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Slaughtering and Eating Beautiful Creatures: Kim Waldron's Folk Feast

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Slaughtering and Eating Beautiful Creatures: Kim Waldron's Folk Feast

In the photograph *Bleeding Out* (2010), the Montreal-based artist Kim Waldron, dressed simply in a blue quilted vest and plain overalls, stands over the limp body of a sheep lying in its own blood. Behind her are another animal's bisected carcass and a plastic bin. Nearby there is a broom. The floor is roughly poured concrete. Three distinct handprints made in blood immediately suggest that she has just killed this animal. She has. Her gaze is focused on the broken animal at her feet. Her puzzling facial expression could be read as pensive, troubled, bemused or satisfied. She is in an abattoir. In this case, temporarily at least, it is also the artist's studio.

Bleeding Out is one in a suite of photographic images that record Waldron's long-term project *Beautiful Creatures* (2009), for which she learned to slaughter and prepare animals, and then used these skills to harvest various meats for a



celebratory feast served to a small East Coast Canadian community.¹ For this project, Waldron acquired skills that are tied to folk practices. From a certain position, the slaughtering of animals for food is a sort of lost knowledge that is nonetheless fundamental to the food and cooking practices of many people today.

This artwork culminated in three feasts: a buffet feast held at English Harbour Arts Centre; and two four-course meals held at the four-and-a-half star inn The Fisher's Loft at Trinity Bay, Newfoundland. News of the three-day event spread through the local community by word of mouth. Around forty people attended each of the three dinners. Locals were employed as wait staff in exchange for surplus meat.

What provoked her folk feast? In an interview, Waldron explained to me that her seven years of vegetarianism stalled when she began working as a chef at Montreal's Laïka restaurant and at the Reservoir gastropub.² She became an omnivore. But when faced with an order of rabbits that was brought in from the butcher with heads intact, she faltered: their skinned visages too greatly resembled those of cats and therefore she could not bring herself to decapitate them. She describes the outcomes of that event: "I served meat to people all the time but I couldn't deal very well with any relationship to the live animal. The disconnection that I became aware of that day between the live animal and the food that I eat was the beginning of this art project."³ In part to remedy this anxiety, Waldron took instruction in New York State at the Cobleskill College of Agriculture and Technology in the winter of 2009 to learn how to slaughter

animals. She also took butchering classes the summer of 2009 at Calixa-Lavallée Centre de formation professionnelle in Montreal North. When conceiving *Beautiful Creatures*, Waldron originally hoped that she could do her slaughtering on open land, but learned that federal law dictates that these activities must take place in a licensed facility. Since Waldron intended to photographically document her actions, the first slaughtering facilities she approached refused her request, fearing a media scandal. Eventually, an abattoir agreed to host her project.

If her objective was only to learn a skill, why host a feast and give the meat away for free, I asked? Was it simply a matter of obtaining *authentic* knowledge about how meat has traditionally been prepared? She responded by saying her project created a product, and that this product needed an endpoint. In other words: a consumer. In Newfoundland, Waldron elaborated, there is a tradition of harvesting your own meat and sharing it with the community. Her project builds on that legacy. There seems something more poignant and less utilitarian in her choice of holding a communal feast, however. By gifting these foods, I want to suggest that Waldron also performs a kind of ideological value for her diners, but that her audience may accept or reject the artist's position without refusing to dine.

Sociologist Marcel Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, considered a foundational text on the role of gifting in social groups, investigates the ways that so-called primitive cultures negotiate generosity as a method to maintain peace and happy cohabitation. One means for enacting negotiation is the sharing of food, which he considers to be a self-interested gesture motivated by obligation.⁴ Mauss' theory suggests that meals provided by artists' vernacular feasts are not necessarily benevolent gestures, the offering and acceptance of food also involves a contract of trust between giver and receiver. This does not guarantee, however, that Waldron's diners will agree with the artist's politics. In fact, the feast may be an opportunity for conversational disagreement and negotiation.

My thinking here is also influenced by the writing of French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) and in particular his concept of political gastronomy. He claims that feasting is a political device for plying conviviality between diplomats and other leaders from different nations. By this model, "the table [has] established a kind of alliance between the parties, and made guests more apt to receive certain impressions and submit to certain influences [...] the fate of nations is decided on in a banquet."⁵ In reflecting on *Beautiful Creatures*, I want to build on Brillat-Savarin's model and argue that vernacular feast artworks have a robust effect in the social and political spheres. Waldron's project raises the questions "what is good to eat" and also "how is good to eat," and although her own solution involves adopting skills to slaughter meat, diners are left to make their own conclusions. Regardless of their politics, diners are welcome at the table. There is persuasive, rhetorical, power in the gift, and so by offering her food for free I suggest that Waldron's ideological program is presented in an advantageous light.

