THE STATUS OF FOOD PRODUCTS IN TOPICAL WORKS OF ART


Contemporary artists make use of the most diverse objects and materials in their work. In this text we will focus on three artists that all make use of foodstuffs in their sculptures, each of them in very different ways and as part of a personal vocabulary. To Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976), elements such as mussels, French fries, and eggs are connected to the Belgian gastronomic culture. Broodthaers uses empty egg shells or mussel shells as metaphors of the “empty” work of art, which according to him always takes over the meaning of the museum context. Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) is interested in the most everyday food products, such as fat or honey. To this artist, they represent the energy and warmth that would stimulate the creativity of each human being to contribute to the betterment of society. Central to the work of Matthew Barney (1967– , USA) is transformation — of the body, of objects, and of raw materials. His installations, videos and performances offer reflections on the human body as a kind of machine that can remodel foodstuffs by means of a complex metabolism.

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Throughout the history of art, in genres such as the still lifes, banquet scenes, or vanitas tableaux, artists have fixed their attention on the representation of foods. Unlike traditional painters of the past, however, contemporary artists make use of everyday food products not only as objects of representation but also as artistic media, and they assign to these unusual materials a unique meaning. Within their personal oeuvres, these artists transmit into banal food products such as eggs, honey, butter, or bread specific connotations and meanings. Works by artists like Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976), Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), and Matthew Barney (1967– , USA) have little in common. Pieces by each of them can be found in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, or S.M.A.K.). In this article we will focus on works by these artists. Although this involves three separate case studies, it is significant that each of them uses food products as integral parts of their artistic vocabulary.

Marcel Broodthaers

The objects, including foods, that Marcel Broodthaers uses in his sculptures and installations are all tied up in a web of references and meanings. Throughout the work of Broodthaers one can discern two constants: on the one hand, the relations between language and the sign; on the other, the discrepancy between content and form or context. Broodthaers is not a sculptor, nor a painter; he transforms and accumulates everyday objects. Initially a poet, he retains poetry as a source of inspiration throughout his pictorial work. At the beginning of his career as a visual artist, about 1965, he creates a series of assemblages composed of natural and artificial consumer goods: eggshells, empty mussel shells, bottles, bags of French fries, and charcoal, but also fragments of poetry. It is remarkable that Broodthaers doesn’t opt for consumer goods such as Coca–Cola or tins of tomatoes, as they were used by his colleagues, the Pop Artists. He rather chooses mussels, French fries or eggs, as they refer, to him, to the Belgian gastronomic culture. In composing his assemblages Broodthaers remains above all a poet. The objects are like letters or words that become meaningful when remodelled or arranged with other objects to form phrases.

Throughout his work, Broodthaers seeks to hold a mirror up to society as well as to point out the importance of the context of art. At the later stages of his career he made these ideas explicit,
together with his museum fictions and decors. But the same themes already constituted the basis of his early assemblages. To Broodthaers, eggs as well as mussels symbolize the functioning of the work of art. Like the work of art, a mussel or egg is essentially a formless content. This content is caught and given a form by the shell. Broodthaers argues that works of art are formless and have in fact no independent meaning. Rather, they take over the meaning of the context wherein they are presented, the theme in accordance with which they are exhibited. Broodthaers criticizes the fact that art objects are malleable, always subordinate to the larger whole or narrative of which they are a part. The empty mussel shells and eggshells symbolize this loss of content. The so-called fruit or content is itself absent; only the shells are arranged and piled up, as in the piece, "Grande Casserole de Moules" (1966). The idea of the shell and the lost content thus also functions to Broodthaers as a context from which he realized images and exhibitions. Throughout his entire oeuvre one encounters this opposition between form and content, be it in the form of the mold without the original, or in the form of the museum (and the whole network of implied agreements it entails) without a work of art.

