflakes in art – even when addressing the issue of hunger and the inequities of food distribution – is concomitant to it being “wasted.”⁷ The response, by contrast, to an early example of an artist working with food, Leonardo, was one of overly enthusiastic appreciation. Creating marzipan sculptures for the Milanese ruler (the artist was also known as the “court perfumer”), Leonardo plaintively noted, “I have observed with pain that my Lord Ludovico and his court gobble up all the sculptures I give them, right to the last morsel.”⁸ Between these extremes lie works that foreground the sculptural qualities of

Doug Hammett,
Finger Licks, 1994.
Cake frosting, artificial
flavours and scents,
wood, installation
view. Photo: courtesy
the artist.

food, its fragrances, textures, colours, weight, tangibility – in other words, its phenomenological thingness.

Disavowing the manufacturing techniques producing most of the West's consumables, artists seeking to foster an engagement with food's materiality isolate and foreground edible substances at a stage prior to the myriad forms of commodification, packaging, marketing, distribution and store display that reduce and contain many of their experiential aspects. If the modern condition is one of alienation by industrial processes, and the postmodern one of overstimulation by communications media, then the strategic confrontation with materiality harbours more than just a romantic atavism to "real experience," but can be a piquant statement about the ideology of the senses and the significance of body beyond the triumphant eye. Anya Gallaccio's walls of chocolate, for instance, confront visitors with an overpowering scent long before actual viewing. *Stroke* (1994) is a mural-sized spectacle of the sweet, endorphin-inducing substance, underlining the enormous difference between the satisfaction gained by visual "consumption" and the gustatory equivalent. The sculptures of Ernesto Neto elevate spices from the realm of mere recipe ingredients to sensuous, animated materials in and of themselves. Silk stockings filled with weighty amounts of ground pepper, annatto, cloves and turmeric are dropped and contoured by gravity on the gallery floor. The resulting biomorphic shapes give these aromatic powders eerie personalities, endowing them with an *elan vital* normally spoken about only in fables and pantheistic creeds. Cake icing is the medium which Doug Hammett uses to sculpt aromatic tracteries that inevitably bring visitors to recall birthdays, weddings and other milestone events. His *Finger Licks* (Artists Space Installation, 1994) features mouldings coated with strawberry, coconut and root beer-scented icing (among a dozen other intense flavours) that traverse a corridor linking the exhibition space to the bathrooms. Summoning up not only the confectionery emphasis of childhood celebrations and the fairy-tale fantasies of edible architectures, it also recalls the training and taboos accompanying bodily functions exercised at the nether end of the digestive process.

While some foodstuffs remain stable and can be preserved for relatively long periods of time, most edible and organic elements undergo cycles of transformation – they manifest an inherently performative aspect. The conversion from raw material to tasty consumable is a narrative of metamorphosis with mythic and alchemical overtones. In Dan Mihaltianu's *Firewater* (1996),



local fruits and plants, as well as stories and memories, were gathered from the streets and parks of New York City and brought to the gallery over the course of several weeks. There a distillation process occurred, literally and symbolically, that filled the space with intoxicating aromas of fermenting fruit. The end result? Bottles of alcohol labelled with historical fragments, documenting the spirit(s) of an environment and community.

The cycle of transformation also operates in reverse, from edible to excreable, and artists working with food and smells recognize that decay is an inevitable consequence of organic matter. Meg Webster's decomposing *Butter Wall* (1996) surprised visitors by its oddly pleasant smell, revealing the degree to which putrefaction is always already stigmatized and assumed to be intolerable. Introducing biotic materials into what is typically a sanitized exhibition space sets up a dialogue between the palpable and the cultural, reconnecting urbanized inhabitants with the vitality of the environment For

