

## GOOD TASTE: METAPHOR AND MATERIALITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART CRITICISM

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Around 1873, Manet painted a beer mug across a vertically placed palette, known today only by an old black and white photograph (figure 1). In *La Palette au Bock*, paint moves strikingly between signifying itself and signifying the object depicted, as the residue at the top of the palette turns to beer froth as the eye moves downward, and then takes the shape of a mug and finally its shadow. The contour of the palette echoes the mug's handle, its thumb hold directly above the glass's grip. The elision of the palette with the palate, or appetite, is figured as Manet creates a visual analogy between the frothiness, wetness, and sticky texture of both paint and beer.<sup>1</sup> The palette becomes like a mug, supporting the paint that doubles as a consumable substance. This connection between palette and palate was not exclusive to Manet. It was exploited in nineteenth-century menu design, when the shape of the artist's tool served as a popular motif for the listed courses of a meal. The J. Minot printing house designed and marketed a series of such menus in the second half of the nineteenth century that could be ordered by restaurants or households (figure 2). One of these palette-shaped menus features multi-coloured dabs of paint arranged along its upper edge, alluding to the artistry of cooking, presenting, and consuming cuisine. Just as the painter would dip a brush into the mounds of pigment, so too would the diner dip a spoon into helpings of sauced foods upon a plate, which the palette also evokes with its ovular shape. In this way the menu suggests correspondence between the materials of food and paint, as does *La Palette au Bock*.

The distinctive shape of *La Palette au Bock* also insists upon the palette's tactile function. Art collectors sought out artists' palettes, which were intimately connected to their original owners, even standing metonymically for the artist with whom they were indexically and symbolically associated.



**Figure 1** Edouard Manet, *La Palette au Bock*, 1873. Oil on wood, 51 × 38 cm. Location unknown. Courtesy of Archives, Wildenstein Institute, Paris.



**Figure 2** Anonymous, *6 menus en forme de palettes de peintre*, c. 1870–1900. Colour lithograph, 29,5 × 37 cm (sheet). Photo: BnF, Estampes et photographie, LI-84-PET FOL, Roger Braun Collection.

If one painted image or genre upon the palette could stand in as a sign for Manet's practice it would be a still life element. Still life comprises a fifth of his production, and nearly all of his large-format figure paintings include still life elements that migrate between them, sometimes as signatory signifiers.<sup>2</sup> Since critics commonly complained that Manet's figures themselves resembled still life objects, the genre became a paradigm for how the artist's production was understood more generally.

Manet submitted a painting entitled *Le Bon Bock* to the 1873 Salon portraying print-maker Émile Bellot grasping a beer (figure 3). *Le Bon Bock* was a critical success, and inspired Bellot to found a dinner club in 1875 called the *Dîner du Bon Bock*, attracting artists and writers to Montmartre for fifty years. The artful invitations to the dinners specialized in humour, as in an 1883 example in which caricaturist Alfred le Petit depicted a man



**Figure 3** Édouard Manet, *Le Bon Bock*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 94.6 × 83.3 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

knocking on a door while holding a giant playing card representing Bellot as king of hearts, holding a mug of beer (figure 4).<sup>3</sup> Manet was often accused, most famously by Gustave Courbet, of flattening his subjects and making paintings that resembled playing cards.<sup>4</sup> This invitation is a jocular reference to Manet's original painting of Bellot; both show the portly, bearded figure



in similar format, close up and wielding a beer in the left hand, while the pipe that Bellot holds in Manet's painting is transformed into a sceptre in le Petit's variation. Manet's early biographer Adolphe Tabarant claimed that the artist painted *La Palette au Bock* in celebration of *Le Bon Bock*'s success, and that the palette was the same one that Manet had used for that canvas.<sup>5</sup> Once embellished with the mug, the palette was shown in a fashionable boutique of *curiosités* on the Rue Vivienne where it functioned as a sign of Manet's practice just as the tavern signs depicting beer mugs that frequently featured on the invitations to the *Dîners du Bon Bock* (figure 5) were a summons for the crowds united in celebration of liberal artistic ideals.<sup>6</sup> Manet's critics were also fond of comparing his paintings to signage, implying that they were unrefined. Ernest Duvergier de Hauranne wrote in his review that 'there are certainly tavern signs that are more life-like' than Manet's submissions to the 1873 Salon, *Le Bon Bock* among them,<sup>7</sup> and a Latin Quarter brasserie actually took a reproduction of *Le Bon Bock* as a sign.<sup>8</sup>

These connections indicate that in 1860s Paris, cultures of dining, drinking, and the arts intertwined, thus raising the possibility that experiences of viewing and tasting were mutually inflecting. Art critics contributed to culinary magazines, wrote novels and journal entries focusing on the alimentary habits of modern Parisians, and allowed, whether consciously or unconsciously, this language to seep into their discussions of painting.<sup>9</sup> Comparisons of paint to food focused attention onto the paint itself, the ways in which that material could be representative independent of subject matter. Such analogies also implied a visceral viewing experience. Whereas sight could be understood as a sense that instilled distance between viewer and viewed, taste, on the other hand, broke down the boundaries between self and object, implying a proximity with potentially dangerous or pleasurable effects. The possibility for paint to migrate between the conventional categories of the aesthetic and the alimentary was especially pronounced in relation to Manet because the materiality of his paint, displayed so candidly upon *La Palette au Bock*, was subject to much attention. As Manet's painting challenged critical vocabularies, cuisine and its associated language provided a place to turn.

