

Distasteful: An Investigation of Food's Subversive Function in René Magritte's *The Portrait* and Meret Oppenheim's *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*

Janine Catalano

People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? . . . They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, unfaithful to the honor of my craft. . . . [I]t happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it . . . and warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied . . . and it is all one. . . . There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk.¹

Despite its daily importance—necessity, even—food has often been glossed over, taken for granted, not seen as appropriate fodder for those working in the arts, and certainly not for those studying the arts. Legendary food writer M.F.K. Fisher's above words, written in 1943, suggest this general attitude to be the case among writers between and during the world wars, contrasting the "honor" of writing with an implied humility, unworthiness, and even disparagement attributed to food. Kenneth Bendiner suggests that the same fate has befallen food in the visual arts: "We recognize the social role of meals. . . . But the utter commonness of food in every single person's life every day of the year makes it unexceptional, mundane, not worth extensive consideration."² There is a history of

¹ M.F.K. Fisher, "Forward," in *The Gastronomical Me* (1943); reprinted in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterick (London: Routledge, 1997), vii.

² Kenneth Bendiner, *Food in Painting: From the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 23. This has very much changed in the contemporary art world. An emblematic example of the use of food in postmodern art is Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which, in its place settings of vaginas dedicated to important women in history, very much evokes "impassioned responses testify[ing] to the important . . . question of defining subjectivities and sexualities, of political agency, of women's desires and erotic experiences, of strategies of representation, of how or whether to attempt to define positive female identities, and what these might be—to ongoing discussions about contemporary culture in general." Amelia Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: University of California Press, 1996), 22. For a diverse exploration of food's usages in a variety of more contemporary art media, including Elaine Tin Nyo's performance art piece *Egg Curry* (1997), which enacts Asian-

still life painting, to be sure, but further probing into food's role in art seems relatively minimal and superficial in comparison to, say, that of religious iconography. In particular, it seems that food-related art in the first half of the twentieth century, and in surrealism in particular, has been largely uninvestigated; Bendiner goes so far as to make the unqualified generalization that, for many artists of this era, "the joyous spirit of most food subjects destroys the psychological gravity needed for serious . . . investigations."³

In this essay, I hope to counter Bendiner's claim that food is inherently joyous, and therefore eschewed by artists in this period, by investigating the presentation and implication of food in two nearly contemporaneous but very different works of art: René Magritte's oil painting *The Portrait* (1935) (Figure 1) and Meret Oppenheim's recontextualized "found" object *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) (Figure 2). For these two artists, food is not something that is satisfying and comforting, but rather a familiar entity that can be exploited to challenge basic cultural assumptions, as part of a larger movement.

Indeed, these two works are both products of the surrealist movement of the 1920s and 30s, which ushered in a new kind of rebellion against society.⁴ The surrealists were radical in both their artistic practices and their lifestyle choices, seeking to enact what Salvador Dalí deemed their "colossal nutritive and cultural responsibility" in the face of patriotism and conservatism that dominated France and other nearby countries at this time.⁵ While surrealist sexual experimentation and gender boundary-blurring has been well-discussed in both the art and lives of the movement's artists, their approach to the daily routines of food and eating, though lesser-known, was illuminatingly atypical in its own right. A picnic staged by Caresse Crosby in 1932 saw such figures as Max

American recipes; Felix Gonzalez-Torres's participatory *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)* (1990); and Dough Hammett's *Finger Licks* (1994), cake frosting covered picture frames, see: *Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1999), a collection of essays which accompanied an exhibition of the same name at ArtLab, The University of Western Ontario.

³ Bendiner, *Food in Painting*, 215.

⁴ Throughout this essay, I will use the term "surrealism," with a lower-case "s." This decision reflects the fact René Magritte and Meret Oppenheim, as well as many of the other artists in question, had ambivalent and often ambiguous relationships with the "official" Surrealist movements. However, more importantly for this paper, both were also directly involved with thinkers who did voluntarily adopt the title, and the works in question were all decidedly influenced by the tenets of the movement.

⁵ Salvador Dalí, *La conquête de l'irrationnel* (Paris: Editions surréalistes, 1935); reprinted as "The Conquest of the Irrational," in Salvador Dalí, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. and trans. Haim Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263.

Ernst and Julian Levy creating an impromptu safari-themed film and partaking in perhaps the most infamous surrealist food: lobsters.⁶ Leonora Carrington, at the home she shared with Ernst, her lover, was a notorious food prankster. According to Marina Warner: “she might cook an omelet with hair cut from the head of a guest while he slept and serve it to him, or dye sago black [with] squid’s ink and dish it up with cracked ice and lemon as caviare [*sic.*] for a collector.”⁷

