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In a poem called »Sewing,« Anne Boyer describes the making of a simple piece of clothing: »Sometimes when you look at smoothly joining at least two different pieces of flat but pliable material so that these pieces might correctly encase an eternally irregular, perspiring and breathing three-dimensional object that cannot cease its motion you think that there is no way ever this could happen, yet sometimes it does.«¹

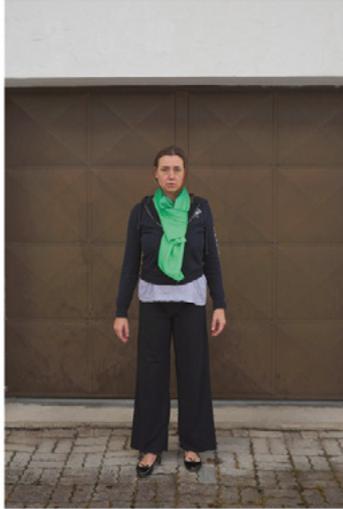
I feel something of this disbelief in the artworks of Anna-Sophie Berger, as well as a consideration of how clothes and bodies organize one another. What follows is the result of spending some time with this mutual induction of meaning between bodies and objects, and a look to how their relationships are mediated by style. From Berger's work, I'll draw examples from the twin disciplines of food and fashion, supplemented by a short consideration on use value, style, and civic space.

Food

In Berger's *Pea earring* (2015), a sterling silver clasp holds in place a dried pea, attaching it to a post and earring back. Some iterations of this work have seen pairs of earrings presented on a small flattish tile of dry white clay,² while others have made use of the earrings as fixtures that fasten other elements to the gallery wall.³ In one of the photographs that make up *Pea campaign* (2015), an earring punctures a sheet of fabric as well as a model's pierced ear, draping the body in printed silk organza. A square image at the silk's center shows a photograph of sea bass bones on a bed of dinnertime detritus. A thick white strip borders the image on all sides, placing

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it in conversation with images of food as they appear on the Internet, banal records of taste or leisure or necessity.

Food's pleasures seem simple, a feeling that obscures the social relations that determine them—the care or labor or violence of others—and that, in turn, literally constitute bodies. Wars have been waged in the name of salt; people have been enslaved in the name of sugar. Considering eighteenth-century French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's ubiquitous aphorism »Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are,« critical eating studies scholar Kyla Wazana Tompkins writes, »But it is not simply the ›what‹ of what one eats that matters. It is the ›where‹ of where we eat and where food comes from; the ›when‹ of historically specific economic conditions and political pressures; the ›how‹ of how food is made; and the ›who‹ of who makes and who gets to eat it. Finally, and most important, it is the many ›whys‹ of eating—the differing imperatives of hunger, necessity, pleasure, nostalgia, and protest—that most determine its meaning.«⁴

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Materials as cheap and abundant and irregular and life-giving as dried peas are not often afforded the luxury of a silver setting; making these earrings are the bearers of an uncomplicated humor: they treat as an object of desire that which is not. But this inversion also looks to how value is organized. What is a jewel, and why? With what might one want to dress oneself? Here, food and garments are married in their work of matching the body with its meaning.

As food constitutes bodies, it also has intimately to do with style. In art as in food, taste is a vertical relation, where appetites are tempered by class, race, and geography. But



unlike other cultural forms—like art, or music—one has no alternative to participating in food, to giving and receiving meaning from it, to making economic and aesthetic and political decisions about it. If one is committed to a life of not reproducing social inequities, feeding oneself can be the province of great compromise.