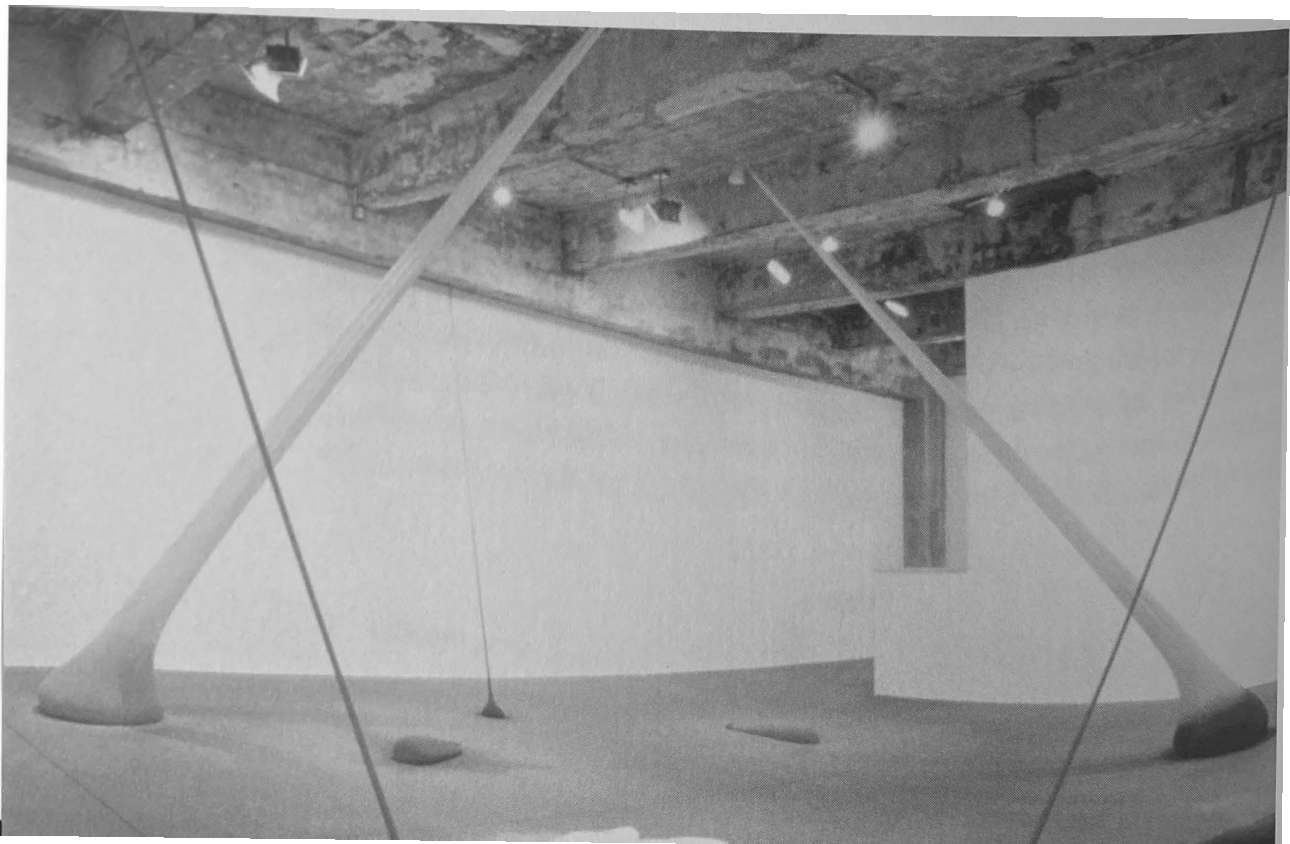
Meg Webster, *Butter Wall*, 1996. Butter, installation view. Photo: courtesy the artist and Morris Healy Gallery.

Webster, ignorance about ecosystems and organic processes can be transformed into appreciation by transposing natural materials into the dignifying frame of art.

Assaulting sensibilities, rather than fostering appreciation, was the *raison d'être* of Adrian Piper's employment of malodorous foodstuffs in the series of performances, *Catalysis* (1970–7). Wearing clothes soaked in a rancid combination of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil, Piper walked the streets and rode on public transportation in deliberately confrontational outcast states. Her pungent disturbance of hygienic standards aimed to address intolerance as it occurred at the level of interpersonal relationships, where the norms of etiquette sometimes mask racist and xenophobic attitudes.

