

Vincenzo Campi's *Ricotta Eaters* (c.1585):
Viewership and the Early Modern Market

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Vincenzo Campi's painting *Ricotta Eaters* (c.1585) in order to provoke questions about the practice of viewing and its relationship to an emerging art market. *Ricotta Eaters* draws on familiar types and narratives from genre painting and is usually interpreted as a comic, but moralizing allegory. I argue, however, that the painting resists this reductive interpretation, particularly by manipulating the conventions of genre painting to produce different and unexpected effects. Most striking are the aggressive yet unexplained outward gazes of the ricotta eaters. By turning my attention to how *Ricotta Eaters* constructs the experience of viewing, I will explore how the art market produced a new kind of viewer (an unspecified, potential buyer instead of a known patron) and provided different incentives and opportunities for artists to approach this viewer. I argue that *Ricotta Eaters* strives to be marketable by the way it disrupts the "normative" (stable, privileged) viewing position, offering instead a more "novel" (active, reciprocal) way of engaging with the painting. The "tactical" mode of rendering the irreducible properties of food, the eating body, the face, and laughter unfixes conventional limits of representation creating a more dynamic experience of viewing.

Further, I explore the interrelationship between viewing *Ricotta Eaters* and viewing in the marketplace. In *Ricotta Eaters*, an unresolved conflict between a realistic and theatrical mode of representation complicates the viewer's relationship to the painting. The boundary of viewing is destabilized, creating an anxiety that parallels growing concerns over forms of representation in the marketplace. The breakdown of commercial and social boundaries in the marketplace produced new doubts and possibilities for exchange that, I argue, are present in *Ricotta Eaters*. The painting creates a difficult experience of viewing; but this challenge becomes an opportunity for the viewer to become actively involved in the production of meaning. By considering the overlaps between the marketplace and *Ricotta Eaters*, the various ways in which the market impacted on the production and reception of painting are revealed. Thus, *Ricotta Eaters* offers a new way to think about connections between viewership, representation, and the marketplace.

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Introduction

In Vincenzo Campi's painting of the *Ricotta Eaters* (fig. 1) c. 1585,¹ four raucous figures confront the viewer unexpectedly. Filling up the shallow foreground space of the painting with a tangled mass of bodies, these figures command the viewer's complete attention. But how are we to interpret this group of ricotta eaters? While it seems as though they have gathered for the simple reason of eating communally, an uneasiness about the encounter prevails. The ricotta cheese pictured in its typical conical shape, soft texture and dazzling whiteness, draws our eyes toward its sensual tangibility. But this visual absorption is quickly disrupted by an equally insistent agitation that surrounds the ricotta. Crowded around the freshly prepared ricotta plate are groping hands and bulging body parts. The four eaters jostle for space, their abundant bodies threatening the very stability of everything in their proximity. The small table, barely able to withstand the excitement that swells around it, struggles to remain steady. The overwhelming bodily presence of these four figures transforms the tranquil space of food into the fulcrum of uncontrolled sensuality. Indeed, it is the act of eating which opens up the limits of their bodies, allowing them to challenge the physical and symbolic boundaries of the painting. Teetering at the very edge of the painting's border, the man who holds a giant ladle has gorged himself to the point of excess. The cheese that no longer fits into his mouth dangles precariously on the edge of his lips. The man behind him tilts his head back, boldly offering a view of his gaping mouth that will momentarily be filled with a large spoonful of ricotta. For both figures, eating emphasizes the mouth as

¹ Vincenzo Campi, *Ricotta Eaters (Mangiaricotta)*, c.1585, oil on canvas, 72 x 89.5 cm, private collection, Cremona. Reproduced in Francesco Porzio, *da Caravaggio a Ceruti: la scena de genere e l'immagine dei pitocchi nella pittura italiana* (Milano: Skira, 1998), 126 (catalogue no. 6), 293 (text); another version is at the Musee des Beaux-Arts, Lione.

the unstable site of passage between the inside and outside of the body. The last man in the painting thrusts himself into view while digging his spoon into the mound of cheese with an eagerness that, at the very least, transgresses a sense of decorum. Dominating the right side of the painting, a woman whose white décolletage frames an ample bosom like ruffled icing does not participate in this orgy of consumption but instead waits patiently with her spoon turned backwards. She rests her hand tenderly on the plate of ricotta in the manner of a proud hostess presenting the meal that she has prepared. Perhaps these people have gathered at a tavern or an inn, low-class establishments associated with uncontrolled indulgence in eating, drinking and other licit or illicit excesses. However, the setting remains uncertain as the background details are absent and appear only as gaps of indistinct space between the ricotta eaters.

Indeed, the painting raises any number of questions. Who are these ricotta eaters? Are they clients at a tavern? Is the woman a hostess, a prostitute, neither or both? Why are they eating ricotta cheese? As questions mount, so do the doubts of their being fully answered. Each ricotta eater in his or her own way is absorbed by the activity of eating, yet all simultaneously fix their attention on the viewer with a self-consciousness that is rather unsettling. Their gazes aggressively pierce the boundary between the inside and the outside of the painting. We no longer seem to be watching them eat, but more radically, they are watching us while they eat. Their outwardly directed looks form a major point of rupture in this painting.

Thus, viewing *Ricotta Eaters* is not a simple process; it involves a high degree of negotiating the contradictions and conflicts in the painting, especially the intense effect of being pushed from and pulled into the image. We are drawn into *Ricotta Eaters* by its mimetic

rendering of tangible food and bodies. The materiality of cheese is emphasized through its bright, lumpy, spoonable texture. The skin of the ricotta eaters is coarse and brawny; it responds to the movements of the body and face, creasing along the edges of eyes and wrinkling above raised eyebrows. The textural difference between the short stubble of the man in the rimmed hat and the soft, thinning hair of the older man wearing pointed collars is also discernable. However, while this naturalism dissolves the distance between representation and reality and pulls the viewer into a more intimate relationship with the scene depicted, there is a simultaneous presence of theatricality that disrupts our mimetic absorption into the painting. The ricotta eaters' excessive awareness of the viewer's presence keeps him/her at a distance. As conscious of our presence as actors on a stage, the ricotta eaters enact a sort of jubilant performance of anticipation and consumption specifically for our attention. The viewer is faced, then, with an unresolved tension between realism and theatricality.

How are we to respond to the confrontational, even contrived, engagement of the ricotta eaters? Indeed, determining our response becomes our most difficult task. The man with the ladle looks out with an expression of incoherent overconsumption. Searching for meaning in his face, we find only glazed eyes and a blank face, the expression of a man frozen in a moment of bodily ecstasy or abjection. The two men in the middle gaze more deliberately at us, but their expressions seem to turn to mockery. As one defiantly casts his eyes down at us with an unexplained look of derision, the other leers out from the painting with a mischievous smile. The female figure turns her head to direct a smile toward the viewer, but how should it be received? Is it offered as an invitation of camaraderie, an erotic enticement, or a mocking glare? These figures forcefully initiate an intimate relationship with

the viewer by looking directly at us, even by leaving a suggestive space in front of the ricotta plate. But the vagueness of their solicitation causes our response to vacillate in a perpetual state of undecidability. They smile, laugh, eat, but are they smiling at us, laughing with us, inviting us to eat with them? Or, with an unexpected twist, are we the object of their laughter, the object of some joke that we have not been let in on? The uncertainty of the painting's meaning problematizes the stable boundary between the inside and outside, between the painted image and the space of the viewer. And in this confusion where realism conflicts with theatricality, invitation with exclusion, and laughter with mockery, the response of the viewer becomes central to the overall meaning of the painting. I will argue that the central concern of the painting is not within the scene of eating, but elsewhere, in the space of viewing. In effect, the changing and uncertain position of viewing becomes the focus of the viewer's attention.

Who possibly could have been the intended viewer here? While scholars have turned to the uncritical categorization of the painting as "genre," the problematics of viewing set up by *Ricotta Eaters* have not been addressed. Genre, of course, refers to works which represent the "everyday," the "commonplace," or the "low" and *Ricotta Eaters* certainly seems to fit such a categorization. It does not deal with a religious, mythological, or aristocratic theme, but rather with the subject of the lower-classes and the bodily activity of eating. Yet the designation of *Ricotta Eaters* as genre raises certain assumptions about that category that serve in turn to neutralize the tensions in the image. For instance, *Ricotta Eaters* is often considered only within traditional interpretations of "genre" painting, such as allegory. Like Campi's paintings of peasant markets, for instance *Fruit Vendor* (fig.

2) c.1580,² *Ricotta Eaters* is interpreted as a "mingling of naturalistic observation, allegorical meaning and sexual overtones."³ For example, Barry Wind interprets *Ricotta Eaters* as a blend of burlesque humour and moral allegory.⁴ He argues that the "insatiable appetites" of the ricotta eaters "are exaggerated to the point of comic absurdity"⁵ to suggest the shortcomings of their behavior to the viewer. The ricotta eaters form a "ludicrous quartet"⁶ of uncouth, gluttonous subjects. The feast is a spectacle of their "low-class" physicality and sexuality since they are depicted as satisfying their base appetites and bodily needs with vulgar abandon. As well, their lack of self-control easily becomes suggestive of their sexual lasciviousness. Indeed, Wind's interpretation of the painting as a "vignette of comic folly"⁷ assumes that the viewer is intended and able to look down on the ricotta eaters from a place of superiority. In order to cull a didactic meaning from the painting, the viewer would indeed have to occupy this position.

In addition to the allegorical and moralizing approach, Wind also relies, albeit inexplicitly, on another convention of genre painting: stock "types". Because of their unruly, "low-class" behaviour, it is often assumed that the figures in *Ricotta Eaters* consist of a prostitute and three clients at a tavern or inn, generic types which were common in sixteenth and seventeenth century depictions of Merry Company and belonged also to Old Testament biblical traditions such as the "Prodigal son."⁸ Stock characters afford a level of predictability to a painting's meaning as they condense various social behaviours into

² Vincenzo Campi, *Fruit Vendor*, c.1580, 142 x 215 cm, oil on canvas, Kirchheim Schloss.

³ Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 38.

⁴ Barry Wind, "Pitture Ridicole: Some Late Cinquecento Comic Genre Painting," *Storia dell'Arte* 20 (1974): 25-35.

⁵ Wind, "Pitture Ridicole," 25.

⁶ Wind, "Pitture Ridicole," 27.

⁷ Wind, "Pitture Ridicole," 30.

⁸ Nanette Salomon, *Jacob Duck and the Gentrification of Dutch Genre Painting* (Belgium: Davaco, 1998), 107.

distinct, recognizable types. Thus, the common interpretation of *Ricotta Eaters*, as embodied in the main points of Wind's argument, approaches the subjects of the painting as predictable social types. They are understood to signify a rather expected narrative: the ravenous appetites of the men are a coy indication that their feast on cheese will continue into an equally excessive sexual indulgence. Within the stabilizing frame of genre, the eating body is merely an "object" that the viewer witnesses from a position of authority and distance.

