

Menu Dégustation: We insist the entire table participates

An introduction to On Taste

Josh Abrams and Richard Gough

While the Latin maxim 'De gustibus non est disputandum' (literally: 'about taste, it should not be disputed') suggests that taste is so individual as to efface any possibility of debate, it has long remained a fundamental conception for philosophical discussion. From Plato and Aristotle through Hume (1757), Kant (1778) and Hegel, to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Nicola Perullo (2016) and Carolyn Korsmeyer (1999), taste lies at the basis of much of the history of philosophy. Frequently considered the 'lowest' of the senses, gustatory taste has long served not only as a marker in itself, but also as a crucial metaphor for the defining of aesthetic sense and sensibilities. Linked to analyses of class and education, taste has defined a category of aesthetic philosophy reliant on notions of 'good' and 'bad', negotiating between positions of subjectivity and universality. Slippages in categorical considerations, and a frequent historical lack of grounding in the gustatory as a mode of performative engagement have too often limited such discussions to disembodied theoretical considerations, while gustatory taste itself occasions considerations of theatricality, both in notions of rehearsal and performance. This issue seeks to return the focus back to the physicality of gustatory taste as a means of understanding through and in performance contexts.

To begin to consider any sensory practice, it is necessary to turn to notions of embodied understanding and to re-align it alongside other embodied encounters and in relation to other sensory practices. While philosophical musings have often positioned gustatory taste as low, its synthetic nature and relation to the remaining four physical senses, which it brings together, mean that such hierarchies are both meaningless and perhaps more usefully inverted. In his discussion of cross-modalism and sensation, Oxford psychologist Charles Spence confirms, relatively unsurprisingly, that 'flavour turns out to be one of the most multisensory of our everyday experiences' and distinguishes between two types of roles that the senses play in understanding flavour, 'exteroceptive senses of vision, audition and orthonasal olfaction... typically stimulated prior to (and sometime during) the consumption of food; and the interoceptive senses ... that are stimulated while a

diner is eating' (cited in Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman 2014: 183–4). Indeed, as an act of performance, taste distinguishes itself from visuality, aurality and touch since it necessitates the destruction of that that is being tasted. It may be said, qua Peggy Phelan, that taste 'cannot be saved, recorded, [or] documented' (1993). Scientific understandings of taste grapple with the limited palate of recognizable flavours to produce a full range—saltiness, sweetness, bitterness, sourness and umami; physical tasting is the performative combination of these recognitions and novelties, along with the contributions of the other senses. Through investigating taste, we truly explore the world as encounter; it is through tasting that an infant discovers the world and that anyone can understand our relation to it—what is safe and what poisonous, how do we relate to other people and beings. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin suggested that 'animals feed themselves; men [sic] eat, but only wise men know the art of eating' (Brillat and Fisher 2011: 3). While such a statement is perhaps more quotable than unquestionably true, the inversion of the final sentence offers an undeniable truth: the art of eating produces knowledge and wisdom. It is these knowledges that the current issue explores. Writing in 1999, sociologist Paul Rozin argued that 'food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching', suggesting that such importance suggests its centrality to any cultural understanding, perhaps a more useful basis even for Freudian explorations of human development than sex (Rozin 1999). Exploring taste in, as and through performance, the essays here explore art and performance that explore fundamental questions of humanity.

With particular regard to theatre and performance, notions of taste have been long embedded in theoretical understandings, articulated and formulated across different cultures (particularly, India, China, Japan and Europe) conveyed through aesthetics and poetics that have the potential to be applied to both culinary and performance arts, the performative and the gustatory (and in many cases already are). Examples here would include the Indian aesthetic of bhava and rasa (flavour) as an attainment in dance but most especially to be savoured/instilled in the onlooker; the Chinese notion of he (和—sometimes transliterated as ho)—an all-pervading concept of harmony, derived from both music and the cooking cauldron; Chinese Buddhist notions of savouring and emptiness and a seamless blend of different sensory perceptions and the concept of p'in-wei—a theory and description of savouring that

encompasses emotional experience and self-reflexivity; and the Japanese concept of umami—now widely embraced as the fifth taste bud (along with sweet, savoury, salty and bitter) but also the Zen aesthetics of Yugen, Wabi-Sabi, Shibui, and Kaiseki (applicable to both gastronomy and theatre) and the French notion of ‘terroir’—that is, the taste and sense of place and location. This issue extends the notions of taste to a variety of modes of performance, seeking to integrate bodily practices from the notion of taste into other theatrical theories and understandings.

