

Devouring Theatre: After taste

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This text is a reduction and distillation (to use cookery terms from the outset) of a much longer presentation that I made at the end of my fellowship (December 2015) at the International Research Centre/Centre for Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Freie Universität, Berlin. I would like to thank Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte and Dr Christel Weiler along with the entire team at the Centre for the opportunity to pursue the fellowship—it was an extraordinary and enriching time.

For the end-of-fellowship presentation, I took as my starting points three formative experiences I had in Berlin: seeing the paintings of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; participating in the performance of Cooking Catastrophes at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin (HAU)—both of which are described below; and dining at a Zagreus Projekt artist-curated meal (not included in this text). These experiences caused me to rethink and re-evaluate the sense, and place, of taste in food-related art projects, together with a reconsideration of aisthēsis and interwoven, multi-sensorial perception, reflection on radical practices of hospitality and participation and the perplexities surrounding artist-orchestrated meals.

(this text could be in a one column block and smaller font)

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses...

... this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me.... Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?

(Proust 1981: xx)

Manna from heaven

What if we apprehended theatre as if it were food? What if we understood theatre composition through a culinary optic: performance as if it were a form of cooking, the kitchen as laboratory, the studio as laboratory—the studio as kitchen, technique as mastery of material, with precision and dedication, alacrity and respect—the preparation of subsistence, of necessary nourishment, invigorating sustenance: food of the gods, as if manna from heaven.

Theatre as if it were a strange food from another world, like one of Ferran Adrià's creations,^[1] provoking bewilderment, rekindling enchantment, inspiring awe and curiosity... lo and behold... as if it were a miraculous food, to be shared not just through an act of collaboration and co-participation but as an act of commensality... of being together to share and partake. Theatre as if it were manna, necessary in times of wilderness, alienation and social upheaval... appearing on the stage like a hoar frost, tasting like bread tempered with oil, like flour with honey, a foam, a suspension of seeds... seeds of change, for perception and the imagination—as if we may digest theatre; as if we may devour theatre.

Throughout the last few years manna has become an urgent provocation to me—how may theatre function as if it were manna necessary in times of wilderness. This fascination has pushed my research into mythical and historical terrain, turning to painting and art history, beyond my initial twentieth-century focus. This perspective is developing in concert with an insatiable curiosity as to how we taste, what we taste and how taste not only triggers memories from the past (nostalgia and a sense of loss) but also instils and directs imaginings about the future. Taste can generate a desire to encounter other cultures and countries and contributes to a storehouse, a databank of pre-nostalgia—a longing for fuller sensorial experience to come.

11 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

12 I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying,

At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.

13 And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host.

14 And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.

15 And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was.

And Moses said unto them,

This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.

31 And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

(King James Bible 2010: Exodus 16)

Land of Cockaigne

In times of extreme hardship, poverty, food scarcity and brutality, the collective mind often turns to envisage utopias—so it was in Medieval Europe with the Land of Cockaigne. This is the land where rivers flow with wine, where the sky rained basted plump geese and cheese, fish leaped out of the sea ready cooked and roasted pigs wandered the earth with knives in their sides willingly surrendering chunks of crisp fatty flesh. I encountered the Land of Cockaigne through Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting The Fountain of Youth (1546) at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, that focuses less on the abundance of food and more on the rejuvenating qualities of water.

[[figure1]]

At the Gemäldegalerie, The Fountain of Youth looks across to Cranach's much earlier work The Last Judgment, inspired by Hieronymus Bosch.

Dystopia faces Utopia. The Last Judgment for all its seemingly nightmarish and surreal details perhaps more accurately capturing the brutal reality of medieval life. The Fountain of Youth that was painted by Cranach towards the end of his life, projected hope for a paradise on earth; the Land of Cockaigne.

Reaching further back into the mediaeval imagination we encounter the power of Cockaigne to promise bliss and abundance with edible houses—the walls built of pies and pastries—pre-dating the Brothers Grimm’s Hansel and Gretel (1812) Gingerbread House by approximately 500 years. An extract from the poem The Land of Cockaygne (from an Irish manuscript of 1330—author unknown):

Cockaygne offers better fare,
And without worry, work, or care;
The food is good, the drink flows free
At lunchtime, suppertime, and tea.
It’s true without a doubt, I swear,
No earthly country could compare;
Under heaven no land but this
Has such abundant joy and bliss.
There are rivers great and fine
Of oil and milk, honey and wine
The house has many rooms and halls;
Pies and pastries form the walls,
Made with rich fillings, fish and meat,
The tastiest a man could eat.
Flour-cakes are the shingles all
Of cloister, chamber, church and hall.
The nails are puddings, rich and fat—
Kings and princes might dine on that.
There you can come and eat your fill,
And not be blamed for your self-will.

[[figure2]]

In an Italian map of the Paese di Cuccagna (circa 1540) we encounter an entire landscape of edible delights—here it rains cooked poultry directly on to the table and partridge, grouse and all manner of game descend to the dinners. This is titled Description of the Cuccagna Country, and the subtitle declares ‘where who does not work earns the most’. Indeed, in the lower-right corner we see a man who has been arrested—‘he is going to prison because he was working’. There are lakes of meatballs and pies, furnaces continuously producing fresh bread, a pit of beans, donkeys laden with sausages and ships creaking with charcuterie. Each depiction is accompanied by a caption—as the fantastical and the imaginary, evoked through the pictorial, needs scriptural authority. A map of magical realism, a cartography of desire, a manual for gluttons, a forager’s field-guide—but this chart was conceived hundreds of years before such terms became fashionable. This vade mecum was the product of hunger and captures the power of the imagination to (momentarily) satisfy need—albeit through fantasy, magical yet real.

