

Marking Eggplants and the Unpredictable

by Richard Conte

The marking of eggplants is an experimental practice, rarer than the marking of fruit (apples and pears). Like with fruit, the basic idea is rather simple. One exploits the pigmentation process of vegetables exposed to light. Physiologically, the phenomenon observed in vegetables is analogous to human suntanning. If a person suntanning wears a watch or a particular clothing item regularly, the resulting tan lines may be visible for several weeks thereafter.

As with human skin, the coloring of plant skin can occur independently from exposure to light. Certain varieties of fruit will develop a strong color, even if grown in total darkness. Therefore, it is important to choose the right varieties. It may be noted that the skin of a fruit grown in darkness is more fragile, thinner and more sensitive to UV rays, once exposed to light, than the skin of a fruit with normal sun exposure. However, one element distinguishes fruit and vegetable skin coloring from human suntanning. That is the link between the color of certain varieties of fruits and vegetables and colder nighttime temperatures. Thus, depending on the year and the growing place, certain varieties of eggplant can acquire a more or less pronounced violet color.

Having made these naturalist's observations, we look to the technique implemented, which is basically quite simple. It consists in growing fruits or vegetables in darkness, by putting a bag around each fruit and then exposing only a portion of the mature fruit to light. This results in a differentiation in the coloring of the fruit, that remains as long as the fruit is in good shape, providing it's sheltered from strong light sources. This work can only be done with bi-color (white inside) species of eggplants. Sun-marking other varieties of eggplants is to be ruled out. Furthermore, as opposed to apples, the dimensions of eggplants are highly variable, which makes it difficult to use the bagging technique. Thus, we need to experiment with a technique imported from Japan, consisting in gluing stickers, made with the software Illustrator. Eggplant growth is quick and difficult to control, so all sorts of effects generated by this growth should be expected: blur effects, deformations, etc. Also – and this is important for a potential exhibition – eggplant skin starts to wrinkle very quickly, in the third week after picking. This wrinkling is not without artistic interest, as we will see. If we want to keep vegetables from rotting, it's possible to eliminate the bacteria causing the ionization of vegetables.

This allows them to keep for several months.

In 2009, with the team from the *Potager du roi* (*The King's Kitchen Garden*) at Versailles, as well as researchers from the French National Institute of Agricultural Research in Lyon, we cultivated different varieties of bi-color eggplants, as an experiment. The somewhat late sun-marking was done using rather elastic stickers, each sticker a stencil of a firearm. In using images of firearms, the goal is not to surprise or shock anyone, but on the contrary, to weave connections between different actors unfamiliar to the art world. Together we can create a work that is innovative, not only artistically, but also in the area of the specialized skills called for. Thus, marking eggplants was a side experiment at *the Potager du roi*, whereas apple marking has been known of and practiced since the 19th century. My artistic initiative (after having worked for four years on "libertine" apples) gives substance and amplitude to this practice, which is in its embryonic stages in the horticultural field. Through this work, we can make visible an approach that is simple, but whose implementation requires very refined and even complex aptitudes. Specialized skills are called for and play a major role in the work. The involvement of the most sophisticated image-making technologies are required, including high definition animated filmmaking, photographic printing on diasec, and computer graphics simulation processes.

Furthermore, numerous questions arise when working collectively on this project which accompanies the natural growth cycle of the vegetables.

Of course, one of the central preoccupations is the question of the image chosen. Marking eggplants, through sun-prints, with images of firearms, may indeed seem like an approach akin to the that of the surrealists Lautréamont and André Breton, so arbitrary does the relation between eggplants and firearms first seem.

One needs to keep in mind, though, that artistic exploration and research doesn't close in on it's project, but, on the contrary, is always unfolding into an ongoing trajectory. Meetings, technical experiments, horticultural happenstance and the evolution of the documenting process, etc., will contribute significantly to the development of this project.

My discussions with vegetable specialists from the garden first made me aware of their feelings about this project. Marking vegetables with images of firearms shocked them. Why? They think of eggplants as mainly

enveloping and maternal, not having any phallic connotation whatsoever. Fragile and hidden fruits, they have no connection with violence and war. As for me, I saw the eggplants as they are on view in French open markets: soft, dark violet, lain out side by side.

Those best suited to sun-marking are quite round. Their sepals hurt one's hands and their coloring is rather random. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, they remain perfectly white!

To conclude, I'd like to return to the notion of radical unpredictability, that I am trying to put forward and show you a very short film, which has been made into an unusual loop. In the film-making process as well, collaboration with outside specialists was indispensable and highly significant in the work's development.

With a photographer and a computer specialist, a system of shooting was developed. A sort of gyroscope was built for the occasion. Imagine a white disk with my marked eggplant in the center. The goal of the operation is to photograph the vegetable's decomposition and the disappearance of the sun-print, over a week-long period. We've decided to shoot 7200 photos at 360°. That means 36 states of decomposition, with views of each state every 10°. We will have 200 photos for each state of decomposition, with which we will make an animated film.

But an eggplant doesn't rot in a week. It takes five or six weeks to decay. However, the daily studio rental costs won't allow us such a luxury. Without asking my opinion, the photographer installs powerful tungsten lamps and a fan heater, to speed up the decomposition process. The lights are brought closer and closer to the vegetable. The eggplant doesn't rot, but swells and then becomes charred.

This use of heat wasn't my idea, but the result seemed clear: The methods used to adhere to our time frame had the effect of changing and amplifying the meaning of this film. It's obvious that charring is more explosive and pertinent to this work than rotting. Charring interrupts the natural process of decomposition and offers the image an incursion into real life.

I wanted the looping of the film to allow a perpetual deterioration followed by a perpetual restoration of the vegetable, without changing the direction of the gyration. This was accomplished by transforming the photos of the 36 states of the eggplant into an animated film. We used the software After

Effect, which treats images, placed end to end, layers them, manages transitions between each state and modifies the opacity between one layer and another. The eggplant images were not perfectly lined up when taking each shot, which will explain the imperfections of the film.

This passage from plant to mineral, then from mineral to plant, without changing the direction of the gyration was, for me, a radically unpredictable element of the work. In conclusion, I'd like to put forth the notion that the integration of unpredictable aspects of a work, due to outside intervention or events, into the poietic process, is a reversal of the ordinary order of affairs. That which could have been a small catastrophe (from kata : meaning fall) in the work, in this approach, on the contrary, adds real depth and complexity to the work, beyond the artist's initial intention. This occurs through a certain unplanned mix of circumstances, which are part of the material conditions involved in the development of a work and involves the untimely intervention of the Other.

Translated by June Allen