In framing this issue, there were a number of through-lines that may have served to organize the work, for instance, tracing a historical arc from classical art and actors through seminal performances and performance artists of the middle part of the twentieth century, to work pushing at the boundaries of contemporary, and in some ways we begin and end with notions of a historical then and now. Another—conceptual and playful—frame may have been to align the different articles to broad categories of cooking techniques: reduction and distillation; basting and roasting; emulsifying; kneading and resting; poaching; and smoking and marinating. Or even simply assigning each article to one of the five primary tastes—sweet, savoury, salty, bitter and umami. And although that may have been divisive for our authors (wouldn’t everyone one wish their article to be categorized as umami—‘scrumptious’ and ‘deliciously tasty’?), it would have conveyed the need to regard each category as porous and cross-fertilizing with multiple and meaningful combinations and complex fusion between the five sections (as in the gustatory)—as should the four thematic sections we ultimately selected as the structure for this issue still be regarded.

We chose to structure the eighteen pieces here according to a thematic of encounter. Taste is fundamentally a means of encounter with the outside world—a mode of understanding—and the four sections into which these works are grouped follow these notions through to create relations across time and space. The borders between these sections, however, are thin membranes that, it is hoped, allow a commingling of flavours, so we encourage each reader to engage the issue through their own personal tastes, perhaps reading within sections, or perhaps sliding across them, choosing one ingredient from each section to produce their own recipe. We see connections and blending across the groupings and think that there is a flow to the issue that belies the idea that each section is discrete.

The issue starts with essays on 'Breaking Frame', on taste as a mode of encounter to challenge and open other art forms and spaces. Richard Gough's essay After Taste considers the capacity of performance work to function on the level of gustatory taste, or rather as truly multi-sensory events. Beginning with medieval fantasies of the world as edible (in times of hardship, famine and austerity) and their pictorial depiction across centuries through fine art and civic sculpture, he progresses to contemporary works of 'urbanphagy'—imagining city centres as edible and rescaling and reconstructing them and then destroying and devouring them—to evocations of natural disasters (and climate-change catastrophes) and edible installations that capture the visual, aural and olfactory events and attempt to convey gustatory correlation (with bitter aftertaste). Erin Mee in Dancing on the Tongue embraces the burgeoning practices of immersive and participatory theatres that involve eating and drinking to create multi-modal experiences for their 'partakers'. She proposes that these strategies and embodied practices 'literalize' the Sanskrit aesthetic theory of rasa and the metaphor of taste becomes actual through participatory ingestion and relishing. Apprehending several participatory performances staged in New York in recent years (2013–15) she advances critical reflection on modes and meaning in contemporary work through adoption and adaption of rasa—ingestion, digestion and consumption.

While Mee focuses on experimental, newly devised work, Kristin Hunt turns towards recent edible performances of 'classics'—Strindberg's Miss Julie, Buchner's Woyzeck and a 'mash-up' of the two presented at the 2015 Prague Quadrennial (PQ) (the premier exposition for all matters relating to scenography and performance design). From a design perspective, Hunt considers the alimentary possibilities for these productions and their practical realization, the involvement of audiences and the invention of menus. In the context of PQ Makers, a curated programme within PQ2015, focusing on recycling material from past productions, other designers and performances incorporated radical and innovative engagement with food and considered whether taste can ever exceed the present tense while depending on a whole set of (formative—grounding) references from the past.

