

Flavour Unbound*A way forward for Gastronomy in art*

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Gastronomy is not art. While this assertion may ruffle the feathers of the proponents of cuisine as an art form, this statement does not exclude food from participation in art, nor does it reduce the capacity for cuisine to express the creative, intelligent spirit of humanity. Allow me to explain.

My introductory statement becomes more clear when we ask the question, “Why is it that we desire ‘food’ (and by this I mean prepared food, or cuisine) to be considered as art”? In European philosophy, the debate concerning the suitability of food in ‘art’ can trace its roots back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but the question of why we desire this label for food is rarely asked. Is it that we seek to elevate the status of gastronomy to a more hallowed realm of human expression? If so, this is a pretention that should not be pursued any further, for the cuisine of the most celebrated restaurants and prized alcohols are already sought after as much as any luxury good product¹, and cuisine is universally valued and beloved as a high form of culture. So, if not for status then it must be for another reason.

I propose that we aspire for cuisine to be considered as art because art serves an important function in society (in particular, in the European tradition) – that is, art is an evocative language of concepts and symbols through which salient issues are laid bare in a way that words alone cannot achieve. When we say about an object, “that is a piece of art”, what we mean is that it is more than its material form because it communicates with us in the language of art. Art is the material discourse of the soul; and gastronomy, being a similar sort of cultural material, ‘feels’ that it can contribute to this discourse. I, for one, am a passionate proponent of this notion; however, let us un-muddy the waters in order to better understand the relationship between gastronomy and art, and to explore what greater good can be achieved through their collaboration.

Clarity

Let us clarify some terms: the word “food” is often applied when “cuisine” is inferred; the difference is vast. The term ‘food’ can be used to describe almost any edible object. In this essay, I will be discussing “cuisine” – an edible product transformed through cultural knowledge, rather than the unprocessed ingredients of nature².

¹ E.g. A bottle of 1946 Macallan whisky in a LaliqueCire Perdue decanter was sold in 2010 at an auction for \$460,000.

² This remains a blurry distinction, as many of nature’s raw ingredients have been shaped by their interactions with humans (e.g. selective breeding, hybrids, modern agriculture (and its ‘inputs’), genetic modification, cloning, etc.).

In the same way, the term “art” is used to make reference to a broad category of cultural products, including antique collectables, aesthetic objects, craft products, and objects of a conceptual nature. I will use the term “art” to mean ‘contemporary art’, as this is the relevant expression of art in our time and it is my intent to place this discussion within current industry practice. In this understanding, art is a language of philosophical inquiry that utilises concepts and symbols, impregnated within creatively conceived objects, performances and situations, in order to birth its discourse through its audience.

I will make another important qualification: rather than discussing whether or not cuisine can participate in the language of art, let us discuss the senses responsible for its perception, those being the chemical senses of taste, olfaction and chemesthesis³ - often erroneously referred to collectively as “the sense of Taste”. In art, we make reference to “visual art” or “sonic art”, describing the sensory medium that is employed in the communication of the artistic concept. In the same way, it is proper to discuss the chemical senses as those which may, or may not participate in art; rather than cuisine, which is the object being perceived. It is, after all, by way of the chemical senses that we perceive the properties of cuisine that are disputed in art literature.

Thus, the question being discussed becomes, “Can the chemical senses participate in the discursive language of art? And, if so, what symbols and concepts can be communicated by way of these senses? How are they communicated? And to what end?”

Issues

If we ask the question, “Can art be made from food?” Then the answer is a most confident, “Yes.” Many examples can be cited: Kaprow’s, *Apple Shrine* (1960); Barbara Smith’s, *Ritual Meal* (1969); Jana Sterbak’s, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987); and Janine Antoni’s, *Gnaw* (1992), are but a few of the many excellent works of art where food has been used as the primary material. Therefore, complications surrounding the suitability of food in art do not concern material, but rather, the senses utilised in art’s perception. If we look at the classical arguments lobbied against the inclusion of food/cuisine in art, they all concern artistic values that can, or cannot be perceived by way of the mouth (what I refer to as, “*Art per Os*” (Bromley, 2012)). Let us take inventory of the main issues that have ensnared cuisine’s artistic development.

