

Title Feast for the eyes
Date 2003
Publication BIRNBAUM, Daniel. *Feast for the eyes*. Artforum, 05.2003

Author Daniel Birnbaum
Artist Rivane Neuenschwander

Feast for the eyes

I recall staying in a skyscraper with a small jungle on the roof and then traveling by taxi through a hailstorm to attend the sumptuous opening of a vast biennial organized around the (to me) surprising idea of cannibalism. This was my first visit to Brazil, and it was the bewildering context in which I encountered Belo Horizonte-based artist Rivane Neuenschwander's work — delicate and often ephemeral in nature, yet so precise that you always immediately recognize its unmistakable atmosphere, its distinct tone. Or should I say scent? Or flavor?

Eye, nose, mouth: Whether in large murals made by affixing black pepper to adhesive tape [Attachment, 2000] or in paintings with luridly colored stripes made of substances like Orange powder and Indian curry [Eatable Alphabet, 2001], Neuenschwander's "visual" art involves more senses than one. Olfactory qualities play a central role, and in a number of pieces the mouth is also put to work, physically and symbolically. In *Carta faminta* (Starving Letters), 2000, the oral process of incorporating external material is part of the production: Neuenschwander made the series by releasing hungry snails onto rice paper. Eagerly devouring their environment, the snails drew curious maps — the images have a strong cartographic appearance — while escaping the territory. The mouth is also significant in *Eatable Alphabet*, a series of abstract paintings composed of horizontal magic tape stripes against the white ground of PVC board. The piece's title makes the ancient analogy of reading and eating — the prophet Ezekiel eating his roll is just one of many biblical examples — relevant to the understanding of the work. While the different stripes of "edible letters" are visually similar, only the varying colors indicate that different food powders have been used, and the paintings are ordered alphabetically: açafão, black pepper, colorífico, dill, espinafre, feijão árabe, gergelim, hähnchen, Indian curry, Jamaican pepper, kräutersalz, lorbeer, mustard, noz moscada, orange, pimenta chili, quatre épices, rote beete, semente de papoula, tomate, urucum, vinaigrette, wasabi, xique-xique, yellow corn flour, zattar. This work is certainly experienced with the eyes, but its true significance is graspable only if the absence of the experience of taste is taken into account.

Or can the eye also eat? In the context of Brazilian art, the idea of cannibalism isn't such a strange starting point for issues of interpretation and the varying aesthetic experience — quite the contrary. "Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically," declared the poet Oswald de Andrade in his *Manifesto antropófago* (1928), describing the evolution of modern Brazilian culture in terms of the cannibalistic devouring of other cultures. In the words of art critic Guy Brett, "This was a figure for the process by which Brazil 'swallowed' various world cultures in order to create its own, not in a predatory fashion but in a spirit of anti-colonialist rebellion." Andrade's oral metaphor took such hold almost half a century later that artist Hélio Oiticica would define the resistance of Brazilian culture to external influences — its ability to ingest other cultural information instead of succumbing to some international style — as a kind of "super-cannibalism." And Lygia Clark considers the concept overtly in works such as *Cannibalismo* (Cannibalism) and *Baba antropofágica* (Cannibalistic slobber; both 1973). "I think I have even become a cannibal. I feel like eating everybody around me that I love", she once wrote about her projects. The driving force of cannibalistic desire in Clark's artistic practice and approach to the world becomes less an issue of cultural influence than one of psychic economy.

