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Eating Art and the Art of Eating: Unsettling the Practices of Taste

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Tasting is a practice by which we turn the material world into food (Evans and Miele 2012; Roe 2006b). As the world around us changes, so must the ways in which we taste. As technologies develop new foods become possible yet it is not the materials themselves that deliver change but the practices of taste, within which we make sense of them. Hennion (2007) has shown that tasting is an emergent performative relation. Consequently, taste making can be an exercise in world making, placing attention not simply on how to make new foods to change the world but on the ways in which we make new worlds through food.

This article draws on an experimental performance in which ideas of what food is were unsettled. FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN was a performance held in Milan in October 2015. Performed by honey & bunny -- performance artists from Vienna running alongside EXPO Milano -- the aim of this performance was to bring scientists, artists, policy makers and the public together over a meal with a difference. The meal played with diners' expectations, presenting food in surprising ways. Here food itself became art as the processes by which materials become food emerged through encountering familiar foods in new ways.

Such performances have the potential to disrupt and make visible the industrialized processes through which materials become food. They also present an opportunity for engagement with the reflexive embodied relations with food, as part of the practice of interdisciplinary research.

As an activity, tasting goes beyond the palate and the plate, involving our guts, fingers and the whole range of our sensory experience (Spence 2013). Through the unsettling of the

material practices in the performance, our embodied, reflexive engagement with food might offer spaces for developing interdisciplinary research that slows down the reasoning (Stengers 2005) that has made food as it is, making space to speculate on how food might otherwise be.

Eating Art

I sit and try to figure out how to eat the cabbage in front of me. It is large -- as big as my head or thereabouts -- dark and bitter. Daunted by it, I munch on a carrot instead, looking around me to see how the others are tackling the 'meals' in front of each of them. I am sitting at a dining 'table' made from supermarket shelving on top of which is a layer of dark, earthy compost and on top of that, my dinner. There is no plate. The various vegetables sit neatly between a knife and fork and wineglasses, but directly onto the layer of soil. Others are luckier; they have cucumbers, peppers, even onions. I don't know what to do with this cabbage. The knife is useful but, like the food, there is dirt from the table on it. Surreptitiously, I wipe the knife on my jacket and consider whether to try and carve a slice from the cabbage ... the smell of the earth pervades the room ... Combined with the scent of the vegetables it smells more like a garden than a meal. Although I am hungry when I sit down, the cabbage in front of me does not seem to offer the promise of a full stomach

... We are seated randomly at these long tables, assigned our places by one of the performers, Bunny.

He is dressed as a clown because, as he told us earlier, 'a clown can say whatever they want to.' As we sit down to our 'meal' Bunny tells

us, 'This food does not meet the hygienic regulations -- I'm sorry about that', but then, 'Food is culture, we know that but tonight, food is even art...'

(adapted from Laura's field notes)

[[figure 1]]

On 13 and 14 October 2015, an interdisciplinary experiment was organized by two artists in conjunction with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the EU. Held in Milan, the event brought together experts on food from a variety of disciplines with policy makers and the public through participation in FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN performances. The event was part of a two-day festival, Resonances: Science-Art-Politics, organized by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and running in conjunction with the European Union's events at EXPO Milano 2015 (see <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/event/exhibition/resonances-science-arts-politics>). As a transdisciplinary event in which food was interrogated from all angles, the Resonances festival was influenced by Latourian ideas of 'making things public', asking questions about the 'three types of representation ... : political, scientific and artistic' (Latour 2005: 24). These two days brought together artists, scientists, politicians and the public in order to provoke conversations about the political and environmental implications of the food system as well as to experiment, using artistic practices to break down disciplinary boundaries in order promote innovation in EU policy making.

In this performance, ideas of what food is were unsettled and food itself became art as we encountered familiar foods in new ways. As we moved to eat the vegetables in front of us we paused, met with resistance by the unexpected table settings: the lack of plate, the dirt on the knife, the difficulty of cutting the cabbage. The smooth passage from material to food was interrupted and we became aware of the small processes which normally take place before a

meal reaches our table. It was through these small resistances that we were confronted with practices of food production that would otherwise remain invisible and taken for granted.

Within the large studio at Superstudio Più Gallery, Milan, there were artistic installations for school children and the public to interactively engage with issues from water pollution to animal rights. Talks were held, with discussions around these topics, culminating on the second day in a conversation between cultural food historian Massimo Montanari from Bologna University and Franz Fischler, Chairman of the Steering Committee of the EU scientific programme for Expo Milano 2015 and former Commissioner for Agriculture and Fisheries. Held directly after the debate between these two luminaries from the world of European food, the FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN performance offered another way to provoke cross-cutting discussions, and the three types of representation for 'making things public' were reproduced at the dinner table, as policy makers, farmers, members of the processing industry and scientific experts were invited to share an unusual meal in an unusual setting.