Most of Waldron's audience will access this work photographically, and so returning to this image—disturbing for some—is fruitful. These complex photographs might offend with their direct representation of the means by which animals are slaughtered, but the fact is that Waldron includes this action within her art practice, thereby presumably aestheticizing it. Are these images callous in their representation of a creature's death because they turn this event into a *merely* aesthetic object? My position is that these images and the performative practice that produced them are aesthetic in the sense that they *grope for feeling*, as one searches for an object in darkness. Here I am referring



Kim Waldron, installation of *Animal Heads* at the exhibition *La Colonie*, 2010. Variable sizes.





Kim Waldron, *Packaged Veal*, 2010. Inkjet print, 76, 2 x 76, 2 cm.



Kim Waldron, *Packaged Pork*, 2010. Inkjet print; 76, 2 x 76, 2 cm.

to the definition of aesthetic based on the Greek *aisthesthai*, to perceive, which highlights the act of perception that is delivered through feeling. These images, by the same token, represent an attempt to sort through the predicament of those of our species that can survive without meat but choose to eat animals for sustenance or pleasure.

Now: some admissions and clarifications. For my own part, I have become a kind of dietary agnostic. After many years of veganism followed by vegetarianism, gradually animals of many sorts have found their way back to my pantry, fridge, butcher's block and dining table. It is hard for me, when I take the question of "why to be omnivore" most seriously, to not see this development in my own diet as an insidiously inflaming lacuna in my moral order.⁶ I too am in search of some root or guidance in terms of what I eat and where it comes from, and this is what draws me to *Beautiful Creatures*. Because of this, I am inclined to see Waldron's project as one of bravery and great sensitivity. I want to argue that this project can be considered as a vernacular artist's feast, and that this way of working is necessarily linked to folk practices.

Beautiful Creatures is not divorced from the cultural tides in which it works. The contemporary consumption of foodstuffs and particularly meat as a decisive and political act is at the moment greatly on the minds not only of artists, but also scholars, ecologists, chefs, and literary authors. Pivotal and popular written contributions from the field have been made in recent years by Amy Cotler, Maria Rodale, Michael Pollan, Jonathan Safran-Foer, Ruth Ozeki, and Isa Moskowitz to name but a few.⁷ Through the writings of these and other authors, terminologies and practices such as domestic foodways, foodmiles, freegan, flexitarian, dumpster diving, gastronaut, the 100-mile diet and locavore have come to popular attention. Contemporary chefs such as Alice Waters, Jamie Oliver, Deborah Madison and Mollie Katzen have presented cookbooks that are also effective ideological treatises on food preparation and consumption—what our food choices represent and effect. Similarly, agencies and organizations such as the Slow Food Movement and Food Not Bombs are engaged in educating and enabling urban dwellers to access and understand food in new ways. Also connected with the trend of food-related folk practices is the proliferation of pictorial publications on domestic canning,⁸ preserving meats at home,⁹ homemade cheese¹⁰ and cooking from a home garden.¹¹ The blogs focusing on these subjects are countless. Waldron is not alone in her investigations: other artists of the last century who have established independent artists' restaurants and hosted public feasts include Iain and Ingrid Baxter's *Eye Scream*, Daniel Spoerri's *Restaurant Spoerri*, the Futurist's *Holy Palate*, Caroline Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark's *FOOD*, Carsten Höller's *The Double Club*, Dean Baldwin's *The Dork Porch*, Agathe Snow's *First Postapocalyptic Christmas Dinner* and many others.¹² At the root of these inquiries, it seems to me, is a turbid undercurrent having to do with the production of commodities, but also the treatment of humans and their fellow beings (the animals that some choose to eat). These are two entwined subjects inflected under the conditions of capitalism.

