

FIVE FOODS FIT FOR THOUGHT

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1.

Long before I first had the pleasure of tasting that most American of condiments, Heinz tomato ketchup – mayonnaise was the seasoning of choice in the unadventurous Belgium of my youth – a culinary battle raged in the American heartland I now call home that in many ways presaged the culture wars of our current political moment. I am referring here to the so-named “ketchup-as-vegetable controversy” of 1981, an early benchmark of the perfidy of Reaganomics and its corrosive impact on America’s social fabric – the destructive consequences of which are now so thoroughly normalized that we are regularly compelled to look back at Reagan-era Republicanism as the last stand of political reason on the right. Said controversy began only a few months after Reagan took office, when he cajoled Congress into cutting \$1.5 billion from the National School Lunch Program. Reagan gave the US Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service just ninety days – the proverbial blink of an eye, for the federal bureaucracy – to compile a new set of nutritional standards that would enable school districts across the country to cut corners where needed without, theoretically at least, lowering the quality of the food on offer. Among the standards proposed by the USDA-convened panel of nutritionists was the notorious reinvention of pickle relish as a species of vegetable (ketchup wasn’t explicitly named in the original document, but it came to symbolize the new standards). This was a particularly glaring symptom of the precipitous decline in overall food quality in the United States since the beginning of the 1980s. (Junk food is the fleeting gastrointestinal equivalent of “junkspace.”¹) Incidentally, a comparable controversy occurred in 2011, when Congress passed a bill prohibiting the USDA from increasing the amount of tomato paste required to constitute a vegetable, thereby allowing pizza with just two tablespoons’ worth of tomato paste to pass as a vegetable. Whether the scourge of our endless culture wars originated in the kitchen or not, one could make the case that of everything personal, it is perhaps the dietary and digestive that is the most political.

2.

A half-hour walk and some twenty city blocks to the west of the Neubauer Collegium stretches one of the foremost “food deserts” in the world’s richest country: predominantly Black, economically depressed Englewood. According to a feature published in *The Guardian* in 2019, average life expectancy in the neighborhood stalls at sixty – thirty years less than the age that rich white Chicagoans can expect to reach in Streeterville, just ten miles to the north. (This is the greatest such demographic

¹ “If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.... Junkspace is the sum total of our current achievement; we have built more than did all previous generations put together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales. We do not leave pyramids.” Rem Koolhaas, “Junkspace,” *October*, Spring 2002, 175.

divergence in any US city, according to *The Guardian*.) The article shared the following evocative impressions:

Walking down 69th Street in Englewood, Chicago, near where she grew up, Michelle Rashad gestures to a rundown retail shop, across from a long open lot. “At this store, there’s a Muslim brother who sells some fruits and vegetables some days,” says the 27-year-old. “But that might be the only piece of fruit you can get for another mile. Most [of] it has been like this since I was a kid. At least since I can remember.” The stores here – the few that haven’t been boarded up or burned to the ground – sell mostly packaged goods from behind thick plates of ballistic-proof glass. Even at the Subway sandwich shop a few blocks down, the healthy option in the area, customers have to shout their selections to overcome a muffling bulletproof encasement around the food and register.²

Ironically, this is the very same neighborhood that in November 2022 witnessed the closing of a Whole Foods Market – just one of six stores nationwide to suffer this fate, and just six years after it had opened its doors with much mayoral fanfare and high-minded promises of filling a “South Side food desert.” What constitutes such desertification? The USDA defines food deserts as “regions of the country that feature large proportions of households with low incomes, inadequate access to transportation, and a limited number of food retailers providing fresh produce and healthy groceries for affordable prices.”³ A report published by the USDA in 2009 found that “23.5 million people live in low-income areas that are further than 1 mile from a large grocery store or supermarket.” This is a standard metric for mapping food deserts in the United States, where the most widely available foods tend to be both processed and high in sugar and fats, key ingredients of the nation’s obesity epidemic.⁴ There certainly is plenty of stuff to chew on here – but what good is food if it is food for thought alone?

3.