[[figure3]]

In Pieter Breughel the Elder’s painting entitled Land of Cockaigne (1567)—in Dutch, Luilekkerland (Lazy Luscious Land)—we see a clerk, a peasant-farmer and a soldier, satiated and in slumber having gorged themselves of all they could fill. An egg (centre, downstage) is still wandering, spoon poised in its open shell ready for self-service, and a conveniently prepared pig (upstage, right), carving knife haltered by its side, a perambulatory hog-roast, an itinerant field food (precursor to street food or the modern-day ‘takeaway’). We see also the open-mouthed knight waiting for the next ready meal to fly his way from the roof of pies above. Here the landscape invites all to over-indulge, but through the comic, Breughel points to a spiritual emptiness encouraged by gluttony.

Eight years earlier, Pieter Breughel the Elder had painted The Fight between Carnival and Lent. Here we witness both gluttony and abstinence—food in performance both celebrated and denied, present and absent, in excess and

abundance, demur and modest—always, as ever, highly charged and symbolic. In this magnificent depiction of mid-sixteenth century Northern European village life, painted as if from a bird's eye view, we are offered panoptical sight on to a densely animated village market square. And although the church looms on the right with seemingly humble and virtuous figures, and the inn cascades revellers on the left, this is a multi-layered, incredibly detailed, gathering of numerous events, stories, transactions and rites.

The season is changing, the last boisterous bouts of carnivore-carnival effervesce, as a period of abstinence and purity—observance of Lent towards Easter—is about to begin. As in any great piece of political street theatre, the central idea, the drama, is encapsulated in an instance, in a single frame—the rotund figure of Carnival, mounted on a beer barrel (pork chop as ship's figurehead), pie as headdress, pig's head on javelin, about to joust with the lean, ashen figure of Lent, his weapon being a long wooden spatula with two fish (five loaves of bread on his simple wooden cart). These floats epitomize the battle, but Breughel populates the village square with many scenes depicting food and the villagers' interactions with food and with one another—water and fish surrounding the well creates a central focus, meat and alcohol assigned to the outgoing carnival and bread and dry biscuits to the incoming period of Lent. The sense of food is palpable; one can smell the carnival and the riotous mix in the air of the market square, and one can almost taste the earthy flavours and the texture of the terrain. And it is this dynamic oscillation between a feast being for both the eyes and for the taste buds that I wish to explore further, first in the public domain and then in the theatre.

Staging opulence and abundance

[[figure4]]

In mid-eighteenth-century Naples, the stories, poems, maps and paintings about the Paese di Cuccagna developed into processions; elaborate structures of food fountains, momentary festivals of abundance and civic celebration were constructed in the public sphere. Machina Cuccagna were

developed, these edible monuments were displayed and then paraded, serenaded and then consumed. This developed into what today we may call civic sculptures or Public Art—massive freestanding structures, temporary wooden fortresses adorned with food that as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has remarked ‘enact their own ephemerality [...] when the King gave the signal the gathered crowd scaled, attacked and destroyed [through ravenous devouring] a Neapolitan cuccagna’(Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1999:5).

This tradition of elaborate edible monuments then transferred from the public sphere into the banquets of the aristocracy. In grand dining rooms and banquet halls across Europe, ingenious, opulent structures caused the oak tables to groan. Ever more inventive—the pie with four and twenty blackbirds released to fly skywards once the crust was cut—some inedible due to their architectural structure, some purely confection (for the eye only) and some made from sugar and confectionary for a spectacular end to a meal—a banquet. The host would invite the assembled guests not just to leave the table but also to destroy and consume all that towered upon it. From the perspective of performance, this participatory act of collective and collaborative dismantling seems wonderfully immodest and profligate; one imagines wild abandonment and epicurean debauchery. An annihilation licensed and permitted through voracious devouring, unseemly, yet seen—although with emphasis placed on the visual destruction of the pièce montée and with the taste being predominately sweet and sickly.

The staging of opulence, abundance and hospitality is the stuff of royal pageantry. This hand-tinted version of an engraving of the banquet in Westminster Hall (London) for the Coronation of James 2nd (1685) captures the scale of the event and degrees of participation. The banquet comprised an extensive menu, which included hot and cold foods for the diners and room for spectators in the galleries above the tables. It is titled A Prospect of the inside of Westminster Hall, together with the description Showing how the King and Queen, with the Nobility and others did sit on the day of Coronation 23 April 1685, and with the additional illuminating caption With the manner of serving up the First Course of Hot Meats to their Majesties Table.

The 'manner of serving' is extraordinarily elaborate and one can see ranks of waiters in attendance, one to every two diners, the tables laden with plates and the procession of hot meats (partly conveyed by horses) down the central aisle. What I want to draw attention to is the number of guests, no doubt still privileged and part of the aristocracy, who were invited to watch only, to be spectators of the banquet—to be present but not to partake. Hundreds of paintings depict this moment of vicarious pleasure and culinary voyeurism—from small gatherings watching a king and queen dine, through to mass spectacles of national ceremony. Such meals are performances of complex dramaturgy and exquisite stage management, participatory and immersive for those at the table, visually spectacular, staged and choreographic for those at distance—requiring dedication, subservience and precise timing from the attendants, waiters, stewards, footmen and servers (and from the fires of the kitchens—the army of cooks who must function behind scene, out of sight, to produce such bounty and in such proportions).

But how may such culinary voyeurism function in the imagination of the spectator? The meats, the sweet breads, the pies and the puddings could be seen; the joy of those dining, those consuming the seemingly endless parade of platters, could be witnessed; and no doubt also the smell of the various dishes wafted up to the galleries—and so through visual and olfactory means the appetite must have been stimulated. Flavour rises in the onlooker, feasts for the eyes.