The argument most-often levied against the chemical senses in art is that of their subjectivity. The argument follows: as that which each person perceives by way of the chemical senses is discernable only to them, and there is no way to be certain that another person perceives in the same way, then no objectivity is

³ “Taste” is the perception by the tongue of sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. “Flavour” is perceived by olfactory receptors by way of retronasal olfaction. “Chemesthesis” is perception resulting from the chemical sensibility of the skin (e.g. menthol, pungency and the effect of carbonation).

possible⁴. A summary of this argument is provided by Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Taste is a subjective sense that directs attention to one’s bodily state rather than to the world around, that provides information only about the perceiver, and the preferences for which are not cogently debatable.” (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 69). There are flaws in this argument. Firstly, it could also be said of the other senses that their perception is subjective; while vision is esteemed as the most objective sense, it is also unreliable⁵. One example of this is the immediacy of our physiological response to the recognition of fear-relevant patterns. If, for instance, we see a pattern in the carpet that appears to be a snake, we may immediately react to avoid the object before realising that it simply bears resemblance to a snake but is, in reality, a decorative pattern woven into the material (Ohman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001). Pattern recognition is based upon our knowledge (e.g. snakes can be dangerous) and our experience with related stimulus. In this regard, flavour recognition shares similar cognitive features to visual pattern recognition⁶, in that flavours are stored as profiles in our memories, with each new flavour encounter being compared to previous ones (Shepherd, 2012, p. 59). Another issue with the argument of subjectivity is that it was a crucial issue only when aesthetics was the guiding principle in art. Since the emergence of conceptual art (Hegel G. W., 1894) (Kosuth, 1969), aesthetic values have taken a back seat to the communication of an artistic concept. In conceptual art, a subjective response is not necessarily detrimental for an artwork, as the audience now has the freedom to be able to interpret what is relevant for them about the embodied concept. Consider as an example, John Latham’s, *Art & Culture (Still & Chew)* (1966), where Latham had his students rip out, chew and spit pages of Clement Greenberg’s book, *Art and Culture* (Greenberg, 1961), into a jar of acid⁷. Through this act Latham acknowledged the idea that art is a digestive process where concepts first must be “chewed” by the artist. It is the act of digestion that is put on display – a process to be shared with the viewer in a sort of participatory subjectivity.

Another argument against the chemical senses in art is the believed lack of ordering principles (Sibley, 2001). In visual art we have contrast, scale and proportion (for example); in music we have harmony, dissonance and volume; yet, aesthetic philosophers have struggled to find principles of order for the

⁴ Objectivity of perception was of primary concern in Greek philosophy, which later became an ideal in art. That the chemical senses are subjective is an established fact, with the research of Linda Bartoshuk on “Supertasters” being a strong example (Bartoshuk, 1991).

⁵ E.g. The perception of colour is also subjective, influenced by acculturation and individual association, despite various attempts by Kandinsky and others to stabilise its language in art. Majid and Levinson present a very engaging discussion concerning the language of sensory perception in a cross-cultural context (Majid & Levinson, 2011).

⁶ For example, when trying a Witchetty grub (*Endoxyla Leucomochla*) for the first time we might describe it as tasting like scrambled eggs, as this is the flavour pattern from our experience that it most closely resembles.

⁷ An act that may have contributed to Latham’s dismissal from St. Martin’s School of Art.

chemical senses that would allow for the measurement of the objects that they perceive. This seeming lack of order is no longer a problem in contemporary art for two reasons: 1) because conceptual art has replaced aesthetic art, and the evaluation of sensual properties is no longer an argument to validate or exclude an object of artistic consideration; and 2) because there are, in fact, certain ordering principles for the chemical senses. One recent area of study in food science has been flavour pairing on the basis of similar volatile molecules (Ahn, Ahnert, Bagrow, & Barabasi, 2011). The guiding rationale is that if volatiles have similar molecular structures then they are more likely to have complimentary flavours. The ideas of flavour compatibility and proportion are no strangers to a chef, where such virtues are the foundations of a successful dish.

Finally, the ephemerality of food has been an argument that has excluded it from art (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 191); that is to say that, as the object of appreciation is destroyed in the act of perception then it is not suitable for consideration as art. This argument was particularly valid in a time when art was valued for its display and collection. Permanence is, however, no longer the rule in art. Since the time of Kaprow's "Happenings"⁸ there is a strong precedent for ephemeral works of art and this can no longer be used to exclude the chemical senses.

The Crux of the Matter

The primary obstacle for the participation of the chemical senses in contemporary art is the degree to which flavours, tastes and chemesthesis can communicate concepts that are relevant to artistic discourse. This is an issue that has received very little attention and few documented case studies exist. The immediate question that arises is, "what sort of concepts might be conveyed through the chemical senses?" In art, it is not sufficient to communicate obvious concepts (e.g. water conveying the idea of 'wetness'); instead, artistic concepts must be complex, illuminating and/or critical. While the visual senses have profited from hundreds of years of learned symbols⁹, we have not yet developed a similar symbolic lexicon of flavours. Although it is possible to train flavour-concept associations (e.g. the taste/flavour of wine represents the blood of Jesus), a realistic attitude must be taken as to how enthusiastically people will adopt such a system, where it may be seen as pretentious when the visual symbolic language is already so rich and efficient.

