

# The Dialectical Potato: Potato in Art, Art in Potato

Jeffrey Price

“Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being...even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act.”

-Joseph Beuys

“My favorite dinner is turkey and mashed potatoes—it looks clean.”

-Andy Warhol

“That’s not a solar system. It is a potato.”

-Painter Joan Miró to surrealist poet Paul Éluard

## Preface: A Brief Note on Early Potato Art Ancestors

The foremost potato artists were certainly those who first discovered it growing in the South American Andes Mountain region 10,000 years ago or more. If potatoes and humans are indeed involved in a symbiotic “coevolutionary<sup>1</sup>” process as posited by Michael Pollen in *Botany of Desire* (2001) then this is when and where the relationship began. By 6500 B.C. the Peruvian Indians had already harnessed the power of their *papas*<sup>2</sup> to grow in very harsh and diverse climates of the *altiplano*, developing potato agriculture. These early potatologists experimented with many of the 5,000 varieties (and 8 species) of potatoes that existed and developed a wide range of peripheral innovations influenced or inspired by the potato.

Among these innovations was the making of *chuño*, a form of naturally freeze-drying and preserving potatoes. The process of *chuño* making could be described as a kind of ritual dance (Potato Dance) where all the moisture is squeezed out the potato by means of rhythmic feet movement.<sup>3</sup> This development made the potato more portable and storable, allowing the Peruvians to use it for trade and commerce (Potato Money). The necessity for potato farming led to the invention of *tacllas* (Potato Digging Tools), and

inspired an elaborate system of terracing the mountainous land (Potato Earth/Land Art) for maximizing and compartmentalizing their potato plots. These early potatoists also employed alchemical methods, transforming the potato into *chicha* (Potato Beer), and also converting the potato into human energy and consciousness by eating it. These potato artists developed a sophisticated pottery technology in which they created various potato tributes (Potato Effigy Pots) including human/potato and animal/potato forms. The slow process of boiling water in the high altitudes of the Andes also suggested to them a system of telling time by measuring how long it took to cook potatoes (Potato Clocks). Using the potato, they also concocted many folk remedies used in healing and personal hygiene (Potato Medicine). They even adopted a method of fortune telling by counting potatoes to presage the next harvest (Potato Augurism/Potato Divination) and believed the potato could be used for purposes of magic or voodoo (Potato Witchcraft). These foremost potato peoples worshipped the great animating spirit of the potato, the *Axo-mama*<sup>4</sup> (Potato Mother) and organized seasonal fetes to celebrate her energy and propitiate her abundance (Potato Festivals).

### Introduction

This essay proposes to illuminate and examine major works of art in which the common potato, *Solanum tuberosum*, appears as symbol or subject matter, since its arrival in Europe and consider particular philosophies behind its presence there. It will be shown that the potato has surfaced as an image, symbol, ideology, and philosophy in a number of artworks of the modern era, whereby a particular dialectic has developed. The potato has played an increasingly paradoxical role in Art History just as it has in the annals of human History, which makes for an interesting investigation. Deliberating on the immense importance and reliance that humans have had, and still have on the potato as a valuable source of nourishment, is not the direction of this paper—but it is useful to keep this in mind when focusing on the presence and meaning of the symbol and dialectic of Potato Art works.

It is also not the intention of this paper to persuade the potato's position as a major genre in Modern Art. The presence of the potato, as a theme or subject does, however, make some several curious appearances in the works of modern "masters." The point then is to highlight specific occurrences of the potato that do exist, and examine how the potato functions as a symbol "and ideology in these works. The works which I will be examining can fairly easily be placed within an "art world" milieu, and will be discussed in this context. I have tried to provide as extensive a list of Potato Art works as possible, knowing that I have missed many along the way. This initial attempt at narrowing the search for these artworks has revealed much to this author,

and has provoked a desire for further research. By deciding to focus on the potato as theme or motif as an area of research in art, I am consciously taking an Anthropological-Art Historical approach in analyzing these works. Hopefully, this attempt to discover a strand of "Modern Potato Artists" reveals a Potato-Art Lineage-continuum, which has existed since humans first encountered potatoes around 8,500 B.C., opening up the possibilities for what Potato Art means.

Many are indebted, and I am no exception, to the voluminous work *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1946) by Radcliffe N. Salaman, which has provided much knowledge about all aspects of the potato from its paradoxical role in history, its important nutritional value, and detailed analysis of art objects based on the potato. This tome has been the impetus for many later books on many different facets of the potato. It has been an important source and starting point for this paper as well.

For the archaeological art record Salaman has provided an enormous wealth of data and speculations about early Moche and Inca Potato Effigy Pots. In his chapter on "Potato and Art," however, he only discusses Vincent Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* as a major work of 'fine art' in which the potato has been a theme or subject matter. Of course, he died in 1955 before many of the works I present here were made, but he does leave out a few early key works that I would like to add. Therefore, I am interested in continuing this investigation into the history of the potato in art, and what its presence there means.

Indirectly, this essay will also shed some light on one of the symbols/sources of my own inspiration, as well as reveal some human artistic influences; pronouncing kindred spirits in a lineage of Potato Artists I now find myself encompassed. By examining the potato as it has appeared and been used in works of art from the beginning to the present, it has helped me to evaluate, re-think and in many cases validate my own philosophical ideology behind making Potato Art.

