

# On Becoming Ben Kinmont

Being an artist isn't exactly like being a chef—both professions share a litany of affinities in their pursuits of intellectual and sensory tantalization, and both must feed a relentless appetite for innovation. But everyone needs to eat, no matter how humble the dish. Art has different stakes, and being an artist is a job that often goes unpaid and unrecognized. This isn't lost on Ben Kinmont, an artist who began a piece twenty years ago titled *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family*, and opened an antiquarian bookselling company, specialising in cookbooks and culinary texts. Raised in an artistic family, Kinmont bore witness to the realities of a career in the art world, particularly during a time when art resisted the market, demanded alternatives for itself, and sought a way out of the white cube.

After launching the company, Kinmont was invited to participate in the Centre Pompidou's Nouveau Festival in Paris. There he distributed a large broadside printed with seven short paragraphs, each describing the path of an individual artist who stopped being an artist and became something else—paragraphs that are not unlike the size and scope of this one. The text, *On becoming something else*, makes clear these weren't chronicles of failures, or cautionary tales of a fallen genius, but rather a collection of instances where an artist's obsessions, concerns, and questions naturally led them to a place where their work was more effective, and that just happened to be in a different profession than "artist." Lygia Clark, for example, whose body-activated sculptures grew to be more and more concerned with their healing potential, saw her work evolve into a full-time psychotherapy practice. Just as the modern era saw art step off the canvas onto the wall, into the room, out the door and onto the street, onto land, and into life, these artists made art that went a step further and left art behind. The start of each of these paragraphs is punctuated, in bold type, by the declaration of the artists' metamorphosed field: activism, social work, farming, medicine, yoga.

In a column aligned with each paragraph is the name of culinary dish, a Parisian chef, and the address of their restaurant. Kinmont invited these seven chefs to design a dish inspired by one of the artists, making the broadside something of a menu. Laurie Parsons' turn to social work conjured beets roasted in a crust of natural grey sea salts from Guerande in Brittany in the mind of chef Alain Passard. Those visiting the Pompidou would need to go out into the city and find the various

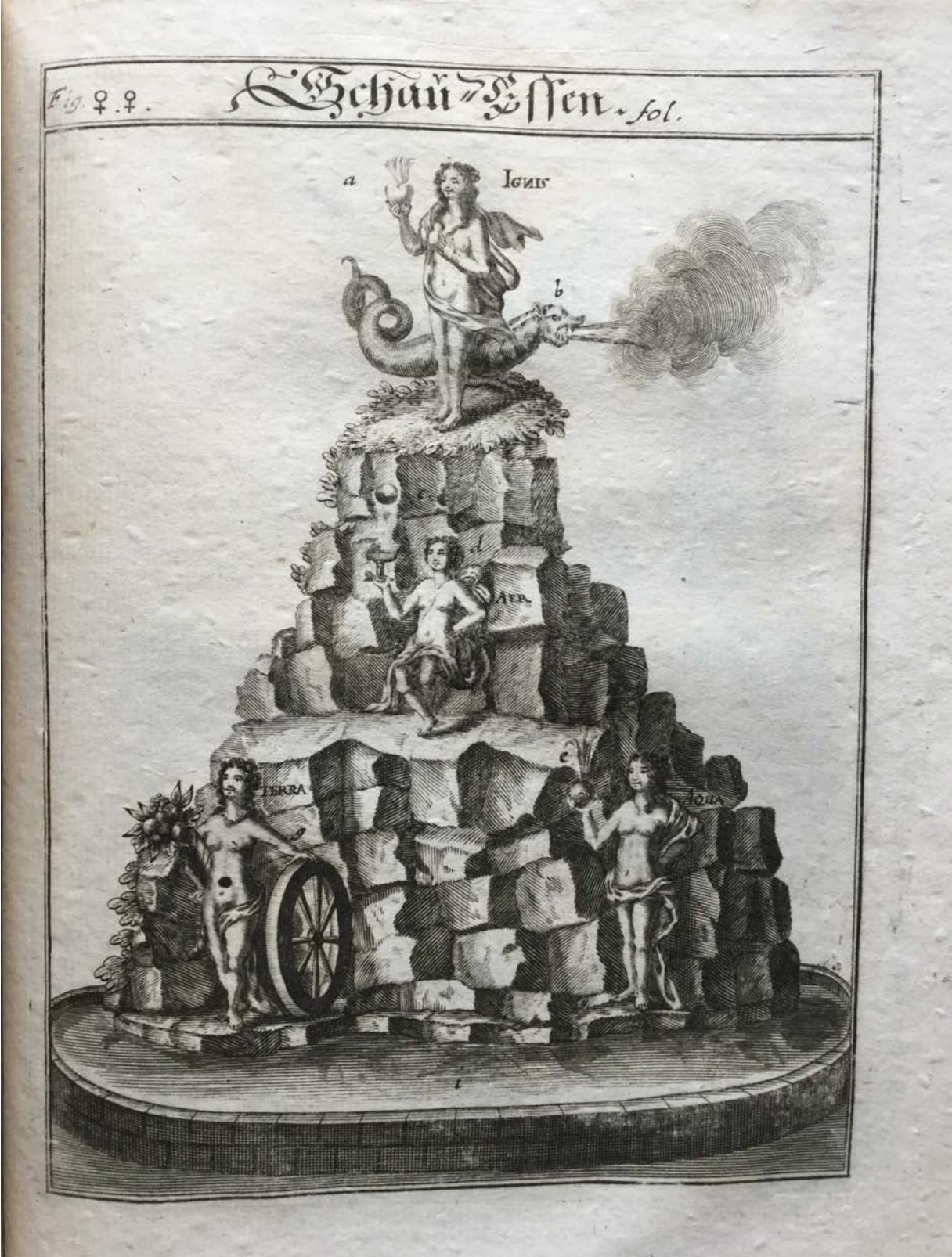
restaurants serving the dishes to complete the piece, effectively prompting the viewer to exit the art space themselves and enter new contexts in the outside world—specifically restaurants, which like museums, are often like small theaters for playacting a heightened charade signaling certain taste and class. The meal is not just the most quotidian daily ritual, but an opportunity to acknowledge the structures that governs us. Like good art, a well crafted meal builds a thoroughfare between histories and cultures, stretching out time, so something that exists only to be digested is simultaneously infinite, giving life for the future.