If the idea of creating a new language of symbolic associations for flavours is dismissed, what remains for the chemical senses are associations that have already been established but scantily codified. Flavour combinations that represent certain cultural identities stand out as an area rich in meaning¹⁰. Far from being subjective (as asserts the classical argument), such flavours offer an intimate avenue to explore the lives of others. For example, the myriad spices

⁸ See Allan Kaprow's essay, *Legacy of Jackson Pollock* (1956), and the later sound recording, *How to Make a Happening* (1966).

⁹ The Symbolist Movement in art focussed specifically on this lexical language and did much to develop and reinforce visual symbol-concept associations.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Rozin describes these as "flavor principles" (Rozin, 1973).

that are combined in Indian cuisine tell us not only about the diet of people from that culture, but also about other aspects of their cultural identity and values¹¹. In Indian culture, the balancing of distinctive ingredients to achieve a perfect equilibrium is not only a culinary ideal but also a social one.

While flavours may embody meaning in this way (and in other ways), the application of flavour in works of art remains challenging. Perhaps the most noteworthy obstacle is the difficulty that we have in identifying and distinguishing flavours in the absence of contextual data¹². With the rise of conceptual art the way has been cleared of the classical arguments that had excluded the chemical senses from art practice; however, the physical/cognitive realities of chemical perception present a new obstacle to their inclusion.

Applying the Chemical Senses in Art

One of the qualifications for works of art is that they intend to be considered as art (Levinson, 1989)¹³. The issue of intentionality was provoked with the introduction of “Ready-Mades”¹⁴ with the logic that, if art is a conversation of objectified concepts then artworks are those objects that contribute to this conversation. This precept is often the disqualifying criteria for gastronomy, where works of cuisine are beautifully constructed but lack a conceptual dimension that contributes relevantly to artistic discourse. In other cases, some ‘dishes’ are beautifully conceptual and well suited for artistic consideration, but have not been presented as such - realised only for the purpose of gustatory pleasure.

One example of an artwork that communicates by way of the chemical senses is a performance piece by Polish artist, Oskar Dawicki. In his performance, *A Treatise on the Anatomy of Bad Taste* (2011), Dawicki intended to make a statement about his dissatisfaction with the relationship between artists and art business. At a gathering of art industry professionals during the 2011 European Congress of Culture in Wroclaw, Poland, Oskar presented what could be understood as a

¹¹ A relevant topic for exploration in this regard is the Indian aesthetic-spiritual philosophy of Rasa. While Rasa is most often applied to dance and music, it is also very applicable to flavour, as well as the process of meal preparation and dining. With regard to flavour-value associations, the subject of Rasa has been briefly covered in ‘Western’ literature (Korsmeyer, 1999, pg 44), however, there is much more to be gleaned from further academic inquiry into this subject.

¹² While there is plenty of research on this phenomena, a worthy example is this study where the flavour properties of white wine are confused by expert oenologists when red dye is added (Brochet, 2001).

¹³ There are counter-arguments to the notion of intentionality; however, examples tend to present anomalies in *relationalism*, rather than to create a new rule. For example, in Daniel Kolak’s, *Art and Intentionality* (Kolak, 1990).

¹⁴ The most famous example is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917).

contemporary version of the “cold shoulder”¹⁵. An elegant white banquet table was presented on a black stage, laden with beautiful party food. Oskar opened the performance with a vodka toast (as is traditional in Poland) made from an infusion with meat - an introduction to a banquet of distaste. Attractive waiters passed beautiful, but distasteful food to the guests, with each morsel compounding the distaste of the last. Paul Rozin explains that the emotion of disgust represents an internal boundary that separates the cultured human from its animalistic nature (Rozin P. , 1997); in the case of Dawicki’s work, the participants celebrated their regression into bestiality – playfully taking pleasure in violating this boundary while demonstrating that the social etiquette of group behaviour, for the most part, trumps individual preference.

In the example of Diwicki’s work, the chemical senses were employed to communicate a very effective critical comment in a way that may not have been equally achieved by the other senses. In contrast to Barbara Smith’s, *A Ritual Meal*, where sound and vision were used to evoke unsavoury food associations, Dawicki hides the potency of his critique within the beautifully aesthetic packaging of cuisine – leaving the chemical senses to deliver the conceptual blow.

Contemporary gastronomy draws upon science and technology in a way that is unprecedented in the history of cuisine, allowing it to construct previously impossible compositions of form and flavour; we are now able to craft the food of our imaginations. While new tools present exciting avenues for gastronomy, its participation in art remains limited by the quality and effectiveness of its artistic comment, and its intention to be considered as such.

