

Richard Conte
The Bath of the Libertine Apples.
A parody on Orientality.

The performance

The artificial Balbi cave is somewhat to shrine to the libertine meetings that took place there between the Countess and the future King Louis XVIII between 1784 and 1786. At 3pm, on Saturday, October 7, an art ceremony was held there to celebrate the end of the *Libertine Apples* harvest. These apples, fruit of active cooperation between the gardeners of the *Potager du roi (The King's Kitchen Garden)* and the artist, Richard Conte, were marked with sun-prints, made using laser-cut stencils, representing lovers' scenes that were culled from erotic engravings published the end of the 18th century, and documented by Emmanuel Pierrat.

After the harvest, the red or black paper stencils, glued on with edible gelatin, remain stuck to the apple skin. To remove them, the fruit has to be soaked in warm water and gently rubbed with one's fingers or palms, to remove what looks like fine lace. The need for this bath reminds us of the developing bath that was central in this art act, as it was progressively conceived and developed, with the help of several young assistants from the Versailles National Landscaping School.

We were under the sign of Eros. This was determined as much by the location of the ceremony as by the marking of the apples, the apple being, as we know, a fruit with a strong symbolic content. So the idea of putting a nude woman, **Laetitia Melierres**, in the midst of this event, seemed a natural step. She represents both the nude model, seen in paintings and photos, and the vaporous presence of the countess, mistress and, perhaps, priestess of the cave. The grotto itself is in a form that explicitly evokes the female genitalia, and can be seen as a symbol of a fantasized anthropology of our origins.

The cave wraps around the redhead. She settles into a tub covered and lined with white sheets and filled with water that's been warmed by a brasero heater that's just outside the cave. The water temperature has been maintained at 104°F, since the previous evening. The warm liquid passes

through a closed circuit, a serpentine of metal pipes that regulates water temperature and flow.

Once the model is in the bath, the artist hands her the first apple. She soaks the fruit in the warm water, ungluing the stencil, revealing the positive of the erotic scene represented. This is always a surprising moment. The image revealed depends on the fruit's coloring, the gardener's fancy or the parasites' random work. For two hours, nearly two hundred stencils will be removed, showing countless variations of the twelve stenciled images. The bath is lit from above, with the addition of artificial lighting in red and orange. In this light, the paper stencils don't dissolve. Some remain intact to return and stick to the white skin of the naked woman. Others remain floating on the surface of the bath water, only to later tip and plunge to the bottom of the tub. Finally, dozens remain, like splashes of fine lingerie, lying in the soaked folds of the cloths lining the tub.

But the artist hasn't finished delivering the apples to the woman. Now, he pours them into the tub by the crate-load, while viewers come and go through the two principal openings of the cave. The artist is dressed as a gardener, wearing a dark blue canvas apron. He is there to serve the woman, who hands the fruit back to him, as soon as the the drawing is revealed. He dries the fruit with a white tea towel and places some of it carefully in order, like *pièces montées*, onto large, flat stones, and goes to nestle other pieces of fruit into crevices of the cave, thus punctuating the walls at an ever greater distance. The woman bites into an apple. The artist does the same. She throws some fruit to the viewers, who catch them in mid-air. The artist hands some of the fruit out to the public. The attendees keep their apples, as a proof or their presence at this event. Yet the fruit is ephemeral. Sooner or later it will decay.

The musician **Benjamin Petit** improvises on the transverse flute and the piccolo, while moving around freely inside and outside of the cave of the Anglo-Chinese gardens, within earshot of the viewers.

It's a ceremony on an October Saturday in Versailles, an apple festival, sealing and stamping two years of cooperation around a project involving the artist's constant gestation of the work, the will of the Assistant Director of the gardens, **Manuel Pluinage**, and the know-how of Versailles

horticulturalists, **Jacques Beccaletto** and **François Moulin**, and Montreuil horticulturalist, **Philippe Schuller**.

Orient and Origin.

