Sculpture

December 2000 Vol. 19 No. 10 $6 £6 ¥1800 $8CAN

Magdalena Abakanowicz

Joyce Scott

Isamu Noguchi

Yoko Ono

COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

THAT FOOD THING YOU DO

Food
I demand you, food!
My hunger will stay at no half-way house;
Nothing but satisfaction will silence it;
No moralities will put an end to it,
And I have never fed anything but my soul on privations.[1]
—*André Gide*

by Claire Lieberman

Erotic desire, power, obsession, fear—no materials are so liberally laced with these qualities as gold and food. There is, not surprisingly, an obvious relationship between the two, not the least of which is their commutable value. The worth of one, a traditional material in art, lies in its incorruptibility. The other, equally potent, is subject to inevitable disintegration. In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman refers to the term "salary" and its derivation from salt: "...beyond the elemental act of day to day nourishment, food, like gold, functions as currency."[2] Intrinsically social and cultural, rife with ritual, food ignites awareness of the presence of life and the shadow of death and serves as a powerful stimulant for memory.

Regarding the link between food and memory, we need only recall Proust's protagonist in *Swann's Way*, who, upon tasting "a piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom," says: "But when from a long distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."[3]

In modern art, food was frequently used as a vehicle to cultivate awareness of larger social issues, a means of blurring boundaries between life and art. For example, the Futurists held bizarre banquets and formulated plans for the reinvention of daily practices. In a discussion of *The Futurist Cookbook*, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes: "Much Futurist writing on food was a critique of satiety and its dulling consequences. The first step in a Futurist gastronomy was to separate hunger and nutrition from the pleasure of eating, to dissociate food as fuel from food as art."[4] Explorations of food as fuel and art have continued into contemporary discourse. Examining power and vulnerability, feminist artist Barbara T. Smith hosted meditative banquets and was also fed by the audience during a performance in San Francisco. Arte Povera artist Mario Merz incorporated lush fruits and vegetables into his room-sized installations based on Fibonacci numbers, a system he also employed in a series of restaurant events. In the catalogue of Merz's Guggenheim retrospective, Germano Celant contemplates the evocative qualities of fresh produce: "Fruits and vegetables, from lemons to tomatoes, from pumpkins to beans, have an offensive beauty: they seduce with their colors and shiny delicate skins, with their fragrances; but then when time consumes them, they repel us; squooshy and wrinkled, rotten and foul smelling, they bear a resemblance to life and death."[5] Italo Scanga created *Potato Famine Series* (1979), human-scale sculptures that contained large numbers of whole spuds left to sprout. Supported by rakes and other utensils, the decomposing potatoes relayed a dichotomy of abundance and scarcity.

By contrast, a more ascetic "food as art" concept emerged in Fluxus. One recalls Yoko Ono's simple, fluid gesture in *Apple* (1966), an apple left to rot on a pedestal. Or consider John Cage's *Edible Papers*, which grew out of his experiences during a trip to Chile.[6] There, he observed the local street population collect paper, soak it, boil it, and later eat it in an attempt to stave off hunger. Drawing from his impressions, Cage embedded mushrooms, broccoli rabe, and carrots into

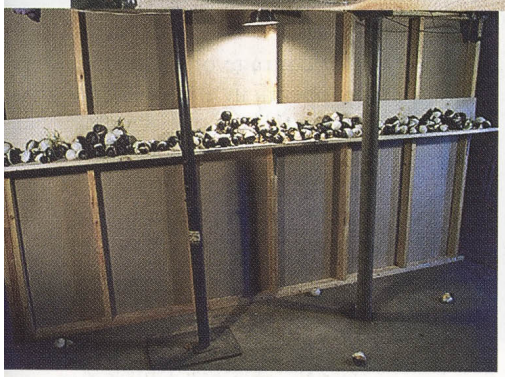
Nayland Blake, *Feeder 2*, 1998. Steel and gingerbread, 7 x 10 x 7 ft.

