

FOOD, GENDER AND REPRESENTATION

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Meanings attached to food cover an unbelievably wide spectrum of human existence. Food is life and death, profanity and sacredness, an intoxicating aphrodisiac and an addiction, abjection. Food refers to material and spiritual experience, embodies the most covert fantasies, fears, and passions. It signifies interaction, mutual bonds, and communality but at the same time is a sign of division. It transgresses the outside/inside body limits, but serves as a signifier of clean/defiled, own/alien, me/other that also has gender connotations. As a cultural signifier food carries different weight in constructing the values of masculinity and femininity, everyday experiences of men and women, and performs different roles in the process of their representation and self-representation. Food also occupies a peculiar place in art. The aim of this article is to analyze how modern Lithuanian women artists use food to express feminine identity, what meanings they attach to it and how, in polemics with cultural stereotypes, feminine identity is articulated in their *oeuvre*.

In their book *Female Fetish*, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen thoroughly analyze the correlation between food and concepts of femininity in Western civilization. They notice that “traditionally, our culture constructed masculinity as he who fucks, femininity as she who cooks” (Gamman & Makinen 1995:159). This vivid phrase aptly marks out the difference between the meanings of femininity and masculinity characteristic to modern culture, in psychoanalytical terminology described as a dichotomy between the oral and genital phases. They also could be understood as two different periods of psychophysical development or as two different psychic states that could be experienced at any period in life. Analyzing the structure of the Great Mother archetype, Erich Neumann discerned two inherently connected aspects (positive and negative) that are revealed in genital and oral symbolism in dreams, fantasies and artistic creation. The scientist notes that, contrary to the misogynic evaluation of feminine genitalia in

western civilization, accentuation of genitalia in pictures of the Goddess was a sign of her disposition. On the other hand, oral images depicted by the mouth cavity embodied the destructive aspect of the deity as sowing death (devouring), as well as regressive states (Neumann 1996:122-123).

In modern Western culture the image of woman has lost its ambivalence. It was formerly split into the good (nonsexual) and the bad (erotic) images. The ideal of the Christian Madonna propagating denial of erotic satisfaction turned maternity into a melancholy and ecstatic performance of a father’s will. According to Kristeva, “if a woman is not a virgin, a nun, and chaste, but has orgasms and gives birth, her only means of gaining access to the symbolic paternal order is by engaging in an endless struggle between the orgasmic maternal body and the symbolic prohibition – a struggle that will take the form of guilt and mortification, and culminate in masochistic *jouissance*” (Kristeva 1986:147).

Demanding the renouncement any genital satisfaction hidden in a mother’s body, patriarchal culture offered a woman an alternative model of identity full of oral connotations. The Goddess’ vagina that gave birth to the richness of the world was replaced with nourishing breasts that provided care but were devoid of the power to procreate. The gendering of eating and love rituals, closely connected in Western culture, acquired connotations of power and hierarchy. Particularly vivid symbolism of breasts, autoeroticism that manifested itself through pleasure delivered by food, and other oral symbols, according to Neumann, referred to infantile states of mind (Нойманн 1998:45-46) that in our culture are unambiguously related to normative femininity. Gamman and Makinen accurately disclose that the feminine body in Western civilization is not only turned into a fetish and reduced to the breast motif, but is identified with food. The feminine body, irksomely related by means of mass media to food products, becomes a product itself. A woman is

‘consumed’ like food; she is seduced by food (as a man is seduced by pornographic images). In advertisements her image is closely connected with gourmet experiences that surpass sexual experiences but at the same time emerge as a menace to the ideal, graceful femininity (Gamman, Makinen 1995). Food in Western culture has become an inseparable part of modern feminine identity, taken on unconsciously. To be a woman means to consume, to be consumed and to constantly fight off her extra weight. Therefore to be a woman also means to create using food and food motifs.