Over the course of 20 years Émile Zola drew on such culinary analogies when describing Manet's work, and many of these instances challenge established art historical readings of Zola's criticism as well as the novelist's

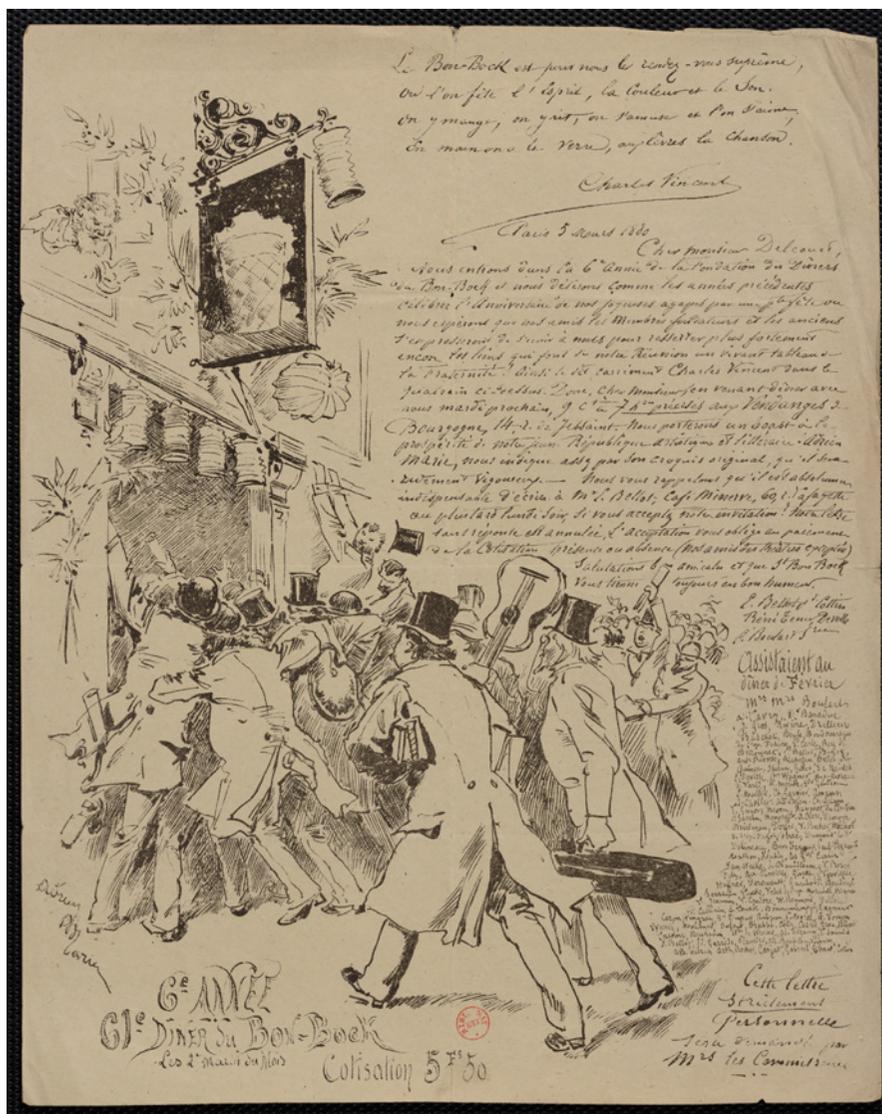


Figure 5 Adrien Emmanuel Marie, 6<sup>e</sup> année, 61<sup>e</sup> dîner du Bon-Bock . . . invitation personnelle, 5 march 1880. Autolithography, 27,5 × 22 cm. Photo: BnF, Estampes et photographie, LI MAT-5-BOITE PET FOL (Menus: de 1843 à 1883).

own posturing as a detached analyst of the visible ‘facts’ of painting.<sup>10</sup> In 1866 the young author published a series of Salon reviews in *L'Événement*, opening with a discussion of the exhibition jury:

Imagine that the Salon is an immense artistic stew [*ragoût*] which is served to us every year. Each painter, each sculptor, sends his morsel [*morceau*]. Now, as we have delicate stomachs, it was thought prudent to name a group of cooks [the jury] to accommodate the food to our varied tastes. One fears indigestion, and said to these guardians of public health: ‘Here are the elements of an excellent meal: hold the pepper, because the pepper excites; put water in the wine, because France is a grand nation who cannot lose her head’ . . . The old Academy, that founding cook, had her recipes from which she never strayed . . .<sup>11</sup>

While the articles that make up *Mon Salon, 1866* are well known to Manet scholars, this section is rarely discussed. Zola criticized the self-perceived importance of the jury members. This group, he asserted, believed that in creating the right combination of *morceaux* to present at the Salon, a gourmet, or at least salubrious, meal would result. Instead Zola called the jumble of displayed art merely a pre-digested stew, bland and sobering. Comparing paintings to foodstuffs turned paintings into just another commodity, drawing attention to the similarity of their increasingly bourgeois markets. Manet would wittily make a similar point when he affixed his signature to a bottle of liqueur in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in 1882. Likening the jury, made up disproportionately of members of the Academy, to a group of aged chefs, Zola suggested that as artists they were no better than the cooks of the Salon buffet.

More generally Zola raised the question of ‘good taste’ literally. Taste was the most common term to straddle the languages of art and gastronomy. Defined as ‘one of the five senses by which we discern flavours’, it was used figuratively in eighteenth-century aesthetics to name the ability to distinguish specific qualities of beauty.<sup>12</sup> Aesthetic taste was separated from appetite, the latter understood as a base impulse. However, by the nineteenth century gustatory and aesthetic taste were increasingly conflated as the table became a privileged location of distinction.<sup>13</sup> The explosion of gastronomic literature as a genre testified to the importance placed upon the ‘*code gourmand*’, or

behaving appropriately at the table, by then often located in the public restaurant. This knowledge helped the reader/eater to navigate a changing metropolis and growing populace, for as the primacy and ‘objectivity’ of sight was being questioned,<sup>14</sup> the refined use of all the senses was considered key to rendering social hierarchies more transparent.<sup>15</sup> For Zola the entire class system could be summarized in the dichotomy detected between ‘Fats’ and ‘Thins’. His *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873) follows the escaped convict Florent as he returns to the neighbourhood of *Les Halles* – the massive, newly renovated, centralized Parisian marketplace – but feels a stranger in the modernized *quartier*. As Florent’s sight fails to orientate him, Zola invokes smells and tastes to describe the new city and its inhabitants to his marooned hero. At stake in Zola’s narrative, as well as his art criticism, was his own ability to sort through the sensory landscape of modern Paris. He took this task seriously with detailed notes and sketches of the market.<sup>16</sup>