How does morality shift when an eater has knowledge or awareness of the production process by which an animal is delivered to their plate? Doubtless, some would argue that this is not a moral question—but for the purposes of this discussion, I would like to suggest that moral questions surrounding meat's production are exactly what has motivated Waldron's project, and not only ones that have to do with the authentic lustre associated with folk practices. And it is the awareness of the means of production involved in making food commodities that has everything to do with their perceived morality or immorality. The

message that these commodities carry is one suggestive and not inherent to their being as things. As Karl Marx observed, once commodified, food takes on a social soul according to its means of production and consumption. He gives the example of the flax-farming Westphalian peasants that Frederick II sent into exile. The new farmers who took over the enterprise might have managed to produce exactly the same commodity from a material perspective, but something vital had changed in the means of its production via human labour. He writes, "the flax looks exactly as it did before. Not a fibre of it has changed, but a new social soul has entered into its body."¹³ In Waldron's case, the very same is true. Her lamb cutlets have every physical resemblance to those produced by other commercial means. But those that are mass-produced carry the apparition of their particular means of production, and Waldron's comestibles have their own wraith floating above them.

Something stirs here. There are many artists who take on the commodification process as carried out in late modernity by setting up alternative points of sale for comestibles and other goods. These have been tied, theoretically, with counter-capitalist trends of the 20th century's close. While activist models and grassroots free-food movements work to bring attention to the scarcity of healthy food and the problems of food's production, several artists are adopting a joint-mantle as activists. Little activism *per se* seems at work in *Beautiful Creatures* from my perspective, however. There is another method at work in her project.

Beautiful Creatures, as it was later represented in exhibition, includes a display of the trophy-mounted heads of the animals that Waldron slaughtered for her feast, resembling the trophy heads of moose or deer caught by a hunter. But her trophies are animals usually raised agriculturally: a rabbit, a duck, a pig, a sheep, a cow. A statement available on her website reads, "The heads signify my pride in having faced the uncomfortable act of killing another living being and they draw attention to the representational aspect of photography."¹⁴ While her remark about photography requires too much unpacking to be adequately explored here, her notes on the display of the heads suggests a "more honest" or folk approach to the delivery of meats to table. Carefully considering these animal busts and the process that produced them as artworks is illuminating. While usually trophy heads are associated with the celebration of killing animals for sport, and sometimes also for food, Waldron's animal busts celebrate the harvesting of meat for consumption and the production of an artwork, following a means of production generally kept out of sight by virtue of the factory farming of cattle.

Waldron's piece draws from knowledge developed and maintained by hunting communities that collect, process and prepare their own meats. These practices reject or show disdain for the commercial or industrial production of foodstuffs, and privilege and encourage an agrarian or partially-agrarian economy. Her project seems a response to a gradual but significant shift in agricultural production and food consumption in North America. Cattle, poultry and other livestock are raised in industrial settings that have been villanized by some, I would say appropriately, as factory farms. And yet meat is hardly the only industrialized food commodity delivered to contemporary consumers in this way.¹⁵ Dairy products, fruit, vegetables, spices and grains are all comestibles that move through these similar trade-paths and foodways. What is the difference?

Several new food movements argue that our dietary choices position us as political beings and shape our sense of self. Carol J. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* for example is a rally-call that offers one perspective on how diet can be linked to a feminist position: she draws parallels between the consumption of meat, cruelty to animals and violence

toward women. Adams sees both animals and women forced into oppressed roles, and she in part turns to visual culture—menus, billboards—to prove her point. As a result, she considers her vegetarianism and feminism to be indelibly linked.¹⁶ While some would consider her view extreme, there is much worth in her argument. By her logic, what we eat, and also *how we eat it* has ideological value. A slightly subtler example is helpful here. The practice of drinking wine in France and the personal taste this activity involves, according to Roland Barthes, has a “decorative value” that demonstrates facility in the mores of the country; thus the drinking of wine functions to give “a collective morality.”¹⁷ Barthes tells us in this passage that by the consumption of foodstuffs knowledge as ideology is performed and transmitted.

Beautiful Creatures promotes the re-domestication of food crafts and trades that have been co-opted or abducted by the commercial sphere. I am cautious of any efforts to show that folk practices are ideal, more natural, or inherently good—since these evaluations romanticize a lost and ideal form of knowledge. However, if the literary sources I have cited above are any evidence, there is a marked tide in North America toward a desire to feel connected—rather than alienated—from that monolithic spectre called the means of production, whether in the production of T-shirts or in that of food. The sense of responsibility or even indemnity that finds its way into the artist’s practice arrives through these same channels of cultural communication.

With *Beautiful Creatures*, the artist trains and studies in order to understand a method that developed as a folk tradition—that continues to this day—and then re-performs that small-scale practice back to a small community of individuals. This is not a failing in the work, but it does seem to be a reflection of the often phrased “act-local” discourse that serves to reduce culpability, or fulfill and resolve a sense of indemnity, where the artist wishes to give back to a community and simultaneously promote ecological awareness, communitarian values and an apparent rejection of capitalism.