One encouraging reality of art is that no single sense is required to bear the entire burden of the artistic concept; very often art is multisensory, and to its benefit. In Allan Kaprow’s work, *Apple Shrine*, he made a labyrinth “environment” of chicken wire, straw and newspaper in a church basement gallery, with a shrine with both fresh and artificial apples at its centre. Participants were invited to either eat a real apple from the pile or to take home a artificial one; however, to determine the difference meant touching, smelling and, eventually, tasting the apples (Kelley, 2004). In this work, Kaprow employs visual, haptic and chemical senses in order to achieve his conceptual aim. The utilisation of all of the senses was an ideal for Symbolists artists who sought to heal the artificial rift in the artist’s body created by their separation by philosophers¹⁶ (Classen, 1998, p. 109). While effort was made by Symbolist artists to unify the human sensorium, art theoreticians maintained the unsuitability of the chemical senses in art practice (Hegel G. W., 1975, p. I/78).

We now live in a time when the ‘artist’s body’ can finally be unified - communicating concepts through a combination of all the senses. This is

¹⁵ While accounts of the origins of this expression vary, one explanation is that cold meat cuts from a roasted shoulder of mutton were served to houseguests as a way of indicating that they had overstayed their welcome.

¹⁶ As with the “hierarchy of the senses” in classical literature.

empowering for gastronomy, which is now liberated to participate in the philosophical conversations of art, utilising all of its multisensory properties. The question remains, what does the information perceived via the chemical senses have to say about us as humans, the world that we have made for ourselves, and our future. Without this important conceptual embodiment, edible artworks need not be.

Stronger Together

There are many reasons why gastronomy should be informed by art and, in return, why art should embrace gastronomy. For art, the inclusion of the chemical senses offers a rich and dynamic way of engaging public audiences. Amidst the sensual orgy of our age, art venues struggle to maintain strong audiences - appearing analogue in a digital world. I would contend that one reason for this is that, where philosophy has addressed the relevant questions of the past, science is untangling the mysteries of the present and immediate future¹⁷. This is not to say that art and philosophy are not relevant, simply to acknowledge the increased potency of science and its central role in resolving our current global issues. One avenue forward for art is to embrace the entirety of the human sensorium in art practice and to proactively engage with science, which can explain how our senses work and what can be achieved by harnessing their potential. Art can no longer afford to be at odds with science (Snow, 1993) but must increasingly integrate scientific tools and knowledge in order to remain relevant¹⁸. The acceptance of the chemical senses in art is a step in this direction, offering art evocative ways to engage with audiences, new tools for its expression, exciting pedagogical avenues, and an increasingly relevant field of inquiry (e.g. the food of the future, sustainably, public health, food poverty, biodiversity, food ethics, etc.).

For gastronomy, art offers a model for the critical consideration of food and cuisine. It is noteworthy that, while almost every cultural expression in the European tradition (i.e. literature, music, design, art and architecture) enjoys scholarly 'schools' of critical thought, gastronomy does not. I contend that gastronomy is no less worthy of critical consideration than these other cultural disciplines, but that this absence is the result of its exclusion from classical aesthetic consideration. The impact is that food critics are often under-qualified to wield the authority that they garner; where, rather than acting as educators, mediators and facilitators between chefs and the public, they function in the role of adjudicator of culinary worth - a model which has been rejected for a considerable amount of time in art.

¹⁷ Stephen Hawking makes a very strong argument for this idea in his book, *The Grand Design* (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010)

¹⁸ "Science-art" is a genre within art practice; however, it is stigmatised by its attachment to science. In essence, all art is facilitated by and, in varying measure, dependant upon by the scientific knowledge and technology that is used in its creation. Conversely, the association of art with science can devalue its worth within the scientific community.

An additional contribution of art to gastronomy can be its model for creative/conceptual development. In gastronomy, the primary locale for the creative development of cuisine is the restaurant. In contrast, one of the primary 'vehicles' for the production of artworks are "residencies" – where artists are supported by curators and critics. Gastronomy would do well to unshackle its creative development from the restaurant constraints of consistency, efficiency and deliciousness – allowing it space to breathe and to err.

Conclusion

I began with the statement, "Gastronomy is not art." Art and Gastronomy are two distinctive cultural expressions that have grown in tandem – each with their own traditions, values, pedagogies and ideals. The exclusion of the chemical senses from art has allowed gastronomy to flourish independently; however, in this era of integration, there are increasing intersections between these two behemoths of culture. While each discipline bears the weight of its own limitations, together they can improve each other and provide a potent tool for inquiry into the issues that are shaping our future.

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