For Zola and others the culinary metaphor became important for contrasting Academic painting on the one hand and the constellation of artists and authors associated with ‘Realism’, although not an accepted or well-theorized category, on the other.<sup>17</sup> This was developed in a subsequent *L’Événement* article entitled ‘M. Manet’ (1866), in which the author compared the Academically trained artist to a *pâtissier* or *confiseur*. These were labels for artists such as Alexandre Cabanel, Édouard Louis Dubufe, and Jean-Léon Gérôme, all of whom Zola believed flattered the vulgarized taste of the bourgeoisie by striving toward a preconceived ‘*beau absolu*’.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, Zola explained the effects of Manet’s paintings at the Salon:

All around them stretch the sweets of the fashionable artistic confectioners, sugar-candy trees and pastry houses, gingerbread gentlemen and ladies made of vanilla cream. The candy shop becomes pinker and sweeter, and [Manet’s] living canvases take on a certain bitterness in the midst of this river of milk. Also, one must see the faces made by the grown-up children passing through the gallery. For two cents you will not make them swallow true flesh having the reality of life, but they stuff themselves like famished people with all the sickening sweetness served them . . .<sup>19</sup>

This comparison allowed Zola a more specific means of addressing technique, ‘finish’, and training. The tools of pastry-making and painting

– with brushes, knives, sponges, and canvas – overlapped. The surface of an Academic painting (often described as ‘licked’) shone with varnish like a glazed pastry, and would have been smooth to the touch of a finger or tongue. Zola referred to the methods by which painters identified with the ‘old Academy, that founding cook’ arrived at these effects as ‘recipes’, suggesting a precision based on mere copying that denied individual artistic vision or invention.<sup>20</sup> Sugar-coated confections, moreover, were also associated with bourgeois women and their children who were believed to crave them with irrepressible appetites. The lightness of pastries made easy comparison with perceived female superficiality. So when Zola dismissed the official canon of contemporary French art in 1867 in his monographic essay on Manet, ‘*Une nouvelle manière en peinture*’, with the declaration that ‘art has become, with us, a vast candy shop’, he feminized and infantilized the artists who created confections and the crowd that devoured them.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Zola termed Manet’s painting ‘*viande crue*’ and praised the fleshy materiality of his brushstrokes.<sup>22</sup> Meat, aligned with masculine strength and widely identified as an especially stimulating food, was understood as healthy for the active male but dangerous for ‘delicate’ female sensibilities.<sup>23</sup> Zola suggested that the ‘flesh’ of Manet’s painting, still holding the ‘reality of life’, was raw. This corresponded to the critic’s desire for sensual immediacy, for painting that was ‘bitter and strong’,<sup>24</sup> metaphorically untouched by the ostensibly dubious art of cuisine.

However, despite Zola’s apparent disdain for culinary painting, he returned continuously to the language of alimentary consumption when describing Manet’s work, often before a metaphor was self-consciously applied. He was not alone; George Heard Hamilton has noted that many of Manet’s critics used language that did not belong to the typical vocabulary of pictorial criticism, such as ‘acrid’, ‘savour’, and ‘pungency’.<sup>25</sup> However, the implications of these words remain largely unexplored. They suggest that viewing painting did not unfold as detached witness or commanding oversight, but as consumption of images by an embodied viewer whose vision was reconfigured in visceral terms. At times, the strategic mobilization of culinary metaphors was just another rhetorical device allowing critics to draw from a ready-made stockpile of binaries, including between good and bad taste, painting that was ripe or rotten, healthy or unhealthy. These tropes did not necessarily push the boundaries of visual experience and description

because they remained tied to other dichotomies around which critical logic was commonly structured, including whether the painting was good or bad, beautiful or ugly, finished or unfinished. But on other occasions culinary vocabulary manifested a struggle to come to terms with contested practice and exceeded such binaries. Zola's consistent descriptions of Manet's paintings that proceeded as though he were tasting them – in such phrases as 'we must, I cannot repeat enough, forget a thousand things to understand and taste' the 'bitter and strong savour' of Manet's works – went beyond the author's bravado metaphorical opposition of cake versus meat, and ran counter to his goal of aligning Manet with Positivist progress.<sup>26</sup> Positivism called for empirical observation of material reality. Zola, who conceived of his criticism as analytical questioning of visual evidence and argued that art (as well as his art criticism) was approaching science, emphasized the physiology of Manet's eye and directness of his vision, calling him a '*peintre analyste*'.<sup>27</sup> But the language of tasting and flavour undermined any such distance or detachment on the part of critic or artist. If the sense of vision was most likely, though not unproblematically, linked with the emerging ideal of scientific 'objectivity', taste pretended to no such thing. Aphorisms derived from the Latin *de gustibus non est disputandum*, including 'one cannot argue with taste' or 'everyone has his own taste', were repeated in the major dictionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under '*goult*' and treatises on physiology emphasized that the same flavours could produce different sensations in diverse individuals.<sup>28</sup>

The language of bodily consumption used by so many of Manet's critics contributes to interpretations of his work that foreground the sensual complexity of corporeal encounters with 'nature' and painting. *Fish (Still Life)* (1864), in which Manet represented seafood in his summer studio in Boulogne-sur-Mer, is an apt example because of its subject matter and materiality (figure 6). In it the artist took the perspective of a cook, selecting and arranging ingredients for painting. Whether critics used cookery puns in their analyses of *Fish* is an open question; no known contemporary criticism is recorded. Manet painted a series of still lifes in the 1860s, but they were not intended for the Salon, the exhibition that generated the most reviews. Many were shown at the galleries of dealers Louis Martinet and Alfred Cadart, and *Fish* was included in Manet's 1867 retrospective. Certainly, however, viewers would have associated *Fish* with the legacy of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon



**Figure 6** Édouard Manet, *Fish (Still Life)*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 73.4 × 92.1 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago: Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection, 1942. Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago.