It is often taken for granted that the viewer is in a position of visual authority and moral/social superiority simply because the subjects are from the lower spectrum of society. But the notion that the viewer is able to look down on the subjects depicted is an assumption that is contested quite dramatically by the ricotta eaters themselves. Indeed, their way of engaging directly yet indeterminately with the viewer exceeds interpretive models provided by tradition scholarship on "low life" genre. Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten provide a brief outline:

There has been the requisite discussion of the iconography of the peasant genre in the recent art-historical literature. One key question was how artists viewed peasants, in other words how they ranked them in the social hierarchy, and to what extent they satirized them. It is hard to deny that peasants were long portrayed as an inferior type of being: unpolished, coarse, lacking in moderation, lecherous and aggressive. However, there was a more or less neutral counterpart which gradually came to be seen in a more favorable light.⁹

Satirizing or sympathizing? *Ricotta Eaters* corresponds to neither category. What then do we do with this painting and its relation to genre?

⁹ Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genreprints in the Netherlands 1550-1700*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoom, 1997), 315.

Since the category has failed to account for the instabilities in *Ricotta Eaters*, should genre be discarded as an interpretive frame? Recent scholars have noted the inadequacy of the term and its problematic historical conception.¹⁰ The category of genre did not exist in the sixteenth century, but was invented in the late eighteenth century in France to unify an unruly group of images that represented everyday life.¹¹ The term provided a stable, hierarchical definition for the various works that depicted "low" and "base" subjects such as peasants, street life, and domestic life. Historically, the term has been used to stabilize images that were difficult to define even as "art" and I would argue that this tendency is evident in scholarly interpretations of *Ricotta Eaters*. However, genre should not be disregarded from an approach that aims to go beyond a reductive reading. Certainly, it is useful and necessary to think about *Ricotta Eaters* within the frame of genre since the category alerts us to the painting's relationship with other representations of "low" or "common" life. It allows us to investigate how *Ricotta Eaters* negotiates (rather than replicates) the familiar "types" and conventions of genre painting.

Thus, the term provides a crucial structural frame from which to interpret *Ricotta Eaters*; but its usefulness is contingent upon how its assumed stability is problematized. As a categorical label, genre suggests a level of fixity that, as many scholars have argued, is incongruent with many of these "low" images. On Dutch genre painting, Nanette Salomon writes,

Indeed, while the seventeenth-century Republic produced an extensive number of paintings whose evolution and history

¹⁰ See Salomon's discussion of this problem in relation to Dutch painting, 19; her source, Christopher Comer and Wolfgang Stechow, "The History of the Term Genre," *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 33, no. 2 (1976-77): 89-94.

¹¹ Salomon, 19.

are driven by conventionality and typification, they remain, paradoxically resistant to modern categories or labels. Even more easily definable categories such as portrait, landscape, and still-life are complicated in Dutch art by their many hybrid formulations and exceptions to the rule. It seems virtually impossible to find a definition for genre scenes as a coherent group in a way that accounts for all their various permutations.¹²

Further, Gail Feigenbaum,¹³ Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten¹⁴ explain that the division between secular genre and religious works was equally porous. In the sixteenth century, ancient biblical themes intermixed with contemporary scenes of everyday life. For example, the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son blurred with less didactic images of brothels and tavern life. Ger Luijten emphasizes the intermixture between these different visual vocabularies:

It was not so that depictions of the Prodigal Son metamorphosed into merry companies in the seventeenth century, with the biblical content being swallowed up in the process. The two types co-existed back in the sixteenth century, and continued to do so.¹⁵

Genre was not a fixed category, but a site of constant slippage between several modes of representation. While various recognizable themes and types developed in genre painting, their signification was far from limited. Thus, we must consider the presence of intermixture in the genre tradition and, most importantly, pay attention to how different paintings stabilize or heighten those instabilities. The implications of genre's permutations for the viewer also need to be addressed. Certainly, the viewer's interpretative role becomes especially crucial. However, the level to which the viewer is engaged as an active participant in the completion of meaning depends on the degree of

¹² Salomon, 19.

¹³ Gail Feigenbaum, "Gamblers, Cheats and Fortune Tellers," in *Georges de la Tour and His World*, Philip Conisbee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 150.

¹⁴ de Jongh and Luijten, 122.

¹⁵ de Jongh and Luijten, 122.

clarity or ambiguity in a painting's mode of signification. This is an important distinction that I will explore in the course of my project.

In *Ricotta Eaters*, all eyes are fixed on the viewer and in my efforts to understand the instability of the painting and its relation to genre, I too shall focus my attention in that direction. The most striking aspect of *Ricotta Eaters* is how it reworks the idea and practice of viewing. The viewer is engaged very differently in comparison to Campi's other genre paintings, for instance those of market vendors that were produced around 1580 for the banker, Hans Fugger.¹⁶ In *Fruit Vendor* (fig. 2), an attractive female seller glances out at the viewer, but her gaze is unambiguous and nonconfrontational. Her eyes meet with ours in order to welcome and return our gaze. Indeed, there is much for the eyes to see: in the foreground, basket upon basket of vegetables, an abundant variety of ripe fruit, and of course, the lovely seller herself; in the middle ground, peasants busy harvesting fruits; and in the background, a pastoral vista that recedes softly into the distance. Our gaze is unimpeded and unchallenged. We can choose to linger on the slightly sensual gaze of the female seller or we can allow our eyes to flicker pleasantly between the different varieties of fruit. In *Fruit Vendor*, the relationship between image and viewer is quite "normative" as the boundary separating both realms is both comfortable and stable. *Fish Vendor* (fig. 3) c.1580¹⁷ from the same series deviates little from this mode of representation. Though bawdier in the erotic undertones of the objects and gesture of the vendor, for the most part, this painting signifies through stable interpretive modes. Unlike *Ricotta Eaters*, the paintings of peasant markets easily satisfy allegorical interpretations as they take on the guises of the

¹⁶ For a discussion of this series, see Barry Wind, "Vincenzo Campi and Hans Fugger: a Peep at Late Cinquecento Bawdy Humour," *Arte Lombarda* 47-48, no. 1 (1977): 110-114.

¹⁷ Vincenzo Campi, *Fish Vendor*, c.1580, oil on canvas, 142 x 215 cm, Kirchheim Schloss.

seasons or of the senses. The desire to find allegorical meaning is not disrupted by unresolved tensions. In *Ricotta Eaters*, where we would expect to find stable symbols and straight-forward types, we are instead faced with uncertainties that ripple into other doubts about the painting's meaning. Why of all cheeses are they eating ricotta cheese? If the painting is actually an allegory of folly, then why is our reception of that rather simple message interrupted by four ambivalent stares? Indeed, the various tensions in *Ricotta Eaters* need to be situated within the tradition of genre painting as, I will argue, the potency of Campi's painting stems from its ability to disrupt what the viewer would expect to encounter in an image of "low life." It is thus important to distinguish *Ricotta Eaters* from these other genre paintings.¹⁸ Not only does *Ricotta Eaters* engage with the viewer on entirely different terms, but the role of the viewer is dramatically made the focus of attention.

It is my contention, then, that the strategic instability of *Ricotta Eaters*, especially in its encounter with viewers, signals an important moment when the possibilities of viewership are opened up by new forms of exchange in a developing art market. This, of course is not a new claim. Many scholars have studied early modern patterns of patronage in Italy noting the shifts from a traditional system of direct commissions to more unconventional forms of art production for anonymous buyers.¹⁹ Indeed, these shifts were complicated and contingent on many factors, but suffice it to say for now that what developed was

¹⁸ Wind collapses these differences in "Pittore Ridicole," 25-35; see also A.W.A Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna: Visible Reality in Art after the Council of Trent*, trans. R.R. Symonds (New York: A. Schram, 1974), 1:72.

¹⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth century Italy: a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Martin Wackernagel, *World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist: Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*. Trans. Alison Luchs (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981); Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: a Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

a different form of exchange, one shaped by market strategies. Production was no longer limited to fixed commissions based on "contractual" agreements between the artist and the client,²⁰ as paintings produced on speculation became more of a common practice in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.²¹ Certainly, these new patterns of exchange created different opportunities and incentives for artists, allowing them to actively seek out an audience for their paintings by displaying and marketing their works in a variety of ways.²² Another important shift included the audience itself, which was greatly expanded as ownership of artworks was unmoored from the social hierarchy of patronage.²³

Thus, as the developing art market created new ways for an artist to approach an audience, the status of the viewer also shifted to include a more fluid concept of an unpredictable, anonymous buyer. Undoubtedly, these changes significantly impacted the production and experience of viewing for painting and, I would argue, the effects are evident in *Ricotta Eaters*. How does this painting respond to the market? I would argue *Ricotta Eaters* adjusts the "normative" mode of signification in genre painting to incorporate a different notion of viewing offered by the art market, that is, one that is less bound by the limitations of fixed patronage. It is rather useful to consider how market exchange could prompt an artist to devise an alternative way of engaging the viewer, one that would catch and sustain his/her interest, rather than conform to his/her expectations. This appears to be the case with *Ricotta Eaters* since the subjects of the painting

²⁰ On the nature of the "contract", see Baxandall, 1,5.

²¹ Haskell, 15.

²² Haskell, 126.

²³ The polemics surrounding the "vulgar public" or unsophisticated buyer in the art market are addressed in Sheila McTighe, "Perfect Deformity, Ideal Beauty and the *Imaginaire* of Work: the Representation of Annibale Carracci's *Arti de Bologna* in 1646," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, vol. 1 (1993): 78-80.

unexpectedly spotlight their attention onto the viewer, making him/her the focus of an uncertain and intriguing dialogue. Of course, I do not want to suggest that the ways of addressing a market audience were limited to the confrontational method deployed in *Ricotta Eaters* since similar versions of the Fugger commissioned paintings, such as *Fruit Vendor* (fig. 4) c.1580,²⁴ were also popular on the art market.²⁵ Rather, I want to emphasize that *Ricotta Eaters* is particularly interesting because it allows us to think about the intersection of viewership and marketability in a more complex way. The persistent challenges the painting poses for viewing and interpretation are intended to engage the viewer in a manner that exceeds the conventions of genre. *Ricotta Eaters* initiates an intimate, reciprocal dialogue with its viewer/buyer that in one way can be seen as increasing its market appeal.

How are the two related? I would argue that the marketability of *Ricotta Eaters* is inseparable from its effect of "novelty." Scholars have noted that novelty becomes an important feature of market paintings that strive to catch the eye or attention of potential buyers.²⁶ But novelty as a particular kind of effect that is both created and experienced is fundamental to my examination of *Ricotta Eaters*. Marina Bianchi argues that "novelty, in the form of novel experiences or goods (or both in combination)...is linked with consumer satisfaction and pleasure" and, therefore, is an important factor in determining consumer choice in a market context.²⁷ Novelty is not newness, but rather familiarity that has been pushed to its limit, to the degree that it "disrupts a previous set of individual

²⁴ Vincenzo Campi, *Fruit Vendor*, c.1580, oil on canvas, 145 x 210 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

²⁵ Luigi Salerno, *La Natura Morta Italiana, 1560-1805*, trans. R. Erich Wolf (Rome: Ugo Bozzi Editore, 1984), XXVIII.

²⁶ Elizabeth Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 13.