One only has to pronounce the word ORIENT and the mind becomes inebriated. "For this word to produce its full effect on the mind of someone, that person must, above all, never have been to the imprecise land that the word depicts", writes Paul Valéry in 1938, in *Oriente versus*. "One must know the ORIENT only through images, stories heard, readings and a few objects, so that it is perceived, not with understanding and knowledge, but with confusion. One thus creates good material for dreams. There has to be a mix of space and time, of pseudo-truth and false sureness, of tiny details and excessively vast visions. That is the ORIENT of the mind".¹

Our origins are a fable. Origin and orient are both born of the same *etymon*. *Oriens*, the rising sun - the east - is the present participle of the Latin word *oriri*, meaning rise, particularly in relation to a star "being born" or "originating from". The rising sun is this powerful star that gives life and reddens apples. We are then likely to have developed a complex paradoxical perception, in which the origin of the world, as depicted in the *Roman de l'origine* (that Bernard Teyssèdre writes about, in regards to the famous painting of female genitals by Courbet), the Grotto of the Nativity, Plato's cave, and the cave of the Koran are all mixed, from the start. From the most obscure cave, emerges the blinding light of the god Phoebus, who plays the main role in the marking of our apples.

According to Valéry, "this word 'ORIENT' can not reasonably indicate a simple point on the *horizon of a place*, but comes from a time when cosmology was more human, when the earth was what one saw, and the sun, each day, truly emerged from the sea. People from our [Western] countries placed a powerful visible god in the direction of the rising sun. This god was a generator of vision, and all that could be conceived of that was immeasurable, strange or *original*."²

The word *original* is used to talk about original sin. Original sin is a main subject in our dealing with apples. The word apple in French is *pomme*, from the Latin word *pomum*, but this Latin word is a perfect example of a *false friend*. In Latin, the word for apple is *malum*, whereas *pomum* indicates any sort of fruit. The word *pomme*, in French, replaced *malum*,

¹ Paul Valéry, *Oriente versus*, magazine *Verve*, number 3, summer 1938. From *Œuvres*, Volume 2, Pléiade, Gallimard, 1960, p.1041.

² *Ibid.*

because *malum* can make one think of *malus*, or *mal* in French, meaning “bad” or “wrong”, that is to say “forbidden”, and because the *pomme* (apple) remains the quintessential fruit, the *pomum*.

In the Book of Genesis, it's only after having bitten into the forbidden fruit, falsely identified as an apple, that Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise. Thus, apples have remained linked to original sin, because of the Latin translation of the Vulgate in the 4th century, and because of the Latin word "*malus*" tree, *malus* meaning both "evil" or "wrong", that is to say "forbidden" tree, and also indicating a simple apple tree. Because of this confusion, apples can be seen as symbols, both of the sexual act and of forbidden knowledge.

Apples can also be an erotic reference. Sometimes they call women's breasts to mind. In Portugal, this fruit is considered an aphrodisiac.

Yet apples come from the Orient. The apples we consume today originate from the variety *malus sieversii*, which has been consumed by mankind since the Neolithic period, on the plateaus of central Asia. 3000 years ago, they were already consumed by the Chinese. Apples in Europe arrived by way of the Silk Road, to the Israelites, the Greeks and the Romans. Pliny the Elder later listed about 100 varieties. Today there are 11,000 varieties of apples, 7,000 of which are grown throughout the world.

In viewing the slide show, did you notice how round and pale this woman is, just like the models in certain paintings by Ingres or Gerome? She goes into the Anglo-Chinese garden where the Balbi cave is, and where, in the past, one could find farm industry buildings, which may stimulate the imagination.

"We know that Anglo-Chinese gardens were in fashion at the end of the 18th century in England, Germany, Sweden, and in France starting in 1770.

In them, we can find orientalizing plant species and landscaping, as well as buildings that are meant to look as if they are Chinese or from Antiquity. These so-called "fabricated" parks contain many slight constructions, from pavilions to temples, to belvederes. They were built next to utilitarian-looking buildings, such as dairies, icehouses, and so on. It's a garden that harbored a place of discreet pleasures, but also provoked astonishment, reflection and emotion.