As much as odours mark the material transitions of food, smells and ingested substances can initiate subtle, fundamental changes in perceivers themselves. Eating and inhaling are processes of consumption, whereby external elements are incorporated into the body. Foods and smells can be physiologically affective, exerting subtle, and at times overt, influence on health and mood. The compelled intimacy of taking nourishment and air into our bodies challenges the distance and detachment central to visually-based aesthetic theories. Artworks that atmospherically envelop or undergo digestion break the illusion that viewers exist solely as scopic viewpoints, that is, without bodies, sensations or feelings.

Ernesto Neto,
Puff, Piff, Poff, Puff...,
1997. Installation view.
Photo: courtesy Tanya
Bonakdar Gallery.



Montien Boonma is explicit about the curative powers of herbal fragrances in the installation *Alokhayasan: Temple of the Mind* (1995–96). At once a sacred space and medicinal retreat, the pungent aromas of citronella, ginger and other spices unite the subtle practices of spirituality and healing that have been deemed improper by Western doctors. The chamber immerses visitors in a fragrant environment that aims to relax the mind, reduce stress, support contemplation and engage with the recuperative powers attributed to plants by aromatherapy and homeopathic practitioners. The encompassing and invigorating presence of a work such as this stems from a holistic viewpoint in which art can provide a haven for mending the fracture between mind and body.

Yet, like the apparently innocuous background melodies of Muzak, ineffable atmospheres and subtle potions may conceal manipulative interests and motives. What one person may consider to be immersive and welcoming, may be to another a covert means of entrapment and control. The works of Carsten Höller, a trained phytopathologist whose dissertation examined the olfactory communication of insects, foreground the biological nature of human behaviour. Infusing installations with pheromones (Dü You, 1994) and stimulants (*Aphrodisiac Tea*, 1995), Höller mischievously asserts the involuntary, physiological processes inherent to culturally hallowed activities such as love and reproduction, as well as draws attention to the exploitative desires of those who seek to capitalize upon such presumed weaknesses.

As textbooks on physiology and perception assert, smell and taste are categorized as the “chemical senses” and intimately linked in the evolution of species and in everyday acts of eating. That certain foods are indistinguishable without their accompanying smell – the similar textures of apples and raw potatoes is one example⁹ – attests to the significance of olfaction to the experience of taste. But it would be unusual to consider the appreciation of food’s aroma as superior or even equal to ingesting the food itself – witness the heartlessness implicit in the nineteenth-century engraving *Living Made Easy*, in which a wealthy industrialist of questionable philanthropy allows the malnourished poor, through an elaborate construction of tubes, to sniff the smells of his cooking dinner.¹⁰

This individuating of food scents from their sources, creating, in other words, virtual culinary experiences, may have been satirical in 1830, yet in the postmodern era, it is a common practice to employ artificial odours. Nike stores redolent with the odour of bubble gum and restaurant chains emitting

the aroma of fried chicken are just a few instances of environmental fragrancing in which scents, manufactured in mass quantities, are pumped through air conditioning units inside buildings and ventilated onto streets. The motives are decidedly instrumental rather than decorative: deception (disguising the industrial production of food), manipulation (inducing ambivalent customers to purchase and consume), and marketing (creating a consistent, recognizable olfactory identity to imprint upon the public). Advances in synthesizing food odours, however, have not been ignored by artists. The fiddle music accompanying a video projection of a young couple doing the *csardas*, a Hungarian dance, in Thomas Zitzwitz's ...*Barbapapa* (1996), may cause visitors to tap their toes, but it is the scent of cotton candy pervading the installation that summons spirited memories of festive gatherings, summer fairs and youthful escapades. And in *Ma che simpatico ... quel pescecane* (1998) the smells of mango, fruit punch and coconuts, mixed with seaweed, salty air and suntan lotion, are juxtaposed with video projections of an excursion to the Aeolian Islands to olfactorily recreate the look and pungent atmosphere of an idyllic beach locale.¹¹ Compared to the instrumental use of artificial scents, Zitzwitz's simulations aim more towards poetic evocation, memory stirring, and exercises of the imagination.