²⁷ Marina Bianchi, "Consuming Novelty: Strategies for Producing Novelty in Consumption," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, vol. 1 (Winter 1998): 3.

experiences."²⁸ Thus, the novelty of *Ricotta Eaters* is created within the frame of genre painting. By manipulating the viewer's expectations of genre, *Ricotta Eaters* produces an effect of surprise for the viewer. Indeed, the concept of novelty as a quality that is achieved by pushing at the boundaries of the familiar is valuable to our understanding of the relationship between marketability and painting. But perhaps even more significant to my concerns is how novelty is received by a viewer/buyer. Bianchi rightly stresses that novelty is not passively consumed, but rather is actively produced when a buyer engages with an object for sale.²⁹ Thus, indeterminacy of meaning in a painting can create a purposeful "collaboration and interplay...between the producer and consumer of an art product."³⁰ Through the aggressive yet permissive looks of the subjects in *Ricotta Eaters*, the viewer is pulled into a difficult dialogue that he or she must actively work through.

The notion of the consumer as a creative producer of meaning has been theorized before, especially in the work of Michel de Certeau.³¹ While his work focuses on mass consumption in contemporary culture, the emphasis that he puts on consumption or usage as a secondary production of meaning³² provides a useful model for thinking about the viewer in the early modern market. De Certeau's theoretical re-examination of "ways of using" that have been overlooked in recent scholarship³³ plays

²⁸ Bianchi, 4.

²⁹ Bianchi, 12.

³⁰ Bianchi, 5; here Bianchi is relying on Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (Milano: Bompiani, 1995).

³¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

³² de Certeau, xiii.

³³ de Certeau, xiii; as an intervention into the discourses on the consumer in contemporary culture, de Certeau stakes out his project along the following lines: "This essay is part of a continuing investigation of the ways in which users—commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules operate...[The goal of the essay] will be achieved if everyday practices, 'ways of operating' or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity, and if a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives, by penetrating this obscurity, make it possible to articulate them...the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles...The purpose of this work...is to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose

a vital role in my examination of *Ricotta Eaters* and will be discussed in the following sections. Indeed, his study urges us to pay more attention to the consumer, or in the case of *Ricotta Eaters*, to the experience of the viewer and the act of interpretation as a creative process.

I have raised the importance of the art market in shaping the mode of signification in *Ricotta Eaters*; however, this intersection cannot be understood fully without considering the implications of a changing marketplace and new forms and values of exchange. Jean-Christophe Agnew examines the shifts in the early modern marketplace, explaining that "the residual boundaries separating market from other forms of exchange were rapidly dissolving."³⁴ He presents an image of an unruly, placeless market that was quite different from the markets of antiquity and the Middle Ages:

early markets did not so much control space as they were controlled by spatial arrangements growing out of the organization of other kinds of social exchange, including gift and tributary practices. These markets were, in every possible sense of the term, *situated phenomena*; that is to say, they were assigned to precise sites—in space and time...³⁵

By the sixteenth century, the market "yielded a primacy of place to a marketing network"³⁶ of activity that exceeded the physical boundaries of the marketplace proper. With the breakdown of these limits, the practice of buying and selling goods expanded in unpredictable ways. For instance, it became common for the sale of products to flow outside of the official marketplace and into the many shops or inns that limned its borders.³⁷ Further, Agnew suggests that the fair, as a more informal

status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers,'" xi-xii.

³⁴ Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), x.

³⁵ Agnew, 18.

³⁶ Agnew, 49.

³⁷ Agnew, 49.

and infrequent space of exchange, was the most significant factor in "the gradual erosion of the bounded marketplace."³⁸ He explains,

the fair tended to move transactions outside the purview of manorial and municipal authority and thus to bypass the regulative structure of the public market...There, in the exchange fairs, the personal and ceremonial apparatus of the marketplace gradually gave way to the relatively impersonal framework of a money and credit market; and there, under the successive auspices of Genoese, Flemish, and English merchants, the commercial bill of exchange moved steadily toward the ideal of unlimited and unrestricted endorsement. All along the sixteenth-century 'commercial axis' that linked Antwerp and London exchanges new forms of liquidity were developing that overflowed, where they did not burst, the mold of medieval commerce.³⁹

As the physical boundaries of the marketplace became more permeable and less visible, the available methods of buying and selling increased and the experience of exchange intensified.

Thus, the advantages of the marketplace were also accompanied by growing anxieties toward these rapid changes. This is evident in the early modern understanding of a "market," which began to incorporate a different notion of exchange, one less defined by the certainty of place than by the obscurity of process and anxieties about value.⁴⁰ Fluid forms of commercial exchange in the marketplace caused some distress because they penetrated other realms of human activity creating new worries about broader social dealings. As the symbolic and psychological boundaries that separated and defined the relationship between the self and other (buyer and seller) in the marketplace were destabilized by less regulated forms of exchange, self-representation became a more ambivalent expression of personal intention.⁴¹ Deception became a common concern. The breakdown of an older system of bounded exchange and social signification created, as Agnew argues, a "crisis

³⁸ Agnew, 46.

³⁹ Agnew, 49.

⁴⁰ Agnew, 53.

⁴¹ Agnew, 59-61.

of representation."⁴² Serious questions gathered around the notion of truth behind mimetic and theatrical forms of display, doubts that had never before figured so prominently within the context of exchange. Thus, the marketplace produced a complex fusion of problems and possibilities that seeped into other realms, initiating new discourses on the value of exchange and representation.

Certainly, *Ricotta Eaters* engages with the discourse of the changing marketplace, offering its own exploration on the nature of exchange and representation. Like the marketplace, the physical limits of the painting are neither stable nor impermeable. The boundary of the painting seems barely able to contain the restless, abundant bodies that fill its interior. This instability extends into the viewing process as the ricotta eaters pull the viewer into a space of exchange that is conflicted and ambivalent. Deciphering the glances of the ricotta eaters in order to define the viewer's relationship to them is presented as an intriguing problem to work through. And the unresolved tension between the realism and theatricality of the painting prompts the viewer to consider the instability of representation in relation to painting and the marketplace. I would argue that as a market painting, *Ricotta Eaters* was in a unique position to comment on the pressing anxieties about exchange in the marketplace. There is no attempt to resolve these anxieties; rather, they become productive in the very marketability of *Ricotta Eaters*. By drawing on Agnew's study, I will argue that *Ricotta Eaters* not only explores the possibilities of market exchange (for instance, through its novel engagement with the viewer), but that it also makes the problematic of visual exchange an integral part of its theme.

⁴² Agnew, 60.

My thesis explores *Ricotta Eaters* in relation to genre painting, marketability, and the early modern marketplace. I will argue that the thread which links all of these issues is the practice of viewing. *Ricotta Eaters* creates an unfinished dialogue that the viewer is provoked to take up. While this process is difficult, it is also productive, opening up interesting ways for the viewer to engage with a painting. Specifically, it is through the themes of the body, eating, and food that *Ricotta Eaters* achieves an unexpected mode of signification that exceeds the limits of "normative" viewing in genre painting. In order to understand how *Ricotta Eaters* produces meaning in a radically different way, we need to think beyond how these themes are usually interpreted in art historical literature on genre painting. As I have argued, the kind of distanced viewing that allows one to reduce consumption in *Ricotta Eaters* to a spectacle of "low-class" behaviour can no longer be assumed. The painting does not allow for such a stable position. Instead, I will suggest that *Ricotta Eaters* realizes the possibilities of the eating body through a "carnavalesque" aesthetic. By drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's classic text on the "carnavalesque,"⁴³ I will explore how the bulging, gaping, laughing bodies of the ricotta eaters extend into the viewer's space, creating an intimate, unpredictable exchange. Being more than just generic types, the ricotta eaters call up the conventions of genre precisely to unravel them. Further, the meaning of food in *Ricotta Eaters* needs to be reconsidered beyond the restrictive frame of allegorical interpretation. As that which transforms the body (it nourishes and putrefies) and destabilizes the limit between the outside and the inside (it flows in and out of the body's orifices), food plays a crucial role in the painting. I will

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984).

argue that Campi dramatizes the inherent unruliness of food in his deliberate choice of ricotta as the type of cheese in the painting. Piero Camporesi's insightful study on the ambivalent history of cheese and its social and symbolic significance⁴⁴ will shed new light on the meaning of ricotta in Campi's painting. Indeed, the emphasis on corporeality as an unstable, polyvocal language of the body undermines the expectations of genre painting. My focus, therefore, is on how *Ricotta Eaters* negotiates strategies of representation as they relate to a new system of market exchange. Further, it is not my intention to resolve the suggestive questions that the painting provokes, but rather to examine the mode and effect of these ambiguities as central issues to provoke further discussion on viewership in the early modern (art) market.

1. Early formations of an Art Market: opportunities and anxieties

Scholars have studied the emerging art market in sixteenth century Netherlands,⁴⁵ but in Italy the complexities of market exchange and its impact on painting production remain largely unexamined. This discrepancy may suggest long held anxieties toward the incompatibility of humanism and commercialism in the Italian context. Indeed, the great effort to establish painting as a "liberal art" distinct from the "mechanical arts" is well documented.⁴⁶ Such fragile concepts of "Art" that were based on humanistic ideals and scientific principles depended on the elevated concept of the artist and patron/connoisseur. Indeed, the emergence of an open art market and the success of genre painting

⁴⁴ Piero Camporesi, *Anatomy of the Senses: Natural Symbols in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, trans. Allan Cameron (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ On recent scholarship, see Elizabeth Honig; see also Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: an Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne Marie Glasheen. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 178-189.

in that market threatened the very foundations of "Art." Sheila McTighe explains:

The success of low-life painting on the Roman art market, from the late sixteenth-century market scenes of Campi through the Caravaggisti to the Bamboccianti in the 1620s and 1630s hadn't escaped anyone's notice. That noble subjects should be bought by noble patrons was a notion flagrantly contradicted by the aristocrats who amassed their van Laers and their Cerquozzi's. Painters from the lineage of the Carracci academy such as Sacchi and Albani, who eschewed genre for higher subjects, felt a certain bitterness over the market success of low-life.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly, the discipline of art history has inherited some of these anxieties and biases toward market painting in Italy.

What, then, do we know about the early modern art market and its impact on production and consumption? Certainly, it provided more possibilities for the artist than the established patronage system alone. According to Michael Baxandall's study of fifteenth century patronage, we get a general sense that prior to the production of a work, a "contract" was forged between patron and painter that determined the outcome of the final work.⁴⁸ For instance, materials, dimensions, subjects and payments would sometimes be agreed upon. Of course, contracts would vary with each commission and at times there were discrepancies, but, in general, the contract clarified a patron's needs and his expectations of the artist.⁴⁹ There was stability in this system, but there were also obvious limitations, especially for the artist.⁵⁰ But the exclusivity of fixed patronage would gradually break down, and a new market system would appear. One major impetus for this emergence was an increase in trade. Martin Wackernagel explains that Florentine merchants could be seen as opening the way to a limited art

⁴⁷ McTighe, 78

⁴⁸ Baxandall, 5.

⁴⁹ Baxandall, 5.