Chardin, who had elevated the status of still life and genre painting in the preceding century. In the 1850s and 1860s Chardin's work entered the Louvre, contributing to a revival of interest in his typical subject matter. It also received new critical attention, as evidenced by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's 1863 essay entitled 'Chardin' in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which would be included in their book *Eighteenth-Century French Painters* (1859–1875). Manet probably saw some forty works by Chardin in the show organized by Phillipe Burty at Martinet's gallery in 1860, including *The Silver Tureen* (c. 1728), the probable compositional model for *Fish*.<sup>29</sup>

Chardin was not trained at the Academy. He mixed and secretly guarded his own colour 'recipes', as contemporaries called them, and produced canvases that were particularly tactile, according to critics including Denis Diderot:

One says about him, that he has a technique all his own, and that he uses his thumb as much as his brush . . . his compositions call out . . . [with] biting [*piquant*] and true effect, beautiful masses, a magic that brings one to despair, a stew [*ragoût*] in selection and organization.<sup>30</sup>

Diderot focused on touch, a sense that he believed had philosophical importance surpassing sight, and taste.<sup>31</sup> Those two senses were sometimes allied in physiological writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of the tongue's ability to both touch and taste.<sup>32</sup> Diderot's reference to a spicy quality, and comparison of the composition to a *ragoût*, suggests that taste also held metaphorical significance for the author. This would become more pronounced in the nineteenth century with the proliferation of gastronomic literature, a genre comprising restaurant reviews, instructive magazines, advice literature, and philosophical treatises on dining that established eating and drinking as the object of discourse. To narrate Chardin's materiality in the 1860s the de Goncourt's turned to the language of gastronomic critique, as in their reaction to *La Pourvoyeuse* (1739):

. . . this radiant woman, from shoes to bonnet in a clear whiteness, *creamy*, in a manner of speaking . . . the contour *fatty* in its outlines, the scratched scrapes of the brush, the *dots* of colour, in a sort of crystallization of the paint [*pâte*, also translates as dough or batter]. The lightweight tones . . . *rise*, like . . . a dust of *heat*, a *floating vapour* that envelops the woman.<sup>33</sup> [emphasis added]

In this prose the painting, like the female figure within it, becomes semantically edible with its creamy, clotted colours rising like dough, giving off heat and steam as though freshly baked. Such passages portray Chardin as though he were making bread, his 'grainy', 'buttery', and 'raw' pigments fusing to make a 'shining', 'porous' product. His 'feast for the eye' is characterized by 'freshness' and 'richness' of 'burnt' colours. Jealous artists endeavoured to acquire knowledge of '*sa cuisine de peinture*', his 'colour recipes' and the 'flavour' of his touch. The viewer 'penetrates' the painting as though viewer and painting merge in a metaphor of incorporation modelled off of ingestion.<sup>34</sup>

The de Goncourt's mode of viewing – what Jacques Rancière has called a 'de-figuration' that transforms figurative details into 'events of pictorial

matter', granting new autonomy to the materials of paint and the artist's gestures – would, as Rancière has argued, help to construct a 'gaze' for painting of the 1860s and 1870s even though the de Goncourts did not engage that contemporary painting directly.<sup>35</sup> Their visual model was widely shared with contemporary critics and artists. Zola's interest in the evocative powers of smell and taste in *Le Ventre de Paris* drew upon precedents including Baudelaire's notion of 'correspondences' between senses.<sup>36</sup> Such exploration ran through to the *fin-de-siècle* in the synesthetic experiences of Des Esseintes, the hero of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) who claims to create poetry, visions, and symphonies from mixtures of scents and tastes. Given the value that many of Manet's contemporaries and compatriots placed on multisensory engagement, such a model is of use when considering *Fish*.

In the painting, the seafood is depicted larger than life, out of proportion, and as if suspended between life and death. The eel slithers along as though through an ocean of thick, undulating strokes of the tablecloth, in colour variations of white, grey, brown and blue that make the cloth look more like the sea itself than pressed white linen. At the bottom right its corner flows up to meet the knife, only to fuse again with the surface as the eye moves to the left, like a breaking wave or like the process of painting, with each new stroke folding into the surface, seeping into the paint and canvas like the saltwater from the oysters leaking into the tablecloth. The table rises too high at the back, as if tilted up to suggest overlap between the tablecloth and the canvas, both of which support the still life objects. As Carol Armstrong notes in her discussion of *Fish*, reciprocity is also established between the sticky materiality of paint and of seafood.<sup>37</sup> Broad strokes of impastoed white on the carp's belly evoke the cool slickness of the animal. The mixing of colours in the tablecloth, especially at upper left, adds a fluidity to forms which is echoed in the curving right edge of the pot. What should be solid flows in an organic rendering that takes its cues from the watery home of the transposed sea creatures and sets the viewer adrift with the eddies and currents of the paint. As if to demonstrate this instability and drift, painted outlines do not adhere to the objects they represent, as evident in the tablecloth at the lower right where the thick black contour line pulls away from the peak of the cloth tip. These loose strokes indicated to contemporary audiences that this was painted rapidly,<sup>38</sup> which raises questions about Manet's process of painting raw fish during the summer months. The clotting paint suggests the crusting

over time of slimy materials, as does the stiffness of the carp's elevated tail, intimating the decay of once-fresh food and its effect on the nose and palate.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed that painting could reveal how vision interacted with other senses; the phenomenologist resisted the distinctions drawn between the five sensory modes, which he believed was only the result of modern science. Critical of the philosophical tradition in which the conscious mind was understood as an 'impartial spectator' detached from the body, Merleau-Ponty insisted that all knowledge was the result of one's embodied experience of the world.<sup>39</sup> In order to describe this 'lived perspective', Merleau-Ponty turned to tactile metaphors, in explicit reaction to the philosophical privileging of the visual and its isolation from other senses.<sup>40</sup> He would develop the concept of the 'flesh' to describe the subject's imbrication in material and social reality. Through this concept, he argued for the reversibility of perception, the fact that the body is both sensitive and sensing. To touch is to be touched back, and to see is also to be seen.<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty particularly admired Paul Cézanne, whom he wrote about at length, because he understood Cézanne's project as the rediscovery of the world as apprehended in lived experience – also the goal of the phenomenologist.<sup>42</sup>

