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INTRODUCTION

Amuse-Bouche

*'Tis still man with whom we have to do,
of whom the condition is wonderfully corporal.*

— Michel de Montaigne,

“On the Art of Discussion,” 1585–1588¹

That a person might eat an image — welcoming it inside their body, and sending it, in solid or liquid form, from mouth to stomach, lodging it in the secret recesses of their guts, making themselves, in a word, an *iconophage*² — what a very strange idea! And yet, there was a time when icons, frescoes, sculptures, devotional engravings, stamped eucharistic hosts, waffle cookies, marzipan figures, and sculpted dishes were not simply looked at but also ingested. There was once a time when figured artifacts, from the crudest to the most highly wrought, were drunk, chewed up, and devoured. Now, who remembers this time? Who understands it? Surely, very few people do. Because, as we must admit, this singular use of images is in large part foreign to us today. Even though we continue to eat biscuits, lollipops, or other figured candies, even though we still decorate our birthday cakes with portraits and stereotypical representations, the long process of rationalization that forms our heritage — the process that has brought about a deep division between body and mind just as it has induced a growing specification of the abilities assigned to our various sense organs — has triumphed over the beliefs, commands, and dreams that justified, in times past,

such physical dealings with images.³ To physically consume a representation, especially an inedible representation like a painting, a sculpture, or an engraving is surely something that, quite literally, defies reason.

If we want to get a sense of this, we have only to look to the products of the contemporary imagination. Consider, for example, how the madness of Francis Dolarhyde, one of the main characters in the movie *Red Dragon* (2002), is depicted on screen by the director Brett Ratner in his adaptation of Thomas Harris's novel.⁴ It is by eating a masterpiece of Western art history that the serial killer, played by Ralph Fiennes, reveals to the viewer the full extent of his madness (fig. I.1). In the drawing section of the Brooklyn Museum, Dolarhyde regards with disturbing fascination a William Blake watercolor, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Sun* (1805). He moves toward it, leans in, and then suddenly knocks unconscious the curator standing beside him, and finally he starts to devour the work of art he has just frantically seized.⁵ What should have been held at a distance, simply contemplated, is torn up, swallowed, destroyed. This wild ingesting of an image, along with the loud gasps and contorted facial expressions accompanying the act of manducation, transforms Dolarhyde into an animal, a being devoid of *ratio intellectualis*, the faculty that in ordinary times would enable him to distinguish the edible from the inedible, to see the difference between good and bad uses of the sense organs, and whose absence here delivers him over completely to the supreme domination of an oral drive.⁶

We are very much here, of course, in the fictional register of cinematographic fable, and perhaps more exactly that of mass entertainment. This might explain the extreme character of the iconoclastic act that we are given to see. But we would be wrong, I think, to see in this only a piece of sensationalism, a screenwriter's eccentricity, something that reflects no presuppositions about our normal relations with images. In fact, popular culture is not alone in having made *iconophagy* into an exemplary transgressive

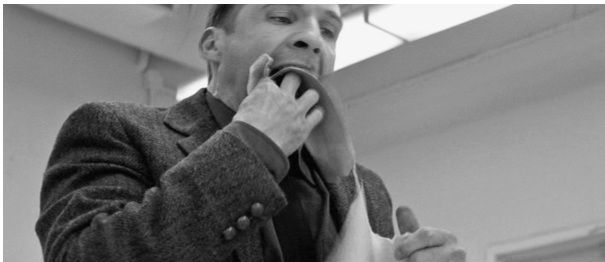


Figure I.1. Brett Ratner, *Red Dragon* (2002),
35 mm film, 5 screenshots, MGM.