⁵⁰ I do not want to overemphasize the limitations of this system, as there were many ways in which artists turned constraints into reasons for innovation.

market in the late fifteenth century. Acting as mediators between foreign clients and Florentine artists, these merchants would exchange paintings along with other regular goods.⁵¹ By the early sixteenth century, this "loosening of the former direct personal relationship between patron and artist" would become more perceptible as merchants began to commission artworks specifically for re-sale elsewhere.⁵² In Rome, an art market also opened up gradually through impetuses like trade. But, as Francis Haskell argues, the influx of foreigners and the drastic changes in political power in the seventeenth century undermined the stability of the patronage system, inadvertently throwing artists on to the market.⁵³ Through financial constraint, some artists were forced to seek out a market system; but many artists chose to exploit opportunities afforded by the market, especially in the way of increased publicity.

The market was far from any fixed system of exchange and this condition is evident in the various ways that artists displayed their paintings. Haskell explains that since motivation for production was no longer tied exclusively to commissions, it became common practice for artists to keep many completed or near-completed paintings in their workshops to show to potential clients. Elizabeth Honig's work on the Netherlandish art markets illustrates that the case was similar in the fifteenth century for artists who experimented with the market by displaying their works in the windows of their shops.⁵⁴ Artists also dealt directly with professional art dealers in order to expose their work to a wider audience.⁵⁵ Haskell points out that the greatest opportunity laid in the expanding art exhibitions of the seventeenth

⁵¹ Wackernagel, 283.

⁵² Wackernagel, 285.

⁵³ Haskell, 15.

⁵⁴ Honig, 15; see also Lorne Campbell, "The Art Market in Southern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century," *Burlington Magazine* 118 (April 1978): 188-198.

⁵⁵ Haskell, 122-125.

century. These exhibitions mostly took place on saints days and brought artists into contact with a wide public.⁵⁶ Often, publicity was the main impetus, as artworks were not sold on the spot but at a later point at the artist's home or workshop.⁵⁷ These exhibitions were not highly structured as it was likely that artworks were displayed indiscriminately beside other market goods.⁵⁸ Because of this, Haskell argues, "no artist of established reputation would ever think of lowering his dignity in this way, and those that we generally come across are minor specialists in landscape and genre and above all painters newly arrived in Rome or returning after a long absence."⁵⁹ But as the case of Salvator Rosa shows, there were artists of reputation who shrewdly exploited the possibilities of exhibiting their work in the marketplace simply to increase their publicity and subsequent sales.⁶⁰ Further, Sheila McTighe explains that in the art market, the division between "high" and "low" was blurry.⁶¹ In her discussion of Annibale Carracci's prints of labourers, she argues that "there were not two separate markets for popular and elite imagery, but a constant interference and overlap between the two."⁶² On the publishing and sale of popular broadsheets, she explains, "The cheapness of these prints did not limit their success to a lower-class public, it merely opened up the social spectrum of their audience."⁶³

The art market, then, offered various possibilities as new patterns of exchange led to an intermixture of commodities, audience desires and artistic strategies. The processes and values that defined the art market, however, were inseparable from the changes that were

⁵⁶ Haskell, 125-127.

⁵⁷ Haskell, 126.

⁵⁸ Haskell, 125.

⁵⁹ Haskell, 125.

⁶⁰ Haskell, 126.

⁶¹ McTighe, 75-91.

⁶² McTighe, 80.

⁶³ McTighe, 80.

occurring in the early modern marketplace. As noted earlier, Jean-Christophe Agnew explains that while earlier antique and medieval markets were defined above all as situated places,⁶⁴ the early modern markets became increasingly detached from these boundaries. The marketplace could not be fixed to any singular notion of place or time and this shift was evident in the changing etymology of the term:

By the sixteenth century, however, the meaning of 'market' had multiplied and grown more abstract... "Market" now referred to the acts of both buying and selling, regardless of locale, and to the price or exchange value of goods and services. A culturally confined site was no longer the precondition of a market so-called. Rather, the topography of exchange had been made to depend on a market now understood to be the mere presence of marketable items or disposable income. As a matter of customary usage, the process of commodity exchange had spilled over the boundaries that had once defined it.⁶⁵

Scholars have shown that the early modern art market was not one single thing but a multitude of possibilities. Indeed, we cannot be sure whether Vincenzo Campi exhibited works in open exhibitions or if he kept paintings available in the workshop he shared with his brothers Antonio and Giustiniani.⁶⁶ What seems clear, though, is that *Ricotta Eaters* responds to the idea of a marketplace viewer by making the position of the viewer the focus of attention.

In order to understand the relationship between *Ricotta Eaters* and the market, we should turn our attention to how the painting reformulates the "normative" viewing process and for what reason. Why does the painting engage the viewer in such an unexpected and ambivalent manner? What kind of appeal does this approach have? I have already mentioned the importance of novelty in determining the

⁶⁴ Agnew, 18, 27.

⁶⁵ Agnew, 41.

⁶⁶ Bram de Klerck, *The Brothers Campi: Images and Devotion, Religious Painting in Sixteenth-Century Lombardy*, trans. Andrew McCormick (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 14.

marketability of a painting.⁶⁷ As Bianchi argues, when a consumer encounters a product that pushes at the boundaries of familiarity, he/she experiences a sort of pleasure that comes from being surprised or challenged.⁶⁸ In *Ricotta Eaters*, the viewer is startled by the gazes that stare out at him/her. Being a genre painting about eating, the viewer would probably not expect to be challenged by the assertive and undetermined looks of such "lowly" characters. The disruption that occurs has, as Bianchi explains, "a double emotional dimension: it can represent a positive, pleasurable stimulus, as when it breaks a situation perceived as too uniform and repetitive, or it can become unpleasant and threatening, as when the 'unknown' looms too great to be manageable."⁶⁹ This idea reflects Umberto Eco's study of "bounded novelty in art" in *Opera Aperta*⁷⁰ and is suggestive in that it underscores the relativity of novelty. Campi's painting pushes at the boundaries of genre painting to provide an alternative to the conventional viewing process. The viewer's position of detached or privileged viewing is undermined, but this destabilization rewards the viewer with the opportunity to engage with *Ricotta Eaters* in a way that exceeds his/her expectations.

Further, novelty does not suggest a unidirectional transmission of meaning, but instead indicates that meaning is produced at "both ends—the making and the receiving—of [a] communication system."⁷¹ Indeed, *Ricotta Eaters* signifies according to this process of reciprocal engagement. Because the painting creates so many tensions that it does not attempt to resolve, the viewer is called upon as an

⁶⁷ For the market in early modern Antwerp, Elizabeth Honig writes, "the artists' situation required them to appeal to the tastes of consumers who were accustomed to making choices. The open market in Antwerp was a place where novelty was demanded by buyers and where competition determined the strategy of the seller," 13.

⁶⁸ Bianchi, 3.

⁶⁹ Bianchi, 12.

⁷⁰ Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta* (Milano: Bompiani, 1995), 31-38, 45.

⁷¹ Bianchi is still relying on Eco's study here; 5.

active producer of meaning. Thus, we need to reconsider the role that has been given to the viewer of *Ricotta Eaters*. Assumed to be the passive receiver of an allegorical message, this typical designation of the viewer ignores the dynamics of interpretation and the possibilities that are provided by the painting. De Certeau offers a way to think about these issues specifically in the context of consumption. He argues that while the consumer is often conceived of as a passive receiver of ideas or products, this notion overlooks how usage can transform the consumer into a creative producer. His argument is worth quoting at length:

the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behaviour) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer "makes" or "does" during this time and with these images. The same goes for the use of urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by the newspapers, and so on. The "making" in question is a production...but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "production" (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves "consumers" with any place in which they indicate what they make or do with these systems. To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called "consumption." The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.⁷²

Thus, de Certeau's study alerts us to the productive role of the viewer/buyer of *Ricotta Eaters* and also to the necessity of approaching "usage" with a different vocabulary than has been available. To understand consumption as another form of creative production, we need look beyond models that aim to classify, calculate and reduce methods of consumption into statistical units.⁷³ Just as art historians have

⁷² de Certeau, xii-xiii.

⁷³ de Certeau, xviii.

tended to categorize *Ricotta Eaters* as a stable genre painting, the viewer's act of interpretation has been subjected to an equally limited model of passive reception. That is, the viewer is seen as uncritically consuming the allegorical message (assuming that there is one) in the painting. How the viewer interprets what he/she sees in the painting is left unexplored. But since *Ricotta Eaters* demands so much from its viewer, it seems as though we can only understand the painting by unraveling how meaning is created in the active process of viewing.

Thus, if we turn our interest to the "usage" of meaning in *Ricotta Eaters*, then we must be willing to accept that this "secondary production" is more elusive than has been acknowledged. The viewer's experience of the painting resists tabulation and other systems that depend on tangible evidence. As de Certeau explains,

[consumer] trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences) and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms (temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic orders of spaces, etc), the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop.⁷⁴

Ricotta Eaters involves the viewer in an intimate negotiation of meaning that flows back and forth between the painting and viewer. There is a fugitive, plural aspect to the viewer's "usage" of the painting; it is a production that in many ways derives from the possibilities of the body. On the practice of reading, de Certeau writes:

[It] has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance...He insinuates into another person's text

⁷⁴ de Certeau, xviii.

the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body...The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place.⁷⁵

Like reading, viewing is not a purely intellectual operation that is detached from the bodily experience. In *Ricotta Eaters*, the bodily effect of viewing is heightened. The viewer is startled, unsettled, made suddenly aware of his own undetermined position. Indeed, it is precisely by rupturing the conventions of genre painting that *Ricotta Eaters* reworks the experience of viewing to incorporate a more productive mode of using and interpreting meaning.

2. Manipulating the Conventions of Genre painting

I stated that *Ricotta Eaters* intentionally manipulates the conventions of genre painting to construct a different process of viewing that would incorporate new forms of (visual) exchange introduced by the market. What, then, were those generic conventions? Of course, this is a problematic question as ongoing scholarly debates, especially in the area of Netherlandish genre painting, reveal the difficulties in applying a general theory to such a heterogeneous body of works.⁷⁶ Yet despite the complexities of genre and the overlap and intermixture that often occurred between different categories, there were certain trends that remained consistent, forming recognizable frames for viewers and artists.⁷⁷ These included moral allegories, familiar narratives, and stock types, which were not discrete but often built upon one another. These generic conventions, however, were sometimes quite paradoxical. While the standardization of stock characters in genre painting tended

⁷⁵ de Certeau, xxi.

⁷⁶ Salomon, 19-23.

⁷⁷ David R. Smith, "Irony and Civility: Notes on the Convergence of Genre and Portraiture in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," *Art Bulletin* 69, vol. 3 (Sept. 1987): 408.

to encourage rigid interpretations that deviated little from well-known narratives or allegories, the unpredictable movement of these conventions between various pictorial modes produced a persistent instability within them. In *Ricotta Eaters*, these instabilities are heightened and become central to the work's overall mode of signification.