The meal performance itself was designed by honey & bunny, also known as Sonja Stummerer and Martin Habesreiter, architects and performance artists who bring food onto the stage in various ways in order to provoke reflection on the inherent challenges, contradictions and possibilities within western European food systems. In line with the overall festival, their aim was 'stir up debates on certain predetermined subjects and publicly produce new and unprecedented insights' (Stummerer and Habesreiter 2015).

[[figure 2]]

By presenting food materials and foods in surprising ways, FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN played with the boundaries of food and art. The embodied, routine practices of eating were transformed in potential sites for discomfort as familiar foods were presented in unsettling ways. These everyday processes can be understood as practices of tasting and, consequently, the effects of this performance may offer potential for developing tasting as an interdisciplinary method for bringing the visceral and material elements of our relationship with food together with more traditional knowledges such as politics and science.

This comes about through three effects of the performance. First, by unsettling the mundane embodied practices of eating, the production processes that contribute to bringing food to our table are brought to our attention. Second, by setting tongues wagging through public discussion and engagement with issues of sustainability. Third, as tasting is performative, by engendering new tasting practices which have the potential for creating new ways of relating to one-another and the world around us. The unsettling of tastes therefore allowed for embodied, reflexive engagement with food, giving the situation 'the power to force those who are gathered to think and invent' (Stengers 2010: 21), making space in which to speculate on how food might otherwise be.

The Art of Eating: Taste Making as a Performative Process

The art of eating is a classic concern through philosophy, arts and the social sciences but still what it means to eat well is a slippery concept. The French sociologists Geneviève Teil and Antoine Hennion (2004, 2007) are also interested in these practices. For them, tasting is a dynamic and emergent performative relation:

Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity.... Tastes are not given or determined, and their objects are not either; one has to make them appear together, through repeated experiments, progressively adjusted... differences are not 'already there'. Through comparison, repetition and so on, things ... must be made to appear in and through contact: to taste is to make feel, and to make oneself feel, and also, by the sensations of the body, exactly like the climber, to feel oneself doing. (Hennion 2007: 102)

This means that the bodies that eat need to be trained (or 'deserve cultivation' as Van der Weele (2006) and Miele and Truninger (forthcoming) have argued) to taste, to appreciate and to be pleased. This also implies that the body able to taste and to appreciate is not singular and isolated, but linked with others and the world (Mol 2009: 278). While Bourdieu brought attention to 'habitus' by showing how differences in bodily practices are part of the ways in which differences emerge (1986), for Hennion (2007), Mol (2009), Van der Weele (2006) and Miele and Truninger (forthcoming) tasting is something that brings us together, rather than holds us apart. From this perspective 'good food' is not simply a material quality that human bodies can learn to appreciate but is emergent, taking form through material practices that are enabled or hindered through devices, settings and collectives. While humans can technically eat a cornucopia of materials, it is through these practices that matter becomes food.

Unsettling Taste

Importantly, from this perspective, tasting is a practice that is, 'backed up by skills, traditions, objects and tools' and 'is a "making aware of", and not a simple "sensing" ... letting oneself be carried away, overflowing with the surprises that arise through contact with things' (Hennion et al. 2005: 674). In disrupting the processes, honey & bunny were playing with the skills, objects and tools that would normally accompany a meal.

[{figure 3}]

As a consequence, this performance disrupted ideas of what food is through embodied visceral practices in which bodies interacted in the processes of eating. Gut reactions offer clear and dramatic points at which human digestive systems reveal the multitude of visceral processes through which we make sense of food all the time. This performance, however, brought the mundane practices by which matter becomes food to our attention.

Small things, such as cutting, drinking, putting food to lips -- which are normally taken for granted, eased by processes of food production and cuisine -- were now sites of resistance. Trying

to cut the cabbage that had not been prepared for the table, eating with cutlery that lay on soil, all of these practices became sites where our taken-for-granted interactions with food were challenged and became tasted, seen and felt, interrupting the normal processes through which things become food. While the cabbage looked attractive, the sight and smell of it did not bring on hunger. Sawing on it with a blunt knife, trying to spear the pieces with a fork, chewing on it, all took time. During that time, we talked and reflected on the food system, flavour unfolded slowly, revealing itself through the cutting, the aroma, the long chewing, the layers of bitterness and fresh, floral sweetness and the aftertaste, tinged with earthiness. Although we ate very little during the first course, these few mouthfuls appeared to sate everyone and we stopped eating even though there was plenty of food left.