With regard to the *oeuvre* of Lithuanian women artists, I see not only the heights of culinary art, but also the day-to-day practices. In Lithuania the kitchen still remains on the list of feminine duties. Even while writing this article I am sitting in my kitchen and keeping an eye on lunch boiling on the stove. Maybe this is why metaphors of table ‘rituals,’ moldings of food products and the products themselves are becoming a very eloquent part of feminine self-expression. Recollecting traditions of Rococo, women artists create witty porcelain sets—delicacies (Dalia Laučkaitė–Jakimavičienė’s *A Sweet Set*, 1983, Živilė Barzdukaitė’s *A Set with Bananas*, 1994) and crochet yarn ‘broth’ (Virginija Gvazdaitytė–Degenienė’s *Broth*, 2000) to re-create rituals of the table. The composition by Lina Jonikienė, *Lunch* (1998), presents wide possibilities for interpretation. A napkin and a saucer made from photo material (that also raise associations with needlework in a frame) are served together with a metal fork and knife. At first sight it may seem that such a reconstruction of a household ‘ritual’ is mainly aimed at denying the stereotypical demarcation lines between the official/private, masculine/feminine spheres that already are anchored in our culture, by transferring the everyday kitchen reality into an exposition hall. But the author’s intentions go far beyond the breaking of the ‘high’ art rules by manipulating household appliances. The suggestiveness of the image is based on color and texture contrasts that are achieved by the use of opposite metal and red tones, ‘cold’ material quality of metal tableware, photo paper and cotton yarn. The motif of bright, ripened berries does not only reveal the gourmet aspects of the kitchen motif but also expresses cultural layers of femininity. Here, red fruit serve not as a simple filler of a plate. They encircle, delineate the main ‘delicacy’ – a photo image of a woman’s navel, singled out in the center of the witty work. The semiotic and compositional

centers of the work concur. Circular forms are inserted into a quadrangle plane like a mandala, and frame up the center of a woman’s body, in mythological tradition very often linked with a womb, i.e., with the center of cosmic transformation – the conception of fetus. The navel zone symbolizes the unity of body–vessel, and is identified with a womb, fertility, and the potential of generation and creativity. But in the consumer society a woman’s body is deprived of all connotations of majesty. It is materialized, reduced, turned into a fetish. Patriarchal culture cannot perceive the polymorphous eroticism of a woman. Therefore Jonikienė ‘sets’ the table for a Hannibal feast (lunch) and ironically visualizes the suggestion of our culture to consume a woman’s body in parts, bit by bit.

Loreta Švaikauskienė is also interested in the problem of feminine identity in patriarchal culture. In her composition *Baroque in Lithuania*, the accent is laid not on the importance of food in the conception of femininity, but on the correlations between nourishment and sexual rituals that reveal themselves in the de-signified image of a woman advocated by our culture. The artist ‘crochets’ (fuses) a chic bikini and a body from the disposable white plastic tableware. Like feminine accessories that hang in the windows of underwear boutiques, they unambiguously articulate consumer values. Here, an almost sacred symbolism of white is drastically contrasted with the purpose of disposable tableware, when a consumer is encouraged to waste away, do not treasure. In a Westerner’s mind, a smart bikini and body ‘shells’ function as a metonymy of a woman and, as a package of a product, are meant only to attract the eye of potential buyer (viewer, consumer). The artist makes an ironic comment recreating cultural layers of femininity that are formed emphasizing hunger (psychological infantilism), but not the richness, or maturity. Plastic, hollow laces that remind one of mousse that cannot satisfy one’s hunger, but that do encourage erotic fantasies, consumer passions, a yearning for something that does not and cannot exist. Imitating a fetishistic, de-humanized, ‘dead’ (*nature morte*) vocabulary that the modern society uses for self-perception and self-expression, Švaikauskienė also reveals how it serves patriarchal values of reduced, materialized femininity.

Apart from metaphors of kitchen, table and consumerism (eating) rituals, Lithuanian women artists employ other means of expression to articulate feminine experience. Here one can

mention a use of food itself. Fat, honey, chocolate, coffee and spaghetti notably enrich the traditional arsenal of artistic media and provide the possibilities for expanding alternative methods of feminine talking. By employing the aesthetic, plastic, or sensory (odor) features of food and integrating meanings that culture attaches to food products, women artists disclaim the hegemony of sight-logos and 'the pure art' and open ways for alternative talking.