The phenomenological provides one way of thinking through Manet's imperfections of perspective and scale, the approximate brushwork, and the flowing outlines whereby medium is emphasized over narrative or presentational clarity. Manet frankly displayed paint's materiality, painting in a manner informed by the textures of the objects and their marine habitat. The viscosity of the open oysters is not evoked through details of their appearance, but by broad, shining strokes that suggest what it would feel like to touch or lick one. The open oysters resemble open mouths, the white edges like teeth surrounding the tan and pink-tinged flesh of a tongue. The actions of licking, slurping, and swallowing are further invoked by the paint, applied to the interiors in short, wide strokes as if with the tongue itself, implying the same motion of that muscle as would be required to lift the flesh out of its shell and into the mouth. The same suggestion of oral ingestion or play is evident in the virtually licked-on, creamy belly of the carp. In front of this large painting, therefore, the viewer is not set at a distance, but is drawn into its airless density, and can imagine touching or licking its surface as well as its subject. The materiality of the human body, the animal body and

the paint itself laps and overlaps like the ‘intertwining’ that Merleau-Ponty posited between the subject and his or her surroundings.<sup>43</sup>

In 1864 Courbet was the primary artist in Paris associated with materiality, his paint applied in heavy layers displaying traces of his tools. As Frédérique Desbuissons has shown, hostile critics mocked Courbet’s paint by comparing it to food, demonstrating once again that the material of paint was meaningfully associated with the edible. Critics and especially caricaturists extended this metaphor to express disgust at Courbet’s appetite as manifest in his corpulence.<sup>44</sup> While no similar discourse existed on Manet’s physical body – he did not cultivate a hedonistic persona as did Courbet, and his well-to-do Parisian upbringing lent him an air of sophistication and detachment – Zola had a remarkably embodied understanding of Manet’s paintings, which the author aligned with the artist himself. ‘What I look for before all else in a painting is a man, and not a painting’, proclaimed the critic who believed that art should not be confectioned but ‘sweated out’ by the artist who could only, in this formulation, be male.<sup>45</sup> In this vein Zola wrote that Manet’s best works were ‘truly the painter’s flesh and blood’.<sup>46</sup> Such assertions formed part of Zola’s critical strategy whereby he characterized all of Manet’s paintings, regardless of the subject, as no more than configurations of ‘*taches*’, or distinctive painterly marks that attested to the artist’s individual perception and process. Read alongside *Fish*, Zola’s framework opens the interpretive possibility that the material of paint moves not just between signifying itself and the viscera of fish, but also between signifying itself and the viscera of its artist. Zola’s emphasis on Manet’s painting as flesh and blood that sweats out subjectivity animates the work itself, apart from any creatures or figures that might be depicted. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the reversibility of perception, that to sense is also to be aware of being sensed, is useful as a mode of interrogating *Fish*, as the viewer is made conscious of his or her proximity to the ‘flesh’ of animals, of paint, and even of artist.

Jacques Lacan would extend Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of vision as reversible and as interacting with other senses. Seconding the phenomenologist’s refusal to align vision with a distancing operation disconnecting the viewer from the object of vision, Lacan explicitly compared sight to taste. He described vision as voracious, looking as drinking, light as a ‘milky’ substance, and the eye as a liquid-filled bowl. He most fully theorized viewing as feeding the hungry eye in relation to painting, which

he argued 'gives something for the eye to feed on'.<sup>47</sup> The liquidity central to this account is suggestive in relation to *Fish*, in which paint is fluid and the cauldron flickers as though seen through water. The oysters resemble open eyes as well as mouths, leaking saltwater tears as they overflow with milky pigment. The viewer's own eye becomes stuck in the viscous passages of oil paint, caught in the surface of a canvas that resists recession with its uptilted table and unelaborated background. The discrepancies in paint, sometimes thinly applied and sometimes curling off the canvas, represent the objects as unstable surfaces, both dry and wet, solid and yielding, with bleeding boundaries. The effect is seasickness, or even the nausea that Jean-Paul Sartre claimed was the result of confrontation with the material viscosity of the body and other objects, and what Julia Kristeva would name the object.<sup>48</sup> Behind all of these philosophies – whether of Lacan, Sartre, who articulated the visceral immediacy of the *visqueux* as a 'sugary sliminess' and 'indelible sweetness', or Kristeva, who described abjection as an encounter with the clotted skin on milk – is the metaphoric language of drinking or eating, the sensory experiences in which the boundaries between the body and other bodies or objects dissolve most decisively.<sup>49</sup> Moreover this is also a model for sex, as both ingestion and sexual intercourse imply the breakdown of boundaries between bodies, and the mouth and tongue are also sexual organs. *Fish* can be seen to signify on this level, with its strokes that seem orally applied, intimating oral gratification. In the nineteenth century oysters were thought to stimulate appetites both literal and sexual because they were associated visually with female genitalia and connoted erotic interaction through the motions of the tongue whilst eating the live mollusc.<sup>50</sup> The male body is implicated too in the stiff tail of the engorged carp, with the penile fold of its head, on a fluid-stained tablecloth rumpled like a bed sheet.