Like Carrington’s antics in particular, it is through just such clever manipulation of this familiar and usually uncontroversial daily entity that Magritte and Oppenheim’s works evoke very contentious and complex questions. However, unlike Carrington’s jokes on friends, food’s subversion in the painted medium shifts the act from the realm of the personal prank and brings it in direct confrontation with the artistic canon, preserving it in such a way that it becomes a decontextualized statement with which any unrelated viewer can interact. Most immediately and effectively, these two pieces play on the viewer’s visceral reaction to food. Anyone looking at these works will recognize the tropes of food prepared and presented for consumption, which would normally immediately arouse hunger; however, the simultaneous undermining of edibility immediately compounds the appetitive with disgust. In this prioritization of the fundamental, instinctive bodily reaction over the cerebral contemplations that might follow, these works lend themselves to an examination not through the eyes of surrealism’s founder André Breton, but instead through the framework of Georges Bataille, the champion of “undercover” or “dissident” surrealism. Breton’s foundational tenets of surrealism are historically linked to the emotive and the cerebral, particularly to the poetic concept of “love” which he prioritized in poetry, art, and life. In contrast, Bataille found Breton’s rebellion to be insufficiently extreme, and venerated what he termed *la bassesse*—a base, vulgar materialism, akin to Freud’s instinctually aggressive individualism in its rejection of civility.⁸ And indeed, despite all of food’s fancy trappings, there is perhaps no

⁶ See: Carolin C. Young, “Shocking the World: Caresse Crosby’s Surrealist Picnic, The Moulin de Soleil, Forest of Ermenonville, Early July 1932,” in *Apples in Gold in Settings of Silver: Stories of Dinner as a Work of Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 273-295.

⁷ Marina Warner, “Introduction,” in Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below*, ed. Marina Warner (London: Virago Press, 1989), 15.

⁸ See: Georges Bataille, “Le Bas Matérialisme et la Gnose,” in *Documents 1*, Paris, 1930; reprinted in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 45-52. For more on Freud’s uncivilized individualism, see: Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 95.

more base an instinct than the drive to eat. Moreover, in constructing a Bataillian frame of reference, we must also investigate his notion of “heterogeneity”; that is, a mode of interaction with one’s world that does not seek to assimilate it, or be assimilated into it, but which rather strives to combine diverse components while retaining their individual identities to create dramatic, often startling, results. He extolled actions that “have the power to liberate heterogenous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual,” believing this less normative state of disruption to be a source of greater individual and societal freedom.⁹

Viewed in the light of heterogeneity, then, food’s interest lies not in its routine application as an entity to be consumed and absorbed for survival, but rather as a source of otherness, a cause of disruption to the body’s equilibrium. Bataille himself addresses this quality of food in his discussion of the heterogenous byproducts of consumption:

Excretion presents itself as the result of a heterogeneity, and can move in the direction of an ever greater heterogeneity, liberating impulses whose ambivalence is more and more pronounced.¹⁰

In the two examples I will look at, however, it is the inherent inedibility of the food portrayed that underpins this otherness. By employing recognizable culinary tropes of their day, these pieces allow viewers a route into the works that is ostensibly familiar, but then posit them in the realm of humans rather than of foodstuffs, and as artistic material rather than edible matter. As such, the works evoke yet undermine the “habitual” nature of food. In these uncanny renderings, which make the familiar foreign, but familiar in a different way, Oppenheim and Magritte present their own witty experiments in heterogeneity.¹¹ These works make the mundane extraordinary, the serious funny, the satisfying insatiable, and the overlooked inescapable, in ways that uphold rather than resolve a myriad of tensions in interwar European society, from bodily taboos related to sexuality and consumption to intellectual and emotional concerns such as gender roles and familial relationships. In short, they challenge the viewer to find a taste for the distasteful.

⁹ Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh” in *Visions of Excess*, 70.

¹⁰ Bataille, “The Use Value of D.A.F de Sade” in *Visions of Excess*, 95.

¹¹ For more on the relationship between familiarity and foreignness in the uncanny, see: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: RENÉ MAGRITTE'S *THE PORTRAIT*

*[The eye is] the object of such anxiety that we will never bite into it.*¹²

*Eye: cannibal delicacy. . . . [A] young man who by chance holding in his hand a coffee spoon, suddenly wanted to take an eye in that spoon.*¹³

Both of the above quotes are from Bataille's "Dictionnaire Critique" entry on "Eye," published in the surrealist journal *Documents* in 1930. Though seemingly contradictory, the tension between these two ideas is in keeping with the typical Bataillan veneration of all things uncomfortable, and the consumption of eyes is a recurrent allusion in his 1928 novella *Story of the Eye*.¹⁴ Here, however, I wish to examine how this interplay between the repulsion and attraction to ocular consumption is manifested in René Magritte's 1935 painting *The Portrait*, and how this piece embodies Magritte's own belief in surrealism as "the indomitable foe of all the bourgeois ideological values that are keeping the world in its present appalling condition."¹⁵

At first glance, *The Portrait* certainly evokes more traditional food-related artworks, particularly the still life. This is partially due to the piece's austerity and anonymity of style, deriving from the simplicity of the pared-down presentation.¹⁶ The sparseness of the

¹² Georges Bataille, "L'oeil," in *Documents* 4, 1929, 216; reprinted as "Eye" in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ It is not entirely unheard of for eyes to be consumed; Outer Mongolians, for instance, are thought to have ingested pickled sheep's eyes to cure hangovers. See: Alex Williams, "Hangover Helpers: Beyond Sheep Eyes," in *New York Times* (January 1 2006), New York edition, Fashion section. However, the Bataillan phrasing of the eye as a "cannibal delicacy," and the titling of the piece as a portrait, make the eye in Magritte's painting undeniably human, taking it once again out of the realm of the consumption of animals and back into the sphere of the discomfort surrounding consuming another person, be it their eyes or otherwise.