From Eating Miss Julie, we turn to M.Clavel—the robot-chef created by artist-scholar David Szante, In Edward Whittall's article, Taste Performed: M.Clavel and the live feed, the reader is invited to consider the performance of taste and how we, in the act of consumption, are transformed as we eat. M. Clavel (robot), assisted by a human slave and witnessed as museum exhibit, feeds those who visit. The article playfully and insightfully extends the performative aspects of tasting/eating that the artwork explored at the intersection between food and technology. In Transformative Taste-Encounters, Jenny Lawson analyses the dining experience in a Michelin starred restaurant (Cartmel in Cumbria, UK) alongside two contemporary (culinary, food-related) theatre productions: Reckless Sleepers' The Last Supper and Leo Burtin's Midnight Soup. She considers a transcendence of taste and the entanglement of life, death and food—both the theatre pieces engage with notions and realities of last suppers. The piece efficaciously draws on Michel Serres' writings on The Five Senses and the triangulation of the performance works, which reflect on death (with simple, modest food), and the life-enriching (mainly foraged) abundance of the thirteen-course restaurant (durational-performance) meal, is both thought and life–death provoking.

'Encountering Another', the second section, brings the notion of encounter with the outside world to the fundamental Levinasian question of how we may truly understand our own individual place in the world, as well as the presence of an Other (and thus humanity) through taste. What may it mean to come into contact with another through gustation? Michael Pinchbeck and Andrew Westerside open this section, in part where the previous section ended, focusing on Reckless Sleepers' performance The Last Supper, in which audience members partake of the last meals of death-row prisoners for an exploration of dramaturgy and aesthetics. Ann Folino White returns to an artefact from the early twentieth century, a cookbook featuring actors' favourite recipes, to suggest that encountering these recipes serves to erase the distance of celebrity and history. In the centre of this section, Paul Geary examines three recent theatrical performances in which taste plays a central role for examinations of self and other, through the tongue, love, sex and desire. Continuing with notions of sexuality, Emily Elizabeth Goodman discusses how Hannah Wilke's Super T-Art both highlights and troubles historical conceptions of female sexuality and objectification. To conclude this section, Dorota Koczanowic

reads the work of Daniel Spoerri through John Dewey, asking when a meal becomes an experience.

The third section brings together a series of essays that focus on the design and materiality of taste, with works that challenge a binary of good/bad. Design/Materiality opens with visual pages by the Austrian artists Sonja Stummerer and Martin Hablesreiter of the art and design workshop known as Honey & Bunny who create work about the environmental impact of food production and consumption—food waste, food design; issues of taste, manners. The vibrantly colourful and playful imagery is contrasted with the manifesto-style text that appeals urgently for culture and science to engage in discourse, and for issues of sustainability in food design and production to be addressed globally.

From the double-page spread that illuminates both the aesthetic and politics of Honey & Bunny, Colebrooke and Miele's article springs directly from the encounter and consumption of a Honey & Bunny event/installation—FOOD\sustainable\DESIGN that was prepared for EXPO Milan (in October 2015). The piece describes in detail the structure, design and materiality of the event and the co-participation and reflection required to engage with it—giving rise to doubt, perplexity, disorientation, uncertainty and insight. The piece 'unsettled' the authors' assumptions and perceptions of taste and begged questions of what is the 'norm' and the responsibilities of consumption.

In Chemical Sense in Art: Thinking beyond aesthetics, Ryan Bromley turns our attention or rather—to use a less sight-orientated word—our gustatory sensibility towards issues of distaste and disgust and acute, urgently required, subjectivity. Focusing on the 'absence of an accepted multi-sensory theory that considers the role of the chemical senses in contemporary art', Bromley analyses why a hierarchy of the senses (sight and sound supreme) emerged in Western civilization and why the 'entirety of the human sensorium' was fractured and rendered dislocate. He then argues for reassembly and a rebalancing through reflection on a series of performance-installation case studies that range from Spanish and Indian artists to the fine dining of chef Andoni Luis Aduriz and the much-acclaimed Mugaritz restaurant and his own work in 'curating conceptual gastronomy'.