This is to say that the language used by critics including Zola of 'consuming' Manet's painting is appropriate to *Fish*. The work shows the makings of a meal, suggests parallels between the materials of food and of paint, and presents challenges to the eye – imperfect perspective, flowing outlines, discrepancies in scale and paint application – that replace visual transparency and ease with the opaque density of a bodily confrontation with paint that is applied as if to suggest the experience of touching or tasting its greasy smears. This encounter is especially powerful when read in the

context of Zola's criticism, which positioned Manet as somehow literally embodied in that paint and figured immersion in painting as a dissolution of boundaries between viewer and painter/painting that was based upon eating. Considering *Fish* through the lens of sensory interaction and methodologies that structure vision as consumption of images undermines the frameworks of detachment and distance that are frequently invoked to describe Manet's relationship to his subject matter and the viewer's relationship to his still life, from Zola through to art historical orthodoxies today. For while the shock value of Manet's large-scale figure paintings is not usually understated, his still lifes are usually construed, even by Zola, as less challenging.<sup>51</sup> In art historical scholarship these are often discussed in terms of the 'aesthetic pleasure' or 'visual delectation' that Manet and his viewers experienced through contemplation of real or painted table scenes,<sup>52</sup> and it is commonly argued that Manet maintained detachment and distance from his subject, whatever that may be.<sup>53</sup> But the framework of 'aesthetic pleasure', which rests upon a viewer's ability to differentiate between the representation of an object and the actual object depicted, is insufficient for encountering *Fish*, a painting that through its materiality suggests taste, smell, and touch, the senses originally identified by some eighteenth-century philosophers as precisely those opposed to aesthetic pleasure.<sup>54</sup> The distinction in *Fish* between the actual subject matter and its representation falters, not because the viewer mistakes the painted oyster for a real one, but because the paint suggests the non-visual qualities of what it depicts and more.

Frameworks of 'visuality', those efforts to determine how sight was conceptualized and experienced in certain cultural and historical contexts and which have been privileged in art historical discussion of painting in France at this time, cannot on their own do justice to the gastronomic environment of 1860s Paris or the importance of smell and taste in art and literature.<sup>55</sup> As a result they cannot account for the orally-inflected utterances of attraction and repulsion experienced by so many of Manet's viewers. Metaphors of taste were exceedingly common in nineteenth-century art criticism and their significance was far-reaching in a culture that did not believe sensory perception was shared among genders, classes, or nations, when good taste was a slippery but crucial means for painters to be classified as good artists as well as good citizens.<sup>56</sup> Zola encountered difficulty when writing about Manet, whom he wanted to affirm was a 'well brought-up'

man of ‘exquisite politeness, of distinguished appearance’, a bourgeois with an ‘innate need for distinction and elegance’ – in other words, a sophisticated and refined gentleman and not the ‘bohemian rascal’ that public assumed him to be.<sup>57</sup> But the language of ‘good taste’ into which the materiality of Manet’s paint was sublimated was overdetermined, for it was not just metaphoric good taste that was suggested, but an encounter in which paint became comestible, pungent, and savourable. Zola’s discussions of relishing Manet’s tongue-like brushstrokes and creamy impasto drew attention to the physicality of paint in ways that undercut their author’s intention of appearing detached and Positivist in approach, as well as challenged the more general trend within art criticism, including Zola’s own, to allude to cuisine as an insult.

### Notes

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- 1 See also Frédérique Desbuissons, ‘À l’enseigne du Bon Bock’, in *48/14 La revue du Musée d’Orsay*, no. 30, 2010, p. 35. Carol Armstrong mentions the palette in the notes for *Manet Manette*, New Haven, C.T., 2002, p. 361. Before these, the object was most extensively discussed in Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet et ses oeuvres*, Paris, 1947, p. 212.
- 2 Tamar Garb considers a peeled lemon or fallen peony as signatory inscriptions in ‘Framing Femininity in Manet’s *Portrait of Mlle E. G.*’, in *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France 1814–1914*, New Haven and London, 2007, pp. 66, 94. James Rubin discusses still life elements as *alter egos* of Manet’s artistic presence in *Manet’s Silence and the Poetics of Bouquets*, Cambridge, M.A, 1994, pp. 20, 168–174.
- 3 The group published an *Album du bon bock*, Paris, 1878; and is discussed in Auguste Lepage, *Les Diners artistiques et littéraires de Paris*, Paris, 1884, pp. 261–266. The group’s link to Manet’s painting is posed in Edmond Bazire, *Manet*, Paris, 1884, p. 82; and Théodore Duret, *Manet and the French impressionists*, trans. J.E.C. Fritch, London, 1910 [orig. 1906], p. 64; and more recently in Desbuissons, op. cit., 2010, p. 41.

- 4 Courbet's quip that *Olympia* resembled a playing card is related in *Manet, 1832–1883*, exh. cat., New York, 1983, p. 247. See also Paul Mantz, 'Les Oeuvres de Manet', in *Le Temps*, 16 January 1884.
- 5 Tabarant, op. cit., p. 212.
- 6 According to a review by D. de Charnage, *La Palette au Bock* was even shown in an exhibition of commercial signs in Paris in 1935. See 'Expositions: Une exposition de l'enseigne', in *La Croix*, 29 March 1935, p. 4. Desbuissons argues that *Le Bon Bock* was itself a sign, painted after the Franco-Prussian War, for the values in art and politics that Manet and colleagues had espoused in brasseries such as the Café Guerbois under the Second Empire, and around which they could rally in the 1870s (op. cit., 2010, pp. 39–42).
- 7 'Il y a certainement telles enseignes de cabaret qui sont plus réelles que le prétendu réalisme de M. Manet', 'Le Salon de 1873', in *La Revue des deux mondes*, 15 June 1873, p. 637.
- 8 Bazire, op. cit., p. 82; Anon., 'Manet et M. Faure', in *L'art moderne*, 8 October 1905, p. 329.
- 9 The culinary journal *La Salle à Manger* is notable for its contributions by the journalistic elite and established art critics. Desbuissons has argued that a topos of culinary ugliness was a primary vehicle of negative art criticism from 1860 to 1880 in 'The Studio and the Kitchen: Culinary Ugliness as Pictorial Stigmatisation in Nineteenth-Century France', in Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich eds., *Ugliness: the Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory*, London, 2014, pp. 104–121. She discusses Manet's common choice of culinary themes in 'Yeux ouverts et bouche affamée: le paradigme culinaire de l'art moderne, 1850–1880', in *Sociétés & Représentations*, no. 34, 2012, pp. 49–70. Philippa Lewis analyzes the culinary trope in the 1840s, primarily in relation to Baudelaire, in 'Stomaching the Salon', in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 42, nos. 1 & 2, 2013–2014, pp. 35–50.
- 10 'Je ne veux analyser que des faits, et les œuvres d'art sont de simples faits', Émile Zola, *Mes haines; causeries littéraires et artistiques*, Paris, 1893, p. 342.
- 11 'Imaginez que le Salon est un immense ragoût artistique, qui nous est servi tous les ans. Chaque peintre, chaque sculpteur envoie son morceau. Or, comme nous avons l'estomac délicat, on a cru prudent de nommer toute une troupe de cuisiniers pour accommoder ces victuailles de goûts et d'aspects si divers. On a craint les indigestions, et on a dit aux gardiens de la santé publique: 'Voici les éléments d'un mets excellent; ménagez le poivre, car le poivre échauffe; mettez de l'eau dans le vin, car la France est une grande nation qui ne peut perdre la tête' . . . La vieille Académie, cuisinière de fondation, avait ses recettes à elle, dont elle ne s'écarterait jamais . . .', Zola, op. cit., 1893, pp. 264–265. Zola may well have been looking to Baudelaire's *Salon de 1846*, which had also used the culinary trope to introduce the Salon to readers. On Baudelaire's *Salon de 1846*, see Lewis, op. cit., pp. 41–47.
- 12 Pierre Larousse, *Nouveau dictionnaire de la langue française (3e édition)*, Paris, 1856, p. 259. On the metaphorical significance of 'taste', see Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet], 'Goût', in Jean Le Rond d'Alembert et al., *L'Encyclopédie*, Paris, 1757, vol. 7, pp. 758–770.
- 13 In Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term in *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, 1979.