Clockwise from top left: Gay Outlaw, *Caramel Stack,* 1996. Cast caramelized sugar, 108 x 23 x 23 in. Gay Outlaw, *Dark Matter Redux,* 1998. Fruitcake and trench, 40 x 24 x 408. Alison Ruttan, *Dough Girl,* 1996. Bread and underwear, 15 x 11 x 9 in. Opposite and detail: William Pope.L, *The Polis or The Garden or Human Nature in Action,* 1999. Painted onions on shelf, 3 x 8 x 12 ft.

paper, partly for their color properties, but also envisioning a paper that could be eaten. Exploring art as social contract, Adrian Piper's fasts constructed the presence of food through abstinence (*Food for the Spirit*, 1971). Certainly, no catalogue of food forays would be complete without reference to Joseph Beuys's gold leaf- and honey-swathed head in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). His *Honeypump* (1977), an expansive ode to the body's internal realm in which large quantities of sweet amber honey pumped by an electric motor pulsated through hundreds of feet of plastic tubing, exteriorized energy sources of the body while alluding to collective social structure. Like much of Beuys's oeuvre, both pieces construct a notion of art concerned with elemental survival.

In recent years, subjectivity has evolved as a primary force in art. Accordingly, experience, recollections, perception, and emotion emerge as forage. Food, long the artist's subject (as in still life) has now metamorphosed into object (contemporary art material). With its infinite capacity to arouse all of the senses and stimulate memory, it surfaces in a variety of contemporary sculptural enterprises—sometimes transformed, often presented as itself. Though occasionally prepared to a degree of durability, it is frequently meant to degrade, its susceptibility and disintegrative nature invoking unlimited references to beauty and disgust, ceremony and gratification, decay and delirium, ephemerality and tangibility—as well as bringing sculpture into specific correlation with mind and mouth.

Gay Outlaw's first impulse working with food in art was to return to her background as a pastry chef. She builds pastry into sizable architectural forms and in doing so must cope with the material's spongy resistance to large scale. In other pieces, such as *Honeycomber*, Outlaw uses amber-colored caramel. In her words, it "seems alive, captures light, and changes before your eyes." Eminently palatable, the work combines an unsullied elegance with a sticky, sloppy, creepy side. To build *Tin Wall/Dark Matter*, she baked quantities of fruitcake bricks. A large, snake-like aluminum wall with the fruitcakes inside, *Tin Wall/Dark Matter* sets up a striking contrast between the cool metal covering and its oozing, restive contents. Outlaw sacrifices some control by using food as a sculptural material, but speaks fondly of the element of surprise in her working process. She considers "the poetry of temporary materials as a reference to the temporariness of life."[7]



Similarly, Alison Ruttan's *Dough Girls* series grew out of her experiences preparing food. While making dough, she became aware of "how fleshlike it is; its pliability, its sensuousness, and elasticity." Her sculptures are studies of sustenance and the perception of sexual imagery. Made of dough baked inside underwear, they simulate recumbent torsos. The shapes are baked in aluminum pans cast from her own butt and in the process of baking, dough bulges out of the holes in the underwear. The compression of volume and void in these configurations prompts questions of female identity. In Ruttan's view, "They mimic a bodily reference." Reflecting on this odd sculptural matter, she describes it as "dimpled and pocked, very average, very ordinary...The bread is difficult to control, but the artist's hand is part of it."[8]

William Pope.L sees food "as a material that shows its own melancholy, its vulnerability to decay." Issues of privilege and waste inform his work. By using foods that are associated with (though not limited to) working-class culture such as peanut butter, doughnuts, onions, and mayonnaise, he explores "the relationship of appetite and consumption, the idea of periphery and center." Pope.L further probes these themes by trying "to reframe or interrogate categories that have been created for black identity." Works such as *Breakfast Treats (Blackheads)* (1999) or *The Polis or The Garden or Human Nature in Action* (1998) are perishable, underlining "the fact that things do decay and create something anew, decay carries renewal."[9]