Figure 1.2. Jasper Johns, *Painting Bitten by a Man*, 1961, encaustic on canvas mounted on type plate, 9.5×6.9 in. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Jasper Johns in memory of Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, 1989–2001 (© 2023 Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society, NY).

act. Although aimed at the entirely different public of the artistic avant-garde, Jasper Johns adopts the very same approach in order to overturn the primacy of the visual relation to art objects. In *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961; fig. I.2), a monochrome in encaustic on canvas bearing the trace of a deep bite, Johns effectively suggests that a painting might awaken in the viewer a desire to ingest rather than a wise and considered need for contemplation.⁷ While with *The Critic Sees* (1961), a piece in sculp-metal on plaster with glass that depicts a pair of glasses behind which there are not eyes but mouths with bared teeth, he stigmatizes the blindness and voracity of the critics.⁸ In each of these two cases, *devouring* becomes the archetype of a disturbing and aberrant relationship with artifacts, and at the same time, it is the operator of a change in our perspective on art.⁹

Faced with the outrageousness of this approach, that is, consuming something not intended to be eaten and feeding oneself on art, it is easy to accept that ingesting such inedible images might have been banished to the rank of oddities and that no one would have bothered to explain it or write down its history. But what about images specifically made to be eaten? Have they posed fewer problems? Have people been more at ease with figured cakes, anthropomorphic gingerbreads, and sculpted dishes? Have people paid more attention to these? In truth, these items have not received much more attention. Even though certain culinary traditions are today well-identified (I am thinking of figured biscuits like the *minne de Sant'Agata* in Sicily, the marzipan Santa Claus of the Germanic world, and the gingerbread men of the English world, all of which are still eaten today), and even though modern artists and their works such as Piero Manzoni's *Uova* (1960), Dennis Oppenheim's *Gingerbread Man* (1970), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932), Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne's *Cannibal Feast* (1970), and John Cage's series *Wild Edible Drawings* (1990) have brought back within our artistic horizon this oral relationship with visual objects, the ingestion of edible images attracts the historians' antennae no more than does the ingestion of inedible images.

The reasons are easy enough to see. On the one hand, an image that can be physiologically assimilated seems destined for no great fate, at best a paltry one, and on the other, the approach involving eating a figured representation appears to modern eyes as an act that is futile and infantile, betraying a regression in the scale of our relationship with things from the spiritual to the basely material. This way of being with images, therefore, is struck with a double indignity.

Should we therefore strike a line through all these practices? Should we forget the unusual occurrences, the stakes involved, the reasons behind them? Should we give up on doing their archaeology? No, of course not. But how are we to confront this obliteration, this hole in history? How can we stitch together the narrative of what, with very few exceptions, has been taken to be the most negligible, cursed perhaps, share of our culture?¹⁰

Confronting this difficulty will require, first of all, that we make a few methodological choices: we must hold in suspense the already traced lines of a triumphant art history, the one of big names and big artistic aims, and we must instead take an interest in objects that are forgotten today, focusing on types of sensory relations that are often neglected. Secondly, we must appeal to other fields of knowledge, such as historical anthropology, material history, the history of sensations, medical history, philosophy, and semiology so as to remove the epistemological bolts keeping works of art, and images more generally, within the register of the optical. And thirdly, we must return to a few simple questions: How are images configured? What are the technical procedures and the materials involved? What is the nature of the iconographic repertoire of the images in question? How does one go about ingesting an image? Who are the people who form part of the relational network established by ingestion? What social functions can we assign to this “paradoxical” experience? What place must be accorded to the senses in the perception of images and in the emergence of aesthetic relations? These are so many guiding questions that will allow us

to understand these various behaviors and to refresh our knowledge of images, their status, their uses, and their relations to the human body.

Eating an image is all well and good, but what image? A few specifications are called for here. The meaning of the term “image” that I adopt in these pages connects the meaning that prevails in the fields of philosophy, theology, and semiotics—the image as representation, archetype, and sign¹¹—with the meaning that attaches to it in anthropology, that is, the image as a configured object that plays the role of a social *operator*.¹² In carrying through this connection, I adopt in particular the definition proposed by the anthropologist Philippe Descola. An image is any

material object invested in an ostensible way with a socially defined “agency” following an act of fashioning, arranging, ornamentation, and situational setting aiming to give it the potential to iconically evoke a real or imaginary prototype that it denotes in an indicial manner (through delegation of intentionality) by playing upon a direct mimetic resemblance or on any other type of motivation identifiable in a mediated or unmediated manner.¹³