In first reading Martin Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*, which also discusses Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, I began to ruminate on my own theories about the potato. I began to articulate the formulation of a new Potato Philosophy—the *potato* as the origin of the work of art; the potato *as the work of art*; and the potato as also representing a kind of *origin* for the artist and the work of art. I further realized that in the eyes of certain artists, the potato gleams for them a certain Truth. That was another locus of this written paper, a Potato Chapter trying to decode the philosophy and Truth of the potato dialectic as found in works of the modern age.

### **Potato Art in the West**

The potato as depicted in works of "fine art" since its arrival in Western Europe in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century has been very limited and was almost non-

existent until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, the potato had only found immortality in woodcut illustrations appearing in Herbals. The evidence of the potato in these Herbals became very important in trying to pinpoint the exact time and place in which the potato actually entered the Old World.

The very first known graphic depiction of the potato-as-image in Europe, as represented in the herbal literature, is in an Aquarelle from 1588, of a potato branch, which illustrates important taxonomical information about the evolutionary stage, or look of the potato of that time. The next major appearance of the potato in print exists in the frontispiece for John Gerard's *Herball* (1597) in which Gerard himself is holding in his left hand a leaf and flower of the potato plant. There is also a whole chapter in *Herball* devoted to the potato and a stylized woodcut of the "Potatoes from Virginia," which to this day has led to the erroneous historical assumption that potatoes were brought to Europe from Virginia by Sir Francis Drake. Other notable potato plant woodcuts can be found illustrated in Clusius' *Historia* (1601), Gaspard Bauhin's *Prodromus* (1620), Parkinson's *Herbal* (1629), and Jean Bauhin's *Historia* (1651).

Throughout Western history, the potato can be said to have inspired many concomitant utilitarian art forms as well. These include the invention of tools, plows and sorters for potato agriculture and the development of culinary wares such as potato cauldrons, potato mashers and potato forks. There also exist many potato tributes in poems, literature, songs, games, and stories and most recently in cartoons, movies and television.

Perhaps the most notable of the diversity of creativity based around the potato has been the outgrowth of alchemical innovations in the form of gasohol (Potato Gas/Ethyl Alcohol), and fermentation processes producing alcoholic spirits such as potato beer, potato wine, and potato vodka. This does not even include the very basic and very important alchemy involved in the seemingly endless transmuting possibilities of cooking and preparing the potato as a food. Through chemical processes, the potato provides sustenance and produces energy for man, whose body converts this energy into consciousness. Recently, the potato has entered the realm of science and technology with extensive bioengineering projects and potato-growing experiments in space.

Although it is the focus of this paper to discuss Potato Art within an "Art" context, there is a point of convergence with the so-called "fine art" potato work examples, with the aforementioned anthropological/utilitarian potato art works. The dialectical potato found in the following works relies on a certain connection and knowledge of these practical, traditional associations surrounding the potato.

### **Millet's Potato**

The ostensible birth of Potato Iconography in Western Art emerged

in unison with the birth of the avant-garde and Modernism. In 1857, Realist master Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) gave us the first major potato painting incarnation—*Angelus*—originally entitled *Prayer for the Potato Crop*. This image of a man and woman solemnly bowing their heads in prayer in the middle of a potato field at dusk with a steeple on the distant horizon quickly became a widely known symbol of provincial piety. The humble crop, a pile of potatoes, plays a primary and definitive role in the picture, serving as a truly supporting character, a miracle of sustenance and a reward for hard work.

This now-eternal image began as a commission from the wealthy American Thomas Gold Appleton (who never ended up owning the piece). After sitting aside for about two years in his studio, the work was transformed into a more profound metaphor by Millet with his adding the little steeple to the picture and changing the title of the painting to *Angelus*. *Angelus* refers to prayers—reminded by ringing steeple bells, to stop and recite together or alone, for use in meditation or for focusing away the busy and hard aspects of life. By changing the title from *Prayer for the Potato Crop* to *Angelus*, he thus transformed the prayer for the banal potato into a universal prayer. The prayer is a giving-thanks for the success of the potato crop that will give them nourishment and life, and a paean to the potato to continue its rejuvenation and abundance.

It is interesting to note that this image of potato-humbleness quickly became an object of considerable desire and value. After it left Millet's possession for the price of 1000 Francs in 1859, the painting was endlessly bid on, changing many hands (even across the Atlantic), was exhibited widely (including a Barnum-like tent tour across the United States), until it was finally won back over for France and the Louvre in 1890 by Alfred Chauchard with 800,000 Francs and much media hoopla. Thus this Potato Prayer image was ironically transformed into a high-priced commodity and icon of Nationalist pride for the bourgeoisie. Is this the beginning of a paradoxical revolutionary artwork in which the potato is at once a spiritual metaphor, a simple banality, as well as a commercial commodity?

Millet's very first visual depiction of the potato was actually in an earlier drawing in 1851, *Potato Planters*, showing a man digging holes for seed potatoes which are then buried by a woman and child. Possibly, this was the very first intentionally potato-based work of art to be found on the European continent. The only other known painted depiction of potatoes prior to Millet's *Angelus* was from another Realist, Gustave Brion and his *Potato Harvest during the Flooding of the Rhine* of 1852.