Balbi Park was conceived in 1785 by Chalgrin. In the heart of this Anglo-Chinese garden, on a fairly small parcel of about 7.5 acres, there were a pavilion, built for festivities (no longer standing), and a pond.

The cave remains, nestled in the hollow of an imposing burial mound. Lined with rocks, the cave has several chambers, concealing hidden exits and many tiny crevices, that one can slip candles into. The whole cave is overhung by a tiny hollow, where a quartet of musicians could slip in and play melodies that must have hidden and brought cheer to the visitors' frolicking. Balbi Cave oscillates between being a fairy cabin and a sophisticated establishment.

The cave is hidden from the château and the main gardens, since we are in a construction situated in the somewhat remote *Potager du roi*.

But lets return to the process of apple marking, that I spoke about last year. I'll remind you that the oldest reference known on this subject, dating from the 12th century, is to be found in *Le livre de l'agriculture d' IBN AL-'AWWAM*. One can read, "Chapter 14, curious recipes and processes used for certain trees and certain plants [...]"

When you want to create apples with writing or drawing on them, choose a variety of apple that will develop a strong red color. Take it when it has reached its full size, before it turns red. Write on the surface as suits you, or draw as you like, with ink, or with wool dye, egg white or enamel paint or alum dissolved in water or liquid plaster or melted pitch. Finally, use whatever substances you have available to write or draw with. Use a large-tip reed pen. Cover the apple with a mat to keep the dew and rain from washing the marks off, and also to keep the marks from being erased, through rubbing against leaves or other fruit. Leave the apple attached to the tree, until it has acquired a uniform red tone. Then rub the part with the writing or drawing with your hand, or wash the apple with water. The characters or forms remain white or green, without the slightest nuance of red, while all the rest of the apple is red, which gives a beautiful result. You can do the same operation on red or black damson plums, while they are still green, before they acquire their usual color."³

³ IBN AL-'AWWAM, in *Le livre de l'agriculture (The Book of Agriculture)*.

"Chapitre 15, Curious recipes and ingenious procedures employed concerning certain trees and plants [...]"

The garden, the cave, the nude woman and the apples, reddened by the sun, all come together, in a way, to create a parody of orientality, which has no basis other than this Orient of the mind that Valéry speaks of.

Ghosts of Orientalism

Now, the woman goes down into the artificial cave that gave shelter to the libertine celebrations in the 1780s, in this relatively remote corner of the *Potager du roi*, in Versailles.

Outside, from afar, the brasero heater, and its serpentine regulators, maintain the bathwater at 104°F. The woman has walked down the narrow stone staircase and entered the hot water, which invites her lascivious body to relaxation, to abandon. The tub is completely wrapped in soaked linens, like in David's painting of the bath of Marat. It's a fruit tub that comes from the kitchen garden. We had considered requesting a bathtub from the château, but this tub is better for what we have to do. For the the bath of developing liquid, that washes the apples, in direct contact with the skin and hands of this woman, this tub is better. It's more unrefined and has a geometry that contrasts radically with the stones of the grotto and the grotto's organic, uterine, vaginal depths... the archetypical Cave.

Laetitia is not there to rest. She has a specific task to do. The man, dressed as a gardener, drops apples into the bathwater. The apples are covered with fragments of red or black laser-clipped papers, the stencils that drew the negatives of couples making love, or individuals giving themselves joy. The gardeners put bags around the apples, when they were still on the tree, to keep them from pigmenting. Then, when the fruit reached its full size, the gardeners stuck these paper stencils on, to prevent the hidden part of the apples from redding, using an old sun-marking procedure. This creates a primal photograph, that the naked woman, in her warm bath, will reveal. The edible gelatin, sticky and translucent like sperm, served as a glue for these *porned* stencils and will melt in the heat of the bathwater. The shadow bodies become unglued, under the expert fingers of the woman. The dead skins are destined to break up, float for some time, and then

The author of this treaty on agriculture, Ibn Al-Awwam, lived in Séville at the end of the 12th century. He was both a theoretician and an experimenter of agricultural techniques. His writing, long considered as the principal reference on medieval Andalusian agronomy, is a compilation of knowledge accumulated in this area since antiquity. Islamic civilization contributed to the diffusion of many plants, products and techniques (cotton, silk, paper, sugar, apricots, eggplants, watermelon, spinach, artichokes, rice, the water mill...).

suddenly darken and sink; disturbing laces and improbable lingerie, red and black: the drowned of love. When the woman realizes that the stencils have remained intact and whole, she grasps them and, with them, tattoos her body. From the marked apple, these tender papers return to the purgatory of the female body.