¹⁵ René Magritte, "The Lifeline," Lecture given on 20 November 1938, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp; quoted in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: The True Art of Painting*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 120.

¹⁶ This characteristic is fairly typical of Magritte and his fellow Belgian surrealists. The Belgian surrealist group was less outlandish in their practices, both artistically and publicly, than the Parisian surrealists; rather, "The distinctive mark of Brussels surrealism is the apparent modesty of its ambitions and a certain neutrality of tone." See: Jose Pierre, "Belgium," in *A Dictionary of Surrealism*, trans. W.J. Strachan (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 25. However, Magritte was clearly in contact with and influenced by the Parisian group, through his contributions to surrealist publications, his friendship with Salvador Dalí, and his connection to Belgian art dealer Camille Goemans, who settled in Paris in 1927 and whose gallery became a prominent site of surrealist exhibitions. See: Sarah Whitfield, "Chronology," in *Magritte* (London:

composition makes it a far cry from the cautionary tales of excess sometimes seen in artworks, such as in Hieronymous Bosch's 1490 *Allegory of Gluttony and Lust* (Figure 3). Far from being abstracted entities, the relative verisimilitude of the glass, the ham, the cutlery, and the wine make them seem as though, in a different context, they could be found in a conventional painting of a dining table, or indeed on a dining room table in an average family's home in 1930s France or Belgium. Yet in keeping with Magritte's own rebellion against typicality—and consequently upholding a Bataillan veneration of heterogeneity—*The Portrait* is, very immediately, anything but a typical meal. The setting is completely removed from any context; these objects are not situated within a larger room, but are instead presented on a surface against a plain blue background.¹⁷ Consequently, the scene exists in a quasi-dreamlike, potentially fictitious environment that is simultaneous nowhere and anywhere. Moreover, there is virtually no sense of recession into space, and the objects almost appear to be stacked vertically on top of one another rather than being placed on a horizontal surface, removing it from the tradition of the locatable still life setting.¹⁸

And then—or more accurately, first of all—there is the staring eye, agape in the center of the slice of ham. Eyes are commonly depicted throughout Magritte's oeuvre, perhaps most famously in his 1929 painting *The False Mirror*, which depicts an enlarged eye with a cloudy blue sky replacing the monochromatic iris. Some have argued that Magritte's painted eyes, removed from their facial setting and

The South Bank Centre, 1992), 303, 305. In fact, *The Portrait* was painted during a period of exceptionally good relations between the two groups, shortly after what Whitfield describes as their period of closest collaboration since 1929 (307).

¹⁷ This dislocation may owe largely to Magritte's familiarity with Giorgio de Chirico, who had a tremendous influence on Magritte since his discovery of *The Song of Love* in 1925. See: Richard Calvocoressi, *Magritte* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), 14. De Chirico himself incorporated food in a variety of his pictures, many of which may have been familiar to Magritte, such as his 1913 painting *The Square*, owned by Paul Eluard, which depicts two large artichokes in one of his typically ambiguous classicized locales.

¹⁸ Magritte is not the first to manipulate the conventions of the still life table in painting. In the early twentieth century, the advent of cubism relied heavily on the manipulation of café and still life elements, as in Juan Gris's *Still life with Checked Tablecloth* (1915). However, as Christopher Green argues, the cubist use of food here is not meant to draw attention to the social ramifications of the comestibles on the table, but rather to distill the formal essence of the subjects as objects. According to Green: "It allows [the objects], indeed, to signify as objects either of objectivity or of subjectivity. But the stress on both sides of the divide is not on the objects as such; it is on the process of their translation (analysis or synthesis) and the 'purity' of the result." Christopher Green, *Juan Gris* (London: Whitechapel, 1992), 148.

divorced from their partners, act as omnipotent entities, which recalls the Judeo-Christian tradition of the eye that wards off evil, or the all-seeing eye of Christ.¹⁹ I am here more interested in *The Portrait's* transformation of the eye into an object for potential but thwarted consumption, in a complex rendering of suggested cannibalism in an inherently impenetrable and irreconcilable medium of paint on canvas.

The sheer absurdity of the eye in an otherwise recognizable and very familiar scene makes it quite humorous on first viewing.²⁰ However, I would argue that it is at the same time, and more pervasively, deeply disquieting. To again invoke Bataille, ocular mutilation was considered by the surrealist thinker to be “the most horrifying form of sacrifice”—quite a superlative declaration for such an extremist, and a statement which says a great deal about the disturbing potency of this action.²¹ In spite of, or more likely because of, its squeamish potency, the theme was frequently revisited by the surrealists, perhaps most infamously in the scene of a woman's eyeball being sliced in Dalí and Luis Buñuel's 1929 film *Un Chien andalou* (Figures 4, 5).²² *The Portrait*, like its cinematic predecessor, is particularly disturbing in its portrayal of a *human* eye, here not only being presented for mutilation but for consumption. Indeed, the eye in this painting, despite its porcine surroundings, certainly appears human in its recognizable shape and light-colored iris. Magritte himself proclaimed that “a painter is mediocre if he doesn't give

¹⁹ Sarah Whitfield makes this observation as well, relating the eye in *The Portrait* to that depicted in Jacopo Pontormo's *Supper at Emmaus* (1525). See: Whitfield, *Magritte*, 64.