Millet's early drawing of the *Potato Planters* later found its culmination in another painting with a typical Milletian humanistic depiction of simple peasants sowing seed potatoes in his *Potato Planting* of 1862. This painting shows a husband and wife planting humble tubers in a luminous provincial

field, with infant and mule resting in the background, under the shade of a nearby tree. This painting represents an idealized bucolic vision of a Golden Age of Agriculture and emphasizes the close relationship of man to nature, focusing on the reality and necessity of the potato as a source of sustenance and survival. Several critics of the day denounced this work as a banal colloquial vulgarity. Millet drafted a defense of his potato-political ideology:

Why should the work of a potato planter or a bean planter be less interesting or less noble than any other activity? It ought to be recognized that there isn't any nobility or baseness except in the manner of understanding or representing such things, and not in the things themselves.<sup>5</sup>

### Van Gogh's Potato

Millet's most pronounced successor to the potato vernacular is of course, the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. Soon after giving up ministry, Van Gogh became obsessed with the potato as a theme, creating dozens of studies for the work that would become the Potato Art apotheosis, *Potato Eaters* (1885). *Potato Eaters* is a definitive potato-socio-politico-religioso-anthropo-philosophical idiom.

This first masterwork of Van Gogh is a culmination of his early period and has been widely written about and analyzed. Therefore, I will not have to describe the occurrence in much detail. In this case, it is instead important to focus on Van Gogh's own thought and philosophy behind the painting of the *Potato Eaters*, which is illuminated particularly well by a letter to his brother Theo dated April 30, 1885:

I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people.

Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once...And it might prove to be a true peasant picture. I know that's what it is. But if someone prefers a sentimental view of peasants, they're welcome to it. As for myself, I'm convinced you get better results by painting them in their roughness than by bringing conventional charm into it.<sup>6</sup>

For Vincent Van Gogh, *Potato Eaters* is a "peasant picture"—a painting of "uncivilized" and dirty potato eaters—and represents a kind of plebeian primitivism. He seems to see a certain Truth in their "roughness" and interprets this into a kind of self-reliant, ascetic-based spirituality. The potato

object-symbol has now become a sacrament—the sustenent incarnate of the *Axo-mama*, or potato spirit, as life-giver and sustainer—and is being taken in, in an act of transubstantiation. However, the potato here denotes a low social status, reminding them of the poverty and hardship that the object of their labor—the potato—causes. But because it provides them with life and self-sufficiency and humbleness, it allows them a chance at spiritual redemption.

With Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* there is a development of the dialectic of the symbol of the potato in painting—it is at once a “poor picture” and a symbol of spirituality. Like Millet before him, Van Gogh was not appealing to the popular taste of the masses to “like it or admire it,” but rather presented it as a kind of Truth—against the current philosophical ideology of the time—about painting and art, and Truth for that matter. It is well known from Van Gogh's writings that he attributed Biblical significance to many of the figures and symbols in his paintings and drawings, so it is easy to assume that this image of a humble, communal repast represented for him a kind of religiosity. The potato for the artist has now grown into a philosophy of “revolution-in-painting,” as well as a symbol of the poor, the natural and the spiritual.

In addition to the many studies for the *Potato Eaters*, Van Gogh included the potato theme in many works of farmers digging, plowing, and lifting potatoes, as well as drawings of women peeling potatoes at home by the window. After the *Potato Eaters*, potatoes as a symbol can also be found in no less than six other still-life paintings by Van Gogh which elucidates him as an important developer of this potato-symbol and dialect.

### Miró's Potato

Chronologically, the next manifestation of the potato in art is found in an enigmatic painting by the Spanish painter Joan Miró entitled *Potato* (1928). It is curious that this self-proclaimed ‘anti-painter’ is also woven (however loosely) into the lineage tapestry of the potato-symbolists, as it lends credibility to the theory of a revolutionary-potato-art idiomatic philosophy existing in Art History in the employment of “master” artists.

However, Miró's mysterious surrealist image, under the auspice of the title *Potato*, is not entirely a straightforward statement supporting the potato-as-symbol idea. This image came into being with a series of paintings directly interpreting and eschewing Dutch Master interiors. Is he adding insult to injury by naming the painting *Potato*, summarily reducing the Dutch painters to a *You are What you Eat/ You Paint what you are!* context? I don't think so. Miró's *Potato* is not directly based on a specific Dutch Master image, but rather on the image of a Spanish Dancer found in a magazine. Miró named the painting in French, *Pomme-de-Terre*, meaning “apple of the earth,” so here the potato becomes a symbol of the feminine/fertility principle. This image represents a creator/destroyer image as a potato woman deity—the personification

of the *Axo-mama*.

### Beuys' Potato

From the German artist/teacher/philosopher Joseph Beuys we get the first direct potato-as-art paradigm. Beuys took an art-as-life stance, demanding a human revolution/evolution through art and action. His theory of Social Sculpture is exemplified in his own statement: "even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act." By this, he was suggesting we should use and look at materials and consciousness in a whole new way. Using the staple potato as a pedagogical model/tool works well within Beuys' lesson plan—Germany's dependence on the potato made it a very real symbol of their survival.