The cooks (and their legions) who prepared such extravagant banquets largely remain anonymous, unknown, unsung. And their skills and techniques to produce such feasts, on time and in such quantity—looking and tasting good, fit for a king—are seldom recorded, but by the early nineteenth century known and named cooks begin to emerge, together with their strategies for taste and presentation. On 18 January 1817, Marie-Antoine Carême—probably the world's first celebrity chef, Napoleon's cook (who subsequently became the chef of George IV)—served for the Prince Regent and the Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia a banquet of unparalleled splendour. It was inspired

by the opulent surroundings and architecture of the Brighton Pavilion. Carême had established a style (initially through patisserie constructions known as pièce montée and gradually evolving into a grande cuisine) to create staging of abundance—with all the food and the various courses served at once, creating vast edible sculptures with towering confectionary centrepieces of pièce montée.

For the ‘dinner’ served at the Royal Pavilion Brighton, the menu comprises the following: Eight Soups; Eight Removes of Fish; Forty Entrées served around the Fish; Eight Great Pieces; Eight Centrepieces Patisserie; Eight Roasts; Thirty-two Desserts and Savoury Entremets; Twelve Great Rounds. The number of dishes and contrasting textures and flavours is fantastical (and in retrospect sounds like the product of the ‘fabulous’ within surrealism); how any diner could navigate a sensible and satisfying route through such culinary options is almost unimaginable, and the magnificent display of ornate and elaborate pièce montée must have been awe-inspiring, to the point of staggering and stupefying.

To give some examples of these groupings of dishes, that came in multiples of four and eight—from the choices within Eight Removes of Fish one could select braised sole in truffle garnish, or the head of a great sturgeon in champagne. From the Forty Entrées any one could be regarded as a meal in itself; to highlight just two: sliced duck in bitter orange sauce or sautéed pheasant in foie gras sauce. Of the Eight Great Pieces one example will suffice: loin of veal with truffle foie gras and pickled tongue. By comparison the Eight Roasts sound modest: teal dressed with lemons, woodcock larded with bacon or ‘simply turkey’ to identify three. The Thirty-two Desserts and Savoury Entremets are perhaps the most outrageous combinations, again just two examples and by no means the most audacious: a pyramid of lobsters with fried parsley, and pancakes with Chantilly cream. It is the Eight Centrepieces Patisserie that perhaps best convey Carême’s genius and the link with the aforementioned edible structures and imaginings of savoury landscape, and a pre-echo of the art-installation food-based projects I will focus on in the second part of this essay. These eight pièce montée, which

did literally form the centre pieces of the spectacle, included an Italian Pavilion and a Welsh Hermitage (constructed from sponge, pastry and confectionery) and The Royal Pavilion rendered in pastry. So, in the middle of this vast assembly of edible delights, a miniature version of the very building they were dining within was available to be destroyed, devoured and tasted. The flavours that were corralled, and their juxtaposition, in this seemingly contradictory and conflicting series of groupings is difficult to comprehend. It as if Carême attempted to assemble all known possible tastes, textures and aromas (and applied all the emergent cooking techniques that he became famous for—rich stocks and sauces, combinations of roasting and basting, baking and broiling, mixing sweet with savoury). But the sequence and order of service was left to the choices of the diner and the trajectory that they individually generated (from a performance perspective we could say that the installation must have been truly immersive but the dramaturgy weak). And what the stomach could not conceivably ingest, nor the taste buds savour, the eyes possibly could—an ocular consumption of the most flavoursome display.

Allegory of taste

Paintings do not exist of the Brighton Royal Pavilion diners' encounter with the overwhelming smorgasbord of Carême's phantasmagorical creation. But exactly 200 years earlier in 1617, Pieter Breughel the Elder and Peter Paul Reubens began a collaboration that would evolve across two years and result in a series of allegorical paintings: The Five Senses. For these five vast canvases Breughel painted the settings and Reubens the figures.

The painting on Taste conveys a scene of grand operatic opulence. In the other paintings in the series on The Five Senses the female figure is accompanied by Cupid—in Taste it is not Cupid but a Satyr. Among the sumptuous display of game (known as Pronkstilleven in Dutch for this particularly ornate form of still life) we can see the peacock and swan pies. She is eating an oyster and the Satyr plies her with wine. The ecstasy of luxury also leads to her erotic abandon—as the wine flows modesty recedes, and she becomes dishabille.

Taste and emotion are intricately linked and feature prominently within the literature of Magic Realism and surrealist films but seldom is the combination captured or advanced in occidental theatre, and rarely does taste form a part of the dramaturgy of performance or as a strategic device to access memory and emotion. In Gabriel Axel's film Babette's Feast (1987), based on the short story by Isak Dinesen (Babette's Feast), we see the power of food and taste to transform the behaviour of a group of diners. Through subversive and subterranean tracts of delight in savouring, each individual transgresses their own self-imposed restraint. The taste of Babette's magnificent 'real French dinner' melts their sanctimonious etiquette, and they succumb, they give in—like the female figure in Breughel's/Reubens' Taste they abandon their modesty.

Eating food, sharing food, conviviality and hospitality are increasing practices (strategies and tactics) of performance, installation and relational artworks, but the connection between taste and emotion, memory and identity are difficult to 'stage manage' and deliver with any certainty. Perhaps intimacy is a required condition to allow taste to form a significant part of any performance (in parallel to and in collaboration with touch, sight, sound and smell) but with the burgeoning of immersive theatre works, site-located and one-on-one performance experiences, this would seem a deep treasure trove worth mining.

