

Vegitopia: On Jonathan Trayte's Sculptural Work

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Some time in the 1980s, British enthusiasts began harvesting very large vegetables. They produced massive radishes, carrots, onions and marrows and took them to competition shows across the land. Why did this strange culture emerge at this particular time? My own (admittedly highly speculative) guess is that it was a confluence of two main influences: Thatcherism and the crisis of male identity in the post-industrial west. Sounds absurd? Perhaps, but competitive gardening certainly lends itself to the individualistic, neoliberal, social Darwinism of 1980s Britain. Modern gardening is an atomised affair, relying on a raft of technical innovations: advanced polytunnels (called 'hoop houses' in the US), heating and watering systems, armatures to support plants, and the intricate production of specialist crossbreds and mutants. Of course, many in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s deployed these technologies, with new communes growing crops as a form of resistance to the capitalist system. But under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, these micro-technologies morphed perversely in tune with the ideology of home ownership and competitiveness, becoming its unlikely mirror. Gardens were suddenly the sites for a hyper-production akin to the overheated financial markets.

Secondly, and this is perhaps even more speculative, there are the effects of post-industrialism on the brittle male ego. In the 1980s, mass unemployment in Britain reached record heights (almost 3.5 million in 1982/3), with dockers, miners and other labourers losing jobs in droves. For those men with jobs, there was the threat of the empowered female – the second sex was suddenly the boss, and 'normal' sexist workplace language became shockingly contentious. Men were on the back-foot, and they found solace in their sheds, gardens and allotments. Male virility was expressed in the unlikeliest of forms: tubers, bulbs, legumes and gourds. There is, indeed, a near-unavoidable sexual connotation to this tumescent abandon: most growers of vegetative colossi are, after all, men. In the USA, where it probably all began, the veg and fruit have names that sound like inventive sex toys: the Japanese Imperial Long Carrot, the Mammoth Zeppelin Cucumber and the Atlantic Giant Pumpkin. And, of course, in competition, size and weight is everything because only the heftiest vegetables win (growers in the US hope to produce a 1-ton pumpkin soon) (Borel, 2011). So, despite the demanding husbandry that each plant needs, it is ultimately a swaggering, posturing endeavour.

Jonathan Trayte is interested in what food *means*, where it comes from, the social relations it engenders and the aesthetics it produces. Above all, his sculptures have a fantastical, celebratory quality: they are pleasurable, strange and comical. Trayte has cast oversized vegetables in bronze and painted them lurid high-gloss pink, white or yellow (amongst other hues). He also casts items such as cucumbers and giant pumpkins in concrete and leaves them unpainted – they look ashen, like corpses (Trayte usually makes food appear thoroughly inedible). The bronze works usually look colourful and glossy, like overly waxed oranges in a supermarket; they deliberately engage with the regime of spectacular consumption and food's new ersatz urbanity. One thinks here of the *fin de siècle* decadence explored by J. K. Huysmans in *Against Nature* (1884) or the role of the *flâneur* explored by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project*. But Trayte's works are also firmly anchored in the real world. The process of casting lends the sculptural objects a one-to-one relation to

the original fruit or vegetable. It is an *indexical* technology, in the sense described by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914): unlike the iconographic or symbolic, the indexical has a direct link with its object. Trayte's sculptures are in this sense a kind of imprinted testimony to the original. They tell us: yes, vegetables of this size and proportion really do exist.

Trayte is particularly interested in the production and supply of food to the populous: the age-old problem of feeding the masses. He has visited several factories and observed with fascination how processed meat is produced (a complex, mesmerising procedure); he has watched more documentaries about food production than I could possibly mention, although the wonderful *Unser täglich Brot* (Our Daily Bread, 2005) by Nikolaus Geyrhalter is essential watching. Thought of in purely demographic terms, food must be mass-produced. But in an age of catastrophic climate change, it is not the processing of foodstuffs that is the problem: it is growing enough food in the first place. For example, Trayte draws my attention to an interview with James Lovelock, in which the veteran British environmentalist predicts that the world's population will decline catastrophically by 80 per cent by the year 2100 (Aitkenhead, 2008). If we don't simply wish to resign to this fate, we may wish to develop better, hardier and more productive plant stocks. Trayte points out that this is a process that has in fact been ongoing for millennia, from the enlargement of corn stock by selection and cross-fertilisation in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica to the current batch of GM products from pest-resistant papaya in Hawaii to oversized raisins in Japan. Biotechnology is now an established norm, and in the USA over 85 per cent of corn is genetically modified (NASS, 2010).