In this first course, the industrialization of the food system was made present by being absent. Our taken-for-granted expectations of what food looks, smells and taste like were pulled from under us and we were forced into reflection as we struggle to find ways to turn foodstuffs into food with tools and settings that were not suitable for the purpose.

The second course was different. Higher up, on the second shelf, a huge array of bright sweets stretched along the length of the 'table'. The sweets on display in their polystyrene trays contrasted with the earthy meal lower down, and when we were invited to start the second course, our bodies, trained in the vices of a Westernized diet, reached out for the gummy sweetness eagerly. Where the cabbage was hard work, each of the sweets were gone in seconds. The foodstuffs matter here and the bright colours, bite-sized portions and promise of sweetness brought on hunger in a way that the cabbage did not. Jaws worked rapidly on chewy white foam and tongues fizzed with the saccharine acidity afforded by a small blue dinosaur, green and white tubes, waxy, smooth beans of powerful yet indiscernible flavour.

The recent material turn in social theory (Bennett 2010) and cultural geographies of food (see Goodman 2016 for a review) have shown that foodstuffs have agency and can shape our actions and our bodies. Yet these materials do not exist on their own but are entangled in a set of practices, as anthropologist Annemarie Mol and others working within Actor Network Theories (Abrahamsson et al. 2015) show. These materials -- sugar molecules, gelatine gumminess -- do

not have such agency by themselves but gain agency through the network of other things of which they are part. Therefore, the way in which we relate to these food materials -- how we taste -- 'depends on everything' (Hennion et al. 2005: 676). Here the sweets were attractive and easy to eat. However, having been made aware of the amount of work involved in producing a meal -- that which was absent in the first course -- the sweets appeared as hyper-industrialized, their contrast with the cabbage even more striking, not only seen but tasted: felt in guts, fingertips, on tongues and saliva glands. The gut reaction, to reach out for the sweets, becomes a site of change. A pause. The sweets, unlike the cabbage, took only an instant to pick up and pop into the mouth. Gone in seconds, the sweets offer little satisfaction.

By unsettling the devices, presentation and practices of eating familiar foods the performance made visible and tangible the processes of industrialization that we would otherwise take for granted. The differences in embodied ease and resistance between the two courses set out on two different shelves brought about a visceral engagement through ubiquitous, mundane practices of tasting to confront some of the issues of how our food is manufactured. So while the aim was to provoke debate, it was this engagement which goes beyond words which was most striking. Consequently, FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN showed the role that such performances can play in researching how we 'sense and make sense' (Evans and Miele 2012) of food. Not only can we then begin to study food practices through the gut reactions and visceral engagement but, further, through the disruption of embodied norms, the performance was an opportunity to begin to taste differently.

Disputing Taste?

The embodied appreciation of the meal was unsettled and shaped in particular ways through the unexpected setting. This might also be read through Hennion because it works 'not to close mouths but to open them' (Hennion et al. 2005). Tastes prompt discussions; through an unsettling of our usual practices of taste, the performance further aimed to 'use artistic intervention to stimulate thought on an emotional-sensory level', as honey & bunny mention on

the performance website (<http://www.honeyandbunny.com/projects/39/food-sustainable-design>).

[{figure 4}]

At the performance there were nearly 250 invited guests, most of them scientists from the Joint Research Institute, but also representatives of farmers' unions, members of the European Commission, academics, and four 'experts', in disguise among the public, who were invited to 'launch' a conversation about controversial issues. One of us was invited to talk about the consequences of eating meat and over-consumption; the other three experts spoke about food safety, water, waste and the future economy.

We all sat shoulder to shoulder, sharing our different 'meals' with one another, bringing us together as a collective, all trying to make sense of this unusual setting. Sitting together at the table -- with no one announced or introduced to the group -- was a way to challenge the hierarchies between knowledges and individuals that are implicit within conferences where the speakers have the stage, as was the case earlier in the day. On the edge of each shelf were questions, attached by the labels usually used in supermarkets, which aimed to provoke debate about the food system. In keeping with the Latourian approach behind the festival, the performance therefore aimed to use this embodied reaction to provoke discussion, using hidden experts to alert us to what we did not already know when it comes to the cost of food.

As bunny traversed the room facilitating discussions around these topics, participants were able to contribute alongside the experts, who delivered short testimonies based on their knowledge of a particular area of the food system. While the event was open to the public, there were very few who were there from outside of the domains of art, science and politics. Those few were mostly locals, who spoke little English. This highlighted a particular barrier in the discussions: that of language and the conventions of discussion. A microphone was necessary for individual voices to be heard in the space; however, the use of the microphone stilted the conventions of normal dinner-time conversation as most diners remained silent.