*Potato Action/Potato Planting* (3/15/1977-11/6/1977) takes the idea of potatoes back to its original agrarian beginning—one man, one plot. Beuys took an empty lot in the middle of Berlin located next to the Rene Block Gallery, and transformed it into a potato garden. Using simple and traditional tools and techniques, he planted, maintained, and harvested a season's crop of potatoes. This potato activity bespeaks of support for farming and agriculture, reminding us that a small plot of land has the potential to yield a tremendous bounty of potatoes. Beuys' planting of potatoes also demonstrates the idea of freedom through self-sufficiency, strength derived from physical activity and the need for man to continue a direct relationship with the earth. This potato-as-art/potato-as-life action was a time-based performance, dependent on and in rhythm with, the cycles of nature. With *Potato Planting*, the potato itself takes on the role of artist, reproducing and multiplying in a creative act of growing and forming. This self-manifesting process relates to the theory of the potato as the origin of the work of art.

Overall, in the oeuvre of Joseph Beuys, the use of the potato has been a more conceptual than physical gesture. One exception however is the vitrine-sculpture *Dust Painting with Dried Potato Plant* (1981). This display houses a *Dustpainting* (1962) leaning in the back, *Bones and Knife* (1973) placed vigilantly in the center of the display, and two *Sculptures of Dried Potato Plants* (1977) (from his *Potato Action?*). These two dried-out bundles, one on the right, larger and more square-ish with hay—the other on the left, a smaller pile of withered potatoes with dead dry sprouts. The potato is not empowered in this piece, but instead slowly withers away in the showcase in a condition of dried-out, crumbly shriveled putrescence—a state in which the potato is seldom seen. In this exhibit Beuys employs his typical method of juxtaposing old materials and creations from different periods of his creative output, and arranging them to create a new meaning. The potatoes and other elements carry on a dialogue together, while continuously transforming in time. The potato here is not life, but death—a transmutation of material to an

original state, a return to dust.

### Pölke's Potato

In the mid-to-late Sixties, Sigmar Pölke, a German artist and student of Joseph Beuys, was also deeply entrenched in quixotic potato-art dialectic—incorporating the potato into drawings, sculpture, scientific investigations and philosophy. The potato first surfaced in Pölke 's work in the early series dubbed with the Rhenish colloquialism *Potato Heads* (1965). This suite of crude but cute works-on-paper consist of two tuber-shaped head-forms juxtaposed opposite one another, surrounded and in some cases engulfed, by a negative space of Pölke 's colored polka dots. Two of the works, *Potato Heads: Nixon and Khrushchev* and *Potato Heads: Mao and LBJ* take on a decidedly ambiguous political tone by approximating heads of state as lowly tubers. Pölke begins to present us with a paradoxical potato vernacular: "Some people eat magic mushrooms to expand their awareness, what can you expect from people who eat potatoes?"<sup>7</sup> With this statement years after making the *Potato Heads*, Pölke presents us with disparaging associations related to eaters of the common potato.

Pölke, however, believes in plant power—specifically psilocybin (magic mushrooms)—and forthrightly declares that higher beings have told him what to paint. But, he also reveals in an early writing that the potato has played a significantly large part in his scientific experiments, which have led him to understanding that the potato is a living, breathing, creative being. It is important again to focus on what the artist himself has said, at length, concerning the potato and art and inspiration:

On the verge of giving up my planned [scientific] investigation [of inspiration] in the apparent absence of a suitable object of study, I happened to go into my cellar one day, where I finally found what I was looking for —the very incarnation of everything art critics and teachers imagine when they think of a spontaneously creative subject with a love of innovation: the potato!

Of course — if there is anything at all that embodies every aspect of the artist that has ever come under discussion — love of innovation, creativity, spontaneity, productivity, creation completely from within oneself, etc.— it is the potato. One need only watch it as it lies in a dark cellar and begins to sprout spontaneously, innovating sprout by sprout in a virtual torrent of creativity; and then as it disappears beneath its teeming sprouts—retreating totally behind its work—and brings forth the most amazing forms. And what colours! The practically shivering frozen lilac in the tips of its sprouts, the spaceless pale white of the sprouts themselves, with an occasional hint of morose, earthless

green—and finally the timeless, maternal wrinkled brown of the self-consuming fruit that sacrifices itself entirely in the perfection of its work... Yes, what we see at work here is true creativity; it is genuine perfection!

In short: everything the public is accustomed to expect from the artist and every expectation the artist is so rarely able to fulfill—the potato provides it in overabundance! Why, then, doesn't the public turn its attention to the potato, where ultimate fulfillment awaits?<sup>8</sup>

Gaining 'practical benefits from the insights' of Pölke's investigations, he put them to good use in a constructed large scale-sculpture, *Potato House* (1967). Pölke has explained the science behind the work, a kind of potato-healing-magic. This piece consists of a walk-in, house-shaped lattice-work with living potatoes affixed around the outside at all the structural crossings:

Expanding on the basic technologies found in the potato chest and Wilhelm Reich's Orgon Box, I constructed a device, the so-called Potato House which, in keeping with the principle of Faraday's Cage, forms an enclosed innovation space protected against the effects of external field forces. Inside an innovation potential builds up on the horizontally inserted potato, which precipitates its activity directly via the Medulla oblongata of the contents. And I make no secret of the fact that I have the potato to thank for providing essential impulses for my work as an artist.<sup>9</sup>

With *Potato House* Pölke developed a particularly ironic, pseudo-scientific, self-admitting potato-based dialectic. He is invoking the reality of hidden energies, and placing himself and the potato in the realm of radicality by following in Reich's controversial ideological footsteps. The idea of a *Potato House* experiment where potatoes collect orogones and transfer them to humans, hints at the potato's biological similarity with humans; biorhythmically in sine and symbiotically dependent. Pölke's *Potato House* becomes linked to the physiological, the scientific and the mystical and evinces the existence of a pro-magico-potato ideology.

