

## The Food is Getting Cold

By Yuki Higashino



After the planet Earth was demolished to make way for a hyperspace bypass, the stunned protagonist of Douglas Adams' "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" reflected:

*England no longer existed. He'd got that - somehow he'd got it. He tried again. America, he thought, has gone. He couldn't grasp it. He decided to start smaller again. New York has gone. No reaction. He'd never seriously believed it existed anyway.*

Sightseeing, it can be argued, originates from doubt in the existence of places you have not seen. The pictures have already been taken. Increasingly, as photographs and videos are incessantly uploaded it is practically impossible not to know what a place looks like beforehand. The purpose of visiting is then, to verify if it looks how you imagined it to look, to corroborate the real with the picture of it in your head and on screen. In other words, sightseeing is a process of confirmation, not discovery.

This concept is age-old. In the oft-quoted passage from "Northanger Abbey", Jane Austen wrote:

*They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing—nothing of taste: and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her. The little which she could understand, however, appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day ... a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape.*

The primacy of a picture is nothing new, nor is the expansion of digital technology responsible for it. The preference of a picture, of representation, over the real thing always existed. It is the tenet of the concept of the *picturesque* where the value of a physical space is assessed according to how well it resembles the predetermined criteria for a beautiful landscape. Digital technology simply opened the floodgate. It unleashed the insatiable craving for representation in humanity and enabled people to photograph absolutely everything, to spend more time taking pictures instead of enjoying the natural beauty, city, artwork or food that was in front of them. Pictures come first.

In fact, enjoyment and surprise are decidedly old-fashioned concepts. They require an unmediated encounter with nice or unexpected things, this runs contrary to the impulse of a culture saturated with representations. This also leads to the rapid obsolescence of the concept of vacation. Originating from the Latin word *vacare*, to 'be unoccupied', *vacation* implies pause, disconnection and lack of productivity. That taking a vacation is associated today with the production of pictures, moving images and written accounts, and the fact that most people prefer to be present in their virtual social life while still being away somehow tests the limit of the meaning of vacation. Because let's face it, taking pictures or updating your social media account is work no matter how much you think you enjoy doing it. Sure enough, holiday snaps are not new, but today it's relentless. People docu-

ment everything with the zeal of a Soviet spy documenting every detail of the life of an American official. Perhaps we need to invent a new term to describe what we do when we travel for pleasure and thus replace the words vacation or holiday. It is befitting that the protagonists of the TV series "The Americans", are two KGB spies living in Washington D.C. posing as an ordinary American couple disguising themselves as travel agents. The show is as much about the 1980s itself as the plot and characters, and what could signify the bygone era better than a travel agency? Their old tourist posters still looking brand new, signalling the unfulfilled aspirations of the working and lower middle classes who thought the world was opening up to them. A utopian business model that is now in its twilight, which will die with our grandparents. The idea of vacation will probably die with them too.

Street photography has been traditionally the domain of the flâneur. The detachment a camera can offer makes it suitable for the distant observer. Of course, this was never really possible. If a photographer sets out to take pictures of the street, she is inhabiting her professional space, with a hope that some of these pictures will later be published or exhibited. She is being productive, working, which is precisely what a flâneur shouldn't be doing. Nevertheless, it is a powerful image: a man or a woman, strolling aimlessly on a busy street, equipped with a modern accessory such as a walking stick or a camera. It is modernity.

The reality of our contemporary society is different. Street photography no longer denotes detachment or a keen aesthetic judgement, it is about the photographers letting their semi-interested friends know where they are and what they are doing. No matter what is shown in the picture, the subject is always the photographer. Rosalind Krauss was off the mark when she claimed that the medium specificity of video is the narcissism of the artist. But perhaps she was unwittingly closer to the truth as it relates to human nature. When given an available means of image production, most people turn that device onto themselves sooner or later, either literally or metaphorically. This explains the dogged endurance of the picturesque as the most popular aesthetic concept among the general public, instead of the classical beauty or romantic sublime. Since it is ultimately about forcing the world to conform to the mental picture that is dictated by convention, it is the most narcissistic and least demanding of aesthetic systems. Serious artists are at once repelled and fascinated by it. I personally find people who take pictures of their



food at restaurants fascinating. Am I being preposterous to suggest Jane Austen was perhaps led by similar feelings when she described the cultured individual who judged a view as to how it best resembled a painting?