My assumption throughout this study is that the *equiformity*, to take a term from Jean Wirth, of the image will not depend solely upon figurative similarity, but also on a “structural conformity” between the image and its model.¹⁴ I speak, moreover, of images in the context of coats of arms, and I even extend the meaning of the term to attend to an abstract artifact, if the latter demonstrates self-reflexive qualities that make it, like an image to the second degree, a *representation* of its own genre. Hence Cage’s *Wild Edible Drawings* (fig. I.3) are, as I see them, images of abstract art to the extent that they are not just abstract compositions or, yet, artifacts made of edible ingredients, but objects that, through the materials put to work in them, appear *like* abstract drawings.

The present study, in terms of its place in the general history of images in its ways of conceiving, perceiving, and analyzing them

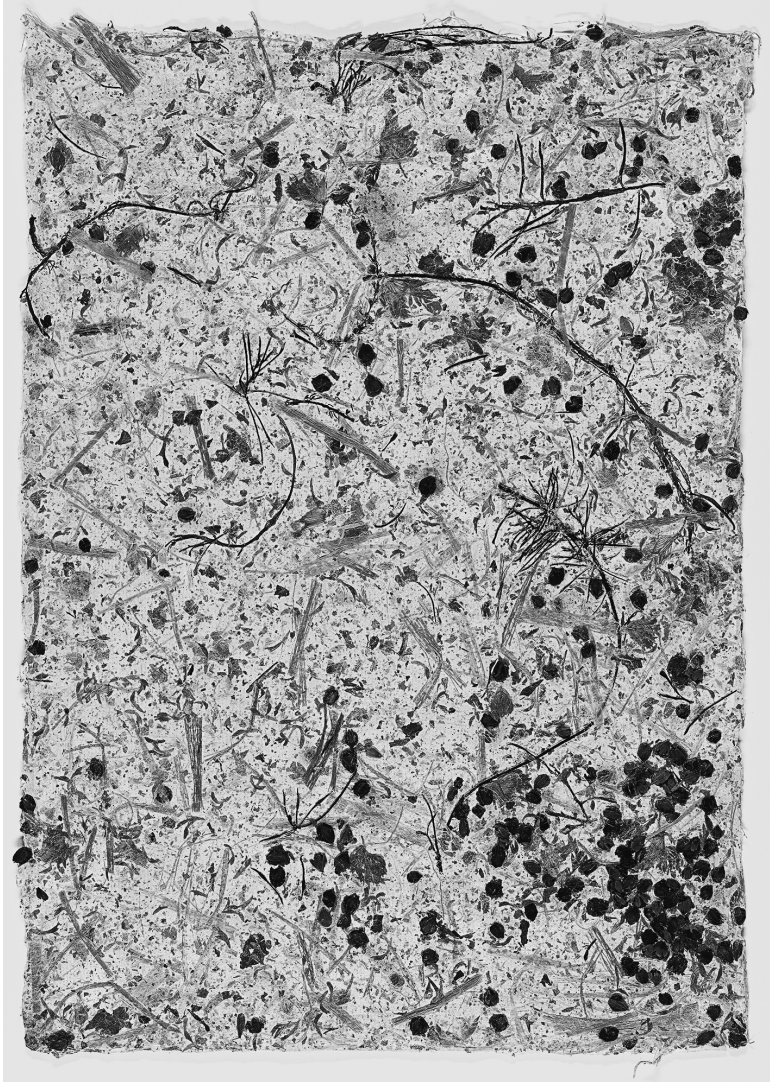


Figure 1.3. John Cage, *Wild Edible Drawing* #6, 1990. Handmade paper of mulberry, burdock, hibiscus stems, barley, hijiki, and clover. 17 × 12 in. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky (© 2023 John Cage Trust).