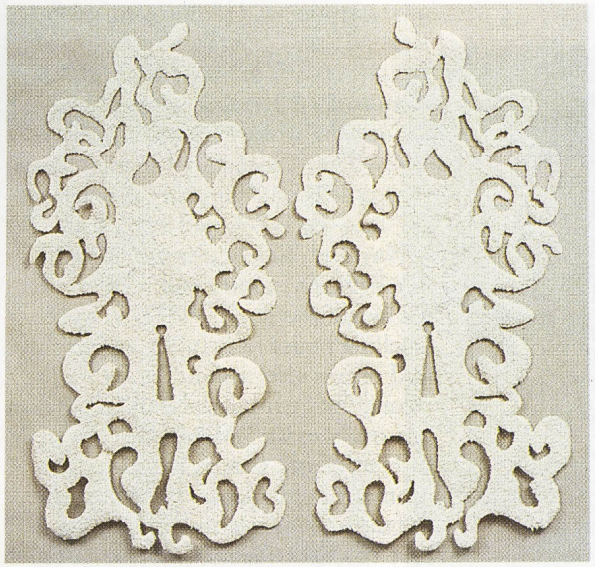
INTRINSICALLY SOCIAL, RIFE WITH RITUAL, FOOD IGNITES AWARNESS OF LIFE AND DEATH AND SERVES AS A POWERFUL STIMULANT FOR MEMORY.

In Julia Kunin's erotic video *Some Egg Blowing*, the artist is seen blowing out eggs, pretending to take them out of her mouth, and then placing the eggshell pieces on her body in order to create a new skin from the broken, discarded fragments. In her work, the egg, both material and motif, "refers to female sexuality, breast, or the body and its internal fluid." Appreciating its humor, "the funny sound, the blobby mess," Kunin understands the proximity of food to fertility and skillfully mixes eroticism and domesticity. In *Eggshells and Oysters* and *Egg Lock III*, she creates intricate filigrees that seem to dematerialize when placed against the white expanse of gallery walls. They are made of minute pieces of eggshells and summon associations of "lace, keyholes, and voyeurism."[10]

Nayland Blake cultivates an edgy line between culture and whatever is excluded. *Feeder 2* (1998), a sweet-smelling house of actual gingerbread laid over a steel armature, draws "a strong image from childhood that does not really exist." Alluding to the story of Hansel and Gretel, he relates the aromatic construction to "the desire for nourishment and being taken care of—how that gets played out in the family." In a true "reality bite," gallerygoers began to munch on the gingerbread house without permission. (Think of Robert Gober's roplex-covered doughnuts.) It was repaired with new gingerbread, and, when coated with varnish to prevent disintegration from moisture, the errant nibbling ceased (captivating fragrance notwithstanding). Blake recently created an artist's project in *Nest* magazine that contains specifications for paneling his mother's bedroom in gingerbread. The plan brings new meaning to the notions of recipes and authorship in art.[11]

Sight and scent play a significant role in Todd Slaughter's work. His *Landscapehats*, enormous suspended hat-forms dusted in a radiant patina of bright red paprika, are studies in sensory awareness. Slaughter also sited an installation on a beach at Asilah, Morocco, that explored themes of impermanence and transformation. A large circular area of sand was removed in the morning at low tide and replaced by an abundant amount of turmeric. The piece lasted only until the tides washed in at 11:30 that night, sweeping away the radiant spice. Another series uses salt to convey ephemerality. In *Comfort Zone*, a full-size sofa and armchair made of solid salt are dissolved by several steam vaporizers set in the floor underneath, their gradual disintegration reflecting the transitory state of existence.[12]

A less expected, but equally inspired, passage of deliquescence occurs in Meg Webster's *Butter* (1996), a 12-by-



12-foot wall drawing that falls away over time. The spectator is drawn to the combined beauty and oddity of the piece, which produces the same mesmerizing quality present in her other works made of organic materials (eggs, molasses, sugar, chocolate, coffee, spices, blood, and rust). Webster guides viewers to perceive a material as directly as possible, inviting chance to impact their experience. She states: "I am interested in making one aware of the phenomenal world, trusting it, enjoying it, as opposed to presenting text or narrative. One is confronted with why this butter is on the wall. It's both globby and beautiful—the scent, texture, quality of light open exploration to discover what the material is and what it means."