Moreover, while the provocation of discussion is often aided by the proliferation of opinions and experiences, here there was little that we disagreed about. Does the food system

use too much water? Yes, we could all agree that this was the case. Some contention and discussion surfaced around the price of food; while producers and several other experts were keen to see the price of food increased to account for the social and environmental damage that is normally externalized, others pointed out the rising numbers of people that cannot afford to eat. Consequently, while the discussions were interesting and engaging, there remains a question as to how the impact of these discussions might be understood.

Making Taste, Making Worlds

Through both of the above examples -- the embodied and the discursive -- the performance offered an opportunity to slow down the reasoning (Stengers 2005) through which we understand food production. Unsettling the settings and devices proved particularly powerful in revealing the industrialization of everyday food. To address issues of sustainability in the food system therefore, it is not simply enough to use words. It's equally important to be aware that it is also through embodied engagement -- through tasting -- that we relate to food. Consequently, it is through new ways of tasting that we can also begin to find new ways of bringing food to the table.

Artistic practices are increasingly attractive to social and scientific disciplines in order to move beyond silo thinking, encouraged by a landscape of impact in which interdisciplinary approaches and public engagement are key. By playing with mundane, visceral interactions with food, such performances offer a possibility to reflect upon industrialization of food processes outside of hierarchies of language and academic knowledge. We can all offer our own appreciation of foods 'constituted through the doing of consumption' (Roe 2006a: 474).

There is one final element of the processual understanding of taste that is worthy of consideration. Brought about only through practices, tasting -- or more accurately, taste making -- is performative.

The art of eating can therefore be understood not only as taste making but also as an exercise in world making, placing attention not simply on how to make new foods to change the world, but on the ways in which we make new worlds through food.

Along with experiments in the diversity of sensory experience that contribute to the ways we taste, new disciplines such as ‘neurogastronomy’ (Shepherd 2012) and ‘gastrophysics’ (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman 2014) along with artistic cross-modalism are building interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and experimenting with the ways in which we interact with food. FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN exists alongside a movement towards a playful theatre of fine dining that create new dining experiences. While these neuroscientific inspirations help in conjuring weird and wonderful foods and toying with our imaginations around futuristic fine dining, Honey and Bunny had the opposite approach, stripping away these complex food processes to instead challenge the processing of food.

In FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN, the focus was not on how the future of food may look but more on the processes through which we have come to eat as we do; a gentler, yet perhaps more profound questioning of the need for such intense technological interventions. This concern -- highlighting just how far industrial processes have come in the last century -- could be read as a more conservative take on the future of food. Rather than flirting with new techniques and products, the performance brought diners’ attention to raw vegetation that can equally function as food. While the development of new foods becomes possible, it is not the materials themselves that deliver change but the taste-making practices in which we make sense of them. Taste might be a way in which we can understand the changing world around us.

Conclusions

The FOOD|sustainable|DESIGN performance was an unsettling of our ideas and practices that construct of what food is. This brought participants’ attention to the everyday ways in which we relate to food and take its particular form for granted, even when that form is a result of hundreds

of years of design and intervention. As a result, the ways in which we sense and made sense of the food (Evans and Miele 2012) were also brought to the table.

For honey and bunny, this was an important part of bringing attention to the consequences of contemporary food production. They made explicit the wasteful and unjust conventions that the contemporary food system externalizes. The performance used embodied and more-than-verbal interactions with food to provoke discussion between experts and lay people around the major challenges facing the sustainability of the food system.

By playing with the material practices through which things become food (Roe 2006b) the performance offered us a space from which we can examine norms and see that they are not always given, but can be changed. While the aim was to provoke discussions around the topic, perhaps the most salient element of the performance was the way in which it enabled reflection on the future of food, not through returning to the past, nor through the development of new foods and products such as in vitro meat, but rather through new imaginings of how the world might already be otherwise, if we bring our attention to the complexity of our embodied relationship with food.

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Captions

Figure 1. The dinner set before me is both familiar and strange. The setting makes normal routines harder to carry out. Credit: Laura Colebrooke

Figure 2. Dressed as clown-like figures, the artists orchestrated the performance. 'Bunny' seats us at the 'table'. Credit: Laura Colebrooke

Figure 3. Sweets on the second tier of the gondola. These are easier to eat than the raw vegetables on the shelf below. Credit: Laura Colebrooke

Figure 4. The unusual setting was designed to provoke discussion. Credit: Laura Colebrooke