Sigmar Pölke created a similar potato architectural structure for Rudolf Zwirner's gallery basement, in the work *Potato Pyramid in Zwirner's Cellar* (1969). Continuing his experiments with potato energy and regenerative powers, this time he produced a pyramidal form, using an actual trellis to attach potatoes together using the principles of a peg game.

Pölke's next quizzical potato work, *Apparatus to Cause One Potato to Orbit Another or Potato Machine* (1969), further demonstrates Pölke's use of the potato as an idiosyncratic sculptural material. In this Neo-Duchampian

work, a modified stool is transformed into its own solar system, when the pressing of a button on the top, causes a small potato beneath the stool, to orbit around a larger potato as if it were the center of the universe. This piece could represent the idea of a microcosm/macrocosm parallelism existing, with the potato becoming at once the Earth and *axis mundi*. Perhaps, however, this is the seed of an iconoclastic potato-as-nonsense, or potato-as-madness idea—an idiom that manifests itself in the work of the later-generation German artist John Bock.

Above all, Pölke's Potato Art methodological principles are completely based on deferring creativity and imagination to the potato, and not himself. He vehemently explains that, "...what appears to be something I have conceived has actually felt its way inside me. In the same way, something that I appear to have felt my way inside has really conceived itself in me!"<sup>10</sup> The basis for Pölke's potato-methodological concerns is commensurate with the theory put forth by this paper, that the potato is the origin of the work of art.

### Immendorf's Potato

In the work of Jorg Immendorf, another German artist and also a student of Joseph Beuys, the potato-symbol develops a distinctly German meaning and vernacular. The potato is overtly present in several paintings by Immendorf beginning with *Meal* (1978). In this painting of a plate labeled 'Meal' there is a pile of steaming baked potatoes, and a tuber-shaped message in the bottom right hand corner reading: *Painting Must Assume the Function of the Potato*. This is the beginning of a potato-political doctrine that will become more prevalent later in Immendorf's paintings. His radical belief is manifest in a painting also using the potato-rallying call as its title, *Painting Must Assume the Function of the Potato* (1988). This has now progressed into a full-fledged potato-philosophical paradigm with Immendorf introducing the potato as a leading character with political motivations. The proclamation 'Painting [Art] must assume the function of the potato' takes a grassroots stance, attempting to bring art back to the people by making it understandable instead of semantically ambiguous.

In another potato apogee, Immendorf presents a self-portrait of himself seated behind and presenting to us—a full basket of potatoes—and calls it *This is All I Have For You* (1990). Immendorf continues to use the potato dialect, equating himself and his capabilities with the Truth of the potato. This basket of potatoes makes many appearances in subsequent paintings, and potatoes as food-on-plates of the proletariat become overtly present symbols throughout Immendorf's body of work. With Immendorf, the potato evolves into a symbol of Germanness—a symbol of the common people, fueling the revolution—a common but practical weapon.

This particularly German-type potato dialectical strand is found con-

tinued in the work of Jerome Witkin, in a painting entitled *The German Girl* (1997). In this painting of Holocaust memories, a scared German girl cowers in the corner of her home as one of a cavalcade of hungry concentration-camp refugees reaches through the window to grab a handful of potatoes. In this painting, Witkin symbolizes the potato as an agent of rejuvenation, a 'real' thing that the reeling Germans could hold on to and use as a restorer of vitality, health and strength. As a recent example of potato-symbolist painting, it helps elucidate the development of a potato dialect—specifically a German flavored potato vernacular.

### **Bock's Potato**

The potato art-continuum is now being further cultivated by another German, the young artist, lecturer and raconteur John Bock. Bock's clownish, ersatz-Beuysian works are usually based around a lecture with accompanying diagrams, actions, and props. The potato is a familiar accouterment within Bock's rich pantheon of performance materials, which also includes gooey substances like toothpaste, shaving cream, and glues, in addition to the multifarious found objects he uses to build makeshift pseudo-devices.

The potato literally takes a front-seat in *MolkeMeMindVehikel* (1999), a lecture/aktion in which Bock drives around a Berlin block in an altered compact car filled-to-the-brim with potatoes. In this humorous potato lesson, Bock acts as a "foodstuff-coefficient," simultaneously communing and commuting with the familiar potato. While slowly motoring along with his copilots, he postures, poses, and interacts with various "anti-form" potato specimens. In one of the vignettes during the five-hour tour, Bock grips a plastic egg in his mouth while nudging it against a real potato skewered with a safety-pin and swaying from the car's ceiling by a string. In this comic juxtaposition of organic to artificial, Bock reaffirms the "realness" of the potato and also demonstrates a useful analogy: the potato, like the egg, represents Origin.