²⁰ This humorous element might be interpreted as a release of a repressed Freudian id, which seeks to somewhat alleviate the anxieties created by this uncomfortable image. For more on Freud's theories on humor, see: Sigmund Freud, “Humor,” in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928), 1-6.

²¹ Georges Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” in *Visions of Excess*, 67.

²² According to David Sylvester, Magritte met Dalí for the first time in the spring of 1929, when Dalí was in Paris “for the making of *Un Chien andalou*.” *René Magritte Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. I: Oil Paintings 1916-1930*, ed. David Sylvester (Antwerp: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1993), 100. Later that summer, “the Magrilles spent August in Cadaques, at the suggestion of Dalí, who was staying there at his family's summer house; others there at his instigation were Goemans and his girlfriend, who shared a rented house with the Magrilles, Luis Buñuel, Joan Miro and Paul and Gala Eluard,” underscoring Magritte's connections with Parisian surrealism (*ibid.*, 105). Dalí, in turn, refers to Magritte as “one of the most ‘mysteriously equivocal’ painters of the moment” in his quasi-fictional autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1961), 208.

special consideration to the importance of his spectator's eyes," and he wryly rises to his own challenge here.²³

It is this confrontation between the painted eye and the viewer's eye that poses a particularly troubling blurring of boundaries. In addressing the eye's unwavering stare *with* his own eye, the viewer simultaneously draws a connection with the painted image *as* his own eye—a quality only underscored by the painting's titling as a portrait, but one without a specific nominal identification. If, as Norman Bryson claims, "still life negates the whole process of constructing and asserting human beings as the primary focus of depiction,"²⁴ Magritte has successfully turned this academic tradition on its head, bringing about a disturbing revival of the medieval term "fleshmeat."²⁵ At the same time, the inverse of this supposition must be considered. If the painted eye can be equated with the viewer on some level, then the viewer can equally identify himself with the painted eye, substituting his own face for the piece of ham on the plate. In this way, Magritte further complicates academic conventions, here undermining any idealization associated with portraiture. Instead, we have not merely flesh, but specifically a face made meat, turned bestial, perishable, and even potentially edible. This troublesome mutual identification adds not only cannibalism but self-mutilation to Bataille's complex tension surrounding ocular consumption.

If Magritte is posing an ethical question of "to eat or not to eat?", it is ultimately rendered purely hypothetical, for *The Portrait* is, fundamentally, paint on a canvas surface available for visual consumption but nothing further.²⁶ Magritte frequently explored this

²³ René Magritte, "The True Art of Painting"; reprinted in Torczyner, *Magritte*, 126.

²⁴ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 60.

²⁵ C. Anne Wilson uses this term throughout her essay "Ritual, Form and Color in Mediaeval Food Tradition" to refer generally to the meat of four-legged animals. She goes on to cite recipes for medieval pottages which call for "ground-up 'great flesh,' a term which translated from the French *grosse char* and denotes the fleshmeat of the larger beasts, either pork, mutton or beef." C. Anne Wilson, "Ritual, Form and Color in Mediaeval Food Tradition," in *The Appetite and the Eye: Visual Aspects of Food and their Presentation within their Historic Context*, ed. C. Anne Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), 22.

²⁶ In 1945, Magritte did translate this piece into a three-dimensional work, literally inviting the audience to sit down at the table. According to David Sylvester, the piece was shown at Brussels Boétie in 1945, where it was listed in the catalogue as "Le portrait (1945)." However, as he writes, "The piece was presumably dismantled when the exhibition closed," and no further details are known about the composition of the work, nor the extent to which the audience could literally partake in the meal in front of them. See: Sylvester, *Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. II: Oil Paintings and Objects 1931-1948*, 455.

distance between representation and object in his work. From early in his career, his famous painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929) (Figure 6) presents a realistic painting of a pipe, but then declares that “This is not a pipe,” leaving viewers to determine how to classify what they see before them. In a more culinary context, his 1936 piece *This is a Piece of Cheese* (Figure 7) makes an inverse declaration. It consists of a painting of gruyere placed under a glass cheese dome, which thus takes on qualities of cheese, yet no one would mistake it for an edible product. In these examples, Magritte highlights the disjunction between, rather than the merging of, signified and signifier; while the audience is free to partake visually, there is an inherent inability for them to literally consume or subsume these painted and sculptural objects. In *The Portrait*, the artifice and impossibility of consummating any suggested act is even further underscored by the idiosyncrasy of the few other objects: the upside-down fork sits on the wrong side of the plate; the butter knife is not the expected implement for cutting meat; the wine bottle, with no wine glass, sits next to an empty water glass.

