

Patatatata
by Ann Demeester

Potatoes and gold. Both cannot be made by man, and that is where the resemblance ends. Potatoes are gnarled, literally earthy and subterranean. Gold is a pure substance consisting of one type of atom and is literally heavenly, it is formed in the stars.

A while ago I bought the book 'The Canary and The Hammer' by British artist and photographer Lisa Barnard. It is a fascinating photo essay on the troubled history of gold and its relationship with the global economy. I will leave aside the recent discussion about gold in the 'Golden Age' for now, but I would like to point out that gold does not merely refer to glory or prosperity. Everyone knows – certainly after reading Barnard's book – that winning gold sometimes goes willingly but more often is accompanied by struggle and renunciation, blood, sweat and tears, rivalry, misery and fights.

Barnard's book offers us this and many other simple yet unexpected insights. At first sight gold is merely synonymous with exclusivity, opulence and luxury. In reality we are surrounded by it in our modern lives but often without being aware of it. The mineral is hidden in much of today's technology that we use on a daily basis. It has traditionally been a powerful symbol of value and beauty but also of greed, avarice and political power. Gold does not always shine. And gold – shiny or not – is omnipresent in art. As a motif – think of Jason's Golden Fleece from classical mythology and the Golden Calf from the Bible – but also as a material, in the work of Gustave Klimt, Yves Klein, James Lee Byars but also Maurizio Cattelan, Roni Horn and Jacqueline de Jong.

Strangely enough, the often somewhat dirty potato is also a leitmotiv in the history of art, from Permeke and Van Gogh to Thierry de Cordier and Jacqueline de Jong. Potatoes also play a prominent visual role in the later cinematographic work of

the so-called 'grandmother of the Nouvelle Vague' Agnes Varda. According to critics, this had everything to do with a search for roots, for origins, with a longing for a fatherland, but according to Varda herself it was pure coincidence. In an interview with Ive Stevenheydens she says: "When I was making 'Les glaneurs et la glaneuse', I fell for potatoes in the shape of a heart. Because their graphic quality fascinated me, I included them in the film. Afterwards, I started cultivating heart-shaped potatoes. I put them in lots of scenes, a kind of radical cinema that took me hours to make, (...) but with no clear goal."

Like Varda, Jacqueline de Jong tells us little about the what and why of the potatoes in her work. She deals with the potato as a subject and as a material. Twenty-five years ago, De Jong planted her first potatoes in the soil. She had bought a large house in the middle of France, the kind the French call a 'chateau', surrounded by a large garden and vegetable plot. Planting potatoes turned out to be exciting: you put just one whole potato in the ground and lots of them come out. De Jong placed the potatoes from her vegetable garden in boxes on long tables in the basement of her French home. She discovered that after a while they sprout and that gigantic sprouts of up to a metre in length can grow from the tubers. The more sprouting there was, the less potato you got because the bulbs dried up. Even after they were dug up, the potatoes seemed to continue to grow. They did not multiply, but changed shape all the time. De Jong became aware of the morphology of the potato and she suddenly saw that she could use them for jewellery, collages, installations.

But what do these potatoes mean? According to Wikipedia the potato is a root vegetable native to the Americas, a starchy tuber of the plant *Solanum tuberosum*, and the plant itself is a perennial in the nightshade family, Solanaceae. Potatoes were domesticated approximately 7,000–10,000 years ago. The Spaniards who colonised South America and waged war on the Incas discovered the potato plant and took it to Europe in the 16th century. Following several centuries of selective breeding, there are now more than 5,000 different types of potatoes. Over

99% of these cultivated potatoes descended from varieties that originated in the lowlands of south-central Chile.

Without a doubt the historical impact of the potato is great. After a slow adoption by European farmers, potatoes became an important food staple and field crop that played a major role in the European 19th century population boom. A sudden shortage of potatoes however had a reverse effect. A dispute between the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy and an alliance of Saxony and Prussia over succession to the Electorate of Bavaria entered history books as the 'Kartoffelkrieg' (1778-1779) because, while the only fighting in the war was a few minor skirmishes, thousands of soldiers died from disease and starvation. The failed potato harvest in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century caused a mass emigration of Irish people to America and even today, more than 150 years later, Ireland's population has still not recovered to its pre-famine level.

On various botanical websites about plant symbolism, you can read that the potato has always been a symbol of beneficence and benevolence. And on numerous websites about dreams and visions, it is explained that the appearance of a potato in a dream stands for something for which you have laid the foundation a long time ago and which is now coming to fruition. The potato refers to the beginning of (new) life, new plans, a new start. Even more esoteric websites will tell you almost the opposite: the potato stands for the fact that you have a good basis in life and are satisfied with what you have.

Potatoes are no longer unanimously considered as an essential staple food by the 21st century urban population. On the contrary, many of us follow a carbohydrate-free diet and have banned bread and pasta as well as potatoes. Yet, more than ever, potatoes are a symbol of everydayness, of simplicity and of basic needs. Love is potatoes, potatoes are love in the documentary of the same name by Dutch filmmaker Aliona van der Horst about her Russian aunts during the dictatorship of Stalin. Potatoes are ordinary, are comfort, refer to basic needs. Things were once different.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, there were many interreligious tensions in Europe. The work of the devil Beelzebub was seen in everything. Potatoes were also affected, as strange, suggestively shaped potatoes came out of the soil during the harvest. The fact that the potato, after having been buried for a winter, could reproduce itself and grow into a fully-fledged plant was also suspect and the work of satanic forces. This was compared to the dead being buried and rising again. The Protestant community indicated that the potato was not in the Bible and therefore did not come from God. The potato was the devil.

I would not go so far, but in my experience, the potato does stand for capriciousness and unpredictability. The ordinary potato cannot be forced into a uniform and repeatable form. It grows in all directions. It resists constraint. The potato is underground, goes underground. The potato, in all its wild proliferation, seems to be a symbol for the indomitable spirit akin to that of Jacqueline de Jong, which does not allow itself to be pigeonholed or compartmentalized. It continues to grow without limitation, which changes and renews itself again and again – and onwards. Without end, always a new beginning.

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