Ellen Driscoll's *Raft* explores a basic contradiction: "In moving through life, we move closer to death." *Raft* contains shoes carved from salt licks and made of cast iron. Both intimate the absent body. In *Lot's Wife and the Human Condition*, Sallie Tisdale suggests that "salt in solution" is "as free as the water suspending it. But when it crystallizes to a solid, salt has a will and a way of immutability, a message of time."[13] Driscoll says that she used salt for its capacity to "take moisture from the air and sweat it out." By combining the shoes with images of a funnel/well (carved of salt) and a divining rod, a highly personal discourse emerges, which "suggests a search for water, an elemental source of life." Driscoll says, "In this narrative, the process of decay and the process of searching are inextricably bound."[14] In using salt licks, she begins with a mundane foodstuff that is set in fields to help animals retain water and transmutes it into metaphorical matter.

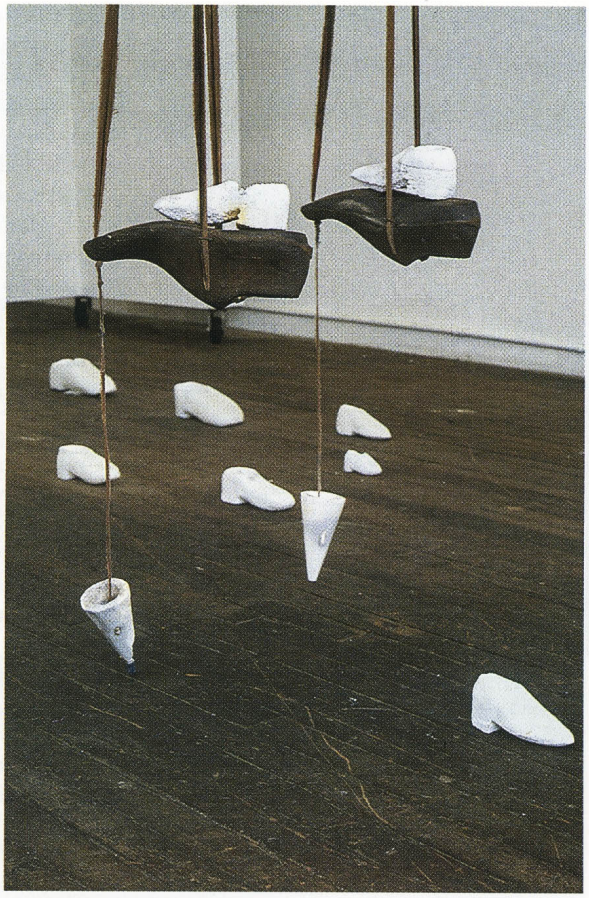
In *Remember Lot's Wife...*, María Velasco also uses the symbolism of salt to explore the role of women in society. She comments: "Salt was once a mark of richness and also a sign of decay or death...The story of Lot's wife is used as an example of bad behavior by women." In her installation at the Salina Art Center (1997), a huge pile of salt presses against the interior side of a glass wall, visible from a well-trafficked street. An oversized transparent photo of a woman's torso and head is supported by the salt, seemingly compressed into the glass. Velasco writes: "Here, salt is used as a reference to the geological past of Salina, and because of its contradictory qualities of preserving flesh, as well as destroying living matter. In this installation, salt becomes the landscape from which Lot's wife emerges in a moment of courage or against which she disappears in a moment of doubt."[15]

> WITH ITS INFINITE CAPACITY TO AROUSE THE SENSES, FOOD SURFACES IN A VARIETY OF SCULPTURE, TRANSFORMED OR PRESENTED AS ITSELF.