Taste tongue slide

Aristotle first began to categorize taste—identifying both sweet and bitter as formative co-respondents. For centuries it was accepted that there were only four primary tastes—similar to there being three primary colours where mixing red, blue and yellow generates secondary colours, and then through further mixing of hues tertiary colours are generated; multiple combinations of primary tastes produce numerous complex compound tastes. Umami—the Japanese concept of savoury or meaty—was first identified earlier in the

twentieth century (first proposed by the chemist Professor Kikunae Ikeda in 1908) but only recently adopted and accepted (1988).

Umami means 'good flavour' deliciousness or 'scrumptiousness' and is fundamental to many Eastern cuisines. Pungency or spiciness created by chilli peppers, black pepper and ginger, also functions as a distinctive taste—piquant, hot or spicy in many cultures and cuisines across the world. And this extends to numbness, the tingling numbness of Sichuan pepper characteristic of Sichuan cuisine generating ma or mati rasa (in Indonesian cuisines). Astringency in some cultures is also thought of as a distinctive taste and is one of six tastes in the Ayurvedic tradition. Calcium (as in the taste of water) and fatty are also now becoming adopted and all of this is further complicated by 'mouth feel', the taste of shape and texture.

It is surprising how much disagreement still surrounds the foundation of five or seven or nine primary tastes and how culturally determined they are, developing through acculturation and maintained through specific and local cuisines that help form home, family and a sense of belonging. It points also to the intimate and subjective nature of taste and the difficulty in Western societies to elevate gustatory taste to the level of philosophy. Only a few books have been written on a philosophy of gustatory taste and yet entire libraries exist on moral taste. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's The Physiology of Taste: Meditations on transcendental gastronomy (1825) remains the most remarkable of the texts on taste, and it founded the genre of gourmand essay writing. While a renowned epicure he did advocate excess or indulgence and the philosophy of Epicurus^[note]² is the bedrock for his thinking about food; a simple meal would suffice Brillat-Savarin, as long as it was executed with artistry.

The connections between the olfactory and gustatory to memory are well established and well documented; smell and taste are strong and sometimes overpowering triggers for memories, on occasions pleasurable, nostalgic, whimsical and romantic, at times terrifying, traumatic and unbearable. For Proust, his Madeleine instantly evoked memories and emotions from

childhood; there is no selection process operating here—we are hard wired from smell to memory to emotion and 80 per cent of taste is dependent upon a capacity to sense smell.

Proust ponders a very well-known yet enigmatic phenomenon associated with taste—the fact that they are nearly impossible to describe verbally, and yet they may be vividly recalled by the faintest whiff of a familiar smell or flavor. This gives taste (again in the full ‘intersensorial’ sense that includes the participation of smell) a singular and powerful place in memory. It can be a trigger of bodily recollection, a source of both yearning and solace. (Korsmeyer 2005: 7)

In Western culture, smell and taste are the most undervalued of all the senses. Their demotion in line with the advances of rationalism and sanitation, would appear to be concurrent with a similar ‘deodorization of theatre’ that occurs with Naturalism. These are the medical terms for dysfunctional states of taste: Ageusia—loss of taste (distinct from Anosmia—loss of the sense of smell); Hypogeusia—reduced ability to taste; Dysgeusia or Parageusia—distortion of the sense of taste. My contention is that occidental theatre and performance in the twenty-first century suffers from dysguesia. But the condition is not irredeemable.

In his introduction to Michel Serres’ The Five Senses: A philosophy of mingled bodies, Steven Connor emphasizes sapidity, the processing of taste and the inter-dependence of all the senses to generate understanding and knowledge. Through a reflection on the aphorism (attribution disputed, Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas; English version by John Locke) Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu (There appear not to be any ideas in the Mind, before the senses conveyed any in), Connor tracks Serres’ playful reiterations:

We used to read in our textbooks that our intellect knows nothing that has not first passed through the senses. What we hear, through our tongue, is that there is nothing in sapience that has not first passed through mouth and taste, through sapidity.

Aesthetics emerged from and spun out of aisthēsis (meaning full, total, sense-perception). Martin Heidegger reminds us in Being and Time (1962 [1927]) that 'aisthēsis was related to the process of revealing and concealing (alethea). Physical sensory perception was trusted as knowledge' (Kane 2007: xx) where knowledge is received through all senses and formed, shaped, processed through the 'mind in the belly'.

The origin of aesthetics within aisthēsis becomes forgotten, delaminates and takes an independent trajectory. So, sense perception (especially taste and smell, gustatory and olfactory) become separate from reason and logic (logos): 'Through the Age of Reason we see the final subordination of all aesthetics to the categories of representation' (Kane 2007: xx).

What concerns me in the art/performance work I am about to discuss is that although working with food as material (gustatory taste and the olfactory), much of the artworks manifest in terms of representation, illustration, and are primarily visual—ocular with symptoms of dysguesia. How may a return to full sensory perception, a visceral understanding (aisthēsis), be reconstructed? How may performance reach beyond the visibility of its theatricality?

[[figure5]]

Taste Buds and Devouring Reality

The Catalan artist Antonio Miralda is known for his culinary work explored through installations, public ceremonies and art objects. The tongue, its shape and texture, has been a recurrent image in his work. Across the taste buds and regions of the human tongue he traces cities and tracks their neighbourhoods, disenfranchised communities and food traditions. His project Sabores y Lenguas (Taste and Tongues) spanned ten years from 1997 to 2007 and manifested in different forms and in many expositions and art festivals embracing collaborations across five continents.

The first manifestation of Sabores y Lenguas was City Plates within the context of the First Istanbul Biennale (1997). Initially a research project, by the time of Expo 2000 in Hannover (for the food pavilion) he had created a series of ceramic plates that involved and graphically reflected many cities from around the world.