In another potato lecture/performance from 1999, *Deutsche Bank*, Bock alludes to the idea of potatoes as an economic system of potato currency. In the chaotic interior installation space of Deutsche Bank, piles of potatoes line the entrance. Visitors have to crouch and navigate under hanging stalactites of stuffed and reconfigured thrift-store clothing-sculptures. The walls inside are messily dotted with blue and red potato-shaped potato stamps, creating a childlike decorating solution. Upon entering, each visitor is then to trustingly "deposit" his or her clean, unsuspecting arms, into a hole in the wall. Hidden on the other side of the wall, inside the bank, the mad-artist makes a mess of their exposed extremities, essentially tar-and-feathering them with various cremes, goops and cotton balls. When participants make a "withdrawal" of their arms from Deutsche Bank they discovered a dripping sticky result all over them.

Witnessing this debacle, from inside Deutche Bank, is an austere, yet silly, potato-effigy statue, meant to represent Adam Smith, the 18th century economist and philosopher. Among his writings on free trade, Smith espoused the virtues of the nutritious potato. Referring to the healthy beneficence of the potato upon the poor “low ranking” Irish (in *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776), Smith wrote, “No food can afford a more decisive proof of its nourishing quality, or of its being peculiarly suitable to the health of the human constitution.”

Jon Bock’s potato works are illustratively dialectical. Although playful and seemingly nonsensical on the surface, Bock’s potato is revealed to be a serious intellectual political ideology—the potato as a total system. An economic/philosophic system where the potato acts as a commodity, a partner, and a way of life. Bock, who grew up on a farm, uses the potato because he knows it well, and knows his audience will also understand the potato, because it is “easy.”<sup>11</sup> Bock’s potato is *materia prima*. It comes from the earth, it smells of earth, it is variously earth-shaped, and represents a microcosmic parable of planet earth.

### Fluxus’ Potato

Amongst the group of artists loosely classified under the heading of Fluxus, I have found a few simple works using a Potato Art argot. First, in the work by the under-appreciated Danish artist Arthur “Addi” Kopcke, *Potato Crate or Potato Box* (1963). This piece transforms a common cigar box into a treasure chest. This simple piece was originally made with fresh potatoes, which in time shrank to their current condition, and were then translated into silver or bronze. Here the potato-transmutation metaphor is similar to Beuys’—drying potatoes—but in this case, the potatoes beautifully intricate mutations have been emphasized and preserved into a new precious element.

Several Fluxus Festivals incorporated the unpretentious potato into their “art amusement” events and games. One such event was *New Year’s Eve Flux-Feast (Food Event)* in 1969, where artist Geoff Hendricks contribution was *Potatoes in 10 Flavors*. This practical potato performance exemplifies the versatile culinary possibilities inherent in the common spud. It also relates to the Fluxus ideology of potato-as-non-art

Ray Johnson, another Fluxus-related American artist, presented *Famous People’s Mother’s Potato Mashers*, in Milano, Italy in 1972. His use of a potato reference is a more indirect, less-organic, and humorous approach, which corresponds to a particularly American colloquial brand of potato-icography sensibility examined later.

### Penone’s Potato

The potato’s original magical agricultural potentials are restored in

the poetic work *Patates* (1977) by Giuseppe Penone. Penone made plaster molds of his own sensory organs—eyes, nose, ears, mouth—and planted them in the ground with young growing potatoes which eventually incorporated these shapes onto their own potato bodies. The potatoes were then cast into bronze to resemble gold, and exhibited humbly amongst large piles or crates of potatoes. Penone explains, “One tends to separate the action of man from nature as if he were not taking part in it. I wanted to fossilize one of the gestures that culture has produced.”<sup>12</sup>

The image of man and potato become one, reminding us that they are made of the same elements. It is not surprising that the potato finds its way into the works of the Arte Povera movement, the artists involved with transforming the simplest, most ordinary, mundane materials into extraordinary objects.

### Grippto's Potato

An extremely important artist in the potato dialectical tradition, across the Atlantic, is Argentine artist Víctor Grippto (1936-2002). The potato figured prominently in his work, particularly in his *Analogies* Series of the seventies (1970-77). In *Analogía I* he created an installation consisting of an extensive configuration of forty potatoes arranged on tables, platforms and chairs, connected to electrodes, cables and a voltmeter. In measuring the electrical charge they generated, he presented an analogy of physical to psychic energies. This also announces a desire to reconnect art and science, with the potato as mediator, toward a transformation of consciousness.

In *Analogía II*, a comparison is established using the element of stone as a compared to the vegetable potato. In *Analogía IV*, Grippto compares nature and artifice, using authentic and synthetic potatoes. This piece consists of a small table sectioned off by a white tablecloth on one side, with a setting consisting of a glass, old-fashioned cutlery, and a plate of fresh potatoes. The other side is sectioned off with black velvet covering, with a glass, silverware, and a plate of transparent acrylic potatoes. The real and fake potatoes create a dialectical opposition, one is natural, earthy, useful and edible—the other artificial, colorless, useless, inedible.

Victor Grippto's potato experiments emphasize transmutation and a move toward new potentials, turning the humble spud into a symbol of latent energy. His intention was to “achieve a changed consciousness through a changed material.”<sup>13</sup> In his work with potatoes and other nourishing materials, Grippto emphasizes various metaphorical states, such as nature, food, consciousness and spiritual energy.