In constructing this constellation of once-artists, Kinmont implicates himself as one of their brethren. We don't need to ask a chef to select the perfect dish to pair with Kinmont's journey, as he already implied the best choice: distributed as an accompaniment to the broadside was the reprint of an essay by the influential fin-de-siècle art and literary critic (and notorious anarchist), Félix Fénéon. While well-known for introducing figures like Arthur Rimbaud and Georges Seurat to society, Fénéon's thoughts on pastry are less widely acknowledged. Kinmont circulated his 1922 investigation into the history of the *pièce montée*, the most flamboyant constructions of the French pâtisserie that since the 17th century have served as showstopping centerpieces at weddings and palace parties. The *pièce montée* typically involves multiple tiers of nougat pedestals supporting towers of choux pastry stuffed with cremes and jams, laced with spun sugar, and adorned with countless meticulously constructed details. Fénéon chronicles a history of artisans that fluctuate somewhere between chef, sculptor, landscaper, set designer, and architect. In fact these master cake-builders constructed confections so elaborate as to have "pavilions, rotundas, temples, ruins, towers, belvederes, forts, waterfalls, fountains, huts, mills and hermitages," often depicting Napoleonic conquests, adorned with fireworks, and overall "more heroic than the initial military operation." Seeing as though these masters were sought after by the very same collectors of Cezannes and Picassos, Fénéon surmises that "some day museums will have departments devoted to pastry work."

For Kinmont, Fénéon's history of chef-sculptors signals what he sees as a parallel art history, one that can't be found in halls of stately museums or royal collections—as these masterpieces have all been ceremonially eaten. It is their "extreme perishability" that begs the question: "What efforts of breathtaking artistic achievement have existed, but leave no trace except for their myths?" Like a *pièce montée*, Kinmont's *On becoming something else* is a construction of many small, glued-together parts, and an exercise in temporality, where something can exist as a

work of art in one stage moves on to be absorbed into something else, and ultimately fall into other histories—ones that exist on the messy fringes of what we call art.

—Sarah Cooper



**Ben Kinmont, *On becoming something else*, Antinomian Press, 2009. Letterpress broadside. Courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris.**

**Georg Andreas Böckler, *Der Nützlichen Hauss...* 1699. Full page engraving. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.**

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***Sarah Cooper* organizes creative interdisciplinary museum performances and programs. Currently, she is the Public Programs Specialist at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, focused on music, performance, film, and artist-driven programs. She has organized programs with artists and musicians including Kim Gordon, Brendan Fernandes, Rafa Esparza, Lonnie Holley, Martin Creed, Midori Takada, Helado Negro, and Solange Knowles. In addition, Sarah has collaborated on performances by Yvonne Rainer and Patti Smith with the Getty Research Institute, the Trisha Brown Dance Company with the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA, and on the LA Phil's Fluxus Festival.**

**From 2006 to 2013, she organized programs at The Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the PopRally Committee, in addition to serving as the Manager of the Department of Prints & Illustrated Books. At MoMA, Sarah assisted on various exhibitions, collection initiatives, and programs including artists such as Jasper Johns, William Kentridge, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Ed Ruscha, and Louise Bourgeois. Sarah has held positions at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Royal Academy of Arts, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Cubitt Artists Gallery in London, and The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. She holds a Master's Degree in Art History from Hunter College. Her thesis, *Expanding Experimentalism: Popular Music and Art at the Kitchen in New York City, 1971-1985*, explores the creative output of artists' bands and the relationship between popular music and avant-garde performance practices.**

***Ben Kinmont* is an artist, publisher, and antiquarian bookseller living in Sebastopol, California. His work is concerned with the value structures surrounding an art practice and what happens when that practice is displaced into a non-art space. Since 1988 his work has been project-based with an interest in archiving and blurring the boundaries between artistic production, publishing, and curatorial practices.**

**In the past few years he has taught courses in the Social Practices Program at the California College of Arts as well as organized various workshops with students from the École des Beaux-Arts in France (Angers, Bordeaux, Bourges, and Valence), Cranbrook Academy in the US, and the Rietveld Academy in Holland. Exhibitions include those at Air de Paris, MAXXI (Rome), Whitney Biennial 2014, ICA (London), CNEAI (Chatou), Kadist Art Foundation (Paris & San Francisco), the 25th International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Ljubljana), the Frac Languedoc-Roussillon (Montpellier), Documenta 11 (Kassel), Les Abattoirs (Toulouse), the Pompidou, the**

**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and a traveling survey show of Kinmont's work entitled "Prospectus" (Amsterdam, Paris, New York, and San Francisco). He is also the founder of the Antinomian Press, a publishing enterprise which supports project art and ephemera (the archive of which is in the collection of drawings and prints at MOMA).**