

## BIG CHEESE

*"I said to myself, when you are thirty you will begin to eat cheese. On my thirtieth birthday I then said, Waiter, cheese now, please. With grapes and a pear, so delicious! For thirty years long I was totally against it. Because it had represented certain things to me, cheese. Mouldy blue cheese, icky, don't touch. Same as certain people, if it is said – icky, don't touch – then I touch them more. Then they become more dear to me, more interesting."*

Martin Kippenberger 1991

BIG CHEESE aimed in a diversity ways, humorously and not, to address the various chemical, alchemical, material, and metaphorical dimensions of cheese. The artists chosen for the exhibition were selected for their openness and/or an attitude eccentric enough to consider the manifold ramifications of cheese as a classic substance and subject of art. Contemporary Art Tasmania (CAT) itself was chosen as an ideal venue given that Tasmania is noted for its production of dairy goods and of cheese in particular. Cheese is a paradigmatically transformative and metamorphic substance that could equally speak of contemporary modes of thought and the experiences of global time and space as fundamentally molten and fluid.

The prosaic origins for the idea of this exhibition are as follows;

*Finishing work at Sydney College of the Arts one afternoon, friend and colleague Justene Williams and I found ourselves at an unpublicised campus film screening. Alongside the typical alcohol on offer was a quite unexpected and spectacular cheese-platter that we promptly proceeded to demolish. Justene confided in me her love of cheese, and of cheeses of all varieties and their chemistry, while I told her of my secret plan, if I ever gave up being artist, to leave the art world to go make cheese in a cave somewhere.*

This latter half-joking admission was prompted after watching a short documentary on the history of Roquefort cheese. For centuries in a secluded rural cave system in the South of France, unripe Roquefort cheeses have been placed on racks along the cave walls. Over time pre-extant bacteria in the caves migrates to the cheeses giving them their very particular flavour. This actually quite incredible symbiosis between bacteria, rudimentarily seen as 'bad', and food prompts a range of other questions. For instance, what caused humans in the first place to imagine eating food that was actually moldy or 'off' and reeks pungently of this fact? The obvious answers are 'accident' or 'starvation' but the implications are broader. Indeed cheese an ancient food of incredible variety, is a spectacularly alchemical substance. And while wine (and much more recently beer in its 'craft' varieties) has been appreciated as part of a particular projected image of High Culture, the equally if not more complex and magical properties of cheese are generally less investigated.

Central to the consideration of cheese in the context of this exhibition, was the quotient of abjection that clings to the idea of certain cheeses that 'stink' as they are quasi-molten, mold and bacteria bearing. In these instances alchemy lies in the transformation of a basic substance into something that is both highly-prized commercially and considered a sensual delicacy. The border between disgust and desire elicited by such cheeses is practically Surrealist. No surprise that a work iconically central to that movement, Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931) transforms watches into camembert: time like cheese is unstable, hard or soft, dry or molten, crumbling or blooming. And aside from Dali's pictorial ruminations on

cheese as an especially fecund substance, as well as much earlier historical precedents like 18<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch still lifes, there are numerous practitioners who have specifically targeted cheese as a worthy focus for art. Notable works that touch on the fundamental weirdness of cheese include Rene Magritte's painted rendition of a fresh brie under a hygienic glass cover as though it were 'real', *the Mystery of the Ordinary*, (1926); Marcel Duchamp's cover design for the *First Papers of Surrealism* (1942); Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's depictions of ubiquitously holey Swiss cheese such as his *Swiss Cheese Elevator Doors* (1985); Robert Gober's wax cheese wedge that has uncannily sprouted a trail of long black hair, *Long Haired Cheese* (1993) and Martin Kippenberger and Werner Büttner's collaborative installation for which they nailed 36 local Harz cheeses to the wall of the gallery and wired them to the room's electricity supply. This in itself may have been an absurd parody of their inescapable predecessor Joseph Beuys' more 'serious' fat objects that could be said to be cousins of cheese.

Beyond considerations of its alchemical and abject chemical and physical properties is the extent to which cheese has inserted itself more broadly into our language and cultural mythologies. *Say cheese*, *cheesy*, *hard cheese*, *Big Cheese*, *toe cheese* are long ingrained, everyday expressions. Equally common is the childhood notion that the moon is made of cheese, a concept humorously played out in one of cinema's defining moments, Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). A popular myth is that eating cheese before you go to bed gives you especially vivid dreams. Elsewhere, cheese appears as double-edged and dangerous as bait for unsuspecting rodents eager to get hold of this delectable morsel, in slapstick cartoons as much as in reality. At its most bizarrely fetishistic, soft cheese has even been used in autoerotic practices that in at least one case, has led to the cheese fancier's death. Ultimately the commonness of cheese hides almost endless considerations of its cultural, historical and philosophical ramifications. Long may we *Sail the Seas of Cheese!* (as post-Punk band Primus once urged us to do).

Alex Gawronski 2016