The linguistic element plays an important role in Broodthaers's work. The poetic play with language, e.g. with the definite article in "la moule" [mussel] versus "le moule" [mold], endows the piece with an array of new meanings. In this respect, Broodthaers reminds one of René Magritte, who likewise would furnish an object with a new and original quality by giving it another name. In 1966 Broodthaers writes "une moule cache un moule et vice-versa" [a mussel conceals a mold, and vice versa]. The artist approaches the mussel as a mold, as an archetype containing all possible sculptures. As is the case with "Grande Casserole de Moules," mussels always appear as a multitude. The shapeliness of the mussels in the pot is as if the cornucopia. The simmering effect and the nearly overflowing mussels refer to the popular connotation of the mussel as symbolizing the female sex—a connotation reinforced by Broodthaers. From this point of view, his "pot" could be considered as the female counterpart to Marcel Duchamp's "Machine Célibataire." (Note that the word "casserole" also designates a prostitute in the French vernacular.) In Broodthaers's conception the mussel is also related to the North Sea, which as the "mother of all mussels" functions equally as another symbol of Belgium. Within Broodthaers's oeuvre mussels are always presented together with consumer goods or everyday objects, such as a pot, a chair or a table. The multitude of mussels also symbolizes to Broodthaers the absence of an original, the negation of the "true" work of art. When Broodthaers later composes his "bestiary," he mentions the mussel as being independent. It exists with the limits of its own shell, and doesn't submit to the whims of society. As such it is "perfect."2

Like the mussel shells, the eggshells used by Broodthaers also sustain reference to the opposition between form and content. Much in the same way as the mussel is the archetype of all sculptures to Broodthaers, the egg is the origin of the world: "Tout est oeufs. Le monde est oeufs. Le monde est né du grand jaune, le soleil. Notre mère, la lune, est écailleuse. En écailles d'œuf pilées, la lune. Poussières d'œufs, les étoiles. Tout, oeufs morts et perdus. En dépit des gardes, ce monde–soleil, cette lune, étoiles de trains entiers. Vides. D'œufs vides." [Everything is eggs. The world is eggs. The world is born from the great yellow, the sun. Our mother, the moon, is scaly. Of pounded egg scales, the moon. Powder of eggs, the stars. Everything, eggs deceased and lost. Despite guardians, this world–sun, this moon, stars all training after. Empty. Of empty eggs.]2 In his compositions the eggshells are often presented in a more organized and deliberate manner than the mussels. In his texts as well as in the works themselves, Broodthaers also establishes a link between the egg and the art of painting. An example of this is "289 Coquilles d'oeufs" (1966). By making the use of the egg, Broodthaers says he wants to rediscover the painting of the Primitives: "painting" with the egg.4 Unlike the mussel shells, the eggshells are often related to the empty canvas, as if he aims to reduce, or "reverse," painting by applying empty shells onto the monochrome canvas. The shells are arranged, as though words in a poem, by carefully placing one shell after another. In "289 Coquilles d'oeufs" the eggs are organized on a red monochrome, whereby the rich, full colour of the red contrasts with the pale, broken shells. These shells are

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displayed on the canvas much in the same way as “collections” are displayed by traditional museums — another way to demonstrate the relative importance of the museum context.

Broodthaers ties up the mussel shells and eggshells in a complex network of meanings. They get references that are linguistic, as well as formal, content-specific, historical, and conceptual in nature. With his work the artist offers a variegated reflection on society, on the museum, on the work of art, and on the wider meaning of the concept and understanding of art.

Joseph Beuys

To Beuys, art should be an integral part of daily life. According to the artist, society (communist as well as democratic) is sick. However, both could be cured by the forces present in nature, such as tea, honey, fat, etc. Also manipulated food products are a source of energy to Beuys, which can have a positive bearing on society. Energy stimulates us to think about the changes that contemporary society should undergo. According to Beuys, everything is constantly in motion and should consequently be kept “warm” so as to avoid rigidity and inflexibility. Our world can only progress when all is ceaselessly questioned. In his sculptures and installations he uses recognizable objects and thus rejects the idea of abstraction in favor of an aesthetics that is based on his personal experience. Yet despite this concreteness, his aesthetics can still tackle larger issues such as our environment, politics, and the relationship between human beings and nature.