Title Feast for the eyes
Date 2003
Publication BIRNBAUM, Daniel. *Feast for the eyes*. Artforum, 05.2003

Author Daniel Birnbaum
Artist Rivane Neuenschwander

Without wanting to reduce Neuenschwander's art to her famous predecessors' productions or to the modernist discourse of antropofagia, one cannot help but note, given her snails and "edible" letters, the presence of this typically Brazilian theme in her work: forms "eating" each other, continually incorporating, digesting, or assimilating others. Her art is full of containers and vessels, bubbles and receptacles. In *Continente/Andando em círculos* (Continent/Walking in Circles), 2000, which comprises a number of aluminum basins filled with water and coconut soap, one container will sometimes hold another, smaller container floating like a strangely hollow island in the liquid. And in *Pertence. não pertence*. (Belong. Not Belong.), 2001, photographs show one, two, or three beetles sitting partially inside one, two, or three soap bubbles—a game of containing or being contained that is played out in all possible combinations. Totally straightforward yet nonetheless mysterious is *Mal-entendido* (Misunderstanding), 2000, a sculpture consisting of almost nothing more than an egg floating in a water glass, sticking up partly but also appearing underwater, seemingly much bigger thanks to the enlarging effect of the convex liquid container.

Time also eats. After all, Saturn (the Roman God of harvests, known as Kronos in Greece) devoured his own children. And if ingestion is one recurring theme in Neuenschwander's work, the relentless passage of time is another — and a possible link between them is the notion of melancholia. In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud explains the melancholic person's inability to get over loss as a "cannibalistic" oral fixation. Instead of working through the traumatic loss in a productive way — as does the person who actively mourns — the melancholic internalizes the lost object, thus producing an aching inner spatiality of agonizing phantasms. On a symbolic plane, the melancholic "eats" the absent object instead of accepting the loss. This theory, eccentric as it may seem, has been extensively elaborated in psychoanalytic literature, from Karl Abraham's writings in the '20s to Julia Kristeva's 1987 study *Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie*. (A number of key essays on the topic were penned by French psychoanalyst Pierre Fedida, who counted Lygia Clark among his patients in the early '70s.)

Many of Neuenschwander's objects and installations display her intense interest in organic substances — dried flowers, desiccated insects, fruit, soap, garlic, paprika and tomatoes. With a keen sense of nature's ephemerality, she has produced a large number of works that seem to capture materials, living or dead, right at the moment before they change state or disappear. But the ethereal and melancholic beauty of decay and decomposition is not the only attraction of time's relentless flow for Neuenschwander. She is just as interested in the repetitions of simple chronometers, such as rhythmically dripping water — which the artist has used both on a small scale (with water drops falling gently from a plastic cup) and large. In *Chove chuva*, 2002, the central piece in the artist's exhibition last year at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha in Belo Horizonte, twenty-five aluminum buckets filled with water were suspended in air, each one with a hole in the bottom so water dripped into other buckets placed on the floor. Every four hours a museum employee would refill the artificial waterfall, using a ladder that was also part of the display.

And then there are Neuenschwander's calendars based on expiration dates — the tiny printed numbers on a can or package that are meant solely to provide information about a product's limited life span but which speak inadvertently of our own predicament as well: finitude. For *Deadline Calendar*, 2002, Neuenschwander collected food items displaying "Best Before" dates and placed these dates (one for each day of the year) in each of twelve frames, one for each month. The strictly ordered multitude of lurid pieces of packaging thus represented a full year's cycle — every

Title	Feast for the eyes	Author	Daniel Birnbaum
Date	2003	Artist	Rivane Neuenschwander
Publication	BIRNBAUM, Daniel. <i>Feast for the eyes</i> . Artforum, 05.2003		

day a memento mori. An accompanying piece, *Found Calendar*, 2002, speaks just as explicitly about time's passage and its organization according to the cycles of sun and moon. The artist placed bits of paper from ads, tickets, and newspaper articles — each one bearing a number, from one to thirty-one — and placed them in order under glass. Thus, she constructed her own calendars for the very months during which the exhibitions took place. A third piece referencing the lunar cycle, *Still-Life Calendar*, 2002, is more oblique, consisting of a wall covered with thirty-one still life paintings. If not for the title, and perhaps the number of images, the viewer would hardly have guessed that these paintings — acquired from different painters at street-markets and partly covered with ground black pepper (a recurring ingredient in Neuenschwander's production) — would constitute some kind of calendar. Still, the bananas, apples, and other pieces of fruit depicted all possess a similar hue, thanks to Neuenschwander's thin film of spice, making them perhaps most arresting for their olfactory properties — a reversal of the senses that is a key characteristic of her art.