and writing their history, follows upon the debate carried on for some forty years now by Hans Belting, Gottfried Boehm, Horst Bredekamp, Hubert Damisch, Georges Didi-Huberman, James Elkins, Alfred Gell, W. J. T. Mitchell, and, once again, Wirth.¹⁵ And I would like to express the hope that this work might bring, along with others, a few additions and perhaps a few nuances to an exclusively visual approach to images. I do not believe, in fact, that it is possible to limit the image solely to the *iconic difference*, as Gottfried Boehm does in his essay “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder.”¹⁶ Although Boehm’s analysis is of crucial importance for understanding some of the most basic aspects of the image, in particular its status as “visual evidence,” it is not sufficient to account for the polysensory complexity of images and the experiences that can be had with them. Wirth has it right, I think, when he notes, “Images, even those that today we are compelled to put into the category of the visual, are not made *just* to be seen.”¹⁷ I would add that any analysis that makes the image’s existence *qua* image depend solely upon the optical relation inevitably misses many characteristics relating to the materiality of the object or medium thanks to which the image makes itself perceptible, and consequently it misses other important stakes involved with these two aspects.¹⁸ History, phenomenology, and anthropology teach us that other senses, such as the sense of taste or of touch, can be engaged in the perception of an image.¹⁹ In order to give rightful place to these other sensory relations, I shall not hesitate, following Jean-Claude Bonne, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and Jérôme Baschet, to use the concept of the *image-object*. This is a notion that, by recognizing the role of the imaging substance and the image’s site or location, allows for a more complex understanding of the image’s reality.²⁰

As we shall discover, people have eaten or imbibed images since ancient times, in widely varied forms, in numerous regions of the world, on very particular occasions, such as times of worship, ceremony, or feasting, and at more simple, everyday events. They have

done this with different and sometimes radically opposing views of the world. The question arises, therefore, as to whether the objects and attitudes that this study deals with can have any sort of unity. How is it possible to encompass so many differing artifacts, behaviors, and discourses? To manage this heterogeneity, it is not enough to do what I did just previously, which was to make a blanket distinction between inedible images (e.g., icons, frescoes, sculptures, and devotional engravings) and edible ones (e.g., eucharistic hosts, waffle-cookies or *cialde*, marzipan figurines, sculpted dishes, breads decorated with images, and so forth). A simple classification such as this does not give us the tools to specify the functions assigned to these various manifestations: edible images, for example, are sometimes consumed for the same reasons as inedible ones; or an engraving and a wafer representing one and the same saint can both be swallowed to cure a sickness. In order to overcome this aporia, it will be necessary to add to this overly simple typological distinction, that is, edible or inedible, a functionalist system of classification based on criteria that are essentially more anthropological, and doing this allows us to understand this very particular experience with images by shifting the center of the analysis away from the object as such and towards the relation connecting, on the one hand, the artifact with its consumer (internal relation), and on the other, the consumer with the collective (external relation). Beyond the dichotomy of the edible/inedible, we should, in fact, distinguish between two functions at work in ingestion. The first of these, linked to the care of body and soul, has a healing or protective purpose. Essentially vertical, this function establishes a relationship between the consumer and the power or *virtus* of a prototype that is represented by the image. I shall call this first form of image ingestion *constituting ingestion*, with the dual meaning, physiological and ethical, of the term. The second function, generally regulated by ritual (although rituals can include ingestion with a constituting purpose) and ceremony or meals, is essentially horizontal and its main goal is to accept and recognize the consumer as part of a

specific community.²¹ I shall call this second category *instituting ingestion*, referring to the meaning that Bourdieu gives the term in his 1982 essay “Rites as Acts of Institution.” Ingestion is here a way of granting the consumer a social place or position, entailing a certain “duty-to-be” and a specific relationship to others.²²

On one side of this distinction, the image appears as a vehicle for establishing a continuity (which is magical through configuration, real through imprint, conventional through representation) with the prototype that it makes present, in such a way that the consumer can claim to capture its power and obtain its benefits by ingestion; on the other side, the image is an operator allowing the one who makes use of it to model and define his or her identity in relation to the other participants in the same ritual. Of course, these two poles are not divided by an impermeable barrier, and certain of the images that we shall study, such as the stamped eucharistic hosts, are able to fulfill both functions. To avoid there being too much rigidity in this division, we shall therefore speak of relations that are *primarily* constituting or *primarily* instituting.