- 14 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge M.A., 1990, pp. 1–67. See also Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven C.T., 1985, pp. 76–79, 100.
- 15 See the work of Alain Corbin, particularly ‘Charting the Cultural History of the Senses’ in David Howes ed., *Empire of the Senses: the Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford, New York, 2005, pp. 133–137; and *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, Cambridge M.A., 1986, p. 141.
- 16 Alexandra Leaf, ‘Emile Zola’s Portrait of Les Halles’, in *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, pp. 72–75. On the importance of smell and taste in Zola’s novels, see Corbin, op. cit., 1986, pp. 167, 205–206; Mark Kurlansky’s introduction to Émile Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, New York, 2009 [orig. 1873], p. xix; Kristine Hoyt Jouanne, *Food and Eating in Zola’s Rougon-Macquart*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Iowa, 1996; Suzana Yvonne Michel, *Producing an Ideology: Food and Sexuality in Emile Zola’s ‘Les Rougon-Macquart’*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Oregon, 1991; Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, ‘The Sensualization of Flânerie’ in *Dix-Neuf: Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes*, Vol. 16, No. 2, July, 2012, pp. 211–223.
- 17 Notably it was shared by Champfleury, as in a description of Courbet versus the art establishment in *Grandes figures d’hier et d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, 1861, p. 243. Champfleury’s reliance on culinary metaphor is discussed in Desbuissons, op. cit., 2012.
- 18 Zola, op. cit., 1893, pp. 338–339.
- 19 ‘Vous savez quel effet produisent les toiles de M. Manet au Salon. Elles crèvent le mur, tout simplement. Tout autour d’elles s’étalent les douceurs des confiseurs artistiques à la mode, les arbres en sucre candi et les maisons en croûte de pâté, les bons hommes en pain d’épices et les bonnes femmes faites de crème à la vanille. La boutique de bonbons devient plus rose et plus douce, et les toiles vivantes de l’artiste semblent prendre une certaine amertume au milieu de ce fleuve de lait. Aussi, faut-il voir les grimaces des grands enfants qui passent dans la salle. Jamais vous ne leur ferez avaler pour deux sous de véritable chair, ayant la réalité de la vie; mais ils se gorgent comme des malheureux de toutes les sucreries écœurantes qu’on leur sert’, Zola, op. cit., 1893, pp. 295–296.
- 20 Ibid., p. 265.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 338, 370.
- 22 Ibid., p. 354; Émile Zola, *Mon Salon, 1866*, Paris, 1866, p. 47.
- 23 Jules Michelet, *La Femme*, Paris, 1860, pp. 52–53; Elphège Boursin, *Le Livre des Femmes au XIXème siècle*, Paris, 1865, p. 167.
- 24 Zola, op. cit., 1893, p. 320.
- 25 George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, New Haven C.T., 1954, p. 154.
- 26 For references to tasting, savour, and flavour, see Zola, op. cit., 1893, pp. 264, 265, 307, 310, 318, 328, 329, 337, 343, 345, 346, 352, 358, 370; quotations from pp. 329, 346.
- 27 Ibid., p. 355. On Zola and Positivism, see Armstrong, op. cit., pp. 32–47; and Rubin, op. cit., 1994, pp. 109–122.
- 28 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, 4th Edition*, 1762; Jean-François Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française*, 1787–88; *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 1835; Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 1872–1877. All available through the University

