

An Appetite for Feasting: Digesting the Seventeenth Century Dutch Still-Life in Contemporary Art

Nicola Krantz

In Michael Pollan's seminal book entitled *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006), he investigates why a visit to the supermarket is a daunting task wherein choices for consumption are varied and limitless. The traditions once forming the culture of our food customs have been drastically replaced by an alternative, cheap, and unhealthy diet. Speaking of the importance of food, not for only mere sustenance, he states, "For countless generations eating was something that took place in the steadying context of a family and a culture, where the full consciousness of what was involved did not need to be rehearsed at every meal because it was stored away, like the good silver, in a set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes."¹ The consumption of food is not only a necessity for living; it is a social and cultural ceremony that identifies one's nationality and socio-political context.

It comes as no surprise that contemporary artists are using food as the subject matter or material to create art with the aim of questioning our relationship with food in a society where it is readily available. Indulgence and gluttony are often imagined – to a disgusting degree – when questioning the over-abundance of foodstuffs we have access to, in contrast to poor countries where the lack of food results in malnutrition, disease, and death. Similarly, in seventeenth-century Netherlands, Golden Age painters once used such subjects and the status of food in order to create luxurious still-life paintings. Such paintings

have generated much praise for Dutch art. The cornucopia, symbolic of prosperity, sumptuousness and exoticism, indicates the flourishing wealth from expeditions abroad that brought new foods and spices into the seventeenth-century consumer market.

This essay will review contemporary art exhibitions such as the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf's *Eating the Universe* (2009-10) and the Robert Mann Gallery's *Food for Thought* (2011), whilst exploring the popularization of food as a material and as subject, in order to voice concerns with consumerism, globalization, modern dietetics and industrial food production. In the same vein, Dutch still-life used lavish arrangements of food to portray their prosperity abroad, their booming economy, thus reflecting their financial ability to afford edible commodities, imported tableware, and well-pressed linens. Two vastly different eras commenting on both visual symbolism and the issues concerning excess and decadence, makes this a relation imperative when examining the cultural significance of food. It is evident that food is the substance that gives us palatable pleasure, aids in fashioning a national identity and creates traditions, rituals and memories within a contextual frame. Through investigating the relationship between artworks and foodstuff, I will explore the importance of food for survival and how it led to an appetite only satisfied by the importation of foreign edibles and artefacts. This gourmandized the nature of food consumption, and inadvertently created a culture with complex eating habits extending beyond the simple 'need' for nourishment. In looking at food items deemed valuable to seventeenth-century Northern European standards, the ubiquity of exotic foods within contemporary culture, has eliminated the value of commodities once precious and now customary. This demonstrates the evolution of taste, culinary skills, and diet; thereby influencing the response of numerous artists, now aiming to critique the incessant consumption apparent within our culture.

Seventeenth-century Netherlands yielded a tremendously prosperous culture, and as such, came to be referred to as the period of the Golden Age. While the production of art flourished in Holland and the lower countries, so did voyages overseas for the discovery and seizure of culinary riches such as sugar, salt, and spices, as well as other exotic fancies like Oriental dishes and Persian rugs. In Willem Kalf's *Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar* (1669), a large porcelain vase shares its space with a metal serving platter on which lemons are carefully positioned, as their cut peels coil and cascade downward. Ornately decorated glass

cups filled with liquid treasures are delicately placed on a creased foreign rug that retains every detail within its folds whilst adding curvature to the work's composition. Each object depicted in this still-life is an iconic symbol of conquest. Simon Schama explains this notion further: "perishable commodities: Dutch still-life paintings and the 'empire of things,'" reflected the consumerism of Dutch culture, as they gave importance to objects based on their ability to be "classified, inventoried, priced, owned and displayed."² Such objects, as seen in Kalf's still-life, are typically exotic artifacts discovered on journeys overseas: "coral from the Indies (West and East); Mingware and Japanese lacquer from the China Seas; Turkish and Persian rugs from the Levant; monkeys, parakeets and shells from Coromandel and the Guinea coast and Brazil."³ By arranging the exotic objects of utmost magnificence into a scene gushing with pride from conquered territories, the Dutch reveal the highly valued and therefore most desired objects present at their dining tables.

The popularity of still-life representations of food and drink stems from the need for – and the pleasure of – sustenance. However, in *Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life*, Donna R. Barnes explains that patrons were interested in purchasing representations of expensive food because they were less likely to own the actual foodstuffs. In owning a painting portraying a fancy arrangement of edible commodities that they were unlikely to possess themselves, they communicated a symbol of status intended to impress visitors.⁴ This degree of ostentation is common within a society where affluence means everything; to acquire status one had to own the desirable possessions of the time.