In all cases, the aim of the project was twofold: on one hand, to preserve local culinary traditions, many of which are transmitted orally and in danger of disappearing: on the other to trace a poetic memory of contemporary food, producing a vast archive that used the dish as material support, the tongue as iconographic element and taste as memory.

(Miralda 2010)

In 2013, Miralda constructed an exhibition entitled Twin Tastes and Tongues for the Ninth Shanghai Biennale. It was an exploration of both Barcelona and Shanghai's traditions, rituals, politics, imaginaries, and way of organization in relation to food. Miralda uses taste terminology (receptors, papillae and anatomical analysis) together with the frame of the tongue to elaborate enchanting cartographies of the taste, memory and knowledge of a city's landscape/foodscape—in this case the civic twinning of Barcelona and Shanghai, exploring similarities and differences.

[[figure6]]

His compatriot and collaborator Alicia Rios also constructs maps, three-dimensionally scaled, and edible maps of entire city centres.

Melbournephagy, Eat London and Eat Lisbon (there have been several editions in an ongoing and ever more ambitious series) is in part a project of undoing reality within the public sphere realized and set within a fabulous Spanish surrealist tradition. To see what you have never seen before—to upturn the mundane and habitual response of 'I have seen this before... I

have been there; it was, as expected.' For once to see the entire city centre and its civic spaces as edible and to be invited to taste the fabric of those institutions (as imagined by often disenfranchised communities of the city) is a radical form of hospitality and culinary imagining. Every Urbanophagy project takes months to prepare, often involving from 12 to 20 communities, each having chosen the part of their city that they wish to reconstruct through the foodstuffs of their culture or fantasy. The eventual parades, carnivals and assembly of all the constituent parts is a great moment of public art in the public domain but it is the process of making and collectively, democratically, conceiving that I want to draw attention to.

In her Urbanophagy projects, Alicia Rios advances ways of seeing, making and savouring city centres, and their civic spaces, as edible. To re-scale reality can be a subversive strategy; to undo so as to understand, to deconstruct and reconstruct through participatory acts of playful disobedience dismantles power structures and the buildings that uphold them and galvanize them. Rios invites citizens to see the honourable institutions and historic monuments of their city as confection, to see their buildings of government, legislation and commerce as unstable, to see their civic monuments and famous landmarks as fragile delicacies that will rot if not consumed: to eat the Houses of Parliament, to devour Buckingham Palace, to gorge on The Strand, to maul The Mall.

A wide variety of communities representing the city's multi-cultural formation are involved, and the process makes strenuous efforts to involve disenfranchised and marginalized groups: disability art workers, activists, elderly and homeless people come together and volunteer. The city is divided into manageable proportions and through a process of consensus the twenty or so different groups chose a part of the city. With the assistance of Rios' professional team of artists and curators, which includes co-director, architect Barbara Ortiz, the chosen plot of the city is reduced and re-scaled to 2 x 2 metre sections. This will effectively be one team's canvas, their part of the jigsaw—a board, a table, a float—on which and within which their three-dimensional model will have to be constructed.

In preparation they go on walks, surveying, analysing and scrutinizing their patch, plot, turf—looking at every building and landscape as if it were edible, imagining how it may taste, how they would like it to taste. At this point in the process, the entire team of Rios, now known as Ali&Cia,^{[note]3} are acting as catalysts, disturbing the group's preconceptions, provoking and inspiring them to be more adventurous, more outlandish, more courageous and audacious in their imaginings. They are given total freedom to build their section from whatever food they wish and are offered expert advice, consultation, chefs, cooks and kitchens. If they are relatively new immigrants to the city, or if they are third- or second-generation citizens, or from specific neighbourhoods where one particular cultural group predominates, they are encouraged to delve into their own cultural and generational memories of foods, recipes and signature dishes. Ali&Cia often place an emphasis on the team/community to think and discuss (and try out in the kitchen) how they would like a particular landmark to taste or the texture it may be constructed from, considering all aspects from the look, the feel of it in the mouth and how it may be destroyed and eaten (with fork, fingers or other means).

In the summer of 2015, I followed and recorded Ali&Cia realize Eat Lisbon with eighteen different community groups. I was particularly drawn to the Ukrainian refugee group and the Chinese Macau and Indian Goan enclaves and their transmutation of the city landscape through dishes that evoked home, family, tastes, traditions and belonging once uprooted now reaffirmed avoiding hybridization. The Mozambique community took great pride in recasting a central part of their former colonial capital in the food of their cultural and gastronomic heritage. These projects, that take months in planning and preparation, are decimated within the hour.

In Lisbon, the host theatre, Teatro Municipal Maria Matos, which has a dynamic relationship with its own neighbourhood, was the site where the eighteen floats were composed—the actual cooking had taken place in various venues from a Hindu temple to a Ukrainian community centre, a university kitchen and a Chinese restaurant. The theatre space and

surrounding studios of Teatro Maria Matos had industrial cooling systems and refrigerators installed and across the two days in advance of the mass public assembly, the different teams worked furiously to construct the landscapes and civic monuments of their dreams. There was an extraordinary sense of industrious creativity as the fabulous and fantastical were made real, and as tactical improvisations had to salvage strategic ambition, and aspiration (for the integral strength of some foodstuff) gave way to inventive compromise. With from six to twelve members in each team, there was at one point 180 people working in the main hall, adding finishing touches and admiring one another's creation; there was also a sense of 'civic pride' and a touch of creative competition as they each began to see how another team had realized their part of the city and what they had made it from.