Following on to a chronicle of distaste, disgust and physical bodily revulsion, this section has a 'sick' end—although a word with multiple meanings, and the 'amazingly good' of current parlance having currency here too, it is the literal, material reality of vomit that rounds off Design/Materiality to a resonating crescendo. Harriet Curtis wrestles with 1970s Paul McCarthy—and amidst the hotdogs, hamburgers, ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise, she gets down in the dirt and debris of food smeared, splattered, pulled, plugged and overly played with to write In Bad Taste?—the question mark opening up an account of McCarthy's early happenings and installations, to fresh review and distanced (less raw and sickening) analysis.

The final section returns to a stable, perhaps even healthy, grounding; writing in The Taste of Place: A cultural journey into terroir, Amy Trubek articulated that 'the "production of locality" through taste helps constitute the meaning ... in the midst of the global flow of ideas, ingredients and values shaping our tastes for food and drink' (Trubek 2008: 53). The works in this section look not strictly at terroir of ingredients and how their sourcing produces their flavours, but instead considers tasting itself as a site-specific performance, considering how location may affect these actions. Lily Kelting examines the work of artists Kate Hers Rhee and Lauren Lee (Fräulein Kimchi), whose interventions across a variety of spaces in Berlin challenge the consideration of questions about the meaning of national identities and slippages of culinary identity through a variety of performative encounters, all staged through the artists' own performance of their personal identities. In her examination of personal identity, folklorist Rachel Hopkin focuses on the layerings of butter and pastry within the croissant as a palimpsestic mode of layering identity across locations, unpicking stories from France, the UK and the US to explore the many ways that the croissant creates and challenges concepts of identity, class and belonging. Hurmat Ul Ain surveys recent food-based art in Pakistan, suggesting that food often remains a crucial metaphor within the art world, rather than a means for examination of questions around food itself. 'The Taste of Money' artists' pages from Spatula&Barcode (artists Laurie Beth Clark and Michael Peterson) playfully bring together projects around relationality and food from a number of artists as well as corporate entities, to ask about challenges of privilege and sociability within artworks involving food across a variety of different instantiated sites. Finally, the issue

concludes with co-editor Josh Abrams's essay on how the rise in cultural centrality of notions of taste may both be implicated in the contemporary political 'post-truth' moment and help to understand the rise of Donald Trump, examining three iconically staged photographs of Trump eating, each of which are fundamentally tied up with location and that serve to unpick complex narratives of identity and taste.

To return to the theatre with a play that itself staged a paradigm of world views coming into conflict, in Chekhov's The Seagull Shamrayev suggests that a rising standard of acting may just be 'a matter of taste', misremembering the Latin proverb with which we began this editorial, and beautifully conflating it with another Latin maxim, 'De mortuis nil nisi bonum' ('Of the dead, speak only good'). He says instead, 'De gustibus aut bene, aut nihil—suggesting instead of a purported impossibility of debate, the idea that 'of taste speak well or nothing'. We are very excited by the provocative tasting menu offered within this issue and hope that in encountering all the 'good speaking' by the authors and artists included herein, the readers will be left with a good taste in their mouths and challenges to the varied ideas of how taste may create meaning in the contemporary moment.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme, trans. M. F. K Fisher, (2011) The Physiology of Taste, or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy, New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Hume, David (1757) 'Of the standard of taste' in Four Dissertations, London: A. Millar.

Kant, Immanuel (1978) Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell, revd. and ed. Hans H. Rudnick, Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.

Korsmeyer, Carolyn (1999) Making Sense of Taste: Food & philosophy, Ithaca, N.Y. London: Cornell University Press.

Perullo, Nicola.(2016) Taste As Experience : The philosophy and aesthetics of food. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press

Phelan, Peggy (1993) Unmarked: Politics of performance, Abingdon: Routledge

Rozin, Paul (1998) 'Food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-Reaching', Social Research 66(1): 9–30.

Spence, Charles and Piqueras-Fiszman, Betina (2014) The Perfect Meal: The multisensory science of food and dining, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Trubek, Amy B. (2008) The Taste of Place: A cultural journey into terroir, Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press.