In Willem Kalf's *Still Life with Nautilus Cup and Ming Sugar Bowl* (1660), the expensive sugar is displayed in an exotic sugar bowl. With Dutch colonies in Latin America fiercely cultivating their sugarcane plantations, sugar production in the seventeenth-century increased exponentially.⁵ With sugar becoming a main staple and necessity to the European diet, its production became excessive. Stemming from the moral stricture of the sins of superfluity, the excess of sugar was seen as immoral. Furthermore, as an apple is also presented in Kalf's work, it is a visual symbol evocative of temptation and "the sweetness of sin."⁶ It is thus apparent that the abundance of exotic luxury created by images of worldly possessions and the sweet commodities produced by Caribbean colonies under Dutch power is visually suggestive of immoral greed and gluttony.

In comparison, twenty-first-century notions of excess are extremely broad. The easy obtainability of all products once deemed ‘exotic’ erases any knowledge of the country of origin of certain commodities. Sugar, for instance, once seen as a symbol of wealth, refinement, and excess, has become the subject of diet books and health manuals, whereby doctors and nutritionists persistently warn the public that the elimination of sugar will guarantee weight loss and health overall. In Thomas Rentmeister’s *Untitled* (2007), once displayed in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf’s *Eating the Universe* exhibition of 2009, he used the contemporary issue of mass-consumption to fuel his work. His installation is composed of a shopping cart stuck in a huge pile of white granulated sugar evoking an image of utmost excess. The artist especially considers its assemblage without the purpose of being consumed. Erasing the refinement and wealth associated with seventeenth-century notions of sugar, Rentmeister represents sugar as a modern product society is all too accustomed to confronting and consuming, thereby erasing the lure and splendor from its status.

Similarly in the *Eating the Universe* exhibition, Jana Sterbak’s *Bread Bed* (2006), uses an excessive amount of bread to create the mattress of an iron bed. The symbolic weight of a bed within the domestic sphere, as a source of comfort – used for lovemaking, birth, and death – is evidently fused with the wholesomeness of edible bread as its material, becoming the object upon which we lay. As consequence, it evokes a sense of support in the attainment of comfort via nourishment, in addition to providing comfort and security. In comparing Sterbak’s *Bread Bed* to Pieter Claesz’s *Still Life with Stoneware Jug Wine Glass Herring and Bread* (1642), the bread-roll presented in latter work, becomes only a small fraction of the bread used in Sterbak’s work. Bread is said to have been the mainstay of the Dutch diet, eaten usually for breakfast with butter and cheese, and again for dinner.⁷ It is also important to note that white bread – *herenbrood* – made of wheat flour, was eaten by those more prosperous, while the less affluent ate a rye-kernel black bread – *semelbrood*.⁸ In most still-life paintings of food, it is the white bread most commonly featured as it was known as a symbol of prosperity. Sterbak’s use of white bread as a home furnishing connotes the materiality of food, the symbolic meaning of food as a source of sustenance reflecting prosperity, thus marking it as a symbolic vision of comfort and satisfaction.

Barnes explains that “homely virtues of everyday foods, such as pancakes, prepared lovingly by women discharging their domestic responsibilities, may have

provided pleasure for Dutch families.”⁹ Both Rentmeister and Sterbak use a food product in abundance to visualize its excessiveness. Similarly, another installation at the Kunstalle Dusseldorf entitled *Reibekuchenwand* (2002) by Judith Samen, featured the artist cooking pancakes on a small stovetop in the gallery, followed by the act of her nailing each one of them to the wall behind her. The preparation of the pancakes became a performance, in which she carried out the cooking in a space typically devoted to the kitchen. The kitchen serves as a domestic site traditionally reserved for women. However by transporting that space into an art gallery setting, the artist challenges the boundaries of the kitchen as a social space. In addition, the work she produced with her skillet was transposed to the wall, whereby a painting would have been conventionally hung. I question how a still-life painting depicting a bounty of foods including pancakes could differ from an actual abundance of pancakes hanging on a wall. Whereas Dutch still-life may have served as “moral compasses,” as explained by Barnes to be “objects of contemplation and reflection, where the imagery of food and drink reminded the viewer of life’s brevity and transitory sensory pleasures, or provided admonitions against luxury, gluttony, drunkenness, or other sinful activities,”¹⁰ this ‘pancake wall’ reaffirms the ‘food as art’ concept, thus depleting food to a material to be viewed, not eaten.