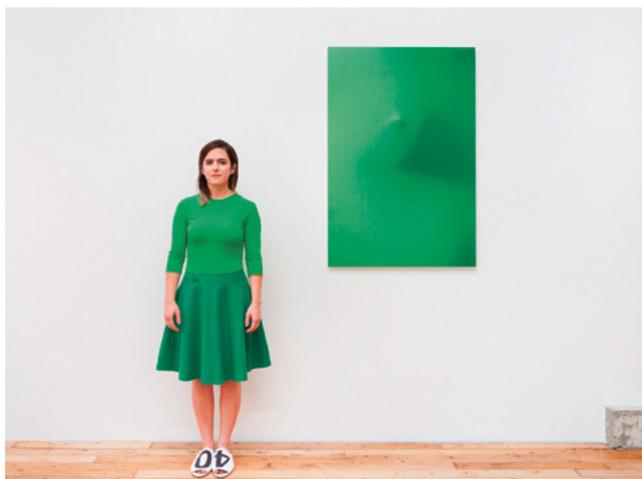
Berger has, on a number of occasions, included a small pile of loaves of bread among other works in her exhibitions. She bakes them according to her mother's recipe in various cities and with various degrees of success. *Skill gradient* (2015) sees the rectangular loaves stacked against a wall, with the most burned one at the bottom, while *Stack* (2015) arranges them in a short and funny cube. Cookbooks were among the first vernacular books in circulation—unsurprising, given food's distinct relationship to place—but they didn't commonly include recipes for bread until the nineteenth century. Baking bread was a knowledge too ordinary to require instructions. Berger reproduces this ordinary knowledge in the gallery space with reference to her family, her precarity, her ability to care for herself and others.

Berger's mandalas are a series of geometric coloring exercises over which succinct short-form texts are superimposed. Each mandala provides a record of the events of a day, focusing on ingestion, productivity, sleep, emotion, and sustenance, including a reflection on the process of coloring itself. These are titled with a calendar date. *22nd June* (2016),⁵ for example, contains the following script: »22 June / Horrible morning / From 11am–2pm in bed half-awake / Unable to get up / Try to masturbate to relax / Feeling dried out / Work painful&slow / Glad for the



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rain / 2 eggs, raspberries / I hate everything / Some work done & drag myself to go shopping / Hate everyone / Hate coloring feel like I want / to crash my car / Small glass o. whiskey.« But things change quickly. *23rd June* (2015)⁶ reads as follows: »23 June / I feel good td / Got up at 8 / Coffee: 2 / No dreams / 6 strawberries, 1 fennel, 2 carrots / + 2 tomatoes / Could work well / Sun & occasional rainclouds / Enjoy pattern very much / Round shapes, good size / Thinking Italy.«

The images bear the mark of their generic provenance: visible in the bottom left corner of *27th June* (2016) is the address »geometrycoloringpages.com.« Practicing self-care, such as in the twin exercises of journaling and meditative coloring, needn't be original to be effective. One can see in the images that the careful manipulation of a coloring pencil is not part of Berger's formal vocabulary. The artist can make elegant and perceptive conceptual work but she can't make herself feel better. Sharing these exercises seems both humbling and performative, as though the imperative to recycle life into art overwhelms the consciously amateurish nature of Berger's attempts at the therapeutic.

Food here makes one day different from another. It's one of a number of things that happen whose effects might be documented and measured.

Fashion

*We allude sympathetically to the lyrical tone of clothing and furniture since they clearly reveal to the eye, mind and judgement the real shapes of peopled sentiment.*⁷

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In the same way that ingesting food integrates body and style, fashion adapts to the body's needs while communicating meaning. On the gallery floor, a white garment lies prone, its polyester body waterlogged. *she vanished 2* (2015) is a lightweight robe not so much arranged as dropped or forgotten and inexplicably very wet.⁸ Its contours mark the approximate shape of two sleeves and a long central panel, like a metonym for a woman. Though neither the cloth nor its design seem to me especially gendered, its abandonment in public does, or the garment's presentation seems related to the vulnerability of women's bodies in public.

I imagine the wet garment on the sidewalk, or in a park. The image is a sinister one, a formal break in the continuity of peopled space. An unexpected element, minorly out of place, makes apparent the deeply ordered nature of civic continuity. What happened to the wearer of this robe? Berger says she vanished. Like an amateur detective, I conceive of a narrative to which I don't have access.

she vanished 2 has a companion in silk, *she vanished 1* (2015). It's a robe of the same pattern but one whose fabric is even more transparent in its wetness. It's yellow in tone, bonded more thinly to the floor. Like the robes of her *4 seasons* (2014) series, Berger makes these garments herself. I'm struck by their grace; despite the simplicity of their composition in water, they're not something I recognize, or have seen before. They disrupt, by a degree, some patterns in my own thinking or feeling about art, which I am grateful for.

