

Chapter 17

Food Photography, Pixelated Produce, and Cameraless Images: A Photographic Journey from Farmville to Kheti Badi

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ABSTRACT

In today's screen saturated culture, perceptions of food are overwhelmingly formed by images circulated via the internet and mobile. The Facebook game FarmVille is the subject of Kheti Badi (Shah, 2015), a photographic artwork reflexively engaging with the contemporary scenario of 'post-photography'. The work comprises not of photographs taken with a traditional camera but of screenshots of a farm and its holdings as displayed in Farmville; the highly compressed jpegs cropped and resized to the point of destabilizing visual coherence are depictions not of pastoral landscapes but of computer vision and the programmable character of photography. While photography remains an instrument for recording material realities, its power extends toward feeding back into the very processes through which science and technology modify food production. This chapter explores how Kheti Badi, through a series of hyper artificial and un-photographic images, shows the constructed nature of both what we put our hands on in the supermarket and see in advertising's dreamscapes.

INTRODUCTION

I believe that we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images. Nothing moves us anymore, nothing has any meaning – Alfredo Jarr

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Food Photography, Pixelated Produce, and Cameraless Images

Kheti Badi is a photographic artwork produced from screenshots taken of an online game called FarmVille. Chinar Shah began making Kheti Badi at the height of the game's popularity, choosing to pixelate the already pixelated screenshots, a strategy of representation that would exaggerate what she terms the images' 'synthetic' and 'cartoon' appearance. This article sets out to explore the significance of Kheti Badi within a contemporary context of photography that is changing as fast as the digital technologies that have become its tools. The concept of post photography, alluded to time and again in discussions of contemporary photographic culture, encapsulates in many respects the focus of my investigation; this same category is apparent for example in the subheading – 'photogr@phy after photography' – of a collection of essays titled 'Pandora's Camera', written by the Catalan visual artist, writer and curator Joan Fontcuberta. Alluded to in Fontcuberta's catch-phrase and captured in Kheti Badi are those significant shifts in photography that cannot be reduced to changes in the materiality of the image – from grain to pixel – or in the photographic apparatus – the existence of a digital sensor where there was once light sensitive paper – but that, and more crucially, are a function of its waning intimacy with documentary as compared to that of its analogue forerunner. Expectations that photography maintain the indexical bond with its subject matter and adhere to the conventions of realism are in contemporary times less determining, freeing photographers to make arguments about reality not necessarily in its likeness but with the urgency of rehabilitating vision. The documentary image has served us well, and will continue to do so. What is becoming increasingly clear however is that the speed with which photographs are being taken, displayed and consumed across various digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat is leading not to more types of images but rather to a high degree of sameness and a visuality dominated by clichéd and generic images. Kheti Badi belongs to a politically engaged domain of photographic practice that shares with documentary its commitment to the social world but that seeks new and creative ways to critically frame social reality. The set of images comprising this work cannot be properly understood without reference to the historical and national contexts to which they are contiguous. The discussion of Kheti Badi in this article therefore is located at the intersections between histories of photography,

*Figure 1. [Untitled]
(© [2015], [Chinar Shah], Used with permission.)*



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