

Introduction

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“Eating Things” is delivered to your hands by the force of a striking paradox: never has the subject of eating achieved a more pervasive celebrity; and never has it been more riddled by notoriety. These days, the celebrity and synergetic branding achieved by Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, Emeril Lagasse and other star chefs of The Food Network has been matched by the feverish notoriety of mad cow, avian flu virus, foot-and-mouth disease, carcinogenic trans-fats and *e-coli* poisoning. On the one hand, there are events such as last summer’s *Pain Couture* by Jean Paul Gaultier, an exhibition of *haute couture* made of bread that transformed the basement of the Cartier Foundation in Paris into a temporary bakery run by some of the country’s top bakers. Commentators gushed that *Pain Couture* captured the essence of France: its love of *couture* and cuisine. I’m sure the foodies and fashionistas were out in force. On the other hand, there were piles of farm animals burning in the fields of Europe, North America and China. The bourgeois fantasies of eating well, maintaining a healthy body and living glamorously are being amplified—even as the scene of eating is infected by a myriad of biochemical transmissions.

Historically, this riddled scene of eating has been demarcated through the calculation of calories and the tracking of both infection and the work of biochemistry in general. The essays in “Eating Things” by Charmaine Nelson and Bertie Mandelblatt describe, in part, how a vast biopharmacopoeia of plants, animals and people was renamed, relocated and re-ordered to constitute the labour force and slavery fueling both colonialism and a nascent industrial capitalism. The rising bourgeoisie extracted itself and the modern body from this general biopharmacopoeia. The history of this capitalist extraction, as Ron Benner, Matthew Clement and Richard Manning will attest, is ongoing. Manning’s “The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain Back To Iraq” describes the attack on Iraq in relation to the biochemical resources required to fulfil the petrochemical demands of American agricultural practices sustaining the nation’s eating habits. But the essay also suggests the mobilization of geologic forces and the biochemical compression of fossil fuels, “so that every calorie we eat is backed by at least a calorie of oil, more like ten.”

The tracking of expenditures required to produce food converts the scene of eating into a panorama of what is increasingly understood as culture-less biochemical exchange. Within this spatialization, it is difficult to locate the

one who eats. The fact is that our digestive tracts are lined with bacteria, most of which are helpful strains of *e-coli*. Eating is therefore not a process conducted by a discrete, individual body but is instead, an effect of a constellation of biochemical exchanges. It has been said that we are donuts: hollow from our lips to, well, our other puckered lips. Our insides are outside, and along the peristaltic surfaces of exchange, others carry out a lot of shitty work. Chris Woods' *Krispy Kreme* suggests the worshipping of American fast food. But perhaps the bodily associations of the symbolic donut suggest that 'Americanization' needs to be rethought in relation to the work of a biochemical generality across a myriad of permeable surfaces and compacted times. So who, or what, eats? And how does one locate a biochemical scene of eating haunted by meaning and culture?

Again and again the specter of the 'body' is conjured and disappears across the spatialized scene of eating. The demand for proper labeling of genetically engineered food taps the anxiety symptomatic of a scene of eating haunted by meaning and culture. Anxious consumers, it is argued, have a right to know what they are putting in their bodies. But cloning and the transferring of genes from one species into another raise the question of what a consumer's 'body' is in the first place. The 'body,' if there is one, seems an event amongst others of biochemical exchange. As the genes of humans are inserted into the cell lines of pigs, the call for better labeling offers no relief from taxonomic ruins as the cornerstone of the liberal bourgeois public sphere—the discrete modern body—haunts its own ruins. Martha Rosler and Fred Wah are particularly attuned to the weathered taxonomies and spectral bodies marking the scene of eating. Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* presses the difference of the alphabet and kitchenware taxonomy against a woman's tossing, violent, bored and ecstatic body movements in ways that anticipate the stuttering disjunction of the body written as a genetic code of biochemical exchange in general: ATCGATCG...

The presence-absence of the body is the flickering mode of an eating scenario that is haunted by meaning and culture—ATCGATCG—a spatialized scene of biochemistry divested of its taxonomic force. Something of this haunting thingliness is prodded by Renay Egami's *Spellbound* and *Frozen Memory*, and by Chih-Chien Wang's photographs of everyday food items and the body. Both illicit a phenomenological engagement even as they seem haunted by narratives of movement, travel, sexuality, genetic engineering, cultural and personal associations, pain...

The contributions of Adam Zaretsky, Hiromi Goto, Chris Bracken and Elspeth Probyn specifically address issues of caring, power and ethics as they relate to a scene of eating troubled by the question: how do we eat with

respect to others? The selections from Susan Kealey's *Case Histories 1989–1991* draw from Case Records of the Massachusetts General Hospital and put the discourses of medicine, infection, blood relations, hospitality and an engulfing biochemistry alongside what seem to be snapshots of family and friends. In one case, a man complains of abdominal pains and is asked what he has consumed, and in the other, a dog has bitten a woman. How is it, ask these patient scenarios of eating, that we care for each other in an increasingly medicalised society?

These days, society is also increasingly measured by biometric identification systems. They are the new borders and lines of defense for a nation and its citizenry, at the expense of human rights and liberal ideals based on the discrete soulful interior of the individual body. It seems timely, therefore, to ask how the thought of 'us' is arising in relation to biochemical spatialization. As Heidegger suggested, we gain our bearings in space through *buildings*, whose etymology encompasses both edifices and ways that we cultivate, preserve and care for (build up) the soil. Buildings are the markers by which we *dwell* in the world. So what are the buildings by which the scene of eating *takes place* in relation to biochemical spatialization?

The dwellings of Lee Ka-sing, Alain Paiement, Lisa Robertson, Liz Magor, Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher all radically rethink the relation between architecture and eating, and provide general starting points for a much-needed rethinking of the eating *polis* . Further, by asking how a scene of eating *takes place* and is secured in a spatialized biochemistry, these contributions help rethink what is meant by "food *security* ."

"Eating Things" ends with Lee Friedlander's photographs of olive trees in Spain. As I stared at the constellations of his photos, my thoughts flashed to the Generalife Gardens in Alhambra and then to the work of the Al-Andalusi School of Agronomy. The learned experimental agronomy of this largely Arab school was, after the second Crusades, incorporated by the Spanish to improve their food security and diet. But the drift of my far-too-simple nostalgia was cut short by the memory that American policy makers—after 9/11, the crumbling of buildings and the subsequent dissemination of anthrax through the mail—changed the meaning of "food *security* ." Previously, it concerned ensuring that citizens had an adequate food supply; it now suggests food secure from bioterrorism—and millions are being diverted from traditional public health programs into those run by military and law-enforcement agendas to ensure just that. Though it might not be phrased as such in official circles, it seems the Arab world is now seen as a threat to the security of biometric America's oily food. The scene of eating is changing, and it is *just that* that is hanging in the fiery, sun-splashed constellations of those weighty olive branches.