- of Chicago: ARTFL *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* Project, <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois> (accessed 22 April 2015).
- 29 Richard Brettell and Stephen Eisenman, *Nineteenth-Century Art in the Norton Simon Museum*, New Haven, C.T., 2006, p. 254.
- 30 'On dit de celui-ci, qu'il a un technique qui lui est propre, et qu'il se sert autant de son pinceau que de son pinceau . . . ses compositions appellent indistinctement l'ignorant et le connoisseur. C'est une vigueur de couleur incroyable, une harmonie générale, un effet piquant et vrai, des belles masses, une magie de faire à désespérer, un ragoût dans l'assortiment et l'ordonnance', Denis Diderot, 'Le Salon de 1767', reprinted in Jacques-André Naigeon ed., *Oeuvres de Denis Diderot tome 14*, Paris, 1800, p. 158. On Chardin's methods, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Chardin Material*, Berlin, 2011.
- 31 Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Paris, 1751, p. 23. See also Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: an Essay on the Relations Between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age*, trans. Chris Miller, Los Angeles, C.A., 2008 [orig. 2003], pp. 55–119.
- 32 Charles Bonnet makes this connection in his *Essai de psychologie*, London, 1755, p. 58. Émile Littré quotes this argument in his entry for 'goût' in the *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 1872–1877. Hippolyte Taine is particularly sensitive to the ways in which taste interacts with smell and touch in his analysis of the senses in *De l'Intelligence*, Paris, 1870, pp. 240–242.
- 33 'cette femme rayonnante, des souliers au bonnet, dans une clarté blanche, et pour ainsi dire crémeuse . . . du contour à la fois gras et cerné, des égrenures raboteuses du pinceau, des grumelots de la couleur, d'une sorte de cristallisation de la pâte. Des tons légers, tendres et riants, jetés partout et revenant sans cesse, jusque dans le blanc du casaquin, se levait, comme une trame de jour, une brume gorge de pigeon, une poussière de chaleur, une vapeur flottante enveloppant cette femme . . .', Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*, Paris, 1873–1874, pp. 130–131. Their use of gastronomic critique has been noted in Jean Louis Schefer, *Chardin*, Paris, 2002, pp. 41–44, 50–52.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 129, 130, 139, 168–169.
- 35 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, London, 2007, pp. 80–83.
- 36 Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris, 1857, pp. 19–20. Baudelaire had also developed the culinary model for encountering visual art, see Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–47.
- 37 Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–272.
- 38 In his 'Le Salon', Phillipe Burty explained, '[i]l est surtout un reproche qu'on adresse chaque année à cet artiste très militant et très convaincu: c'est celui de travailler trop vite', in *Le Rappel*, 11 May 1870, p. 3.
- 39 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, 1962 [orig. 1945], p. 56.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 148–150; see also Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', reprinted in Galen A. Johnson ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston I.L., 1993 [orig. 1945], pp. 64–65; and 'Eye and Mind', reprinted in *Ibid.*, pp. 123–125, 138.
- 41 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Claude Lefort ed., Evanston I.L., 1968.
- 42 Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, London, New York, 2004, pp. 49–56.
- 43 See 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', in Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, 1968, pp. 130–155.
- 44 Frédérique Desbuissons, 'Courbet's Materialism', in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2,

- 2008, pp. 251–260. See also Desbuissons, op. cit., 2014, pp. 119–120; and Desbuissons, ‘Des moos et des mots: Courbet à la brasserie Andler’, in *À table au XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, exh. cat. Paris, 2001, pp. 198–208.
- 45 ‘Ce que je cherche avant tout dans un tableau, c’est un homme et non pas un tableau . . . Car c’est une autre bonne plaisanterie de croire qu’il y a, en fait de beauté artistique, une vérité absolue et éternelle. La vérité une et complète n’est pas faite pour nous qui confectionnons chaque matin une vérité que nous usons chaque soir. Comme toute chose, l’art est un produit humain, une sécrétion humaine; c’est notre corps qui sue la beauté de nos œuvres’, op. cit., 1893, pp. 281–282.
- 46 ‘Je prétends que cette toile [*Olympia*] est véritablement la chair et le sang du peintre. Elle le contient tout entier et ne contient que lui’, Ibid., p. 357.
- 47 See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze’, in Jacques-Alain Miller ed., *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, New York, 1981 [orig. 1973], p. 72; ‘What is a Picture?’, in Ibid., pp. 107–108, 115; and ‘The Line and the Light’, in Ibid., p. 94.
- 48 Art historians whose considerations of abjection in viewing have informed my own include Rebecca Zorach, ‘Despoiled at the Source’, in *Art History*, vol. 22, 1999, pp. 248–260; Carol Ockman, *Ingres’s Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line*, New Haven, C.T., 1995, pp. 98–124; Marni Reva Kessler, ‘Antoine Villon: Rendering Butter’, in *Dix-Neuf: Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes*, vol. 10, 2008, pp. 12–24.
- 49 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1982, pp. 2–3; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, London, 1957 [orig. 1943], p. 609.
- 50 Louis-Eustache Audot, *Bréviaire du gastronome utile et récréatif*, Paris, 1864, p. 46; Louis Clerc, *Manuel de l’amateur d’huîtres*, Paris, 1828, p. 58.
- 51 ‘Les ennemis les plus déclarés du talent d’Edouard Manet lui accordent qu’il peint bien les objets inanimés’, op. cit., 1893, p. 361.
- 52 Rubin, for example, discusses *Fish* as ‘a vehicle for the visual delectation associated with the pictorial properties of the image, as opposed to the referent itself’, op. cit., pp. 27–8, p. 68, p. 215. Rubin is, however, sensitive throughout to the effects of these pictorial properties upon the viewing body.
- 53 One strong formulation of this argument, most persuasively argued in relation to certain figure paintings, comes from T. J. Clark, who frames *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton N.J., 2008 [orig. 1985], p. xxx) as an account of the effects of the ‘distance and superficiality’ shared by Manet’s paintings. It is less compelling as a characterization of this series of 1860s still lifes, an in Brettell and Eisenman’s claim of the contemporary *Still Life with Fish and Shrimp*: ‘[t]he components that constitute this still life are no more salient for the artist-observer than if they were flowers, shoes, or dead rabbits; they are observed with a connoisseur’s combination of keenness and dispassion’, op. cit., p. 254.
- 54 See Rubin’s discussion of this distinction, and his application of this framework to *Fish*, op. cit., p. 68.
- 55 For a nuanced formulation of ‘visuality’, see Hal Foster’s introduction to his edited *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle W.A., 1988. For a discussion of the art historical tendency to equate Manet and the Impressionists with painting that privileged optical experience,

see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, Chicago I.L., 1996, pp. 18–19.

- 56 My discussion is informed by Jacques Rancière's concept of the *partage du sensible* in *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London, New York, 2004 [orig. 2000].
- 57 Zola, op. cit., 1893, pp. 333–334.