In the same tradition of featuring food as a subject of artistic representation, the Robert Mann Gallery in New York City held an exhibition they named *Food for Thought: A Group Exhibition* in March of 2011. Exhibiting photography on the social and cultural traditions of eating food, cultivating food, selling food, and preparing food, many of the artists featured in the gallery paid homage to the Dutch still-life tradition of food arrangements. Food photography captures the theatricality of glistening nourishment, giving our eyes a feast as we seek to satisfy our stomachs yearning for the food pictured. Despite some work imitating the conventional compositions of Dutch still-life, the context is explicitly different. Schama describes the reaction of a viewer when confronted with the “eruption of goods thrown over the canvas” as experiencing “a rush of pleasure, guilt and (for many sensibilities) disgust”.¹¹ *Food for Thought* showcased works by Paulette Tavormina, who re-creates the glossy and unapologetic still-life of luscious fruits, vegetables and flowers. Her use of photography is one way she has modernized the tradition of representing the lavishness of food, evidenced by her work *Lemons and Pomegranates*, after J.V.H. (2008) and *Figs and Morning Glory*, after G.G. (2010). In the former, her bowl filled with of lemons contrast with the humble few that are featured in the Dutch still life, consequently evok-

ing a sense of lush, living, fresh, visual pleasure. The addition of pomegranates, torn open to reveal the juicy seeds inside adds an element of fertility and richness to the composition. The figs and blossoming flowers in the latter conjure up images of fruitfulness, life, and an almost sinful allure to the appealing lushness of its bounty. As Renaissance paintings of tables were laden with foods representing the bounty and prosperity of the Netherlands, the contemporary still-life photographs of Tavormina, equally demonstrate the beauty of ripe fruits well aware of their eventual decay and dissolution. As this introspective concept may be applied to the works of Dutch Renaissance still-life, in which food is displayed in the form of a *vanitas* – warning against the earthly pleasures because of the inevitability of death – I prefer to remain within the political facet of Dutch iconography. It is evident that the wealth of their economy during a time of immense prosperity, demonstrates their success in foreign trade and conquest overseas. In this light, the contemporary still-life composed of food products, evidently reflects the wealth of modern society, specifically the conquest of foreign foods and its integration into the Western diet. In Ansel Adams' *Still Life, San Francisco, CA* (1932), he creates a juxtaposition of a liquor bottle, milk bottle, an egg slicer and two eggs, which are reflective of the everyday and common objects found within most homes at that time. Differing from the idealistic vision of the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life, Adams' humble arrangement, demonstrates the changing status given to certain commodities. However in the exclusion of Oriental jugs and Turkish carpets, Adams has replaced such products, with modern ones, exemplified by his use of the egg slicer: an object that infiltrated the twentieth-century market for kitchenware.

In Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat's *A History of Food*, she explains a current phenomenon surrounding food:

As we become disillusioned with over-indulgence, our next major pleasure may be to fill the stomach scientifically. In an era of excess, there are some who pride themselves on adopting a new nutritional metaphysic: the fashionable diet. The conscientious consumption of diets as scientific as they are surprising gives psychological rather than physical satisfaction; people with access to too much good food eventually become obsessed with putting less and less on their plates.¹²

Her statement exposes the reality of a culture now obsessed with food, albeit in

a different way than during the Renaissance. With the constant availability of food throughout the year, over-abundance and over-indulgence have become familiar outcomes in a society whose warnings against the perils of excess and gluttony are left forgotten. While the Golden Age still-life of palatable arrangements once used food to convey the image of wealth and dominance over its colonies abroad, contemporary food art, similarly communicates its dominance over the food industry, thus exposing the perils of mass-consumption and consumerism.

Food can be used as a material to play with; however it can also be used as a symbol to demonstrate prosperity, gluttony and sensory pleasure. Whether it is a painted still-life arrangement, an installation comprised of sugar, pancakes hung on the wall, or a photograph of lively fruit, food satisfies the human hunger for gratification and indulgence, as much as it causes grief for those without access to it. The prominence of such themes within visual culture, evidently discloses the incessant issue of affluence over starvation, and of luxury over austere destitution.

Endnotes

1. Michael Pollan. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006): 411.
2. Simon Schama. "Perishable commodities: Dutch still-life paintings and the 'empire of things.'" *Consumption and the World of Goods*. Eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993): 479.
3. Schama, 479.
4. Donna R. Barnes. "Dutch Paintings in the Seventeenth Century." *Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life*, Ed. Peter G. Rose and Donna R. Barnes (Albany, NY: Syracuse UP, 2002): 14.
5. Silvia Malaguzzi. *Food and Feasting in Art*. Trans. Brian Phillips (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008): 270.
6. Malaguzzi, 229.
7. "Matters of Taste: Foodways of the Dutch Golden Age," Albany Institute of History and Art. Web. 02 Aug. 2011.
8. "Matters of Taste: Foodways of the Dutch Golden Age"
9. Barnes, 14.
10. Ibid.
11. Schama, 478.
12. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat. Introduction. *A History of Food*. 2nd ed.