Based on the opposition of sight and touch, the modern Lithuanian art hierarchy had developed (and sometimes still exhibits) clear gender connotations. Here, the 'real' art based on the embodiment of pure idea (especially painting) was considered a masculine domain, whereas the applied arts (textiles in particular) belonged to 'feminine crafts,' which had to be content in a far more modest place in the cultural margins. But existing on the outskirts of hierarchy and therefore experiencing less pressure from the ideologized censorship, these arts became a propitious field for experiments and accumulation of marginalized feminine experience. Therefore, in the long run, the search for the means to pertain to a particular perception of existence led Lithuanian women artists to the denial of 'pure' practices of image creation and to enriched interpretations of a work of art utilizing the aspects of touch, taste/smell (*i.e.* belonging to the kitchen, as opposed to the official sphere). Alma Bartkevičiūtė (*Don't Hang Macaroni*, 1999) employed spaghetti to convey her ironic attitude towards the traditional norms of femininity. The Lithuanian saying 'don't hang macaroni' has certain gender connotations: It denotes the act of courting when sweet talk and seductive promises are used to lull a girl's vigilance and to attain the desired result. Therefore the intention of the artist to crochet spaghetti doilies and to hang them in a gallery leads to a witty, manifold deconstruction and reconstruction of gender values. First of all, the artist destroys the stereotype of feminine passivity – here the active agent hanging macaroni is a woman who does not comply with what is expected of her. At the same time, materializing the popular expression (by taking away the power of word-logos) and legitimizing feminine duties (making spaghetti and crocheting doilies) in the artistic (official, masculine) space, the artist immediately directs the viewer toward the field of feminine meanings.

Eglė Bogdaniienė (*Tablecloth for a Coffee Table*, 1998, Figure 1) uses food products, such as finely ground coffee, not for irony or playfulness but to express meditative moods. Ephemeral

ornaments of the tablecloth strewn from fragrant grains capture the flow of time. A multitude of stylized forms emerging from the black non-existence is dispersed into white obscurity. Echoing the birth of the Buddhist sand mandala, the author turns the unforgettably fragrant, day-to-day feminine ritual of coffee drinking into a sacred ritual, the creation of the cosmic order. Eglė Rakauskaitė's *Chocolate Crucifixes*, 1995 (a four meter length decorative panel made of 2042 chocolate figures of the Crucifix), on the contrary, de-sanctifies patriarchal Christian icons and turns them into domesticated, sweet attributes of everyday reality. Here, the boundaries between the official/private, the sacred/profane, and the indistinct demarcation line between death and life are destroyed. In her other works, Eglė Rakauskaitė also uses food as a medium to capture existential transformations. In the video installation *In Fat*, 1995, the naked body of the artist was dipped into melted animal fat (the symbol of death). The whole scene was filmed in fragments and synchronically shown on three monitors recreating the impression of the body's integrity. Video technologies were inventively used to formulate the field of the work's meanings, when the integrity of a woman's body was fragmented and recreated anew. An equally significant role was attributed to food, *i.e.* the natural property of fat to harden was used to convey the main idea of the work – the opposition between death and life. Hot and transparent fat revealed the contours of the woman's silhouette, but cooling off and thickening it hid or buried the body like a mist. The hardened mass concealed the body, substituting the imperative of sight into the dimension of premonition, sensation, and imagination. During the action the mode of existence underwent a certain transformation: The social environment was rejected and the artist's body entered into the primeval, direct, bodily relationship with the nearest material medium, the physical environment. The body was not simply immersed into another substance, it admitted a part of that substance into itself. Therefore 'Me' was created not by the means of isolation, abjection, but by the means of fusion, apparent symbiosis with the maternal body.

The yearning for such a symbiosis is particularly vivid in the video installation *In Honey* 1996. The camera captures the body of the artist coiled in the embryo pose and rhythmically turning in a vessel full of honey. Floating in the sweet, viscous mass it evokes the senses of humidity, viscosity, and mucous quality that are

usually associated with feminine physiology, evokes sensuous feelings, and suggestively conveys preverbal experiences of primary consciousness. The meanings of the image are unambiguously associated with maternity but they also destroy cultural stereotypes that reduce a woman's sexuality to an infantile oral stage. Contrary to the demands of de-sexualized maternity standards, Rakauskaitė's plastic interpretations declare vitality that is sensuous, corporeal, sexual, and unaffected by cultural prohibitions. The artist's body, coiled like an embryo and turning in a compact vessel, and at the same time suggesting the content of her own womb, embodies the heterogeneity of the woman/mother space where the strict borderline between inside/outside, self/other is deleted.

In modern Western culture, where most people never encounter the real menace of famine but are threatened by overproduction and obesity, food loses its sacred connotations and is more and more often associated with profane (often immoderate) consumerism. But the substance that transgresses the outside/inside borderline of a human body stands as a poly-semantic medium that permits the articulation of experiences of the

'in-between' states. This attitude is further confirmed by the *oeuvre* of modern Lithuanian women artists who seek to overcome the dichotomies of binary thinking and to visualize the heterogeneity of feminine identity. Food in their *oeuvre* becomes not only a means to deny stereotypical values of masculinity and femininity, but also to provide the possibilities for creating a distinctive vocabulary of 'feminine talking.'

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Figure 1