A second major concern explored in Trayte's sculptural practice is the social aspect of food. Every culture and people has a food that they savour and identify with. Food is a kind of communication, and it gives cities, towns and villages their synaesthetic flavour. Markets are visually cluttered, noisy, smelly – and full of a life. Trayte has spent time in Istanbul, getting to know its markets and street food. In his exhibition *PAZAR*, Trayte is making 'a portrait of Istanbul'. On his computer, Trayte has a wonderful collection of images of market stalls in Istanbul that form a kind of visual diary or sketchbook for this 'portrait': towering stacks of produce that seem larger and healthier than those we see in Northern Europe; fruit that has been arranged in baskets in bright palettes of yellows, greens and reds; stacks of grapes, olives, nuts and spices that seem almost unbearably exotic to British eyes. Many of Trayte's recent sculptures also examine the display units used in markets: he has re-created stacks of cardboard boxes in steel and made a display unit out of tubular yellow metal (all works in progress) that looks robust enough to withstand a life on the street. In Istanbul he is also casting items found in the bazaars – creating elements of what I would call an *indexical portrait* of the place.

Of course, Trayte's engagement with food is nothing new in itself (what *is* new?). Art has long fed the eyes, encoding foodstuff as symbols of status, desire, power or communality. In sixteenth-century Delft, fecund tables bowed under the weight of ham-hocks and glistening pom-poms of grapes. A century later, portly English squires commissioned portraits of their prize cows, pigs and sheep. Gauguin's arcadia was sexier: bare-breasted Tahitian girls suggestively offering us, the viewer, slabs of gooey watermelon. Art about food can be voyeuristic (look, don't touch); as Gauguin's work suggest, it can also be imperialist (Tahiti is *still* a French colony).

The correlation is no accident. French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote three books on the history of sexuality, each of which explore how power and control are manifest in the discursive formation of sexuality; they are essential reading for an understanding of how desire both articulates and resists control (Foucault, 1998b, 1998a, 1990). Certainly, not all representations of food are sexualised or coercive: Claes Oldenburg's abjection kicked against the rampaging industrial food process as much as celebrated it. More recently, under the banner of relational aesthetics, Rirkrit Tiravanija serves up noodles to gallery-goers, generating a sense of conviviality that, until the mid-1990s, was a surprisingly rare thing in the museum space. Much of our contemporary concern with colossal foodstuffs, however, was first expressed in literature and folklore rather than visual art. Western obsessions with giant vegetables appear to be relatively modern, coinciding with the emergent agrarian revolution – for example, the English folk tale 'Jack and the Giant Beanstalk' first appeared in the eighteenth century and was popularised in the nineteenth century, beginning a whole line of children's stories about small children having adventures with edible plants (*James and the Giant Peach*, etc). This was, after all, the period in which Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834), in his 'An Essay on the Principle of Population' (1798), was forecasting that the global population was unsustainable (Lovelock's predictions of doom are very Malthusian). In an age of rationalism, the logical step is to grow more and larger crops, which before the age of genetic engineering was accomplished by careful crossbreeding. Part of Malthus's insight, however, was that there was a natural limit to the size that a plant or animal might be bred and that the Earth could sustainably produce. This didn't necessarily stop fantasies of such improvements however: in the nineteenth century, potential English migrants were encouraged to settle in New Zealand with the promise that the country grew 'giant vegetables' and had 'immense banana orchards' (Brendon, 2010). The latter example is just one in a long list of tales of bounteous food supplies and fertile lands discovered in newly conquered territories. For example, Hernán Cortés (1485–1587) reported back from Aztec Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City) noting that king Moctezuma II was fed every conceivable type of food by a retinue of 'six hundred chefs and principal persons' (Candau, 1994, p.66). In *Mason and Dixon* (1997), Thomas Pynchon satirises this colonialist cornucopia myth. The novel centres on the historical figures Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, English surveyors who in 1763 were charged with marking the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland (their names now denote the line that symbolically separates the northern from the southern States). Entwining fictive speculation with socio-historic critique, Pynchon's narrator, Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke, recounts how he spent time with the surveyors, listing to locals tell tales of 'fertile lands, savage Women, giant Vegetables, forests without end, Marshlands seething with shell-fish, Buffalo-Herds the size of Paris.' (Pynchon, 2004, p.335). The hero eventually ventures into such a terrain, finding a beetroot large enough to walk into:

'The Beet is of a Circumference requiring more than one Entry-way. All who pass much time going in and out, whether for reasons of Residence, or Investigation, or indeed Nutrition, eventually acquire a deep red-indigo Stain that nothing can wash away' (ibid, p.579)

Jonathan Trayte's sculptures similarly explore the way we inhabit food and are marked by it. The potency of his work reflects the urgent need to produce enough to sustain a growing global population, as well as the desire for a food culture that might

produce pleasure, encourage a spirit of communality, imagination and fantasy. *Pazar* is the Turkish word ‘bazaar’, and Trayte’s exhibition is intended to act as a fantastical marketplace. It should be walked around as if one were in on the street: gaze and enjoy synaesthetically (taste with your eyes); imagine the loam in which such succulent foods might have been nurtured; examine the surfaces – the endless layers of sprayed paint that Trayte has carefully applied, or the naked *brut* concrete. Trayte’s work provides the space and means for appreciation, speculating and contemplation on the meaning of food today and in the near future.

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