Velasco's undertaking raises issues of exchangeability. If food can be replaced, its transience becomes unimportant. If it is not a unique object or a one-time event, the visual object is, in effect, substitutable. Questions of permanence are obscured, and the prevalence of object over subject may be exerted. This is a significant factor in the work of Vong Phaophanit and Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Phaophanit's *Neon Rice Field* is a transcendent installation reflecting a mixture of his youth in Laos and the influence of Western contemporary art. A large quantity of rice spread evenly over a gallery floor (rice signifying basic existence in Asia) is coupled with strips of red neon (which produce a light of significant effect). Phaophanit creates an unearthly environment, wherein visual eloquence takes precedence over a suggested disparity in cultural differences. Neon, normally associated with garish signage, here emits an unreal quality. When the translucent rice grains are strewn over it, they radiate an uncommon luminosity. Assembling passages from various segments of his life, Phaophanit alters the observer's experience of time.

Gonzalez-Torres's "pours" explode the normally constrained relationship between art and observer. Viewers are invited to help themselves from mounds of sexy candies or chocolate in shiny colored wrappers, lollipops, fortune



Opposite, left: Julia Kunin, *Double Closet,* 1996. Eggshells on muslin paper, 65 x 72 in. Right: María Velasco, *Remember Lot's Wife...*, 1997. Rock salt, duratrans photographs, sound, and glass tears. installation view. This page: Ellen Driscoll, *Raft,* 1994. Salt shoes on cast iron shoes, detail of installation.

cookies, and so forth. In plucking out treats, the audience becomes actively involved in the ongoing dispersion and reconfiguration of the work. Viewer participation not only activates the piece, but also redirects its whole existence. Through this process, additional references to appetite and illness, loss and desire, are called up. David Pagel says of Gonzalez-Torres's projects: "Their susceptibility to change suggests a fragility at odds with the sheer volume of their innumerable elements. This tension between the promise of abundance and the threat of depletion allows for the possibility of joy without forgetting the prevalence of despair."[16]

As Gonzales-Torres demonstrates, the possession/consumption of art/food incontrovertibly alters the viewer's relation to it. This idea also factors into the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, for whom art is the composition of social interaction. In *The Physiology of Taste*, Brillat-Savarin proposes: "It was the meal which was responsible for the birth or at least the elaboration of languages, not only because it was a continually recurring occasion for meetings, but also because the leisure which accompanies and succeeds the meal is naturally conducive to confidence and loquacity."[17] Tiravanija is probably best known for preparing pungent curries and offering them to gallerygoers in pristine gallery spaces. In doing so, he rearranges the coordinates of the "white space" model, altering dynamics between audience, gallery, and artist. The artifacts remaining from these meals and their appeal as salable commodities recall the leftovers from Daniel Spoerri's Nouveaux Réalistes dinners, preserved in plastic as art objects. Tiravanija has discovered (he mentions the influence of his grandmother, a chef) what women have known forever: that cooking and sharing food create a pleasurable and comforting environment.

Several exhibitions in recent years have delved into the delights and perils of food as idea. The Swiss Institute offered "Chocolate" (1995), which chronicled pleasure and privation through a compendium of artists using chocolate, from Duchamp to Janine Antoni. Calling up images of childhood and erotic desire, many of the works centered on the relationship of consumption and image to external form. For instance, Hannah Wilke's *Venus Pareve*, modest-scale multiples of chocolate torsos, mixes erotic suggestions of taste with idealized views of women. Highlighting a dialectic between the body's surface and internal conflict in her catalogue essay, Ingrid Schaffner describes such memorable events as *The Ultimate Easter Bunny* (1973) performance of Charlotte Moorman (upon whom chocolate was applied) as precursor to the performances of Karen Finley (famous for smearing herself).[18] Finley's video *Chocolate-Smeared Woman* was included in the exhibition. Also notable were Jana Sterbak's *Catacombs* (1992), a grouping of human bone replicas in bittersweet chocolate and Anya Gallacio's *Stroked*, a chocolate-painted wall, reminiscent of Ed Ruscha's *Chocolate Room* (1970) at the Venice Biennale, in which walls of a large room were covered floor to ceiling with sheets of chocolate.