"By adding food to the work of art, life turns into art, in order to lead art back to life." 5 Beuys wants to knock the work of art off its perch and show its relevance to everyday life by using objects — such as foodstuffs — familiar to all. To Beuys, food is a source of power, necessary to survive in society, enriching us mentally as well as physically. Foodstuffs such as margarine, chocolate, or honey are social attributes to the artist, occupying a place in his personal theory of symbols and metaphors. He uses food products mostly as ready-made objects, yet charges them with new spiritual significance. Several of the materials with which Beuys works can be traced back to a personal experience of almost mythic dimensions to the artist. Repeatedly he has told of an accident he had during the war, when his airplane was shot down. He was saved and managed to survive the cold winter because the Tatars who found him rubbed fat all over his body and wrapped him in layers of felt.

Fat, butter and margarine are omnipresent in Beuys’s work. Because of their high calorific content they are excellent sources of energy and are identified with life and creativity. Each element of his work also refers to numerous connotations other than those immediately obvious. Honey, for example, rather than pointing merely to an energetic value or a sweet result, also refers to the spirit of cooperation in the behaviour of bees, reflecting, to Beuys, a utopian and harmonious society. Margarine represents the creative force par excellence to the artist, as it is a product of nature transformed by human labor and productivity. Beuys also appreciates the fact that fat exists in a liquid as well as in a solid form. By using warmth one can transform its chaos into a stable structure. In Beuys’s installations, fat is often combined with other materials — e.g. with copper, known to be fine conductor — so as to channel the chaotic energy of the fat.

For the exhibition “Art in Europe After 68” [Kunst in Europa na 68] (1980) in the then Museum of Contemporary Art [Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst] of Ghent, Beuys made “Economic Values” [Wirtschaftswerte], a huge installation with foodstuffs. With this piece, Beuys criticizes the contemporary consumer society and the political situation in Germany. A large number of packages of foodstuffs are displayed on metal shelves. Involved are basic staples such as rice, lentils, butter, bread, and honey — all coming from the former East Germany. Of these products, manufactured by social state factories, Beuys chose those packages that looked most old-fashioned and unsophisticated. The boxes consist of unbleached paper with a monochromatic print that only mentions basic information (content, weight). Beuys was convinced that one could identify the underlying ideology of the material world in simple, straightforward ways. In 1980 the difference between the multi-colored packages available on the free market in West Germany and the bland, single-colored packages in the East was already striking, a difference that continued to persist until the Wall came down in 1989. Beuys’s evocative representation seems to be

simultaneously a kind of ode and a requiem for communism. The piece looks like a sober supermarket of found objects lacking a history. With this work, Beuys referred to the hurt of a post-Holocaust Germany, whereby East–Germany was designated both as an accomplice in crime and as a redeeming partner in the recovery. These packages were also rations, used by military and relief organizations in times of need.

Beuys not only stacked L-formed shelves with food products, he also indicated that the piece should only be displayed when surrounded by paintings made during the life of Karl Marx. Beuys appreciated Karl Marx’s analysis of the correlation between labor and economy, even if he raised objections to the conclusions Marx drew from this analysis. Beuys did not consider either communism or capitalistic democracy to be a solution to the problems of society. To complete “Wirtschaftswerte,” Beuys added a block of plaster that was located in his atelier. He rubbed fat into a broken corner of this block. The corner, thus repaired with butter, symbolizes the necessity of repairing the world. Very slowly the fat penetrates into the stone, finally entirely permeating it. Thus Beuys indicates that the owner of the piece should regularly rub fat onto the corner. The block of plaster symbolizes the slow recovery of a sick society, healing steadily thanks to warmth and creativity.

“Wirtschaftswerte” had a couple of forerunners. From 1977 onwards Beuys presented separate packages of foodstuffs manufactured in the Eastern bloc. Each separate object was signed and stamped “ein Wirtschaftswerte” i.e. one unit of economic value. To Beuys, each value refers to the productive force of the worker as well as to the food product itself. Each element symbolizes the investment of creativity that went into it. All packages in the installation “Wirtschaftswerte” also bear this imprint. As such they are labelled as ready-made objects, on the one hand, yet remain part of a larger whole, on the other.