How does *Ricotta Eaters* fit into the expectations and conventions of genre painting? One of the strategies of interpretation has been, as with much genre painting, to locate *Ricotta Eaters* within a moralizing tradition. For example, Barry Wind locates *Ricotta Eaters* within a specific category of "comic genre" painting that is ribald or bawdy in its delivery, but allegorical or moral in its final message. Wind argues that Campi's "trio of gluttonous men" was inspired by the stock characters from the popular theatre, the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In particular, it was the *zanni*, a character whose stupidity and insatiable appetite made him the amusing object of laughter, who provided a model for Campi's ricotta eaters.⁷⁸ Wind writes, "Like a comedy, Campi pokes fun at as well as takes fun in the foolishness of his characters. Campi's moralizing content is substantiated by the Gothic personification of 'Folly' eating a piece of cheese..."⁷⁹ Considered this way, the meaning in *Ricotta Eaters* depends on an allegorical frame. The ricotta eaters, in displaying their typically low-class sexuality and sensuality, become a source of bawdy amusement for the viewer who condemns their follies precisely by laughing at them. Overindulgence in food is interpreted emblematically: cheese becomes the didactic symbol of "Folly"; the male eaters are typified as (sexual) gluttons; and the woman, by association, is reduced to a

⁷⁸ Wind, "Pittore Ridicole," 30.

⁷⁹ Wind, "Pittore Ridicole," 30.

"lewd" provider of culinary and sexual pleasure.⁸⁰ Indeed, the viewer's amused, but distanced response confirms the moralizing content of the painting. By laughing at the uncontrolled behaviour of the ricotta eaters, the viewer distinguishes him/herself from their excesses. He or she recognizes the folly that these stock characters represent and thus places him/herself above them. I agree that *Ricotta Eaters* utilizes generic types and perhaps even encourages an allegorical reading; however, I would argue that Wind's interpretation needs to be problematized as it is built upon the assumption that genre is a stable category of painting and that the conventions particular to that category are equally stable.

The boundaries of genre are never that clear. For instance, the tavern-like context for *Ricotta Eaters* could suggest a link to other traditions, for instance the biblical story of the Prodigal Son.⁸¹ In this parable, a young son demands his inheritance from his father, only to squander it away at an inn on food, drink, and women. When his money runs out, he is driven out of the inn and is reduced to eating from a pig trough. He returns home to a forgiving father (Luke 15:12-23). In visual representations, the story is usually focused on the Prodigal Son while he is wasting his time and inheritance at the local inn. An early woodcut by Lucas van Leyden entitled *Inn Scene (Prodigal Son)* (fig. 5) c. 1517,⁸² was very influential in providing an iconographic precedent for later representations of the theme.⁸³ The cast of characters includes the foolish male, the young female who seduces him

⁸⁰ Wind, "Pittore Ridicole," 28-31.

⁸¹ Of course, *Ricotta Eaters* does not focus its attention on a male protagonist (presumably the Prodigal son); however, the suggestion that the ricotta eaters are rowdy, low-class types often found in tavern genre scenes suggests a link to this biblical tradition. Gail Feigenbaum makes a similar connection to the Prodigal son in her examination of sixteenth and seventeenth century genre paintings of gamblers; 150.

⁸² Lucas van Leyden, *Prodigal Son (Inn Scene)*, c.1517, woodcut, 67 x 48.5 cm, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

⁸³ Salomon, 71.

while stealing his money purse from behind his back, the older woman who acts as a potential accomplice, and the fool who observes the scene, providing an explicit moral warning for the viewer. These characters formed various types that could be drawn upon for other representations of the Prodigal Son or even for more secular inn scenes. Indeed, the tavern became the familiar setting for immoral or riotous behaviour in genre prints and paintings, and the usual excesses and indulgences that occurred there became emblematic for the sins of the flesh. However, as the title of Leyden's print reveals, the boundary separating religious from secular interest was quite blurry and since these biblical narratives were often reinterpreted within a contemporary setting, it was difficult to disentangle the two.⁸⁴ From Leyden's cast of characters there evolved various distinct types: the wealthy patron, the lewd prostitute, the old procuress, and the fool; however, these familiar characters were not limited in what they could signify. In some cases, they could be utilized as predictable types to fulfill a moralizing narrative. In many instances, though, the didacticism behind these tavern types was rather vague or absent altogether. Thus, we need to keep these distinctions in mind to consider how different uses of types affect the process of interpretation.

Dirck van Baburen's *The Procuress* (fig. 6) 1622,⁸⁵ draws on the familiar types of the prostitute, procuress and male client. The title of the painting certainly suggests that we are witnessing an illicit, sexual transaction; however, the prevalence of a moralizing intent is more subdued than in Leyden's print. These types are not necessarily linked to a biblical story; indeed, the appeal of the scene seems to

⁸⁴ de Jongh and Luijten, 122.

⁸⁵ Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, 1622, oil on canvas, 100.2 x 105.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

stem from a detachment from religious iconographic connotations. In her discussion of Jacob Duck's paintings of brothels and taverns, Nanette Salomon argues that,

the appeal [...] is not found simply in their ability to communicate moral or didactic instructions, but also in their more dynamic engagement in the early modern constructions of Dutch social relations and in the definition of class, gender and age.⁸⁶

The viewer's interpretation, therefore, is not limited to a traditional, religious narrative. Yet Baburen's types perform their roles with clarity, enacting signs that confirm their low social standing: the revealing décolletage and dim smile of the prostitute, the old age and vulgar opportunism of the procuress who gestures into her hand, and the lewd interest of the client who holds a coin in his hand. Thus, Baburen's painting is an example of how the permutations in generic conventions (as a result of their movement between different visual modes) can still be stabilized through other strategies. For instance, the position of the viewer is never challenged. As he/she is able to witness the scene as an unchallenged spectator, a safe distance of interpretation is upheld. In *Ricotta Eaters*, none of the suggested types perform their roles with absolute clarity. For the female figure, what her low-cut dress proposes to signify, her countenance undermines. Her role in the painting remains ambiguous: is she the hostess, is she soliciting us, or is she mocking us?

Annibale Carracci's *The Bean Eater* (fig. 7) c.1583,⁸⁷ which depicts a peasant in the midst of consuming his humble meal of beans and bread, is like *Ricotta Eaters* in that it is more removed from the stable types and narratives familiar to genre painting. While lifting a spoonful of beans to his lips, his is suddenly startled by the viewer

⁸⁶ Salomon, 108.

⁸⁷ Annibale Carracci, *The Bean Eater*, c.1583, oil on canvas, 57 x 68 cm, Galleria Colonna, Rome.

who has walked in on his domestic privacy. The shock is registered in his raised eyebrows, his open mouth, and the beans that spill from his spoon. Indeed, Carracci's *Bean Eater* is an important example of a representation that moves beyond the "normative" boundaries of genre painting. The figure before us is obviously a peasant but he hardly fulfills the expectations of his stock type. Is the viewer intended to feel amused by his difference or sympathetic to his poverty? It is difficult to respond in either way because of the painting's unusual context of eating. Neither can we approach the painting simply as a "slice of life" for there is a level of disturbance in the image that exceeds that type of genre. Indeed, a stable reading is withheld especially because the viewer is witnessing a radically contingent moment in time and space. Indeed, the bean eater has no meaning without the physical presence of a viewer who, in turn, is forced to assume the disruptive role of an unexpected intruder. Both the subject and the viewer are hurtled into roles that are signified symbiotically.

The Bean Eater and *Ricotta Eaters* are similar in how they both challenge the limits of genre types to create a kind of exchange that breaks down the distance between image and viewer. This is achieved especially through the representation of eating. However, the collapse of viewing space in *Ricotta Eaters* is complicated by a jarring effect of theatricality, whereas in *The Bean Eater*, it is consistent with the painting's overall mode of realism. In *Ricotta Eaters*, the setting is uncertain, but in Carracci's painting, the peasant is clearly represented in an interior domestic space that is appropriately simple and rustic. From the fresh onions to the porcelain pitcher, all the objects laid out on the shallow space of the table cast appropriate shadows and contribute to the believability of the scene. As well, the peasant with his tousled hair, coarse hands, and simple clothing is

perfectly integrated into the realistic mode. All the elements of the painting are coherently connected; the scene, therefore, appears like a "fragment of reality."⁸⁸ The viewer is pulled into the painting by the mimetic depiction of space as well as by the peasant's appropriate reaction to the viewer's presence. However, in *Ricotta Eaters*, there is a more complicated effect of being pulled into and pushed out of the painting. The highly realistic rendering of food and bodies invites the viewer's intimate response to the tangible scene. But this absorption is disrupted by the contradictory theatricality of the ricotta eaters who behave in a way that exceeds the boundaries of naturalism. They do not react to the viewer's presence, as the bean eater does in Carracci's painting; instead, they are represented as if they take delight in seeing our reaction to their bold presence. *Ricotta Eaters* solicits a response that is more problematic than in Carracci's painting. The tension between the mimetic and contrived aspects of the painting is left unresolved.

A further distinction can be made between *The Bean Eater* and *Ricotta Eaters*. Although both paintings collapse the distance of "normative" viewing, in *Bean Eater* the viewer is still privileged with a level of scopic power. As the figure who surprises the eating peasant with his/her unanticipated presence, the authority of the viewer is reaffirmed by the realistic reaction of the peasant to the simulated exchange of real and imagined viewing. He or she occupies the powerful position to watch the peasant as he eats. In *Ricotta Eaters*, the viewer is no longer in control through the power of the viewing position. The authority of his/her role is forcefully withheld by the ricotta eaters who aggressively stare out of the painting, invading the viewer's

⁸⁸ Boschloo, 34; Donald Posner also describes the painting as having the "character of a candid snapshot," *Annibale Carracci: a Study in the Reform of Painting around 1590* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 1:19.

privileged space without offering any explicit reason for their intense interest. As such, it is not the viewer, but instead the ricotta eaters who hold the position of power. This inversion of viewing authority is disturbing, yet at the same time, it invests the viewer with the creative role of actively negotiating his/her relationship with the painting.

The collapse of viewing space and its relation to power can be clarified by Susan Stewart's distinction between viewing the "spectacle" and the "grotesque."⁸⁹ While drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque, Susan Stewart outlines these basic differences:

While the grotesque body of carnival engages in this structure of democratic reciprocity, the spectacle of the grotesque involves a distancing of the object and a corresponding "aestheticization" of it. In carnival the grotesque is an exaggeration and celebration of the productive and reproductive capacities of the body, of the natural most sensual dimensions. But in spectacle the grotesque appears not in parts but in a whole that is an aberration...the viewer in spectacle is absolutely aware of the distance between self and spectacle...In contrast to the reciprocal gaze of carnival and festival, the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees.⁹⁰

In Baburen's *The Procureess*, the distance that is maintained between the viewer and the painting may be appropriately compared to the distancing achieved by the spectacle. The excess of the illicit exchange is contained by various strategies in the painting: the predictability of the narrative, the conformity of the subjects to their "typical" behaviour and the viewer's detached interest in the scene depicted. Indeed, any potential dangers in viewing are sanitized; the "object" remains blinded. In contrast, not only do the "objects" of *Ricotta Eaters* look back, but they look back with a self-assertiveness that

⁸⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁹⁰ Stewart, 107-108.

cannot be reduced to a stable generic context. Indeed, it is rather unexpected since the theme of eating and the "low-class" status of the ricotta eaters would seem likely to suggest that one could approach the painting as a "spectacle."