Gelitin’s *Democratic Sculpture 7* takes the shape of a giant pizza slice. Measuring some twenty feet in length, it is made of wood and discarded clothes sewn together on a canvas support: a jumble of bright red, yellow, and cream-colored apparel that resembles a typical pizza’s toppings – tomatoes, peppers, cheese. The pizza is mounted on an inclining wooden structure, revealing five large holes through which one can poke one’s head. Indeed, one can easily imagine a well-coordinated group of five

² Jamiles Lartey, “‘It’s Totally Unfair’: Chicago, Where the Rich Live 30 Years Longer than the Poor,” *The Guardian*, June 23, 2019. The article quotes Marc Gourevitch, founding chair of the Department of Population Health at the NYU School of Medicine, as saying that “there’s a concept that is increasingly being understood, that your zip code has as much to do with your health as your genetic code.”

³ See https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45014/30940_err140.pdf.

⁴ Gelitin’s *Democratic Sculpture 7* is presented as part of the fifth Chicago Architecture Biennial. As it happens, several participating organizations are addressing the South Side food crisis through urban gardens, urban farming, and other efforts to support local food economies.

walking around carrying the pizza on their shoulders, their heads resembling olives, inordinately large capers, or uncut artichokes. (This image and the associated notion of an interactive sculpture that invites carefully choreographed “democratic” animation made me think of Lygia Pape’s iconic *Obra Divisor* from 1968, a landmark of participatory art.) The sculpture’s wafer-thin appearance – this is decidedly not a Chicago-style deep dish affair – recalls the pizza’s place of conception and realization. *Democratic Sculpture 7* was first shown, if only very briefly, during Gelitin’s month-long residency at O’Flaherty’s, an artist-run space in New York’s East Village, in the spring of 2023.⁵ The artwork’s title refers to an ongoing series of sculptures realized by the Austrian artist group over the course of a twenty-year period that includes *Schlammloch* (Arnhem, 2001), *Le Cadeau* (Paris, 2002), *Win Win* (Shanghai, 2002), *Sweatwat* (London, 2005), *Zapf de Pipi* (Moscow, 2005), and *All Together Now* (2011). They are works that weren’t just produced collectively, using some of the foursome’s signature heterodox materials (mud, sweat, urine). They also require collective animating; their demotic forms are really only fully brought to life in the experience of sharing. The pizza-shaped artwork that is *Democratic Sculpture 7* operates as a conversation piece of sorts, and it is no coincidence that Gelitin have found in Liam Gillick, of *Discussion Island*—designing fame, the most likeminded and sympathetic representative of the so-called “relational aesthetics” paradigm. (Liam Gillick and Gelitin appear side by side as the protagonists in the 2019 feature film *Stinking Dawn*. Gillick’s *Discussion Islands* are elemental architectural forms designed to accommodate and stimulate the free exchange of ideas.) It is easy to imagine a panel of five speakers donning this particular upper crust while discussing, say, food deserts and food sovereignty, the aesthetics of the pie chart, or the history of human migration as told through foodstuffs – or, alternately, the enduring “problem” of the art world’s historically low esteem of food as fit for thought.

4.

I have written elsewhere, and at length, about the centrality of play in Gelitin’s art practice. (It is worth noting here, if only in passing, that their online bio states the following: “Gelitin is comprised of four artists. They first met in 1978 when they all attended a summer camp. Since then they are playing and working together. In 1993 they began exhibiting internationally.”) Indeed, what may appear abject and transgressive and occasionally pornographic in their art should be considered, first and foremost, from the perspective of the *homo ludens* – the human of whom Friedrich Schiller famously claimed that “he is only a complete man when he plays.”⁶ Gelitin’s dead-earnest devotion to play as the primordial driver not just of art but of the process of becoming human calls to mind a quote from Yamamoto Tsunemoto’s *Hagakure: The*

⁵ The first Neapolitan flatbread to be served in the United States was the work of the Bruno family, Italian immigrants to Boston. Lombardi’s in New York’s Little Italy neighborhood is said to be the oldest pizzeria in the nation, having opened its doors in 1905.

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 56. In this pivotal Fifteenth Letter, Schiller also avers that “man is *only* in earnest when it comes to the pleasant, the good, the perfect; but when it comes to beauty he plays.”