When inhaling aromas and ingesting foods, audiences become aware of their own bodies and their relation in space. The actions of breathing in and swallowing collapses rigid dichotomies of viewer and object, self and other, even inside and outside. Less able to provide the illusion of autonomy and distance characteristic of visuality, many olfactory artworks foreground art as a form of social encounter, directly implicating ethical and moral issues as well as aesthetic ones. The practice of engaging an audience's sense of smell and taste invariably brings to the fore complex (and conflicting) attitudes toward the body, identity and cultural affiliation.

Serving food and drinks, in venues inside and outside of the art context, is a means to break down the barriers that isolate people by creating convivial situations where relationships can flourish. Restaurants by Gordon Matta-Clark or Iain and Ingrid Baxter, cafés by Tom Marioni or Franz West, feminist networking dinners by Suzanne Lacy or Judy Chicago, coffee, tea or milk bars by Thomas Schütte, Chris Burden, Rebecca Belmore or Niki de Saint-Phalle, utilize food as an aromatic, appetizing medium for sociable encounters. If food can easily create spaces of affiliation by merging difference under the rubric of congeniality, food can also underscore and exacerbate difference, by framing

Dan Mihaltianu,
Firewater, 1996.
Distillery apparatus,
alcohol, found bottles,
labels. Photo:
courtesy the artist.

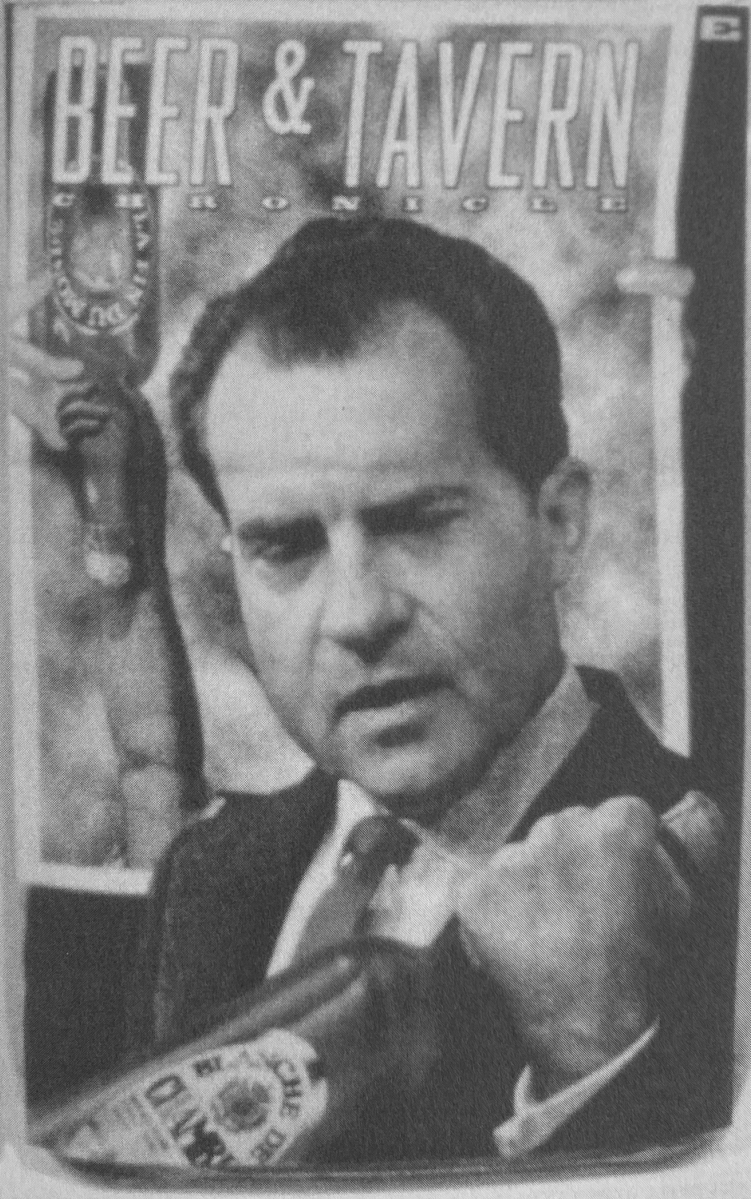
Not for Consumption

FIRE

produced by Dan Mihaltianu &
Art in General, New York, 1996.