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Similarly unknown are Berger's *mud coat 1* and *mud coat 2* (both 2016), robes of a similar composition and presentation to the



wet ones of *she vanished*, though instead of water they're heavy with dirt, thoroughly soaked into the cloth.⁹ The first garment is made of mud-colored flowers in the patterns of its synthetic lace; alongside it are splashes of mud on the gallery floor, traces of the course by which it came to be there. Its color is more that of an urban dirt than a pastoral one. Its polyester counterpart, *mud coat 2*, is backgrounded by mud streaks on the gallery's white wall, an indication of the movement by which it came to rest at the wall's base. Its visual grammar is that of the accidental, the negligent, and the careless—as well as, perhaps, the streaks' gesture towards the impolite.

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The rubric by which to understand these gestures isn't so much what one generally understands as fashion, luxury wear; rather it's the way a garment can give a body meaning, even in the body's physical absence.

Place

*Place is accident posing as politics. And vice versa. Therefore it's tragic and big.*¹⁰

In Vienna's third district, a pair of parabolic acoustic reflectors is stationed in a park, one facing the other at a distance of thirty or forty meters. City signage indicates that the parabolas' intended use is ludic, where an illustration shows one figure leaning into a parabola face-first, and a second figure leaning sideways into the other, his hand held behind his ear. Between them stretch perforated lines, standing in for sound and language.

In 1961, urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs published her seminal study of civic space,



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The Death and Life of Great American Cities. A central facet of the text is its devoted dismantling of perpetual myths around place and value, such as that of the unconditional goodness of urban green space. »Conventionally, neighborhood parks or parklike open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of cities,« she writes. »Let us turn that thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on *them*. This is more nearly in accord with reality, for people do confer use on parks and make them successes—or else withhold use and doom parks to rejection and failure.«¹¹

Who are these acoustic reflectors for? Who imagines and determines leisure? Over time, an illegal accumulation of graffiti on the surface of the parabolas has rendered them two dirty concrete objects among others, indistinguishable from their landscape. The imagined community of this park uses them to speak privately across a medium distance, participating in an invented kind of virtuous leisure; its actual community clandestinely adapts the reflectors to see *itself*—its names and its language—reflected.

»City parks are not abstractions,« Jacobs continues, »or automatic repositories of virtue or uplift, any more than sidewalks are abstractions. They mean nothing divorced from their practical, tangible uses, and hence mean nothing divorced from the tangible effects on them—for good or for ill—of the city districts and uses touching them.«¹² Like the urban park in which they are stationed, the parabolas have no relation to necessity.

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Berger borrowed the parabolas for *Places to fight and to make up*, installing them



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in the gallery as they're installed in the city. They read like a miscommunication between the state and the society, with each party failing to be what the other one needs or desires.

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How can one articulate an ethics while also negotiating the urgent need to eat and to feed others? To care for one's body, and the bodies of others? Over what does one have agency? Who decides which clothes go where, and on which bodies? And what civic objects go where, and whose bodies do what in relation to them?

How do objects and bodies organize one another? In Berger's work, it's an open question.



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1
Anne Boyer,
»Sewing,« in *Garments Against Women* (London: Mute, 2016), 30.

2
For example in the exhibition *Growing Horns*, Ludlow 38, New York, 2015.

3
As in Berger's eponymous exhibition in the library of White Flag Projects, Saint Louis, Missouri, 2015.

4
Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 3–4.





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5

This work appeared as part of Berger's Billboard programming at Kunsthau Bregenz (February 26–May 17, 2016).

9

These pieces were first exhibited at *The Eternal Optimist*, Prince of Wales, Munich, 2016.

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6

This work was one of three mandalas, printed and framed, presented as a part of *Fantods*, with Lucia Elena Průša, at Galerie Kunstbuero, Vienna, 2015.

10

Robertson (see note 7).

11

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 89.

7

Lisa Robertson, »Soft Architecture: A Manifesto,« in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Astoria, OR: Clear Cut Press, 2003), 16.

12

ibid., 111.

8

This work and *she vanished 2* were also part of *Fantods*, with Lucia Elena Průša, at Galerie Kunstbuero, Vienna, 2015.

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