Sol Ostrow curated "Food Matters" (1998), an exhibition produced in conjunction with the 7th edition of *Lusitania*, a journal of writings and projects serving as cultural commentaries on its title topic, "Taste and Nostalgia." Along with suitably piquant essays, choice moments included Marcel Broodhaers's *Moules sauce blanche*, made of a painted iron pot, mussels, and stained resin, and Cody Choi's human-scale Pepto-bismol and toilet paper rendition of *The Thinker*. In the spring of 1999, the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts featured "Food for Thought," which included Sandy Skoglund's record of *Body Limits*, an eerie tableau in which life-size "people" and the room they inhabit are made entirely of raw bacon. Also shown was Lisa Ludwig's *Pretty Poison*, a lavish, tiered cake-form fabricated from rosettes of frosting and placed on a base of kitchen matches, which conjures up fiery images of marriage madness. Frosted extravaganzas by emerging artist Meghan Wood hung on the wall in another recent show—curious mixtures of abstract, painterly references and the

Top: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Para un Hombre en Uniforme)*, 1991. 100 kilos of red, white, and blue lollipops, dimensions variable. Bottom: Sarah Lucas, *Bitch* (back view), 1995. Table, T-shirt, melons, and vacuum-packed smoked fish, 31.5 x 25 x 40 in. Opposite, left: Meghan Wood, *Mothers Day Cake*, 1998. Frosting and mixed media. Right: Peter Boynton, *Cheese Doodle Bonsai*, 1995. Food and wood, 6 x 12 x 4 in.

evanescent pleasure of childhood sweets. An earlier exhibition, "The Confectioner's Art" (American Craft Museum, 1989), displayed 200 objects of inspired elegance and indulgence created by confectioners from around the world. These items, extraordinary in their craft and magnificent in detail, ranged from decorated sugar skulls for the Day of the Dead to virtuosic fantasy cakes built by contemporary architects. Created for ritual, celebration, or as a mark of success, the sweets in this show would have pleased even Antonin Carême, the founder of haute cuisine.

Cultivating the absurd, Tom Friedman has found that chewing, like sucking and nibbling, "can be a metaphor for the thought process—[he is] digesting the piece and spitting it out." Friedman selects materials that talk about regression and involve an oral process. With abundant concentration, he has engineered a sphere of chewing gum; cooked spaghetti, dried the strands into curlicues, and glued them end to end; sucked a roll of lifesavers, each a little more until the last was completely dissolved, stuck together by sugar and saliva to form a beehive shape; and carved aspirin into a self-portrait.

ULTIMATELY, FOOD PROVIDES A METAPHOR FOR THE ANARCHIC MOMENTUM OF LIFE, WHICH IS SIMULTANEOUSLY BANAL AND EXTREME.