Grippto's use of the potato also references history and colonization by the Europeans. The potato also acts as a kind of personal symbol and relates to the larger metaphor of community—Grippto and the potato are both

native to the South American Andes region. By invoking the potato he thereby makes a connection to the ancestral, and the everyday. He also re-establishes a metaphysical communion with the *Axo-mama*, the potato's living force.

### Oldenburg's Potato

The modern North American potato art dialectic reveals itself to be at times a much less organic gesture than that of their European counterparts. Two major of the American artists with works that can be categorized under the rubric of Potato Art come out of a Pop sensibility, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol.

The baked potato specifically figures prominently in the early work of Claes Oldenburg, emerging first in two proposal drawings, *Proposed Colossal Monument for Grand Army Plaza, New York: Baked Potato* and *Baked Potato Thrown Version* (1965). Oldenburg enjoys the sculptural implications of baked potatoes:

The pleasure of the baked potato, apart from its mass, is the slitting of the potato—east, west, north and south—compressing its sides and then laying into the slit a geometrical shape of butter and watching it melt...The baked potato is...a soft sack that registers what is done to it, where it is placed. Its form can be molded and returned to its original position. The baked potato is a construction that, in the course of use, displays its insides like the banana and the tube.<sup>14</sup>

In *Pantry Case: Baked Potato, Sundae, Banana—Transformed by Eating* (1965), Oldenburg created a series of plaster baked potatoes (and bananas and sundaes) in four stages illustrating the sculptural changes in the food forms over the course of being devoured.

For his first commercial multiples, Claus Oldenburg created *Baked Potato* (1966), a series made from a soft-sewn version that was later translated into cast resin. This *Baked Potato* sculpture was included in the collaborative edition *7 Objects in a Box*, containing small editions from six other Pop artists including Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

Claes Oldenburg later transformed the potato into a larger soft sculpture, *Soft Baked Potato, Open and Thrown* (1970), made into an inviting bed-like effigy, with pats of butter becoming pillows. The idea of a potato-sensuality becomes present here, with the slit-open baked potato taking on a vaginal-like presence—a steamy receptacle for the cream and butter. The rumors of Oldenburg and his first-wife romping away on some of their newly finished soft sculptures lends sexual innuendo to the image of a giant baked potato.

In another decidedly American-potato gesture, *French Fries Spill-*

*ing Out* (1977), Claes Oldenburg uses the Fast Food version of the potato for dizzying effect. These enormous French Fries are represented as active, pouring out in all their deep-fried golden glory. Oldenburg's potato works involve translating the organic potato into synthetic materials, but focuses on the active aspects of the potato—rendering them all in loving detail.

### **Warhol's Potato**

The potato makes a somewhat dubious appearance in the last major series of work by Andy Warhol, called *Last Supper* (1986). The suite of paintings comes from a commission by the Milan bank Credito-Valtellinese, located across the street from the Church of Santa Maria della Grazie, where Leonardo da Vinci's original exists. Most of the suite of paintings based on Leonardo's original are repetitions of the Christ image, or representations of the Last Supper image covered in patterns or doused with corporate logos, including Camel cigarettes, Dove soap, and most notably Wise Potato Chips.

The Wise Potato Chips Last Supper is a very large-scale canvas with the image having been vacuously rendered in black outline on blank canvas. To the left of Jesus, much larger and overlaying the image, is a not-quite finished Wise Potato Chip's logo—the Wise owl's eye. With this fringe-potato piece, Warhol has emphasized the commercial over the spiritual with a pun of the 'Wise' eye winking at us, overpowering the original image. The potato itself becomes a metaphor of estrangement and disconnect—potato chips are highly processed, salty, preserved entities transformed far away from their natural state. Warhol's potato is hardly a potato; it is a greasy shadow of its former self.

Warhol's coldness is exemplified by his use of the potato in this piece; it is a disassociation, or unattachment, with the natural potato. This dislocation, or lack of desire for a one-to-one relationship with the potato, becomes a decidedly Warholian potato colloquialism.

### **Barney's Potato**

With the recent Cremaster exhibition at the Guggenheim, which unveiled all five of Matthew Barney's Cremaster films and props together for the first time, the potato is elevated once again to the mythic realm. Barney's elevated status from Art Star to Modern Master, also interestingly reinforces the potato's importance as an object-symbol in art.

Potatoes appear in Cremaster 3, the third episode and middle episode of Barney's hermetic personal mythology. This allegorical reenactment of the Masonic myth of the Architect and the Entered Apprentice, focuses on the construction of the Chrysler building. During this installment the Apprentice cheats, "circumventing the carving process of the creating the perfect ashlar, or perfectly hewn stone"<sup>13</sup> (representing moral rectitude), which causes the

foundation of the tower to become compromised.

Potatoes are employed for comedic effect to echo the corrupted state of the tower. Potatoes become parody when a provocatively dressed woman, in an adjoining room to the action, slices potatoes with blades on the bottom of her shoes and crams them under the bar, causing the structure to become unlevelled.

