Food, Photography and the Indian Pastoral

Aileen Blaney, Srishti Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relationship between Kheti Badi – a series of images produced by photo-based artist Chinar Shah based on the online Facebook game FarmVille – and the contemporary context of image making, agriculture and food production. In today’s digital culture, global perceptions and expectations of food stuffs are grounded less in first-hand knowledge than in images and digital video that circulate on the screens that are now everywhere around us. While photography continues to act in the role of an instrument used to record and classify, it has the power to feed back into the very processes through which science and technology shape food production, going far beyond producing images of a reality that is already out there. In the intersections between a multinational food industry, the global circulation of images of food and the predicaments of people farming the land in India, the author discusses the significance of Kheti Badi’s conceptual investigation of photography’s role in shaping perceptions of, engagements with and modifications to food.

KEYWORDS

Agriculture, Facebook, Farming, Multinational Food Industry, Pixels, Post-digital, Post-photography, Screen Media

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

Kheti Badi is a photographic artwork produced from screenshots taken by photo-based artist Chinar Shah of an online game called FarmVille. In this work, the artist’s conceptually driven photographic practice is informed by a professional background of working with an NGO focused on issues affecting the lives of farmers across Maharashtra and Gujarat, India. 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

DOI: 10.4018/IJEP.2016040101
again 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 and theorist Joan Fontcuberta. Alluded to in Fontcuberta’s 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 to 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 if 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 socially engaged domain of photographic practice that shares with documentary its commitment to the social world but that seeks new ways to creatively and critically frame social reality. The set of images comprising this work cab best be 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, the spectacularization of food in the multinational food industry and elsewhere in visual culture, and the realities of the lives of people farming the land in India.

Shah remembers sitting in class in what must have been second standard when she learned for the first time that India was an agriculture-based economy. This news came to young Chinar as a surprise for she had never set foot on a farm. Neither was she aware of the importance of farming to the approximated 53% of the population who, according to the Census of India 2011, made all or a substantial part of their livelihood from the land (Sainath, 2013). All these years later, Shah is planting seeds, growing

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

Perceptions of Social Media Impact on Social Behavior of Students: A Comparison between Students and Faculty
www.igi-global.com/article/perceptions-of-social-media-impact-on-social-behavior-of-students/160081?camid=4v1a

Social Computing: Implications for E-Government
www.igi-global.com/chapter/social-computing-implications-government/39781?camid=4v1a

Twitplomacy: Social Media as a New Platform for Development of Public Diplomacy
www.igi-global.com/article/twitplomacy/124890?camid=4v1a
The Politics of e-Learning: A Play in Four Acts

www.igi-global.com/article/the-politics-of-e-learning/127688?camid=4v1a