Waldron’s project is dynamic for its investigation of the bureaucracies and legalities that govern the production of foodstuffs not only in North America, but also globally. Strict rules exist to control the processing of food production when that food is sold, and no special exceptions are made for cases where food is gifted or shared with groups without expense. Of course, many hunters are bound to entirely ignore this legislation. But by ferreting out that murky means of production that delivers foodstuffs to us, as well as the legalities involved in the provision of food, *Beautiful Creatures* doesn’t achieve moralistic high ground. It promotes a trade of subcurrent knowledge.

Back to the photograph. *Bleeding Out* shows that folk practice too is a form of knowledge that can be traded, and it also offers a litmus: those omnivores who are repulsed by the image of a slaughtered animal might best search for an alternative diet. As I raised in my introduction, this image gropes for feeling. By presenting such an endgame, Waldron’s image does not trivialize the sacrifice of this creature, but it tests our mettle to face up to the production of those goods that sustain us while also reflecting the ideological values involved in the consumption of meat.

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Mark Clintberg is an art historian, artist, and writer based in Montreal. He is currently a Ph.D. student in the Interuniversity Doctoral Program in Art History at Concordia University. His writing has been published in *Canadian Art*, *Maisonneuve*, *Pivot*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Arte al Dia International*, *Border Crossings*, *BlackFlash*, *Fillip Review* and *Photofile*.

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Notes

- 1 These photographs were created during Waldron’s one-month residency at English Harbour Art Centre, Newfoundland and they were later shown in a group exhibition called *La colonie* in Deschambault-Grondines to mark the 25th anniversary of artist-run centre l’Oeil de Poisson, Quebec City.
- 2 This interview was held in Montreal in person on December 18, 2009. Further information was collected from the artist via email in September and October of 2010.
- 3 From an interview between the artist and the author, October 25, 2010.
- 4 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. W.D. Halls, (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1990. First published “Essai sur le Don.” *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1950): 3. Gifts given to excess, where there is a seemingly unlimited supply of foodstuffs on offer to a community, are of special interest to Mauss since “it is a competition to see who is the richest and the most madly extravagant. Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry.” See Mauss, 37.
- 5 Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, 57. *The Physiology of Taste: or, Transcendental Gastronomy*. Fayette Robinson, Trans. Charleston: BiblioBazaar. (2006, first published 1825).
- 6 Here I am substantially influenced by Michael Pollan’s lucidly argued *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: An Eater’s Manual* (2006). New York; Toronto: Penguin Group.
- 7 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (2009); *My Year of Meats* (1999); Amy Cotler, *The Locavore Way* (2009); Isa Moskowitz, *Vegan Manifesto* (2011); Maria Rosdale, *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Stop the Climate Crisis, Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep us Safe* (2010).
- 8 See *Canning for a New Generation* (2010) by Liana Krissoff and Rinne Allen; *Homesteading: A Back to Basics Guide to Growing Your Own Food, Canning, Keeping Chickens, Generating Your Own Energy, Crafting, Herbal Medicine and More* (2009) by Abigail R. Gehring.
- 9 Examples include *The Complete Guide to Preserving Meat, Fish and Game* by Ken Oster; *The Complete Book of Butchering, Smoking, Curing, and Sausage Making: How to Harvest Your Livestock and Wild Game* by Philip Hasheider; and *Cured: Slow Techniques for Flavouring Meat, Fish, and Vegetables* by Lindy Wildsmith. All were published in 2010.
- 10 Brad Kessler’s *Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, A Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese* (2009) has an extremely promising title. *Artisan Cheese Making at Home* by Mary Karlin (to be published in 2011) is one other example of this burgeoning subject.
- 11 Nigel Slater’s *Tender, Vol. 1: A cook and his vegetable patch* (2009) is an especially beautiful example.
- 12 These eateries are the subject of my doctoral research under the supervision of Dr. Johanne Sloan, Concordia University.
- 13 Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 909. [sic]
- 14 kimwaldron.com. Site accessed October 27, 2010.
- 15 Clearly, there are other issues having to do with the quantity of resources required for the farming of cattle versus the raising of vegetables and dairy.
- 16 Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 15, 23.
- 17 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., Toronto: Harper Collins Canada Ltd. 1972): 59.