Such use of food products later on also raised the question of the preservation of foods. The peas, flour, rice, etc., were damaged by insects and perished gradually (itself a metaphor for the decay of communist East Germany). Thus the artist agreed to have the content of the packages replaced by a mixture of sand and lime, corresponding to the weight and volume of the original package. At present these parcels look like relics of the past. As food products they are no longer useful, yet they obtain the status of a work of art as a super-commodity. With his sculptures as mental generators, Beuys does not consider the transformation and physical breakdown of materials (through chemical reactions, discoloration, decay, etc.) as a deficiency, but rather as an instructive process.

Matthew Barney

Matthew Barney started his artistic career after his studies ended, in 1988. Already in 1992 he broke through internationally at the “Documenta IX” exhibition in Kassel. His oeuvre consists of an extravagant mixture of performance, video, film, sculpture, installation, and photography. In his work, he constructs an idiosyncratic world populated by historical and legendary characters, such as the disappearance–artist Harry Houdini, football legend Jim Otto, mythological creatures such as dwarves, pigeons, satyrs, etc. Matthew Barney draws inspiration from very different disciplines such as fashion, sports, folklore, and medicine.

Matthew Barney’s work is very differentiated, allowing for an individual elaboration of every content or context in ways that lead each time to new shades of meaning. To give priority to one perspective on a reading and understanding of his work is tempting, yet to do so would harm its complexity. The hierarchy of meanings that are assigned to certain figures, actions, or story lines keeps shifting ground. His work is at the same time open, in order that viewers can engage in dialogue with it, but also so diverse that these viewers are only rarely granted a comfortable position. The multiplicity of meanings issues from the equally numerous conceptual approaches. Accordingly, the manner in which Barney uses certain food products or related elements in his work must be framed within a broader context. Throughout his performances, films, sculptures, and drawings Barney’s fascination with physical exertion, bodily transformation and sexual identity emerges. Transformation is a central thread in various themes that he develops with respect to the body and to certain physical substances, as well as to the works of art themselves.
The foodstuffs appearing in the work of Matthew Barney serve to enhance visualization of material transformation and metabolism. To Barney the body is the sculpture par excellence — challenged, provoked, and mutated in his work. The body is also a machine for transmuting food products and transforming substances. In order to visualize these transformations, Barney uses various objects, such as extensions of the body or alienating actions. His fascination with finished products, often testifying to the discrepancy between the form and the substance — shoes made of crystal, for instance — indicate an interest in transaction and in this respect can be associated with the Fluxus artists. Also with regard to performance as ritual, whereby specific substances and activities are charged with meanings, one can discern similarities to the work of Beuys. Nonetheless, Barney approaches the body in a very different way. For one thing, he idealizes the body in action, as in the case of sports. At the same time — in accordance with contemporary television culture — he intimately focuses on the physical organs, bodily fluids, and physiological processes. The charging up of energy is important. For instance, he deliberately limits his mobility in performances so as to increase the accumulation of energy in his body (by means of tape and other constructions). Barney seeks especially to manifest those forces that are opposed to the ones causing normal growth or decay, and this agenda causes him to explore alternative processes such as melting, disintegrating, exchanging, and transmuting from one substance into another. His renowned "Cremaster" cycle can be seen as an exploration of creation and destruction as competing artistic forces. Throughout Barney's work, numerous food products appear, each one linked up to different connotations, such as grapes (with which the hostess in "Cremaster 1" makes patterns in the form of reproductive organs), potatoes (the sculpting of potatoes in the bar in "Cremaster 2"), or honey (the fertile queen bee as mother figure in her cabinet of honeycomb, in "Cremaster 2").