While *The Portrait* conjures up all of the Bataillian anxiety of eating eyes, compounded by the viewer’s self-identification with the eye made edible on the plate, the piece’s integrity simultaneously implicates and incapacitates viewers who must reckon with its tensions. For though the picture deals with issues of consumption, Magritte has incapacitated the spectator’s mouth through his painted medium. Instead, we are forced to ingest the piece at a purely visual level, dealing with the staring eye’s challenge to consider what it is we are viewing and the uneasiness this evokes. We must address this eye; but however we interpret it—as threatening, as trapped, as parodic, as omnipotent, or any combination thereof—we are unable to dominate or alter this static, unwavering scene, reliant on little more than the work’s hints of humor to temper its uneasiness. As I hope to now show, it is a similar upholding of the irreconcilable and indomitable—once again through the viewer’s intimate encounter with highly recognizable food imagery—that makes Meret Oppenheim’s *My Nurse* such an enigmatic piece of surrealist sculpture, and another potent example of Bataillian heterogeneity.

**THE RIGHT TO SHOES: MERET OPPENHEIM'S MA
GOUVERNANTE—MY NURSE—MEIN KINDERMÄDCHEN**

No communication is more profound; two creatures are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they communicate only through losing a portion of themselves. . . . [T]heir integrity disperse[s] in the heat of excitement.²⁷

Bataille's description of physical love is strikingly applicable to Meret Oppenheim's 1936 object *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*. Two white high-heeled shoes are trussed together, topped with paper ruffles, and "served" to viewers on a silver platter, taking on, in their united state, the form of a kind of unappetizing poultry dish. In addition to the culinary milieu, however, *My Nurse* takes its place in a complex social and art historical tradition surrounding the objectification and availability of women's bodies. Although it can be read as a turkey, the piece's title, like Magritte's own, and its composition from decidedly feminine footwear also make it possible to view the work as a prostrate, headless woman, her legs suggestively akimbo.²⁸ These simultaneities result in a witty visual double-entendre that raises and challenges a variety of issues about visual, edible, and bodily modes of consumption, in ways both similar to and different from Magritte's painting of the previous year.

Taking as the starting point Oppenheim's position as a self-consciously active and empowered female member of the surrealist movement, we can first address *My Nurse* in relation to the most basic link between women and consumption—the act of breast-feeding.²⁹ As the most literal manifestation of woman's role as mother

²⁷ Georges Bataille, "The College of Sociology," in Bataille, *The College of Sociology*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 337.

²⁸ In its relationship to shoes, one cannot help but recall the Freudian foot fetish, and his claim that the shoe, as a quintessential fetish object, acts as a "corresponding symbol of the female genitals." Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on Sexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 155.

²⁹ It is important to note that within the surrealism movement, women were often celebrated, but more often for their allure as *femmes-enfants* than for their abilities as autonomous artists, thinkers, or sexual beings. In addition to her own artistic production, Oppenheim acted as a model for male artists, perhaps most famously in Man Ray's 1933 photograph *Veiled Erotic*. In this image, her nude body is "captured" both by the printing press and by the frame of the image, causing some scholars such as Nancy Spector to comment that she was herself "colonized as a Surrealist object." Nancy Spector, "Meret Oppenheim: Performing Identities," in *Meret Oppenheim: Beyond the Teacup*, eds. Jacqueline Burckhardt and Bice Curiger (New York: Independent Curators Inc, 1996), 37. However, I would argue that Oppenheim was far from a passive figure in the surrealist sphere, as I will demonstrate through an examination of her art,

and nurturer, this connection has long historical precedents; in the medieval world, “woman was food because breast milk was the human being’s first nourishment—the one food essential for survival.”³⁰ The primacy and expectation that children would be breastfed was certainly still the sanctioned attitude in 1930s France, as “in the interwar years the Church [in collaboration with the state] was particularly active in encouraging women to stay home and raise families.”³¹

Yet to the young Oppenheim, one feels, this option was far from desirable, and Jennifer Mundy observes that many surrealists found the contemporary “ideological fetters on sexual behavior . . . sufficient to provoke in the surrealists hostility towards motherhood and the raising of children.”³² Indeed, this is an issue prominent in the psychoanalytic theories of the time as well, which inspired and were in turn inspired by surrealism. Though his is a contentious view, Freud very much associated breast-feeding with sexuality, claiming that for the infant, “the satisfaction of the erotogenic zone is associated, in the first instance, with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment.”³³ Melanie Klein, who furthers this connection, claims that “[The infant daughter’s] desire to suck or devour the penis is directly derived from her desire to do the same to her mother’s breast so that the frustration she suffers from the breast prepares the way for the feelings which her renewed frustration in regard to the penis arouses.”³⁴

Through her art, Oppenheim herself links nutritive and sexual satisfaction, implying that if the former is denied, the latter will be as well—quite a contrast to the staunch separation between sexuality and mothering so prevalent at the time. In an early watercolor, *Votive Picture (Strangling Angel)* (1931) (Figure 8), the “angel” seems to be forcibly moving the child away from her breast; she is both strangling

and that to view this piece as simply a projection of a self-perceived victimization and helplessness is far too simplistic, and indeed condescending, a reading.

³⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” in *Representation* 11 (Summer 1984); reprinted in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (London: Routledge, 1997), 150.

³¹ Jennifer Mundy, “Letters of Desire,” in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 44.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ Freud, “Three Essays on Sexuality,” 181.