### Notes

1. Apparently, some of the top chefs in France are trying to ban guests from photographing their food. [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/feb/16/chef-alexandre-gauthier-stop-photographs-food-restaurant](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/feb/16/chef-alexandre-gauthier-stop-photographs-food-restaurant) I
2. Notice that many sub-genres of photography are called "– porn"? For instance "food porn" or "ruin porn". It reveals that this kind of photography is really about desire and the body of the photographers. Does that mean that works by artists who take photographs of other artworks is "art porn" (eg. Thomas Struth or Louise Lawler)?

## Senzo Titolo

By Michael Eddy

It was winter, and that meant that Seiji Takuma had some time on his hands. He was bored, and also happened to be an artist, but most likely this was immaterial to his being selected as one of the three subjects for the experiment. He was paid for his time (and the pay was "not bad"). Nonetheless three months is a long time to stay in an enclosed facility under a controlled regime, with very dim lighting. Seiji would stand directly beneath the niggardly lamp and squint to read the old newspapers brought in for him, held close under his nose.

Every day Seiji slept at 24:00 and woke at 8:00, to the same light. There was not a single window on any wall. It is probably no surprise that food was incredibly important to the subjects' routines. Breakfast was simple fare prepared by staff, with lunch and dinner initially consisting of lunch boxes assembled by a catering company, delivered in their tepid plastic packaging. However, subjects felt these lunch boxes were so horrible that they protested and this arrangement was changed. Throughout the entire duration of his stay in the facility, Seiji was fitted with a rectal thermometer logging his temperature, and was constantly monitored with infrared cameras by facility staff. Excepting, of course, shower and toilet time. Blood and brain wave tests were administered intermittently, and an occasional interview over televideo took place with a psychologist. He had no other contact aside from his brushes with the other two subjects, one of whom already had a psychological condition and backed out after a month, the other being a stereotypical otaku; needless to say interpersonal relations were perhaps the most awkward part of the whole experience.

There was no dearth of activity. A typical day (and every day was typical) consisted of flat knitting, spool knitting, bead threading, puzzle solving, origami folding, mathematics calculation, Lego "brainstorming," an hour of stationary bicycle for cardio-vascular exercise, and other simple tests, etc. Staff surreptitiously removed the completed output from Seiji's quarters (the excruciating aroma of coffee informing of their existence, though neither caffeine nor egghead were ever encountered). Subjects were allowed to select one or two items to bring with them into the facilities, but no means of communication, and no electronic devices. Seiji was allowed to wear his own clothes but they took his shoes and shoelaces. He elected to keep some pencils and a 2-kg hunk of oil clay nearby to work his hands on a semi-daily basis during free time in the evenings. His desk became a shadowy atelier. He sculpted fungi, a compact disk, a curved pencil, a water puddle, a 4-dimensional pocket; in all, fifty shapes to be destroyed and reconstituted again. Before Seiji left, a researcher inquired about commissioning a bronze version of one of these clay sculptures, a human figure, but Seiji turned him down. He was too lazy.

When he finally departed the facility after the 90 days, it was still winter. It wasn't snowing, and the city lights and the cars' headlamps passing in the clear cold night were intolerably bright.

*As told by SEIJI Takuma*



### Postscript

Fifteen years later the convergence of an unprecedented superstorm and a solar wind shockwave knocked out the world's telecommunications networks and pretty much all other electronic devices. It was very, very dark, particularly at night. Huge milling clouds kilometres thick churned against the earth's curving limits, blocking the sun's rays like ancient herds of bison in the sky. It was the type of misery that doesn't like company, even though we all shared it—meaning we each experienced it separately. Many things ceased to function.

What remained from those prior times, when our ecstatic workaday worlds had been fed on the excesses of the sun and the subterranean, weaving the new crystalline monuments from vibrations sped on transparency, when frequencies irradiated thickest flesh and hottest equatorial mud? Math cults called it a reckoning, a flattening of pluses and minuses, whose sum was a protracted situation of stasis. People twiddled their thumbs like blind processors stuck on some numerical palindrome. People whispered in the dark, where history turns inward. People hovered like bees had done, in the throes of their extinction, when cellular signals had fatally overcome them en masse; except with people, the signals had been cut.

Circumstances did not descend into a zombie movie, however. The CEOs had their hard numbers, and most of them knew this was coming. It turned out they had indeed been preparing for the long term after all, but it just happened to be the long hereafter. Through the fog of inactivity, of uneconomy, the long low waves were penetrating. The manic necessary buzzing of latter days was in the past, buffeted by catastrophe, giving onto the quiet clarity of darkness. Humans would re-emerge on the other side—it had been scientifically demonstrated!

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