

Review Essay

Note Critique

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Review of

Diane Leclair Bisson. 2009. *Comestible/Edible: L'aliment comme matériau/Food as material*. Outremont, Québec : Éditions du Passage.

Pp. 120, illustrations, soft cover, ISBN 9782922892406, 24,95 \$.

A French-flapped paperback with a circular hole drilled through its forehead. On the cover, two languages and a dusty, shallow-focus photo of a crumbly, purple-hued substance (Fig. 1). Inside, minimal text and thirty-two images of industrial (*artisanal*?) material swatches annotated with colours (i.e., Pantone number), pigments (anthocyanins, carotenoids, polyphenols), shaping techniques (heating, casting, drying), ingredients (purées, powders, oils, juices) and textures (flexible, rigid, gelatinous). In the final pages, an intriguing but unappetizing recipe for *Scoop: carob cracker* and a bibliography of food pigments.

This is a book.

The English subtitle of Diane Leclair Bisson's new bilingual publication, *Comestible/Edible*, is "Food as material." On first consideration, the subtitle is strikingly banal, a minor modification to an equally underwhelming title. Isn't food, somewhat by definition, both edible and material? The rest of the cover's cues, however, start to reveal the innovative nature of this book, and what it actually represents begins to emerge. The French title, and its use of *comestible* and *matériau*, layers in the notions of food as non-eatable, not as mere ingredient, but as substance, as construction matter. The curious thirteen-millimeter bore, piercing the front and back covers and the 120 pages between, raises more questions: marketing angle? editorial metaphor? third eye? The arty cover photo is presumably food,



Fig. 1
Cover design by Bob Beck.

but it hardly appears edible. Even before cracking the book's spine, a fundamental interrogation of what food is has taken place, and once inside the covers, the exploration continues. This is book as documentation of designed objects. This is book as object. This is book as component of an ongoing process-object project about design, food, materiality and about the interactions with food that produce emotions, ideas and externalities. Like its

outer surface, *Comestible/Edible* is the tip of an engaging and profound iceberg of issues.

Published in 2009, *Comestible/Edible* makes manifest the most recent evolution of Bisson's almost ten-year-old Edible Project,¹ an exploration of food-based serving containers. Triggered by the sight of a mountain of discarded disposable plates at her son's daycare, the Université de Montréal professor began to consider the potential environmental impact of producing dishes that can be eaten. Work with the Montreal-based bakery chain *La Première Moisson*, as well as a 2003 commission for the Toronto Design Exchange laid the foundation; in 2008, support from the Quebec Fund for Research on Society and Culture enabled a period of more intensive design investigation, largely in collaboration with the Center for Expertise and Research at the *Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec*.

Pigments, Colours

Comestible/Edible was launched in mid-December, 2009, in conjunction with an exhibition of images from the book, at Commissaires, an avant-garde design gallery and shop in Montreal's urban-hip Mile End neighbourhood. The gallery, like Bisson's larger project, represents the intersection of several worlds. (The emailed launch announcement arrived in my inbox from no fewer than four colleagues, teachers and students, variously beckoning

Fig. 2
Photo courtesy of Bob Beck.



from overlapping spheres of food, design and communications.)

In the close quarters of the gallery, attendees munched on finger food from large ceramic platters and drank mid-range wine from plain stemmed glasses. No edible scoops of carob and wheat flour were to be found. A large, freestanding point-of-purchase display presented dozens of copies of the book, each hanging by its hole from one of a matrix of upward-canted dowels.

Like the book, the photos on display raised tantalizing questions. A series of four large-scale, wall-mounted light boxes presented eight vertical, rectangular images each. They varied in texture and translucency, and were arranged by colour, beginning with off-white and progressing through the spectrum to earthy gray and near-black. As the crowd ebbed and pulsed, slices of emerald and tangerine and umber shone through gaps between bodies: brilliant, snackable, moody enigmas. Reflecting the book design itself, the rough-edged images had a perfectly circular hole centrally “drilled” (actually Photoshopped) through its upper eighth. Gallery information cards posted below each light box indicated ingredients, colour, technique. As dishes or utensils, the shapes appeared ill designed, with no indication of function. Though some forms presented a kind of nascent three-dimensionality, explicit handles, spouts, lips or flanges were largely absent. In the room, little other didactic material informed the experience, and the majority of attendees engaged less with the art and more in standard vernissage social intercourse (Fig. 2). The illuminated wafers were nonetheless intensely seductive. Food and yet not food; tactile and distant; disquieting and enthralling.

Techniques, Ingredients

A meticulously art-directed print object, *Comestible/Edible* features the same photos from the Commissaires exhibition and substantially more explanation. The book is in fact a designer's portfolio, a record of what has clearly been a well-researched and extensive investigation. Bisson explains her process—the origins and evolution of the project, her motivation in developing edible dishware and implements, the production methods employed—and then presents thirty-two finished pieces, lovingly photographed, alongside production notes for each (Fig. 3).

Though scant, the text answers the questions



Fig. 3
Spread design by Bob Beck. Photo; Pol Baril.

raised by the book's cover and the ambiguity of the exhibition photos. At the same time, new questions surface about the implications of the designer's work.

Bisson's central point is that, as changing consumption habits—including overconsumption—increase the number of disposable food containers going into the waste system, more sustainable materials are needed to make packaging, serving and eating implements. She argues that food be used as this substance in that it is renewable and ultimately edible matter in its own right, or at least highly biodegradable. The book, then, is not about showing finished cutlery and bowls and plates and bottles, but about presenting a collection of swatches or chips—a manufacturer's material chart. It is Bisson's offering to other designers, and to herself, for the development of future applications.