³⁴ Melanie Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, trans. Alix Strachey (London: Virago Press, 1989), 206-7. Though the link between breast-feeding and penis envy is not at the forefront of this discussion, Klein’s reading translates to the larger point of female sexual frustration within a male-dominated sphere of regulations.

the baby and being strangled by it.³⁵ Equally anti-maternal is her 1933 drawing *A Boy with Wings Sucks on the Udder-Shaped Breast of a Woman* (Figure 9). Here, both child and mother figures are demonized, the relationship between them seeming more parasitic than symbiotic. Following in this vein, *My Nurse* can be seen as a denial of breast-feeding, and, as such, female consumability. Alyce Mahon has commented that much of Oppenheim's work "merges the domestic and the erotic, and their compatibility in women," and this work brings those two together along with the edible.³⁶ The very title emphasizes the absence of the breast; the object is not a mother, but a nurse, or, more accurately according to the triplicate title, a governess—that is, a maternal figure who does not and did not perform the fundamental task of breast-feeding.³⁷ In further undermining any edibility of the piece, Oppenheim uses an object made of leather—itsself a product of a cow, situated within the realm of western consumption—but rendered utterly unpalatable. The cow is reduced merely to its tough, processed skin, its inedibility highlighted by equally unappetizing frivolous paper toppers typically used to decorate turkeys.

Additionally, further investigation calls the issue of the submissiveness of *My Nurse* into question. True, this womanly object is presented splayed on her back, but this position of helplessness is one that Oppenheim complicates in much of her work. In her 1938 painting *He Rocks His Wife* (Figure 10), a female armadillo lays on her back, at the mercy of the male armadillo. She appears incapacitated and infantilized, but the viewer might also wonder whether she is enjoying being serviced by her husband. The question of whether this is an act of force, a gesture of kindness, or even an instance of servitude on the part of the husband remains unresolved.

Moreover, the upended pose brings to the surface the shoes' soles. Contrary to the virginal white of the shoe leather, the soles are

³⁵ Bice Curiger very aptly describes this "votive picture against child-bearing" in the context of Oppenheim's surrealist connections: "The clawed angel, lustfully murdering little children in deference to an earth-bound rather than a heavenly order, personifies the negative image of woman that was communicated to Meret Oppenheim by her male peers. The black humor of this irritating candour is born of indignation at the multiple punishment that is the reward of women who choose to be free." Bice Curiger, *Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom*, (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), 13, 15. Curiger's description of the "lustful" murder very much posits sexuality in opposition to motherhood.

³⁶ Alyce Mahon, *Eroticism and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137.

³⁷ While the English word "nurse" can be read as either a caretaker or a wet-nurse, the multilingual title underscores the fact that this is more the former. *Gouvernante* most directly translates to "governess," a figure who acts as a nanny rather than a breast-feeder; *gouvernante* also has no etymological similarities to the French word *allaiter*, meaning to breastfeed or to suckle. Similarly, *kindermädchen* translates most directly to the English word "nanny."

hardly pristine. Scuffed and worn, they reveal a tarnished, dirty underbelly that is generally hidden, but whose visibility here is highly significant. In addition to the fact that food and dirt are inherently incompatible entities, underscoring the object's inedibility even further, the presence of dirt becomes a further challenge to conventional social order. As anthropologist Mary Douglas contends, "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder."³⁸ She further classifies the "dirty" as falling into "a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications"; in its otherness, she claims, dirt becomes transgressive—and "the danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power."³⁹ Though Douglas was writing several decades after *My Nurse's* creation, her ideas resonate both with Oppenheim's work and with other surrealists. Douglas echoes the earlier writings of Freud, well known within surrealist circles, who claimed in *Civilization and its Discontents*: "dirtiness of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilization."⁴⁰ Additionally, in his 1930 essay "Danger de pollution," Max Ernst used the image of dirt to condemn the Church's sexual codes.⁴¹ According to Jennifer Mundy, "If 'pollution' was a common euphemism for masturbation, Ernst turned the tables . . . [to suggest] that if anything had perverted and 'polluting' attitudes towards sex, it was the Church."⁴² This inversion is absolutely critical. If, as Denis Hollier proposes, the symbolism of the "stain" in religious terminology "designates the results of the fall, which for mankind is an indelible stain," Ernst, Bataille, and indeed Oppenheim have turned this concept on its head by citing enforced chastity and the rejection of natural corporeal lust and love as the true danger to humanity.⁴³ Dirt thus becomes a powerful declaration, an embrace of sexuality and a defiance of its classification as taboo.⁴⁴ If cleanliness is next to godliness, the surrealists preferred to worship in the church of mud puddles.

³⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36, 161.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 93.

⁴¹ See: Max Ernst, "Danger de pollution," in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 2, (Paris: October 1930); reprinted in *The Autobiography of Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Marcel Jean (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 264-5.

⁴² Mundy, "Letters of Desire," 44.

⁴³ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1989), 94.

⁴⁴ The worn soles also recall the shoes' controversial provenance. The original heels belonged to Marie-Berthe Ernst, Max's wife, and were given to Oppenheim by her lover, further relating the scuffed soles to a relationship outside the normative boundaries of society.