In Lisbon at the announced time—7 p.m. 12 July 2015—the eighteen floats were carried out by their makers, almost like an Easter Semana Santa^[note]4 parade where the religious effigies emerge from the church and begin their serenaded procession. At the Teatro Maria Matos they spilled out on to Avenue Frei Miguel Contreiras as if ejected by some drama within the theatre and briefly traversed the surrounding street to the plaza close by; here the assembly began, like some over-pixelated and fragmented photograph at first (with only a few fragments discernible) but with the city centre gradually becoming to come into focus and then to miniaturized completeness. The crowd were in awe and each community effort was cheered on by their compatriots and supporters as each section arrived, and when complete a crescendo of applause ricocheted thunderously around the square in appreciation of the combined and collective effort of all. Now, a pause for inspection... for the citizens of Lisbon to survey their city centre, for photographs and speeches, for detours and site-seeing, for imagining of tastes to come, more than a menu with photographs of delicious dishes, this was a three-dimensional landscape from which each individual could plan their meal and could see what part of the city enticed their appetite, which cultural dishes most attracted them (and what part of Lisbon was built from them). Or they could decide, on the basis of destruction and demolition, which

part of the city they most wanted to disappear first—secretly or collectively planning their strategy for satiating desire. And then the erasure began.

In London, the project was commissioned by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), and through their agency a wide variety of community groups (drawn from a range of multi-cultural backgrounds) and disability art workers, activists, elderly and homeless people came together, were volunteered and recruited; as had been established in the first edition of the Urbanophagy series (simply titled: Melbournephagy 3 April 2004) London was divided into manageable proportions and through a process of consensus the thirty or so different groups chose their section. This included: SubCo—a day-care centre for Asian elders from the east end borough of Newham; The Spicy South—a group of local people with learning disabilities based in East Dulwich; the Roj Women’s Association—a collective of Turkish and Kurdish speaking women from Haringey and Hackney; and The Greenwich Vietnam’s Women’s Group that combined Cantonese and Vietnamese communities. As anyone familiar with London will be immediately aware, these are groups (as were all fourteen) from neighbourhoods on the outskirts of London, invited to remodel, cook, reconstruct, savour and devour the centre of London.

The assembly of the edible micro-city (on Saturday 28 April 2008 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.) through the journey of the 2 x 2 metre square sections, wheeled via a complex web of routes and arriving at the destination of Trafalgar Square, was an event in itself, a carnival of disruptive flotillas. So too was the invitation to inspect the assembled map a suspension in time—to meander around the perimeter of the three-dimensional jigsaw, to admire the accuracy in scale and detail and to realize, sometimes with awe, shock and admiration, the variety of materials from which it was constructed. And then the invitation to devour, to destroy, a public feeding frenzy of mass proportions, watched by the lions at the foot of Nelson’s Column. A Monopoly game board turns smorgasbord, becomes exhibition, and becomes buffet and banquet. A great moment of public art in the public domain.

How may you, the reader, imagine that the great (or modest) buildings and monuments of your town or city could taste, should taste, will taste? What foodstuff would you construct them from? What would be the dominant flavour? What would be the after-taste—bitter, sour, sweet or salty, pungent, piquant, hot and spicy? What would be the mouth feel? How would you invite guests to demolish and devour them? What implements may be needed? What sound would emit upon first bite?

And who would you wish to see rescale, deconstruct, reconstruct these institutions? Don't cast according to neighbourhood demographic. Think outside the plot: in Berlin, not Turkish communities building Kreuzberg—rather the Reichstag; in Amsterdam, not Surinamese communities reconstructing Oosterpark, rather Dam Square or the Rijksmuseum; and in Cardiff, not the Somali communities reimagining Butetown (romantically known as Tiger Bay), but rather the Marquess of Bute's castle that forms Cardiff's city centre. Mix and match in unusual, provocative and serendipitous ways.

Cooking Catastrophes

The project Cooking Catastrophes that I saw (smelt, ate, heard and touched) at the HAU in January 2014 is part of a grander project evolving through the collaboration and direction of Eva Meyer-Keller and Sybille Müller with a team of international cooks and video artists. The premise is simple: to create edible structures, broths, brews and stews that replicate natural disasters (some caused by climate change); to stage the moment of their explosion, eruption, destruction, liquefaction, drowning, erosion or pollution; and to film close-up and project in high-density display the catastrophic and irredeemable.

As seems to have been the fashion in Berlin across the last decade (Katie Mitchell's productions at the Schaubühne (theatre) being one outstanding example), one branch of inter-medial theatre and performance work consists of: seeing the action, seeing the live filming of the action and seeing the

simultaneously projected film of the action—all three generating different perspectives, sometimes in illuminating and profoundly insightful ways and, at other times, becoming a rather tedious re-iteration, possible but not necessary.

The cataclysmic and the calamitous were prepared, charged and detonated; we saw chefs working at several stations and heard (through somewhat prosaic and earnestly read texts) descriptions of seismic shifts, glacial melting, oceans rising, tornadoes and volcanoes, earthquakes and oil spills. As an audience, we were scattered through the studio: in the first phase watching the model landscapes and seascapes constructed; in the second phase, witnessing the catastrophic collapse of the food sculptures; and in the third phase foraging through the aftermath of edible disaster, constructing a buffet of debris and discharge. Eva Meyer-Keller and Sybille Müller engage some very experienced professional chefs from a variety of culinary and cultural traditions. Some of their creations are ingenious and delectable; some are purposefully repulsive.