A distillate of
plants and fruits

WATER



otherness in culinary terms. Performances such as Bonnie Sherk's elegant, catered meal in the lion's cage at the San Francisco Zoo interrogates the meta-physical divide between animal and human (*Public Lunch*, 1971). Marina Abramovic and Ulay express the ideological differences between Cold War adversaries by setting contrasting tables of foods available to those on either side of the Iron Curtain (*Communist Body, Capitalist Body*, 1979). Cuisine performances may also solicit and then abuse the traditional courtesies of the guest/host relationship, such as Hi Red Center's action of cruelly eating dinner in front of a ravenous audience, or Meret Oppenheim's *Spring Banquet* (1959), which ostensibly endorsed anthropophagy by serving the feast upon a live, nude model. The class-based politics of abundance and scarcity was keenly demonstrated at the meal organized by Daniel Spoerri: one-half of the audience devoured savoury delicacies, the other half ate a typical peasant meal (which, ironically, garnered more attention because of its unfamiliarity to postmodern, urbanized gourmets).

As much as the artworks mentioned in this essay engage the palate and the nose, they both exploit and repudiate the notion that the oral and the olfactory are the more "primitive" senses. Sensations of the taste buds and the olfactory bulb are no less socially conditioned than what passes through the optic nerve, but their relative lack of aesthetic status mark them as realms of experience bound to corporeal necessity. Eating and breathing are universally essential to survival, yet, as the artists above demonstrate, within the seemingly common-sense definitions of what is edible and inhalable lie numerous cultural assumptions that beg to be exposed, critiqued, transgressed. As opposed to the turn-of-the-century literary personas of the "hunger artist" by Franz Kafka, whom nobody noticed, or the "perfume artist" by J.-K. Huysmans, who exercised his ingenuity in the isolation of a darkened room, contemporary artistic excursions into flavour and fragrance directly and publicly challenge prevailing beliefs about the insignificance of gustation and olfaction, and reveal their integral connections to identity, culture and knowledge.

Notes

1. Archipenko is quoted in Donald Hall and Pat C. Wykes, eds., *Anecdotes of Modern Art: From Rousseau to Warhol*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 184;

Duchamp in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971, 107; Dalí in Haim Finkelstein, ed. and trans., *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 200; and Cravan in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 1989, 12.

2. See, e.g., Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961.

3. See, e.g., John Harris, "Oral and Olfactory Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 13:4, October 1979, and Harold Osborne, "Odours and Appreciation," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 17:1, 1977.

4. For a discussion of the "edible complex," see Maria Angel and Zoë Sofia, "Cooking Up: Intestinal Economies and the Aesthetics of Specular Orality," *Cultural Studies* 10:3, 1996, 464–482.

5. For these three examples, see, respectively, Deanna Marohn Bendix, *Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors, and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995; Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Maurice Joyant, *The Art of Cuisine*, trans. Margery Weiner, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; and F.T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, trans. Suzanne Brill, San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1989.

6. Parts of this text are drawn from my article "Reveries, Assaults and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art," *Parachute* 89, January/February/March 1998, 10–19.

7. The reaction to Sterbak's piece was national news in 1991; for a similar reaction to Levine see Roseann Danese, "Art too corny for some," *National Post*, July 21, 1999.

8. Quoted in Malcolm W. Browne, "Glorious Jottings of a Genius," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1996, C 38.

9. See H.R. Schiffman, *Sensation and Perception: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed., New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990, 156.

10. While foods have a long tradition of being perfumed, contemporary perfumes are now utilizing the smells of foods, snacks and candies. THIS is a new fragrance line that caters to individuals annoyed with the elitism of brand-name perfumes and who prefer the scents of everyday life, such as fudge, vanilla shakes, popcorn, cake batter, and red hot chili peppers. Other fragrance companies have emerged with chocolate and tomato scents – aiming to attract the olfactory attention of children and teenagers.

11. This piece was not a mere travelogue fantasy, but an ironic extension of the Michelangelo Antonioni film *L'Avventura*, in which the female protagonist disappears after the first ten minutes. The artist and a friend visited the Mediterranean site purporting to search for Anna, the absent character. Interview with the artist (June 1999).