I would argue, then, that *Ricotta Eaters* utilizes "tactics" that manipulate the gaps of genre painting. De Certeau distinguishes "tactics" from "strategies" arguing that strategies are calculated or manipulated from a defined place of will or power. It assumes a certain panoptic mastery over place.⁹¹ A tactic on the other hand is a calculation or manipulation "determined by the absence of a proper locus."⁹² *Ricotta Eaters* does not invent a new system of representation (a defined place), but instead creates possibilities within the weaknesses of an existing system. De Certeau explains, "It must vigilantly make use of the cracks...It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse."⁹³ *Ricotta Eaters* diverts the outcome of genre painting by creating effects that are irreducible to what is represented: "It produces effects, not objects. It is narration, not description. It is an art of saying...Something in narration escapes the order of what is sufficient or necessary to know, and, in its characteristics, concerns the style of tactics."⁹⁴ Thus, the impact of *Ricotta Eaters* exceeds what it represents as a scene of eating. This "low" theme becomes a means to pull "tricks of rhetoric"⁹⁵ to offer a new practice of viewing. The expectations of genre painting are used as "tactical" opportunities to "seduce, captivate, or invert the linguistic position of the

⁹¹ de Certeau, 36.

⁹² de Certeau, 37.

⁹³ de Certeau, 37.

⁹⁴ de Certeau, 79.

⁹⁵ de Certeau, 39.

addressee."⁹⁶ The gazes of the ricotta eaters function, then, as one "guileful ruse"⁹⁷ in the painting, turning the viewer's expectations of genre against him/herself. Not expecting to be stared at by such "low-life" subjects, the tactical gazes of the ricotta eaters invert the position of the viewer, producing a "flash shedding a different light"⁹⁸ on the conventions in genre painting.

Indeed, *Ricotta Eaters* depends on many tactics to divert the "normative" effect of genre painting. It is especially by drawing on the themes of the body, eating and food that *Ricotta Eaters* produces new possibilities for viewing a genre painting. These issues will be explored in the next section.

3. Extending the Boundary: the "Carnavalesque" Body and Food

When we look at *Ricotta Eaters*, we are struck by the bodily agitation that threatens to burst the frame of the painting. One figure seems to stumble forward as cheese overflows from his mouth. Standing close behind him as if to keep all figures pressed tightly in the foreground space, a male figure wearing a rimmed hat cranes his neck upward giving us a deliberate view of his gaping mouth. The last male figure with the pointed collars heightens the bodily confusion of the scene by aggressively pushing his upper body into view and adding his greedy hand into the mix of tangled arms. The only female figure in the group has not yet begun to eat, but her presence is also rooted in corporeality. The ampleness of her body is suggested in her revealed breasts, their fullness intermingling with notions of food and fertility. The ricotta eaters seem to signify excess that,

⁹⁶ de Certeau, 39.

⁹⁷ de Certeau, 37.

⁹⁸ de Certeau, 37.

significantly, is not morally determined. Rather, the excess that erupts from their large, but compressed bodies is more productive.

Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of a carnivalesque aesthetic is indispensable to understanding how *Ricotta Eaters* relies on the possibilities of the body to become meaningful. Meaning is not produced through the fixities of generic conventions; rather the irreducible properties of the material body are invoked to provide an alternative mode of signification. In particular, "grotesque realism" and "ambivalent laughter" open up the fixities of language and transform a stable boundary into one of constant negotiation.

Bakhtin celebrates the carnival world and the carnivalesque aesthetic as a "potent, populist, critical inversion of all official worlds and hierarchies."⁹⁹ While his study initially sparked a flurry of interest in areas such as literary theory, cultural studies, and social anthropology, it was also critiqued for its limits. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White provide an outline of these debates explaining that for scholars like Terry Eagleton and Roger Sales, Bakhtin's weaknesses were most apparent in his utopic embrace of carnival as a "vehicle of social protest"¹⁰⁰: "Most politically thoughtful commentators wonder, like Eagleton, whether the 'licensed release' of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes."¹⁰¹ Stallybrass and White recognize the limits of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and propose a different way of approaching the subject. Instead of essentializing the carnivalesque as intrinsically political and populist, they suggest that the carnivalesque is more useful when

⁹⁹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Roger Sales, *English Literature in History, 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1983), 169; quoted in Stallybrass and White, 13.

¹⁰¹ Stallybrass and White, 13.

considered as an aesthetic of transgression.¹⁰² Indeed, the intention of their work was to serve as "an intervention in the current surge of Bakhtin-inspired studies."¹⁰³ They assert,

In fact, those writers and critics who remain purely within the celebratory terms of Bakhtin's formulation are unable to resolve these key dilemmas. It is only by shifting the grounds of the debate, by transforming the 'problematic' of carnival, that these issues can be solved...We have chosen therefore to consider carnival as one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and recoding of high/low relations across whole structures.¹⁰⁴

It has been nearly two decades since Stallybrass and White made their important intervention by critiquing Bakhtin's folkloric approach and reframing the carnivalesque within the larger symbolic context of transgression. I would argue that Bakhtin's study still has much to offer. I agree with Stallybrass and White that one needs to look beyond Bakhtin's model of festive critique, which is located in a specific political context, to consider instead how the carnivalesque has within it the capacity to disturb structural and symbolic boundaries. But my approach differs slightly from Stallybrass and White in that I am not interested in "transgression" from a politicized point of view since *Ricotta Eaters* is far from being an image of social protest. By this I mean that despite the ruptures that occur within the painting, the emphasis is not on the overthrow of social values, but on the disruption of the viewing process. Indeed, the painting is not about "real" low-class bodies, but rather about the limits of representing these bodies in genre painting. *Ricotta Eaters* unfixes the conventions of genre painting by denying the stability of "ready-made, completed" types.¹⁰⁵ It proposes instead a different mode of signification, one

¹⁰² Stallybrass and White, 14-19

¹⁰³ Stallybrass and White, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Stallybrass and White, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Bakhtin, 25.

organized by a "condition of unfinished metamorphosis."¹⁰⁶ By diverting the expectations or structures of genre painting, *Ricotta Eaters* transforms the boundary of the painting into a space of reciprocal negotiation. It thus makes use of a market system that is driven in one way by active consumption of novelty. Therefore, I am using the carnivalesque as an interpretive tool, as a way to give shape to the instabilities in *Ricotta Eaters*. Further, the carnivalesque aesthetic of laughter and grotesque realism is not used as a way to invert or overthrow a structure; rather, in a "tactical" manner, they divert the system, opening up weaknesses in the structure of genre to produce a surprising and marketable product.

Ricotta Eaters confronts its viewer with the overwhelming materiality of abundant bodies pressed significantly close to the edge of the painting. But, having more than just material presence, the bodies of the ricotta eaters extend into the viewer's space. Like Bakhtin's "grotesque" body, the ricotta eaters are represented according to an aesthetic of openness. For Bakhtin,

It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it...the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth that exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body.¹⁰⁷

In Campi's painting, there is an undeniable emphasis on the extended boundaries of the body: the protuberant breasts, the gaping mouth, the parted lips. Its unfinished nature is most poignantly expressed in the representation of the eating body. Indeed, the figure holding the ladel is the fulcrum of the body exceeding its own limits as the edge of the

¹⁰⁶ Bakhtin, 165.

¹⁰⁷ Bakhtin, 26.

mouth becomes a meaningful space of liminality. The ambiguous placement of ricotta on the man's lips calls up the body that is never static but constantly transforming through everyday functions such as eating. Like the peasant in Carracci's *The Bean Eater* (fig. 7) the body of the ricotta eater becomes a site where "the outward and inward features [of the body are] merged into one."¹⁰⁸ Half-eaten cheese hovers in a powerful limbo between the inner and outer boundary of the mouth, emphasizing the persistent irreducibility of the body to any stable limit. Indeed, we cannot tell if that cheese is in the midst of being swallowed or spat out.

Eating in *Ricotta Eaters* opens up a multitude of possibilities in representation, especially in transforming the space of the viewer.

Bakhtin explains,

[The eating body] swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it a part of him...The limits between man and the world are erased.¹⁰⁹

The eating body devours the space that separates the viewer from a representation. Indeed, this distance is swallowed into the dark cavernous mouth of the male figure with the rimmed hat. It is the open, constantly transforming body that denies the viewer a place of certainty. Bakhtin explains that the eating body has an affinity with the collective body, which belongs to a shared, public space that permits "no distance from those who [come] in contact with each other." As a collective, tangled body, the ricotta eaters unfix the stable frame of the painting by challenging the distance of the viewer. They are not contained "objects" that can be (visually) consumed with ease.

¹⁰⁸ Bakhtin, 318.

¹⁰⁹ Bakhtin, 281.

Indeed, the viewer is compelled to enter into this space of "unfinished metamorphosis," to surrender him/herself to the bulges and openings that lead "beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths."¹¹⁰ The boundary becomes a merging of two worlds, a shared space of reciprocal bodily engagement.

Certainly, food plays a significant part in this aesthetic of the carnivalesque. Indeed, the openness of the eating body in *Ricotta Eaters* depends largely on the materiality and complexity of food (rather than its reductive, symbolic meaning) as well as on the conflicted history of cheese. Cheese had a particularly ambivalent history and, I would argue, these contradictions are utilized in this painting. Piero Camporesi explains that in premodern, prescience times, attitudes alternated between acceptance and rejection of the benefits and dangers of cheese.¹¹¹ Ancient attitudes stemmed from a fascination with the "teeming life and unstable suspension" of milk, its magical power to produce cheese through coagulation.¹¹² The ambivalence towards cheese reflected a larger worldview of a "magical and symbolic universe" where the powers of death and life revealed themselves in the metamorphosis of food.¹¹³ However, these polyvalent attitudes were eventually eclipsed by the narrow voice of an official, established scientific paradigm that strongly condemned the transformative properties of cheese. The fermentation of foods such as cheese became more closely associated with putrefaction and decay. The official voice of science found its supporters also in the official world of medicine and church doctrine. Cheese was the foul excrement of milk, the rotten sludge eaten by ancient barbarians and wandering tribes. It was seen as

¹¹⁰ Bakhtin, 318.

¹¹¹ Camporesi, 36.

¹¹² Camporesi, 36.

¹¹³ Camporesi, 38.

only suitable for those who were equally filthy: labourers and those of the lower classes.¹¹⁴ Camporesi's observations support Claude Levi-Strauss's theorizations on the symbolic significance of the difference between raw/rotten and cooked foods.¹¹⁵ Functioning as the dividing line between civilization and barbarism, food in its natural or processed state was embedded in a society's conception of itself. Raw/rotten foods belonged to those who were barbaric, while cooked foods belonged to those who were civilized.

It is rather interesting that the "low class" subjects of Campi's painting, though, are not just eating any cheese, but specifically ricotta or *recotta*, meaning re-cooked cheese. Ricotta was not a raw/rotten by-product of milk, but its re-cooked portion. As the delicious cream that was removed from twice-cooked whey, ricotta could only be consumed while fresh. Like butter and cream, as that which floated to the top during coagulation, ricotta was the pure, frothy opposite of fermented cheese. It was the food belonging to a civilized, modern society, served to important guests during special occasions. Indeed, the ricotta in the painting seems worthy of the same treatment. Deliciously bright, soft, and plentiful, it sits on the plate like a proudly displayed centerpiece. Its abundant materiality is depicted with realism, catching and sustaining our attention in the midst of the ricotta eaters' excited activity. Certainly, the ricotta plays an important role in the painting. More than providing a thematic context for the scene, the ricotta cheese anchors our vision at times, its mimetic appearance absorbing us into its lumpy brilliance.