The piece evolves through the staging of ten different catastrophes, including earthquake, tsunami, oil spillage, glacial melting, pollution and volcano eruption. The sequential and somewhat predictable structure points to a dramaturgical weakness. The distinct phases of the event also militated against the potential for dramatic catastrophe—the denouement of the tragedy and the cycle of tragedies unfolding and observed. Rather, we were invited to share and partake of the disastrous delights in a light-humoured finger buffet. Should we not be made to feel uncomfortable scavenging among the remains of these climatic calamities? Should volcanoes taste so sweet (delicious chocolate)? Should the earthquakes be such an exquisitely seasoned risotto? Or is this reaction itself falling into the problematic of illustration?

On their own website, Eva Meyer-Keller and Sybille Müller describe [Cooking Catastrophes](#) as:

A performance in which you taste the end of the world.

Miso soup floods a city of tofu and seaweed. A chocolate ice cream glacier starts to melt slowly until a brown avalanche buries tiny marzipan houses beneath it. The raspberry, hazelnut and mint bordered streets made of liquorice jelly breaks apart from the force of the shaking and ruptures down the middle. A bread and butter city is set alight and flambéed when a miniature aeroplane crashes into it...

Cooking Catastrophes is a cookery performance in which the hard to digest, even overwhelming realities of disaster scenarios are made shockingly delicious. Tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are made from food in front of the audience to be artfully served over several courses.

(Meyer-Keller xxxx: xx)

Cooking Catastrophes was a courageous collaboration with professional chefs, grappling with an admirable climate-change agenda but somehow—despite such powerful evocations of taste, smell and sound—still manifesting mainly as visual illustration of global issues—how can food reference political and social issues without directly illustrating them? The work was tantalizingly close to fulfilling my quest to experience performance that operates on all senses and through more ancient integrated sense perception but, ultimately, it submitted to the visual and was perhaps seduced by its own inter-mediality.

Last suppers

Perhaps one of the most enduring images of a feast (certainly in Christian-influenced countries) is The Last Supper (L'Ultima Cena) (1498), Leonardo da Vinci's painting serving as a collective icon for a large proportion of humankind. The image serves as a trans-national motif for multiple renditions in painting, sculpture, installation, film and theatre.

While the image remains intensely familiar, we can only guess at what may have been eaten and what tastes infuse this bitter-sweet moment of consternation, a feast replete with betrayal foretold. Perhaps food from the

agricultural staples that form the Seven Species of Israel—wheat, barley, figs, grapes, olives, pomegranates and dates—were served, or perhaps something closer to the Seder of a Jewish Passover: leavened bread—matzos, bitter herbs, a boiled egg, a piece of lamb, nuts, salt and celery. Again, the image resonates but the taste eludes.

[[Own Work Slides 1 Madison]]

The Last Supper has been a series of performative meals and edible installations that I have been creating across the last fifteen years, in the UK, the USA, Italy and the Netherlands. They take many different forms but always cast the audience as active participants through beguiling and persuasive performance structures—not demanding that the audience act but rather allowing them to take control of the events through complicit action and immersion in a complex dramaturgy that compels them (the audience/spectator), and the performers, through a sequence of tasks orientated around food—foraging, feeding (others) and eating—and the sensorial experiences that arise.

Often in my own performance work with food, the edible element is not so fancy, complex or elaborate. Budgetary restrictions usually call for innovation in presentation—in the manner in which the humble food is served and presented: be it uncanny, surreal, disorientating, disturbing and/or playful. Or in the way in which circumstances dictate how it should be eaten: be it blindfolded, only with fingers, with one-metre-long forks, spoon-fed to a stranger or by mouth from a syringe. Attention is paid to the taste and smell of the foods offered to the participants to partake, savour and devour, and to the gustatory and the olfactory design, circumstances and settings (the term 'scenography' in this context placing too much emphasis on the ocular). But this is achieved through simple means and with a focus upon what memories or desires may be stirred in the participant at the moment of relishing the flavours consumed—a speculative experiment lacking certainty with regard to efficacy due to taste being so subjective.

Necessity being the mother of invention of how the modest food is framed and how it is shared and consumed, often collaboratively through co-participation, is where I have developed various artistic strategies. In my own performance work, food is a means of communication—a vehicle for generating communities for extending the performative and the participatory—sometimes leading to a sense of belonging, collectively celebrating, transforming, even, on occasion, *communitas*. My interest is mainly focused on commensality, conviviality and intimacy.

Christchurch and earthquake

In September 2011, six months after the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, ⁵ I took up an Erskine Fellowship at the University of Canterbury. I had been invited to act as artist in residence with the Department of Theatre and Film Studies and to collaborate with the Free Theatre that department's independent and professional production company ⁶. The proposal was to make a production for Christchurch's international arts festival to help heal the city and incorporate a series of performative meals, initially inspired by the series of Last Suppers they knew I had been developing.

⁷

As I was to learn (through living and working within the fractures of a broken city), when the earth quakes, buildings and civic structures become edible—to the earth. Those landmarks—revered or disdained by the townsfolk, ancient and modern—turn malleable, fracture and collapse. They give in. They surrender and are devoured. The ground opens and swallows. The earth itself, the rock, the foundation, turns liquid, friable and pliant, quenching the thirst of subterranean desire.

In the hours and days following the moment of crisis (and painfully extending those catastrophic minutes), all discussion of participation (co-collaboration,

social cohesion, political action, advocacy), become irrelevant. A full emersion in participation operates regardless of class, ethnicity or profession: communities connect; hospitality becomes radical, inventive, improvisational, inclusive and unbounded.