These potato props from Barney's films, like many of his props, became residues and artifacts. In this case, potatoes are represented didactically in two sculptural works, as piles of real potatoes, propping up the leg of a cement-laden grand piano in *The Cloud Club* (2002), and cast thermoplastic ones made to look like freshly peeled potatoes, these stuffed under the uneven bar counter in *Partition* (2002).

The Cremaster Cycle's dominant concept is the idea of masculine development, and all of the films and many of the related sculptures are laden with ovoid forms, which overtly refer to testicles. In this case it is difficult not to associate Barney's potatoes with testes and masculinity. However, in this potato scene, the room has been intentionally been partitioned, the opposite side reflecting femininity, with the woman stuffing piles of sexy potatoes under the partition. Here Barney's oval potatoes are dually functioning as ovaries.

Matthew Barney's connection with potatoes relates to his own personal mythology—he grew up in Idaho, the land of potatoes-a-plenty. Barney's sees his hometown potatoes as ambiguous hermaphrodites, perfect metaphors for what is the obsessive tenant of the Cremaster cycle—sexual differentiation during the embryonic stage of development.

## Conclusion

With the preceding examples, I have tried to provide a broad overview of potato occurrences found in the Western art world since Modernism. This is by no means an exhaustive list of representatives, but provides a fairly significant first attempt to find and call-out curiously themed potato artworks. There are a few other works I would have liked to introduce to the analysis, but time constraints have limited this first draft. By unfolding and revealing works of art with a potato-based theme or subject matter within an historical continuum, a minor theme in art has emerged. This potato theme has created a dialectic in which the potato appears variously as humble and noble, yet also banal and vulgar. Invoking the potato can connote quasi-mystical and pseudo-scientific associations, but at the same time represent a very down-to-earth, no-bones-about-it realism. As has been shown, the use of the potato has played a paradoxical role in the history of art. Does the potato stand as a symbol of the spiritual, the prosaic, and the crazed—or is it just food?

Hopefully this earnest attempt to trace a potato-art-historical-sym-

bolic continuum will prompt additions, corrections and insight into the theory. This course of action—finding every trace of the potato in works of art—has proved a more substantial task than I had first anticipated, leading me on in a seemingly endless investigation. Even I am amazed by the amount of discreetly copious examples of potato works that do exist. My own discoveries have led me to consider the larger historical situations in which these certain pieces were created, and have increasingly allowed me to view the whole expanse of human artistic endeavors as one cohesive strand. It has also revealed the potato to be a distinct philosophical and ideological object/symbol signifier.

Potatoes must be speaking to humans on a level we can hardly acknowledge. They must have been talking to those early Potato Artists—convincing them to open up the earth and pull them out, to propagate and experiment with them. The potato certainly seems to be manipulating humans as much as we are them. They have managed to curry our favor to grow them and develop them, into the most important, versatile, nutritious vegetable in the world. Little wonder then that the potato should be given such tribute in the arts. Many artists throughout history have been inspired by the potato, representing it as a subject, symbol and philosophical idea. The potato has again lured another artist into its mysterious and ubiquitous nature, coaxing him into making another potato artwork—this essay and me.

### Notes

- 1 The entire book is based on the fact that plants, specifically potatoes, use humans as much as we use them, for mutual biological survival.
- 2 Interesting to note the double meaning of papa in Spanish—it means 'Pope' as well as potato. Also, there is a connection to the term of endearment, papa that is found in many Latin based languages.
- 3 Chuno making is still practiced in the region today. Harvested potatoes are left outside and arranged in small piles of equal size and similar varieties. The potato dance begins after a series of frosty nights has partially freeze-dried the potatoes. The potatoes are then rhythmically smashed or ground down by the chuno-maker's shoeless feet, hatted-heads focusing downward toward rolled-up pant legs, and the task at hand—removing the rest of the element water from the potatoes—reducing the potatoes to 20% of their former volume, rendering them more portable, storable, and reconstitutable.
- 4 Radcliffe N. Salman's *History and Social Influence of the Potato*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 25, 28
- 5 Alexandra Murphy, *Jean-François Millet*, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), p. 142.
- 6 Ronald De Leeuw, *Van Gogh Museum*, (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 1997), p.

- 7 Margit Rowell, *Sigmar Polke, Works on Paper 1963-1974*, found in Rowell's essay "Sigmar Polke, Strategems of Subversion" pp. 13-14, which was originally taken from Friedrich W. Heubach's "Sigmar Polke," in *Bilder, Tücher, Objekte*, exh. cat., Tübingen, 1976, p. 133, and translated by Lawrence Shapiro. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 8 Sigmar Polke, "Early Influences, Later Consequences or *How Did the Monkey Get into my Work?* and other icono-biographical questions," *The Three Lies of Painting*, (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1997). , pp. 286-294.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Jeffrey Price, "Interview with John Bock," November 29, 2003.
- 12 Ida Gianelli, *Arte Povera in Collection*, (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2000), p. 236.
- 13 <http://www.artnexus.com/servlet/releaseDocument?document=8257>
- 14 Claes Oldenburg, *Claes Oldenburg: Object into Monument*, (Pasadena, California: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971), p.15.
- 15 From Cremaster 3 synopsis.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is located at the top of this bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Dialectical Potato: Potato in Art, Art in Potato  
SOURCE: Art Crit 18 no2 2003  
WN: 0300206030004

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.sunysb.edu/>

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.