Indeed, there is no simple relationship between ricotta cheese and the ricotta eaters. The elevated status of the ricotta cheese seems

¹¹⁴ Camporesi, 38-42.

¹¹⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

incompatible with the "low class" status and unrestrained behaviour of the figures who are eating it. Is the cheese, as Barry Wind suggests, intended to confirm a moral allegory of folly or is this conventional interpretation exactly what the ricotta undermines? It is quite tempting to interpret this painting emblematically, as a moral warning of "the-world-turned-upside-down." If it is a comic response to the social anxieties regarding the economic rise of the lower classes,¹¹⁶ perhaps *Ricotta Eaters* is a burlesque on the incompatibility of the high and the low. Certainly, these low-class figures lack the refinement that a food like ricotta cheese seems to demand.

Norbert Elias emphasizes that table manners became increasingly important in the sixteenth century and they were often a means to separate "peasant" behaviour from civilized society.¹¹⁷ Elias discusses the importance of a treatise written in 1530 by Erasmus of Rotterdam entitled, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On civility in children). The treatise received an enormous amount of attention and was circulated widely.¹¹⁸ However, as the title suggests, it was not meant for the education of a wide public but for that of young boys. But the treatise, in dealing with social behaviour—particularly "outward bodily propriety"—responded to a general social anxiety, forming a sort of guide for decorum.¹¹⁹ Proper conduct and self-control at the dinner table were of central importance. The ricotta eaters do not control their base, bodily urges but with bad manners, "fall greedily on the food"¹²⁰ like animals rather than civilized people. We see this type of behaviour displayed especially by the man wearing the pointed collars.

¹¹⁶ Peter Burke, *The historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: essays on perception and communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 88.

¹¹⁷ Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, vol. 1 of *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978-1982), 63-64.

¹¹⁸ Elias, 53-54.

¹¹⁹ Elias, 55.

¹²⁰ Elias, 65.

With an unrestrained level of excitement, he plunges his spoon into the ricotta while grinning in excessive self-satisfaction. Indeed, his beastly behaviour is reflected in his face: his wrinkled expression and facial hair appropriately make him resemble a goat or satyr. Further, Elias notes the advice that Erasmus offers on propriety in communal eating: "You may want to offer someone you like some of the meat that you are eating. 'Refrain from that,' says Erasmus, 'it is not very decorous to offer something half-eaten to another.'" ¹²¹ The ricotta eaters offend all such rules of decorum while eating, especially the man who offers his ladle to the viewer. Perhaps, then, the painting provides a humorous depiction of the lower-classes and their bad manners.

Indeed, *Ricotta Eaters* may represent "the-world-turned-upside-down" and in many ways, it even encourages such a reading. But the unexpected turn in the painting that cannot be overemphasized is the excessive ambiguity in the painting. If the viewer is meant to see the folly in their behaviour, then why do they confront him in a way that denies him a position of (visual) authority? Even the ladle becomes a place of unresolved tension, as the uncertainty of invitation is maximized. Held in limbo between the representational space and the viewer's space, we wonder whether the ladle is offered to us or not. The ricotta, the ladle, the table manners of the figures—everything associated with eating is kept in a state of undecidability. Eating is not reduced to a stable allegory nor is it staged as an event that the viewer witnesses from a distance. Eating is represented in its transformative potential and ability to open up the limits of the body and of language. In this way, even the body of the woman becomes expressive of renewal and change. Her breasts, as the "brimming over

¹²¹ Elias, 56.

abundance"¹²² of the carnivalesque body, become the sensuous reminder of fertility, milk, and regeneration. The plenitude of her body becomes inseparable from the idea of cheese as the magical, metamorphic result of regenerative milk. Indeed, the polyvocality of food is recuperated from any "normative" reading that flattens out multiplicity and reduces possibilities into fixed, singular meaning.

The boundary of the painting is extended also by laughter. In the painting, the viewer is unsure whether the laughter of the ricotta eaters is welcoming or mocking. Becoming itself that unstable limit that separates the image from the viewer, laughter transforms the boundary into a space of negotiation. Bakhtin locates ambivalent laughter within the "frank and free" space of carnival, where the slippage between praise and abuse liberates carnival participants from the oppressive regulations of the ruling discourse. It is different from satirical laughter which, as Bakhtin explains, "is negative and places [the spectator] above the object of his mockery."¹²³ Thus, Barry Wind's argument that *Ricotta Eaters* is a comic allegory is problematic in that it does not acknowledge the instability of the ricotta eaters' laughter. It is rather difficult to approach these figures with the assurance that we can laugh at the raucous scene represented to us. In striking fashion, the ricotta eaters reveal that we are the ones who may be the object of mockery. Further, Bakhtin explains that in carnival, "laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives."¹²⁴ Carnavalesque laughter is not private, but a collective laughter that collapses the distance between self and other. For Bakhtin, it is a form of signification that resists the fixities of

¹²² Bakhtin, 19.

¹²³ Bakhtin, 12.

¹²⁴ Bakhtin, 11-12.

language. Indeed, there is an irreducible quality to the laughter in *Ricotta Eaters*. Even though the viewer is put in a position to define the meaning of the ricotta eaters' laughter, perhaps the only conclusion that he/she can make is that the issue is unresolvable.

The "carnavalesque" quality of the laughter in *Ricotta Eaters* stems from the ambiguity of facial expressions in the painting. How do we interpret the faces that look at us with such force? With the male and female figure on the right of the painting, their smiles so easily metamorphose into sneers and vice versa. The two men on the left are at a further stage in consuming the ricotta, but their faces suggest that they are occupied with more than simply eating their meal. Strangely, the figure with the rimmed hat is more focused on casting a look in our direction than with the cheese that he is about to devour. Indeed, his expression is not as easily explained as that of the peasant in Carracci's *The Bean Eater*. Both figures are represented in a similar contingent moment of eating, when their food has just about reached their open mouths. The bean eater's meal is interrupted by the presence of the viewer; therefore, his expression of sudden surprise is easily understood. The ricotta eater, on the other hand, is more inexplicable. It is difficult to decipher the meaning in his slightly derisive look because there are no obvious reasons that would explain his attitude. The facial expression of the man holding the ladle is, perhaps, the most problematic. His eyes look glassy and unfocused, his mouth is overstuffed with cheese—we assume that he has gorged himself to such a point that his body has lost its stability. Yet if we look at the plate of ricotta, we see that not that much cheese has been eaten. What, then, does his face signify if not overconsumption? In *Ricotta Eaters*, the viewer is not only denied a narrative context for the scene

depicted, but figures that usually define the meaning in a painting are vague in what they express to us.

I would like to turn to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's essay on "faciality"¹²⁵ to suggest that the faces of the ricotta eaters contribute to the "carnavalesque" mode of signification in the painting. Being the site where meaning is confused and returned to the irreducible properties of the "grotesque" body, the ambiguous face opens up the possibilities of interpretation. For Deleuze and Guattari, the face as plurality rather than fixity is a point of departure; it is a means to disrupt and dismantle semiotic systems that operate by the "order of reasons."¹²⁶ They argue that the face is the site where meaning emerges, particularly within a capitalist system. Dispelling the notion of a "ready-made" face, they argue that the face is the head which has been "facialized." In other words, the face is an overcoding of culturalized and socialized meaning. Unlike the corporeal head, which is inherently polyvocal like the body, the "face" is produced within a system of signification that suppresses multiplicity into fixed, isomorphic meaning. They write:

A concerted effort is made to do away with the body and corporeal coordinates through which the multidimensional or polyvocal semiotics operated. Bodies are disciplined...A single substance of expression is produced."¹²⁷

They argue that the face is so deeply invested in this system that its mode of signification can aptly be referred to as "facialization."¹²⁸ By disturbing the certainty of this system, the face is returned to the

¹²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c1987).

¹²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 170.

¹²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 181.

¹²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 169-171.

"multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code" of the body.¹²⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari, the unreadable face is a site of possibility.¹³⁰

Indeed, this possibility is pushed to its potential in *Ricotta Eaters*. Like Bakhtin's "grotesque" body, the ambiguous face is characterized by an openness that retains the possibilities of the material body. The faces of the ricotta eaters operate rather differently from other conventional genre paintings. In *The Procureess* (fig. 6) and *Fruit Vendor* (fig. 2), the viewer encounters the kind of face that validates the absolute clarity of a type or familiar narrative. A welcoming smile or lewd expression signifies exactly what it presents. Historically, this is a significant moment for the face. As portraiture was becoming a more established genre, as popular with those of low rank as it had been with the nobility, the face was developing into a language of its own.¹³¹ More and more, viewers were accustomed to scrutinizing outer appearance to decipher the identity of the sitter. The face, as well, gained social importance. As Norbert Elias points out, Erasmus placed great importance on the "look" of a person: "a wide-eyed look is a sign of stupidity, staring a sign of inertia; the looks of those prone to anger are too sharp; too lively and eloquent those of the immodest..."¹³² Through the signs of the face, one would "know" whether the subject was refined, wise, ignorant, or uncouth. Facial expressions were one of the outward bodily signs that revealed "the inner, the whole man."¹³³ In *Ricotta Eaters*, the faces form a crucial site of signification because it is especially through the gazes of the ricotta eaters that the viewer is pulled into an engaged

¹²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, 170.

¹³⁰ For Deleuze and Guattari, the ambiguity of the face is a means to escape the semiotic of the capitalist structure. The way that I am using the disruptive possibility of the face is closer to de Certeau's notion of "tactics." I would argue that the face is used not to escape the system, but rather to divert it

¹³¹ Burke, 150-155.

¹³² Elias, 55.

¹³³ Elias, 55-56.

dialogue with the painting. But their faces are troubling because it is so difficult for the viewer to assign any stable meaning to them. Considering especially the man with the ladle, we wonder whether meaning can be found in a face that has been overtaken by the body. Thus, the stability of the "socialized" face is dismantled and returned to the polyvocal, unfixed semiotics of the material body.

Ricotta Eaters' distinct visual language derives from the possibilities of the material body, food, and consumption. It does not produce objects, or in other words, fixed types and stable, emblematic narratives. By the style of its tactics—that is, the way in which it diverts the conventions in genre—what is produced instead is an effect of "disquieting familiarity."¹³⁴ The viewer does not passively consume a predictable "object" of representation, but actively consumes an unexpected "effect". Indeed, the painting creates this by pushing at the limits of the familiar into an appealing realm of the unfamiliar. But what is so remarkable and different about the novelty in *Ricotta Eaters* is that it does not only manipulate what was represented inside the painting (as many artists did); but it also engages with the viewer in an entirely different way. It destabilizes the viewing position and offers a more dynamic way of consuming and producing the painting's meaning.