In adopting this system of classification, I look at the phenomenon through a functionalist lens. However, employing this approach still only partially completes the investigation. To go even deeper into the ingestion experience, we must take account of the practical ways in which this type of use of images have been carried out.²³ In other words, we must look at the “how” and not just the “what,” and perhaps more precisely, we must examine the procedures that establish or realize a relationship rather than the imperatives that might call for such procedures to be done in this or that fashion. Fortunately, we do have available to us texts, visual accounts, and, in more recent times, ethnographic material that supply us with a basis from which we can isolate certain procedures, gestures, and feelings.²⁴ Indeed, it is through this examination of a lived experience or a “modality of being” — and not through setting out a flat relationship between cold intellectual terms — that we are really able to understand the relational dynamics that interest us here.²⁵

Because it is not simply a question of looking at how the act of ingestion changes the one who ingests, that is, person A becoming person A₁ by virtue of an event marking a change in time (Arnold Van Gennep),²⁶ nor of simply considering what it institutes, that is, the places it assigns and the social configuration it establishes (Pierre Bourdieu); it is, rather, in addition to these things, to investigate the inner experience of the change. In other words, we must examine the ways that ingestion involves bodies that are not only constrained and regulated but also *lived*. As Tim Ingold writes, “Life will not be contained, but rather threads its way through the world along the myriad lines of its relations.”²⁷ Consequently, we cannot ignore the ontogenies, narratives, depictions, and other configurations of the imagination that report on this other way of being with images.²⁸ The main task is to identify what it is in these accounts that belongs to the foundation of this way of being with images as a social practice, and what, on the other hand, falls outside of the social frame, representing a random or utterly unique event. To the structural approach favored in the study of social relations, therefore, I shall add a modal approach, allowing thus for an accounting not only of the various customs that I shall identify, but also of the various ways of ingesting images seen not so much through the lens of technique or procedure, but rather in formal terms.²⁹ History, art history, and anthropology therefore move forward together in a dialectical relationship.

Finally, I would like to stress one point. The two forms of ingestion, constituting and instituting, that I have so far distinguished one from another will only have meaning if we keep in mind their strict relation to the image. It is the eaten-image, always as a sequential syntagm, that is the operator through which a physical, psychological, and social transformation takes place. Consequently, this is not the history of an aberrant form of consumption. Rather, it is the history of a conjunction, a knotting of an act (ingestion) and an object (the image) that transforms the very nature of the representation. The ingested image is not just the instantiation of a

real or imaginary archetype. It is an *operator*, acting and producing very specific effects that are distinct from other modes of experience such as vision, hearing, smell, and touch.

The origin of ingesting images lies, no doubt, in the unreachable regions of the far-distant past. There is nothing to indicate that this very specific use of images emerged alongside writing, when it would first have been possible to preserve it in memory.³⁰ I am inclined to think even that people have consumed images in one way or another since their first appearance, at a time when no written traces existed. Still, although the beginnings of this history are destined to remain obscure, we must begin somewhere — but where and when to begin?

Since my aim is to cover, as much as possible, the entirety of the phenomenon, I have not limited my investigation to a single area. It has been the sources available to me that have, so to speak, established the geographical perimeter of this narrative. The geographical areas will change, therefore, in accordance with the periods of history under consideration. Up to the modern area, I look primarily at the European and Mediterranean region, extending my study after the twentieth century to any region subject to the “naturalist” paradigm.³¹

In terms of chronology, the reader will not find a smooth and regular progression through time. I do not intend to retrace the history of ingesting images from its origins up to its most recent developments, and this is for one simple reason: there cannot possibly be an evolution of the phenomenon in the Darwinian sense of the term.³² This history, therefore, will have no beginning and no end. It will be synchronic and polyrhythmic. If it happens that certain sequences do follow upon one another chronologically, the reader should not assign these concatenations any sort of teleological value.

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