Book of the Samurai that I regularly return to when thinking about art more generally: “Matters of great concern should be treated lightly.... Matters of small concern should be treated seriously.”⁷ Where on the scale of such “concerns” does the vital act of eating figure, and how lightly (or seriously) should it therefore be treated? The exact same question can naturally be asked of art, and the answers to both questions may reveal an interesting set of correlations. In the context of Gelitin’s decidedly anti-monumental, proletarian aesthetic, one such correlation would probably align the Arte Povera flavor of *Democratic Sculpture 7* with the no-frills, working-class roots of much Italian cuisine. Although this is not the place for an in-depth reflection on the forces driving the historical marginalization of gastronomic matters in western art – might the reason why still-life painting has long been ranked among the lowest of all imaging genres have something to do with its predilection for depicting foodstuffs? – it is tempting to frame Gelitin’s seemingly lighthearted, jocular interest in food, and the creative powers of the human digestive tract more broadly, in the larger context of a properly subversive *Umwertung aller Werte* that seeks to restore to art the critical charge of what, like food (and/or feces), *appears* trivial but is, of course, anything but.

5.

In 1939, the German-Jewish scholar Norbert Elias published his landmark book *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, which was translated in 1969 as *The Civilizing Process*. This founding text of modern sociology is best known for its partial characterization of the gradual shift from the Middle Ages’ *Fremdzwang* to the Early Modern Period’s *Selbstzwang* – from the acceptance of rules imposed upon us by others to the internalization of those rules as “good behavior” and “manners.” Tellingly, Elias develops the outlines of his argument primarily at the dining table, in charting humans’ changing eating habits. Much of the first part of his magnum opus is concerned with contrasting how we eat today with how we used to eat. Or rather: how *I* eat today with how *we* used to eat – for it is the *atomization* of the eating experience that is of particular relevance to our current discussion of “democratic sculptures” and quasi-edible conversation pieces. Here are some choice tidbits, starting with Elias’s account of medieval *Tischzuchten*, as the didactic manuals for fashioning proper table manners were known:

The Middle Ages have left us an abundance of information on what was considered socially acceptable behavior at the time. Here, too, precepts on conduct while eating had a special importance. Eating and drinking then occupied a far more central position in social life than today, when they provide – frequently, not always – rather the framework and introduction for conversation and conviviality.⁸

⁷ Yamamoto Tsunemoto, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1979), 27. Note the poignant resonance of this paradox with the precepts of Schiller’s Fifteenth Letter.

⁸ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 53. The most influential *Tischzucht* is Desiderius Erasmus’s aptly titled *De civilitate*

Following a brief discussion about the introduction of the fork in high society in eleventh-century Venice (a “novelty regarded as excessively refined”), Elias muses:

The attitude that has just been described towards the “innovation” of the fork shows one thing with special clarity. People who ate together in the way customary in the Middle Ages, taking meat with their fingers from the same dish, wine from the same goblet, soup from the same pot or same plate... such people stood in a different relationship to one another than we do.... What was lacking in this *courtois* world, or at least had not been developed to the same degree, was the invisible wall of affects which seems now to rise between one human body and another, repelling and separating, the wall which is often perceptible today at the mere approach of something that has been in contact with the mouth or hands of someone else, and which manifests itself as embarrassment at the mere sight of many bodily functions of others, and often at their mere mention, or as a feeling of shame when one’s own functions are exposed to the gaze of others, and by no means only then.⁹

Distaste, embarrassment, shame: there is much here to enlighten even the most casual visitor to Gelitin’s world. Elias concludes his lengthy discussion of changing table manners – a series of changes that revolves, in essence, around the changing politics of togetherness – with the following reflection, touching upon the “transvaluation of values” (to paraphrase the Nietzschean notion of an *Umwertung aller Werte*) alluded to earlier:

Although human phenomena – whether attitudes, wishes or structures – may be looked at on their own, independently of their connections with the social life of people, they are by nature nothing but substantializations of human relations and of human behavior, embodiments of social and mental life. This is true of speech, which is nothing other than human relations turned into sound; it is true both of phenomena which rank high on our scale of values and of others which seem trivial or worthless. But it is often precisely these latter, apparently trivial phenomena that give us clear and simple insights into the structure and development of the psyche and its relations which are at first denied us by the former.¹⁰

This is why the apparently trivial is so worthy of pursuit – and the politics of its trivialization (no matter whether this pertains to art or food) potentially key to a better understanding of much more than the human intestinal apparatus. These are just some of the culinary wisdoms served up in Gelitin’s filling slice of life.

morum puerilium (“On Civility in Boys”), published in 1530. Erasmus referred to such pedagogy as “*crassissima philosophiae pars*,” or “the grossest part of philosophy.”

⁹ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 60.

¹⁰ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 99.