But importantly, despite the “rebellious” dirt, the shoes are tightly bound together, which raises further tensions between freedom and restraint—a recurrent theme throughout Oppenheim’s oeuvre. Depictions of binding and restraint are particularly prominent in her fashion designs: two clasped hands become a belt buckle, and two disembodied girl’s legs drape around the wearer’s neck to form an eerie necklace (1936) (Figures 11, 12). These objects evoke being strangled or squeezed; but simultaneously, the delicate hands and feet are, in their decorative capacity and ease of removability, rendered somewhat less threatening.⁴⁵

In the case of *My Nurse*, it is the binding of the shoes which, in a brilliantly ironic twist that cannot help but invoke admiration at Oppenheim’s cleverness, upholds their irreconcilable, heterogeneous potency. Through Oppenheim’s presentation, two single shoes each lose a part of themselves—to use Bataillian terminology—and become one subversive object, a suggestive symbol of “deviant” sexuality. Indeed, *My Nurse*, in its dirty inversion, invites viewers to join in its tight embrace; in Oppenheim’s own words, “The thing . . . invokes . . . the association of thighs squeezed together in pleasure. In fact, almost a ‘proposition,’” thus compounding the suggestions of the dirty soles with the overall composition of the object.⁴⁶ However, like the inherent indomitability of Magritte’s painting, to literally partake in *My Nurse* would be to eliminate its identity, to undo the compelling spell of re-contextualization, to turn the enigmatic form back into two old dirty shoes. *My Nurse*, protected by the security measures at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and by its status as a priceless art object more generally, evokes in viewers a complicated sexual and culinary appetite than can never be consummated, much as Magritte’s *Portrait* will forever remain staring at us in a defiant challenge. By viewing *My Nurse* in this context, we are left longing to answer this figure’s disturbing, silent siren song, which arouses so many of our base instincts, from hunger to humor to repulsion to desire. But ultimately we must walk away from the object still reckoning with these urges, “wholly other” from the entity before us, with more questions and quandaries aroused than answers.

⁴⁵ In the larger surrealist milieu, bound women imagery particularly recalls Hans Bellmer’s photographs of stringed women, such as the later example *Store in a Cool Dry Place* (1958), which in its title transforms the nude into an edible, perishable commodity.

⁴⁶ Meret Oppenheim, letter to Jean-Christophe Ammann, 8 June 1982; quoted in Jean-Christophe Ammann, “For Meret Oppenheim,” in Curiger, *Defiance in the Face of Freedom*, 116.

DIGESTING THE DISCUSSION: AN INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION

One way of viewing both *The Portrait* and *My Nurse* is through their ultimate presentations of a deliberate, pronounced indistinctness of identification. On one level, this both invests the viewer's eye with a Bataillian role of consumption, while simultaneously, in upholding indistinctness, renders the eye's role inherently incomplete. Moreover, the irresolution of the conflicting arguments and emotions that they raise, merging familiar, disquieting, alluring and repellent, relates them to Bataille's notion of heterogeneity, as discussed throughout this paper. However, if we take this concession to Bataillian theory one step further, we can understand how these two works relate to the surrealists' concept of the "sacred." Both pieces engage with the "foreign and shocking," which are implicit in Bataille's definition of the sacred—but there is another important dimension of his consideration, one that is rooted in Freud.⁴⁷ In his analysis of the concepts of the "sacred" and the "high," Freud emphasizes their etymology, explaining: "In Latin, *altus* means both high and deep; *sacer*, holy and damned."⁴⁸ This conflation of perceived opposites directly informs Bataille's use of the term, in which the more basically instinctual an idea or action is, the more highly revered it becomes, with no apparent pinnacle of either concept. Denis Hollier's explanation of this belief system is critical in understanding its ramifications: if, as he proposes, the high/sacred and low/*bassesse* are each an "*absolute comparison*, a comparative with no referent, a comparative that in and of itself dissolves common measure," then "joining these two transgressions . . . results in dissolving the gap that would guarantee the distinction between high and low."⁴⁹

Ultimately, it is precisely this dissolution of absolutes and, crucially, the maintenance thereof, that is of primary importance to these pieces' functioning. The instinctual reactions we have to these two works are indeed oppositional, but seem to lose their relative qualities of "positive" and "negative" as we find ourselves, through the manipulations of food, in this new realm of perverted familiarity.

⁴⁷ Neil Cox phrases this interest well, stating: "In general, Bataille regards the . . . sacred as moments of extreme awe or disgust, fundamentally linked by the presence of what is absolutely other to the subject." Neil Cox, "Critique of Pure Desire, or When the Surrealists Were Right," in *Desire Unbound*, 265.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Essais de psychanalyse appliquée* (Paris: Gaillimard/Coll. Idées, 1978), 65; quoted in Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 132.

⁴⁹ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 102, 133.

I have tried to make it clear throughout this paper that the larger surrealist goal of undermining rigid societal systems of classification very much informed and inspired the artists in question; both Magritte and Oppenheim, I believe, would support Bataille's statement that "it is high time that human nature cease being subjected to the autocrat's vile repression and to the morality that authorizes exploitation."⁵⁰ But I hope it equally has been demonstrated that it is neither my aim in this paper nor the artists' in their works to propose a unified, cohesive, or decisive solution to Bataille's autocratic enemy, but rather to provide a sampling of the various possible alternatives suggested by food's implementation as a tool in this larger surrealist endeavor. In addition to this macrocosmic project, however, these artists have called for a reassessment of one of the most daily and personal activities by complicating the base act of eating.