But the woman is not there for that reason. She has her labor to do: wash the apples, gently rub them with the fleshy part of her palm, so as not to hurt the scarlet skin of the fruit. Damn! She bites hardily into an apple. The man dressed as a gardener doesn't like that. He's holding a perfectly dry white tea towel and is delicately drying the fruits marked with the sun of Eros. Nor does he like that the woman is tossing fruit to the viewers. He is the master. He hasn't authorized this sort of transgression of the planned ritual. He saw this ceremony more as one of modesty and order. Here, the woman is taking initiatives. She has left her rôle. Fortunately she can't go much further, because too much theatricality would destroy the economy of her dream of orientality. However, in her lower back, the woman has those two symmetrical points, that are so charming and, oh how present in orientalizing images. Thus, she is easily pardoned.

A word or two on heat and eroticism. As Anne Souriau notes, in her article on Orientalism in *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique*, "Siberia may well be east of Europe. It is too cold there, for it to seem oriental!" Yet Muslim Andalusia, west of the Mediterranean basin, is already, in our minds, a threshold to the Orient. Heat and sun are necessary conditions for the orientalizing imagination.

The 18th century, century of the libertinage that we're interested in here, century of *One Thousand and One Nights*, drew its inspiration from a fantasized orient, used as a pretext for eroticism and sensuality. It was the period of Balbi, the period that published the engravings that the libertine apple stencils were made from.

If the reader wants to get an of idea the image of the Orient conveyed by texts of that time, he or she only has to look amongst the multitude of 18th century libertine novels, and read in the work of French authors, La Popelinière and Crébillon, *Zaïrette, histoire orientale*, which can be found in *Tableaux des mœurs du temps*. This fictional work is about the initiation of a French female slave of the great Prince Moufhack, through baths, ornaments, harem pleasures, eunuchs, strange flutes, "skin whiter and finer than porcelain" and "eyes of fire, shoulders and necks of ivory; thighs of alabaster, rose-colored bottoms ... "

As Souriau suggests, aesthetics should reserve the word *orientalist* for those inspired by a "known orient" and "call the person inspired by an imaginary orient, *orientalizing*." In addition to the complex relationship between these two words, a *poetic* approach can offer what Paul Valéry might have called an *implex* of orientality, evoked in this performance, from a parodic angle. The *implex* is that of potentialities, that which explores the creative possibilities or potentialities of an individual or a group. To orientalize a creation is, first of all, to set a course, but, in so doing, to spin the compass needles. "What does it mean to orient oneself in thought?" Kant asked. "How can one orient oneself in the creative process?" is a question likely to incite a *poetic* approach. Artists certainly need to establish a direction in their work, but are immediately confronted with the conditions of possibility and of existence of the work in progress, as the work deviates from its initial trajectory. A communications expert aims to strike the heart of the target. An artist knows from experience, that the heart of his work can't be firmly situated, a priori, because the artist's creation only makes sense, if it is created in ignorance of its final form, and nourished by the unconscious, which, paradoxically, excludes neither randomness nor lucidity. The *orientation*⁴ of a creation is inaccessible, except to the artist who accepts to be indefinitely lost, so as to eventually find him or herself in this elsewhere of self that will become the accomplished work.

The Bath of the Libertine Apples is a parody on orientality, but the orientalizing content of the work is the ingredient of a more authentic *orientation*, that of the work itself, and which consists in each person letting his or her dream unfold.

Translated by June Allen

⁴ In the original text the author uses the French word *orient*, which means both *the Orient* and *orientation*.