In the opening pages headlined "Towards Applied Gastronomy," Bisson states that the project is also intended to promote a new understanding around practice and education in food and industrial design, implying how the field might satisfy emerging needs. She points to developments in molecular gastronomy and culinary design as indicators of change in the food world, and calls for further breaking of boundaries and adoption of transversal knowledge.

Textures

Comestible/Edible extends challenges across a number of disciplines. Sustainability, a rapidly blurring buzzword in environmental discussions, is a central driver of the work that led to the Edible Project. Bisson contends that making dishes out of food is more sustainable than using finite fossil-fuel reserves to generate landfill-bound Styrofoam. While certainly more digestible than plastic (by one ecosystem or another), food as *matériau* raises the same debate as the issue of diverting corn into bio-fuel production. What dangers lie in building a second commoditization of food as we grow forks and chopsticks in our fields? Whose daily bread will we make cataclysmically unaffordable by turning the grains it is made from into edible cups and saucers?

In the realm of material culture, the impermanency of a consumable dish demands attention to temporality in the objects we create. Does eating a fork result in a loss, or merely a transformation of its materiality? How permanent is our culture, and how important is it that formal traces be left behind? Bisson squarely points out that design is about relationships between humans and objects, and that it is necessary not only to create the opportunities for such interactions to emerge, but also to create an awareness of how design places us in a thinking and questioning space within the system of our lives. In her words, design "influences how we feel, by affecting the emotional and polysensorial dimensions of our material world" (24). Design not only makes the things, it sets users into a dynamic

with them.

Within the culinary framework, Bisson has elided several historical examples of edible containers that might have brought useful insight into eventual applications of her work. The trencher of medieval times was a slab of dry bread used as an edible plate, from which a diner would eat his or her meat. Once the meat was finished, the trencher—now soaked with juices—might be eaten or given to the poor. Contemporary versions of the trencher include dip- or soup-filled bread bowls, for both group and individual consumption. While the social implications of food-based dishware may be argued from both the positive and negative, the nutritional concerns about eating a whole loaf of bread after consuming the soup inside are more objective: the calorie-bomb versions at such chains as Au Bon Pain and Panera carry up to 620 calories each, in bread alone.² And if the bowl goes uneaten (perhaps wisely), then other questions of waste arise. Intriguingly, history also presents various *non*-edible food-based containers: the unyielding pastry shell of early meat pies and the confectioner's-paste architecture of Renaissance-era *pièces montées*. Such precedents, however, and more importantly the reasons they have both come and gone, are missing here. Ultimately, if we are going to shift to more environmentally friendly edible dishware, parallel shifts will be required to alter culinary models and consumption habits, along with cost-to-value expectations of food thus served and eaten. While the book explicitly presents the samples as proto-material, probing the historical context and future implications might better demonstrate how, and if, they offer substance for innovation.

It is perhaps Bisson's interpretation of "applied gastronomy," however, that bears most attention. Originally derived from the Greek *gastros* (the stomach) and *nomos* (the word, the law), gastronomy was first construed to mean *the rules of the stomach*, and in the early 19th century acquired

implicit overtones of taste and refinement thanks to such writers as Grimod de la Reynière³ and Brillat-Savarin⁴. Today, academics, marketers, and activists disagree about one single meaning, although the breadth of the term has expanded to include such elements as "the political economy of food; the treatment of foods, their storage and transport and processing; their preparation and cooking; meals and manners; the chemistry of food, digestion, and the physiological effects of food; food choices and customs and traditions" (Santich 1996: 2). Indeed, if the rules of the stomach are influenced by all that has happened since "gastronomy" first appeared in print, then industrial, agricultural and informational revolutions must be considered. The notion of *applied gastronomy* therefore calls for greater consideration of the interplay between economic, social, environmental and cultural spheres, as well as the systemic impacts that works like *Comestible/Edible* may eventually bring about.

Ceci n'est past un livre

In her acknowledgements, Bisson thanks an impressive list of collaborators, including numerous colleagues, partners and students. Together with this team she produced an initial set of samples that appear clear-cut and categorizable, a book that is anything but, and a challenge to her peers that is even less so. Design and gastronomy, like other transdisciplinary fields, are in the process of redefining and framing themselves, shifting and absorbing practices in ways that will ultimately present solutions to a growing set of issues brought on by humanity's evolving behaviour. Despite minor gaps, *Comestible/Edible* is a successful output of both of these fields. It shows us the start of such solutions—a beginning idea for others to build on and adapt, according to the situations in which they find themselves and the requirements that arise therein. Undeniably, it is a winning first taste.

1. Please see www.edibleproject.com

Notes

2. Au Bon Pain Café Menu, http://www.aubonpain.com/pdf/cafe_nutrition.pdf (accessed January 22, 2010).
3. See www.practicallyedible.com/edible.nsf/pages/grimod-delareyniere (accessed June 18, 2010).
4. See www.foodreference.com/html/wjeananelmebrillat-savarin.html (accessed June 18, 2010).

Reference

Santich, Barbara. 1996. Sustaining Gastronomy. In *Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium on Australian Gastronomy: Sustaining Gastronomy*, eds, B. Santich et al., 1-2. Australia: University of Adelaide.