Indeed, if we draw upon the Bataillan project of the sacred, we can understand a fundamental point about these artists' rebellion: in disrupting existing boundaries of morality and immorality, vice and virtue, they sought not to redraw such classifications on their own terms, but to uphold the liminal state of destruction and underscore the artificiality of such categories in the first place. According to Lenore Malen, "In a Sadean universe of abolished differences, all things are returned to chaos—to excrement."⁵¹ Or, returning to Bataille himself, "The identical nature . . . of God and excrement, should not shock the intellect of anyone."⁵²

In this light, the counter for what Dalí saw as the "spiritual and symbolic nourishment that Catholicism has offered throughout the centuries for the appeasement of . . . moral and irrational hunger" is not a replacement of the force-fed doctrines of religion by a unified dogma of surrealism, but instead an exaltation of individual choices based on instinctual satisfaction and uninhibited (and often unanswerable) questioning—a combination that seeks to shatter our self-repressive superegos that have formed in response to civilization's mandates.⁵³ And it is, it seems, through such daily corporeal pleasures—very much including the act of eating—that the surrealists believed true change could be enacted.

What these works all demand, therefore, is a Bataillan "participation"—not just by artists, but equally by viewers, who must

⁵⁰ Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F de Sade," 101.

⁵¹ Lenore Malen, "Postscript: An Anal Universe," in *Art Journal* 52:3 (Fall 1993), 79.

⁵² Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," 102n. 1.

⁵³ Dalí, "The Conquest of the Irrational," in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, 263.

grapple with these contradictions without pre-approved schemas of affirmation and condemnation dictated by religion and society.⁵⁴ The Bataillan eye can therefore be equated with the viewer's eye, not just observing but also actively engaging with and challenging that which it consumes. As such, the broader roles of the artist and subject require reevaluation. Freud remarked that the appreciation of art was the epitome of vicarious satisfaction, calling it "an enjoyment which, by the agency of the artist, is made accessible even to those who are not themselves creative."⁵⁵ Yet by returning the ultimate decisions back to the viewer, the surrealist artist becomes not a definitive source of pleasure, but the fodder and nourishment with which to seek it, fueling viewers' determination to pose their own challenges to society in spite, or perhaps because of, their inability to reconcile their own anxieties about spectatorship, ingestion, and consumption. In this reframing, the artist engages with his or her audience in what Carter Ratcliff deems "ceremonies of mutual ingestion."⁵⁶ As Dalí saw it, the surrealists were there for the cannibalistic taking:

One might try and eat the Surrealists too; for we Surrealists are the kind of good-quality, decadent, stimulating, extravagant, and ambivalent food, which . . . proves suitable for the gamey, paradoxical, and succulently truculent state that is proper to, and characteristic of, the climate of ideological and moral confusion in which we have the honor and pleasure to live at this time.⁵⁷

Thus, in consuming these surrealists, we participate in a new kind of communion—one that does not demand the swallowing or assimilation of a regimented set of beliefs, nor does it promise salvation or comfort; rather, in the reverence of a new kind of sacred, it implicates us to chew, digest, swallow, or spit out this otherness according to no one's tastes but our own.

⁵⁴ Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," 101.

⁵⁵ Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," 80-81.

⁵⁶ Carter Ratcliff, "Swallowing Dalí," in *Artforum*, 21:1 (September 1982), 36. Though this statement specifically refers to Dalí and his audience, the extrapolation to the other artists in question seems warranted.

⁵⁷ Dalí, "The Conquest of the Irrational," 264.

ILLUSTRATIONS

(See online version for illustrations)

Figure 1: René Magritte, *The Portrait*, 1935. Oil on canvas. 73.3 x 50.2 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA.

Figure 2: Meret Oppenheim, *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936. Metal, shoes, string, and paper. 14 x 21 x 33 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 3: Hieronymous Bosch, *Allegory of Gluttony and Lust*, 1490. Oil on panel. 36 x 32 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, USA.

Figures 4-5: Salvador Dali and Luis Buñue, stills from *Un chien andalou*, 1929. Film.

Figure 6: René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929. Oil on canvas. 62.2 x 81 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA.

Figure 7: René Magritte, *This is a piece of cheese*, 1936. Oil on canvas board. 10 x 16 cm, in gilded wooden frame; glass dome and pedestal, height 31 cm, diameter 25 cm. Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA.

Figure 8: Meret Oppenheim, *Votive Picture (Strangling Angel)*, 1931. India ink and watercolor. 34 x 17.5 cm. Galerie Renée Ziegler, Zürich, Switzerland.

Figure 9: Meret Oppenheim, *A Boy with Wings Sucks on the Udder-shaped Breast of a Woman*, 1933. India ink. 21 x 27 cm. Kunstmuseum, Berne, Switzerland.

Figure 10: Meret Oppenheim, *He Rocks his Wife*, 1938. Oil on cardboard. 7 x 14.5 cm. Private collection, Paris, France.

Figure 11: Meret Oppenheim, sketch for a belt, n.d. Ink and gouache on paper. 8.4 x 14.9 cm. Location unknown.

Figure 12: Meret Oppenheim, design for necklace, 1936. Pencil, ink, and watercolor. 16 x 13 cm. Birgit and Burkhard Wenger, Basel, Switzerland.