The mouth, as Hegel liked to point out, is the privileged connection between interior and exterior, between subjectivity and the world of objects — the site where nourishment enters the metabolic system, and thought, via language, becomes perceivable by the senses. Of course, the medium for thought is the voice, which is characterized by a unique kind of self-effacement: Thoughts enter the world but often evaporate immediately with hardly a trace. In a series of miniatures titled "*Involuntary Sculptures (speech acts)*," 2001–2002, Neuenschwander considers places where speech is particularly present: the tables of restaurants and cafés. Napkins, toothpicks, straws, matches, and matchboxes are spontaneously formed into small sculptures that are, in effect, traces of conversation. "The communication and consumption occurring with the mouth during their creation is echoed and then transformed," writes Olukemi Ilesanmi, curator of Neuenschwander's recent exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. "The hand folds, cuts, tears, spikes in similar relation to the multitasking mouth that chews, articulates, spits, and hums." This series of miniatures — constructed out of the things you find on dinner tables — thus represents a catalogue of oral activities. Catalogues, maps, alphabets, calendars: Neuenschwander utilizes not only the devices with which we measure time but also conventional tools that order the universe and so turn the chaos of things into a structured, even meaningful, web. While her series of snail-eaten sheets of rice paper composes an entire atlas of imaginary continents, a number of other works seem to allow nature itself to talk to us. In *Word/World*, 2001, a grainy six minute Super-8 film made in collaboration with fellow Brazilian Cao Guimarães, ants carry tiny banners saying word and world. The film's close-up views make the ants appear to be gigantic black-and-white monsters who deliver the message that the world can be read—that the structure of the world is linguistic. Similarly, in *Love Lettering*, 2002, a video Neuenschwander produced with her brother Sergio (who, as a neuroscientist and student of the cognitive biologist Francisco Varela, seems open to speculative renderings of natural processes), small goldfish swim back and forth in bright blue water, with little banners trailing behind them reading my dear, my love, and kissing — obviously fragments from a love letter. In the same vein, the large installation *Palavras cruzadas (Scrabble)*, 2000, consists of a labyrinth of cardboard boxes and hundreds of peeled, dehydrated oranges. The large aromatic fruits are carved so that each one bears a letter. Again, the artist creates an "edible" alphabet, but this time one that you may touch and use: Audiences are invited to form words, to play "Scrabble" with the fruit — that is, to make sense out of nonsense. To read is to eat, to eat is to read — such is the oral obsession of the hermeneutic tradition, from the founders of biblical exegesis all the way up to Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Verschmelzung*, his attempt to assimilate and digest the texts he

Title Feast for the eyes
Date 2003
Publication BIRNBAUM, Daniel. *Feast for the eyes*. Artforum, 05.2003

Author Daniel Birnbaum
Artist Rivane Neuenschwander

reads. Digest everything. Engulf the text in its entirety, leave no details unread and external: If that's the imperative for art audiences, Neuenschwander's work may produce frustration and a sense of isolation. In life, seen within the prism of her art, the bubble of the self seems to remain no matter how much you want to assimilate the outside world. The metaphor applies to her black-and-white film *Inventário das pequenas mortes (sopro)* (Inventory of Small Deaths [Blow]), 2000, another collaboration with Cao Guimarães, which charts the life of a bubble blown by the wind across the Brazilian landscape. Palm trees and clouds shimmer, slightly distorted, through the transparent membrane. Things that are outside appear, for a moment, inside: The form is infinitely vulnerable yet flexible and capable of reflecting the world in its entirety. Is this the melancholic predicament of the self — open to everything, yet forever alone?