[[After Earthquake Slides]]

Being acutely aware of what had happened to civic structures and communities within Christchurch, and yet at the same time wanting to generate distance, Peter Falkenberg proposed that Henrich von Kleist's After the Earthquake in Chile could be a starting point. The narrative focus of Kleist's novella, on how in the wake of a quake, fractured communities came together, with old divides being set aside, prejudices and long-existing schisms temporally mended/suspended, with a sense of *communitas* momentarily flourishing among the populace, had great relevance to Christchurch. So, too, and most especially, the gradual reassertion of the old order with ethnic and community divides reappearing as the aftermath and dereliction became managed, and as 'normality' recovered.

The production was a complex enterprise involving more than sixty performers, beginning inside one of the few remaining structurally sound churches in Christchurch—St Mary's Church in the district of Addington—built mainly of wood in the Norwegian church vernacular. The first twenty minutes took place inside the church with what appeared to be a highly stylized dramatization of Kleist's After the Earthquake in Chile (evoking the figures and family and community tensions immediately preceding the earthquake in Santiago, Chile in 1647). But at a dramatic moment within the Kleist-based narrative, a disturbing sonic rumbling engulfed the church, seemingly emanating from its foundations and causing tremors throughout the wooden fabric—the performance was ruptured, the audience encouraged to leave swiftly. With the 'play' interrupted the audience began meandering across the church grounds, encountering a night market offering food, hope, prophecies and solace—replicating the journeys of night-time terror following the earthquake's ravishing destruction.

Once again food brought people together in simple and disarming ways; step by step, station by station, the audience—those who had arrived to watch a performance—became the central characters of the performance. In small groups they visited a village of emergency relief tents, containing installations and performances that evoked and recast memories of Christchurch's fall. Each group could only visit two of the six 'peep shows' (the other four remaining a mystery) but they may have encountered a couple attempting to recall the tastes and menus of the disappeared downtown restaurants that had formed and anchored their culinary comings of age... each evocation poignantly offering those gathered a morsel of food to aid remembrance. Or, they may have encountered an eccentric geologist give a lecture on earth crusts, seismic shifts and liquefaction aided by sampling a trifle and speculating on the archaeology of such trifle.

Gradually, they reassembled around the St Mary's Clock Tower, now in different combinations and configurations being encouraged to request their desired food of comfort—the food in need at a moment of crisis, the tastes of reassurance and refuge, their desires for a last supper (what tastes, what flavours). The archive of this project gives testament to how in such moments only simple food is desired: the food and the taste of home, of family, of loved ones, the tastes that bond and form relationships. What was eventually served from the Clock Tower could only be devoured by team effort, by the entire table slowly reeling in the hot food across precipitous planks, in a game that was both riotous and voracious. The structure enabled the gradual disappearance of the performers and the audience took control and became the leading protagonists, dictating time, rhythm and sequencing. As the audience-now-protagonists gained confidence the performers were reduced to fulfilling a support role, to assist their remembrance of time past, of the earthquake of their memories, of tastes and smells recalled, allowing those gathered each night to tell their story on a long table in a refugee tent, being spoon fed trembling jelly, amid the company of strangers.

[{figure8}]

I end as I began, recalling Proust:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

(Proust 1981: xx)

Notes

1 Ferran Adrià is the renowned Catalan chef and author known for his deconstruction of dishes; this 'new cuisine' became known as 'molecular gastronomy', a term that Adrià does not wish to be associated with. Adrià ran one of the world's most famous restaurants—elBulli in Roses, Catalonia—until he closed it in 2011 to concentrate on the elBulli Foundation, his culinary laboratory and his writing.

2 Greek philosopher (341–270 BC) who advocated a happy and peaceful life with an emphasis on friendship and an acceptance of death (thus alleviating anxiety about death and freedom from fear). Epicureanism is associated with pleasure and tranquility attained, in part, from the joys of food and drink. Although hedonistic in aspiration, great value is placed on humble, modest and unpretentious qualities.

3 On their own website (www.alicia-rios.com/en) Alicia & Company offer this description: 'Like an amoeba, Ali&Cia expands, contracts, adapts, absorbs and reflects in response to the circumstances of each work's context. Co-founder Barbara Ortiz has been the artistic director on all projects to date. Also, currently involved are Simon Cohen, in research and production, and the documentary makers Diego Vega and Miguel Eraso. Past collaborators have included Marcos Velasco, Cristina Guijarro, Manuel González de Diego and Ana Riazanova among many, many others'.

4 The Spanish, predominately Andalusian, festivals of Holy Week where large gatherings of brotherhoods and fraternities, dressed in medieval robes, parade religious effigies through the streets, accompanied by bands with strident drumming and wailing trumpets.

5 On 22 February 2011 at 12:51 p.m. an earthquake of magnitude 6.3 with its epicentre in Christchurch caused severe damage, effectively erasing the entire city centre, killing 185 people and causing injury to several thousand citizens. Most of the city centre was left in a perilous and precarious state, and was initially barricaded by troops, the subsequent demolition flattened the downtown heart of the city.

6 The Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Canterbury, in Christchurch, began as an interdepartmental programme in 1979, attaining departmental status in 1997. It was subject to various acts of institutional vandalism over many years, culminating in the decision by the staff, led by Peter Falkenberg and Sharon Mazer, in late 2013 to disestablish. The Free Theatre, founded in 1979, continues to flourish (www.freetheatre.org.nz), under the direction of Peter Falkenberg. It is New Zealand's longest running producer of experimental theatre work.

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Captions

Figure 1. Cranach's The Fountain of Youth and The Last Judgment.

Figure 2. Paese di Cuccagna image map and map detail.

Figure 3. Breughel's The Land of Cockaigne.

Figure 4. Naples Parade.

Figure 5. Antonio Miraldo tongue images.

Figure 6. Alicia Rios images.

Figure 7. Earthquake.

Figure 8. Cathedral and Madonna.