4. Representation and the marketplace

The opacity of the face, the unfinished metamorphosis of the body—these tactics undoubtedly contribute to a productive flux that pushes and pulls the viewer into and away from the painting. But this disorienting effect is also the outcome of the painting's tension between realism and theatricality. While the tangible depiction of food and bodies

¹³⁴ de Certeau, 87.

draws the viewer into an intimate, realistic dialogue with the painting, the theatrical actions and expressions of the ricotta eaters keeps the viewer in a space of disbelief. Because their behaviour seems too contrived to be natural, it becomes difficult for the viewer to respond in an imitative way, for instance to laugh with the ricotta eaters. Beyond unsettling the stable response of the viewer, what purpose does this tension serve? I would argue that the realism/theatricality bind in *Ricotta Eaters* raises issues that extend beyond the frame of the painting into the discursive space of the early modern marketplace.

The doubt toward the realism of representation was present in the marketplace especially in regards to social interaction. Again, I return to Agnew and his points on the blurring between economic and social forms of exchange. He explains that as the movement and representation of commercial activity became more unpredictable and invisible, the nature of social exchange was also affected in profound ways. As I mentioned earlier, the buying and selling of products and services had begun to spill outside of the official marketplace into spaces that were unregulated. It was one factor among many that contributed to the dissolution of boundaries that had once regulated the intensity of exchange and defined its status. But the implications of the shifts in the practice and idea of exchange were far reaching, producing new attitudes toward social dealings in the marketplace. In a space where objects, bodies, and desires mixed and circulated unpredictably, self-representation was crucial in defining the boundaries between self and other. However, the nature of self-representation also became the subject of intense doubt and scrutiny. Agnew argues that in confrontations with others, what was visibly performed was highly dubious as a representation of truth: face,

gesture, and clothing could conceal as much as reveal. The "crisis of representation that a volatile and placeless market had occasioned,"¹³⁵ he explains, "raised the issue of personal intentions in new and disturbing ways. What a person could be said to 'have in mind' grew in importance as the signs of his or her social identity grew in obscurity."¹³⁶

Representation in the marketplace, therefore, was a troubling mix between realism and theatricality. Specifically, it was in the realm of visibility and display that these notions were the most conflicted. But this anxiety was the result of a shift in the early modern period as realism and theatricality were interconnected in the Middle Ages to embody a notion of representational truth:

The legitimacy of the marketplace as a social institution was inseparable from its theatricality, for the medieval criteria of authority and authenticity required that both attributes be bodied forth: deliberately displayed, performed, and witnessed...[It] was above all, a "place for seeing." Visibility was its indispensable property.¹³⁷

Yet the shifts in forms and values of exchange in the early modern market complicated the compatibility of both terms. Visibility as a reliable signifier was challenged by newer, troubling conceptions of theatricality. Agnew explains:

Theatricality no longer served as an unequivocal voucher of the secular world...Rather, theatricality itself had begun to acquire renewed connotations of invisibility, concealment, and misrepresentation.¹³⁸

How are the concerns of the market manifested in *Ricotta Eaters*? Certainly, the painting creates a tension between realism and theatricality that casts doubt on the believability of what is "deliberately displayed" for the viewer. The objects and bodies in the

¹³⁵ Agnew, 59.

¹³⁶ Agnew, 60.

¹³⁷ Agnew, 40.

¹³⁸ Agnew, 40.

foreground of the painting are represented in realistic detail. The ricotta eaters make themselves highly visible for the viewer, as they seem to compete for every inch of viewing space. But the representation of their intentions toward the viewer is more concealing than revealing. They do not attempt to clarify whether they are welcoming or hostile, whether their smiles and gestures are friendly or mocking. Indeed, they seem to emphasize the instability of their self-representation as being potentially duplicitious. Thus, the theatricality of display in the painting becomes quite worrisome. The subjects seem to look at us too assuredly, too deliberately. The heightened emphasis on mimetic realism in *Ricotta Eaters* becomes inseparable from this struggle. The visible representation of the personal intentions of the ricotta eaters remain persistently ambiguous, hidden from our understanding. The effect of this concealment cannot be alleviated or ignored as the viewer is unable to escape the gazes of the ricotta eaters. He/she is pulled into a space where realism and theatricality are thoroughly entangled.

The parallels between the nature of the marketplace and the experience created by *Ricotta Eaters* are remarkable. In both cases, we are brought back again to the central role of the viewer and his/her response to overwhelming uncertainties. Indeed, if *Ricotta Eaters* draws on the market's conflict between realism and theatricality, it is precisely to unsettle the viewer's "normative" role, to involve him/her in an unstable exchange of meaning. Elizabeth Honig writes that in the marketplace, "People were now perpetually able to, even obliged to act out their social roles at market, but the old script for their performance was no longer adequate, and no simple new one was

provided."¹³⁹ Similarly, producing a "script" that defines the viewer's relationship to *Ricotta Eaters* is not an easy task. Much is left unresolved and the viewer as a result, is suspended in a moment of intense uncertainty as to what he/she is viewing. There are various generic conventions that give shape to the meaning of the painting; however, in determining the viewer's response, familiar types and narratives become problematic. They generate more questions than anything else.

Thus, the only "script" that *Ricotta Eaters* offers is the one that the viewer must produce for him/herself. Certainly, investing the viewer with the power to create rather than receive meaning is a crucial strategy in the painting and it should be investigated. Thus, by following the lead of the ricotta eaters to also focus our attention on the viewer, we can see how *Ricotta Eaters* draws on the possibilities and anxieties of the marketplace to formulate a different, novel way of viewing paintings. *Ricotta Eaters* undermines the conventions of genre, emphasizing instead the unstable signification of familiar types and standard narratives. A raucous, unrefined, "low class" group of people who are gorging themselves on ricotta cheese are not a "spectacle" that the viewer observes from a defined, unchallenged space of distance. They look back and aggressively stare at the viewer while in the midst of eating. They disrupt the viewer's expectations, denying him/her any stable generic interpretation of the painting. In a sense, the viewer is threatened in this ambivalent confrontation where the difference between invitation and mockery is vague. But this effect of being unsettled is also experienced as a pleasure in being surprised by the unexpected. It is this kind of novelty that makes the various unresolved tensions in *Ricotta Eaters* so enticing. The viewer is given

¹³⁹ Honig, 11.

the difficult task of working through the painting's uncertainties; yet there is a reward for this kind of engagement which is found in the creative act of viewing itself.

In *Ricotta Eaters*, the issues of market, marketing, and viewership are not separated, but inextricably wound up in each other. My project, therefore, has not been an attempt to untie these knots, but rather to bring them into a meaningful discussion about genre painting. The contradictions and uncertainties in *Ricotta Eaters* reveal that the simple categories of genre are not adequate for understanding how this painting negotiates an important shift in the production, marketing and reception of a painting in the early modern period. Indeed, the painting's tactical manipulations of generic types and allegories form a distinct mode of signification that incorporates the idea of a new kind of viewer and a different way of viewing in the marketplace. Viewing is a dynamic process that involves more than the passive consumption of meaning. *Ricotta Eaters* creates an ambivalent encounter but does not provide the answers or resolutions to the uncertainties it provokes; it offers instead a chance for the viewer to engage with the painting in an active and creative way. Indeed, it is through the particular representation of eating that the painting undermines the position of stable, detached viewing. As Bakhtin writes, it is inside the "open, biting, rending, chewing mouth...[where] the limits between man and the world are erased."¹⁴⁰ In *Ricotta Eaters*, eating is not simply a generic theme. It becomes the context of a meaningful exchange where the viewer and the painting become thoroughly entangled. Thus, by focusing our attention on how *Ricotta Eaters* engages with its viewer we can see how the practice of viewing is reworked to incorporate a dynamic level of interplay, a back and forth

¹⁴⁰ Bakhtin, 281.

process of making and receiving meaning in the marketplace. Indeed, the issue can be opened up beyond the example of *Ricotta Eaters* so that we may begin to explore the complexity of the marketplace and the extent to which the art market changed the status of the viewer and the process of viewing.

FIGURES



Fig. 1: Vincenzo Campi, *Ricotta Eaters*, c.1585,
private collection, Cremona.



Fig. 2: Vincenzo Campi, *Fruit Vendor*, c.1580, Kirchheim Schloss.



Fig. 3: Vincenzo Campi, *Fish Vendor*, c. 1580, Kirchheim Schloss.



Fig. 4: Vincenzo Campi, *Fruit Vendor*, c.1580,
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



Fig. 5: Lucas van Leyden, *Prodigal Son (Inn Scene)*, c.1517,
Paris Biblioteque Nationale de France.



Fig. 6: Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, 1622,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

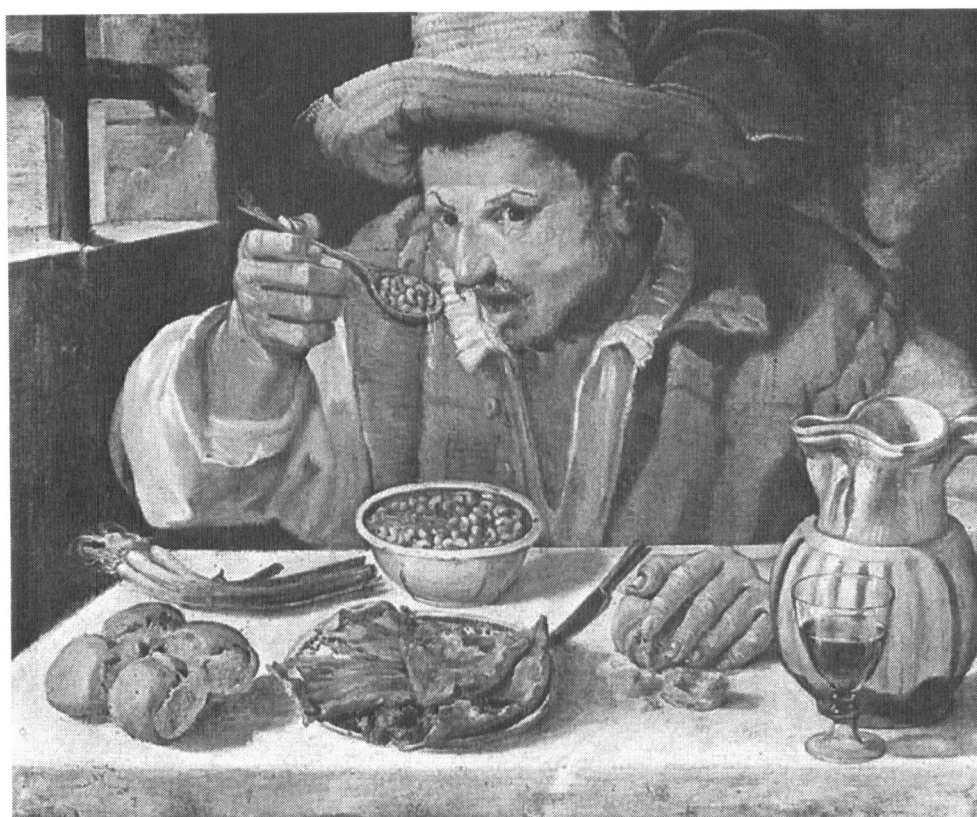


Fig. 7: Annibale Carracci, *The Bean Eater*, c.1583,
Galleria Colonna, Rome.

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