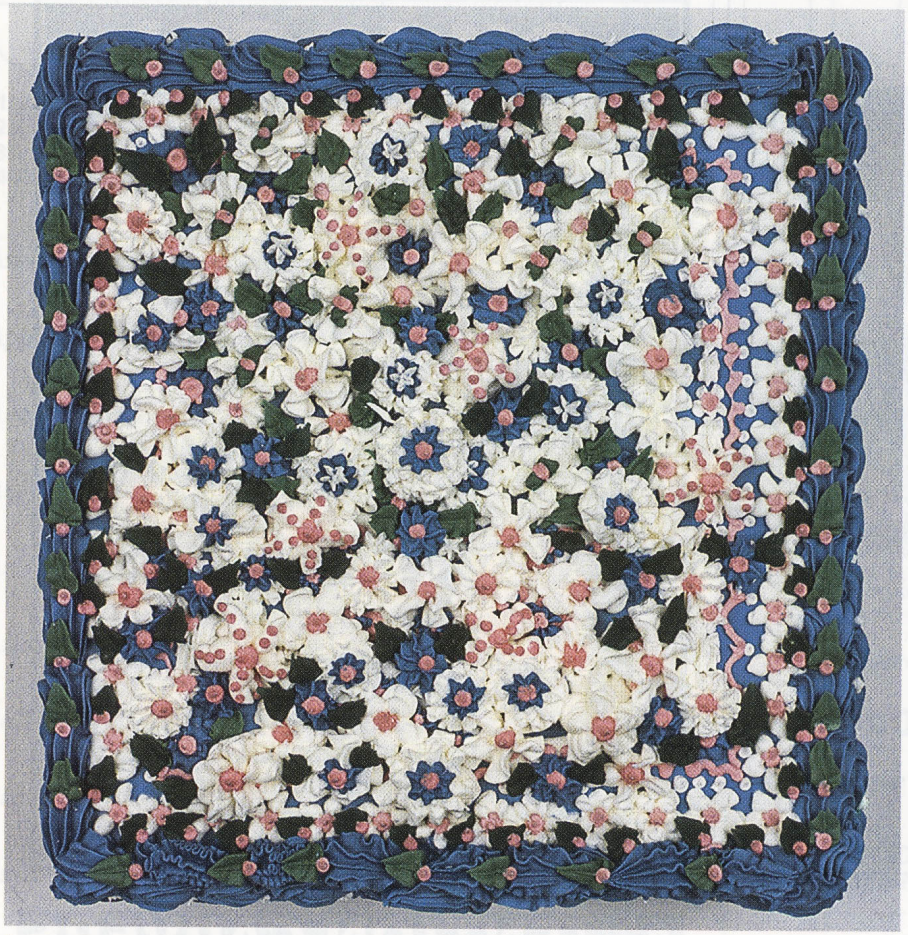
Here, food is a relatively incidental choice of materials. Friedman began this work by using a category of readily available goods, such as soap, that had to do with personal hygiene. He recalls "recognizing that disgust can be engaging" and that his "work took off from there." Most pieces require long detailed processes to bring to completion, and Friedman speaks about how the repetitive process teeters from insane monotony to a meditative state. His humorous, even ridiculous objects/scenarios poignantly address the absurdity of life and art.

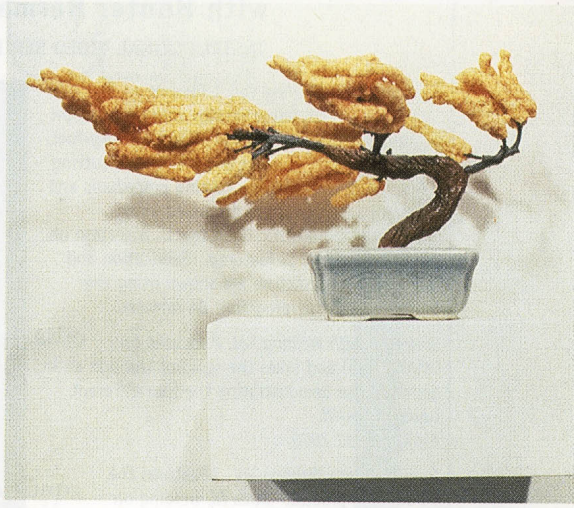
Raucous, grungy, sexually charged, definitively adolescent—these terms characterize the work of English artist Sarah Lucas. Maura Reilly sees Lucas's work as "an assault on gender stereotypes."[19] Its humor is both raw and sexually ambiguous. *Au Naturel* (1995) arranges a water bucket and two melons on a mattress to depict a supine female persona along with a male counterpart fashioned of two oranges and an upright cucumber.