The sculpture "OTTOShaft: Metabolism of the Hubris Pill" (1992–2001) is related to a film that Barney showed during “Documenta IX" (1992), and is based upon a number of performances. This film accords a central place to Jim Otto — the American Football legend who, despite extensive surgery on his knees, kept on practicing his sport and achieved one success after another. For the film, various kinds of athletic paraphernalia such as disk weights, a barbell rod, and other types of body–building equipment are represented in the vulnerable medium of vaseline. Other protagonists of the film are three bagpipers dressed up in Scottish kilts and tights. Curious substances called “hubris pills” also appear, tossed up as mythical sports balls. These are gigantic pills or tablets appearing in successive metabolic states, ranging from glucose to sugar to vaseline, tapioca, meringue, and finally pound cake. The different large pills represent the metamorphosis and the storage of energy in different states. The number "00" on the football shirt of Jim Otto represents the two main gateways to the body — mouth and anus — as points of entrance and exit of food products in the body. The bagpipers are also linked to metabolism, with their bagpipes as representative of the stomach taking up substances, processing them, and passing them on. The musical instrument signifies the pumping of Otto's internal organs, and by extension those of all human beings, thereby symbolizing the transformation of the body as such into a living work of art.

The sculpture in the S.M.A.K.–collection consists of several features taken from the film about Jim Otto. The seven pills in this work are made up of grape sugar (glucose), solid sweets, cane sugar (sucrose), gelatine, tapioca, meringue, and cake. Together with the kilt of the bagpiper these natural substances are presented in a showcase constructed of synthetic materials. In its capacity of being "alive," the work tells us about the complex relationships among the physical materials, the aesthetic values they embody, and their ideological content. Presented in a closed showcase the work is at the same time an autonomous sculpture and a component of a larger whole. Barney's interest in the transformation of forms is emphatically present in the work "OTTOShaft." His strategy of "mutation" is an integral part of the fundamental meaning of the sculpture and has consequences for its maintenance, presentation, and general appearance. Six of the seven pills are made of food products, while the seventh consists of vaseline jelly. Together these pills represent the gradual transition of basic components — in this case glucose — to the finished product, the pound cake. The intermediaries are grape sugar (fructose), cane sugar (sucrose), tapioca (starch), and meringue (froth). The final pill form, the cake, is broken to express the failure of its alchemy — in this case the transition of a simple carbohydrate to a complex amalgam of sugar, protein, fat (purified vaseline), and starch. The complexity of the food product increases with each form,
eventually resulting in failure (a theme that comes up repeatedly in Barney’s work). In Barney’s alchemy of substitution, a simple sugar provides the raw material, digestion represents the method of conversion or transformation, and the cake is the end result. The work thus signifies the aspiration of an athlete like Jim Otto to transform his body by means of science. This aspiration inevitably fails, however, just as glucose cannot succeed in transforming itself into cake, even with the copious employment of fat (vaseline). One can also link the vaseline to the grease that American football players use in order to cause their opponents to slip on the field.

“OTTOshaft: Metabolism of the Hubris Pills” is about the transition of food products. Yet, because these natural substances themselves change continuously, this process demands a great deal with respect to aspects of management and preservation. Moreover, the artist finds it is inconceivable that any substances would be capable of undergoing a total substitution process, as this would interrupt the metabolic chain⁶. He thus proposes that contamination, or the disintegrating of the “pills,” is an integral part of the failure, and hence of the work. Initially, Barney kept the pills in his studio and observed the process of erosion of the natural food products at first hand. At a given point in time, however, in 2001, Barney decided to formally freeze the pills so as to preserve that moment of erosion, nine years after their production. Unlike Joseph Beuys’s work, in which certain substances (such as butter) change continuously or the food products are replaced by substitutes, Barney has chosen to interrupt the aging process and to retain the original substances. Only by first allowing the attributes of the film to erode, and then using restoratives to prevent them from eroding further, is Barney able to make the attributes of the film “timeless” and give them an existence as autonomous works of art.

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Images of Broodthaers, Barney and Beuys can be found on the website of the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.):

www.smak.be

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