In *Bitch* (1996), vacuum-packed smoked fish are placed on a white T-shirt stretched horizontally over a low table. Two cantaloupes have been inserted into the shirt and hang like droopy, fecund breasts. They complete the disturbing impression of a woman thrust into a sexually explicit posture. The orgiastic moments are endless: "stinking fish" or bananas become dicks, fried eggs are tits, beer is spewed forth in orgasmic contractions. Using food as a prop, Lucas seeks out the underbelly of virility to unseat conventionalized attitudes of sexual definitions.

Plunging into a world of zany delights, Peter Boynton displays a theatrical flair. Using unexpected, giddy materials like fluffernutter or rock candy, he creates a domain that is best described as a cross between Martin Amis and Melville (two of his favorite authors), a zone where high

TOP: COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY





and low converge. Boynton uses foods that are available anywhere. That they are so easily obtainable is appealing, as they are tied to something known. In *Cheese Doodle Bonsai*, a gorgeous glass bonsai tree, cheese doodles replace pruned-off leaves; another bonsai sprouts fruitloops. Coupling the very private, precious bonsai with cheap silly food forces a clash of cultural signifiers.

In Boynton's words, "They are two languages jammed together to get tension." Feigning the pureness of Eames chairs, coveted Modernist objects, he created a copy of one and poured pancake syrup over it to simulate a varnished surface. Through this process, refinement is interrupted by sensation. In his rock candy airplanes, geometric crystallized candy growth envelops the fluid lines of model planes. They become surreal, dreamlike ghost planes—as if they were lost underwater for a long time. In this work, the viewer is "grounded with the familiar, surprised by the unpredictable."[20]

Food carries with it a narrative power, and as an alternative material it generates a shock value that is the obverse of the veneer of authenticity exuded by traditional materials. It is necessary to ask if, when regularly employed, its urgency is somewhat reduced. Perhaps its viability as source and substance is that it keeps being rediscovered and is then mutated into new identities. Food's quotidian existence often has a diametrical relationship to how it's being used. It can be transported directly from daily life into art and then recontextualized. Ultimately uncontrollable, however, it provides a metaphor for the anarchic momentum of life, which is simultaneously banal and extreme. Perhaps we are in the midst of new, improved "Banquet Years" wherein artists, stimulated by the interplay of form, sensation, and recollection present in food and all of its attendant allusions, dream up delicious and strange new concoctions.

Claire Lieberman is an assistant professor of sculpture at Illinois State University at Normal, Illinois.

Notes

1 André Gide, *The Fruits of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 31.

2 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 129.

3 Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (New York: Vintage International, 1989). Translated by C.K. Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin; originally published 1913.

4 See her review in *Artforum* (November 1989), pp. 20–23.

5 See Celant's essay in *Mario Merz* (New York: Electra, 1989), p. 34.

6 Conversation with Bernard Toale, November 25, 1999. The project was produced in collaboration with Rugg Road.

7 Conversation with the author, November 22, 1999.

8 Conversation with the author, November 28, 1999.

9 Conversation with the author, November 18, 1999.

10 Conversation with the author, November 22, 1999.

11 *Feeder 2* was exhibited at Matthew Marks Gallery; quotations from Nayland Blake are from a conversation with the author, November 24, 1999.

12 See the review of the Wexner Center for the Arts exhibition, Ohio State University, Columbus, in *New Art Examiner* (Summer 1993), p. 45.

13 Sallie Tisdale, *Lot's Wife and the Human Condition* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988).

14 See Driscoll's statement in the exhibition brochure published by the Threadwaxing Space, 1994.

15 Excerpt from the artist's statement, published by the Salina Art Center, Salina, Kansas, 1997.

16 David Pagel, "World of Gonzales-Torres Teeters on Joy and Despair," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1991.

17 Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 161. Originally published in 1825.

18 Ingrid Schaffner, "Chocolate" exhibition catalogue, Swiss Institute, 1995, p. 22.

19 Review in *Art in America* (November 1998).

20 Conversation with the author, March 22, 2000.