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“How Food can be Art?”
Eating as an Aesthetic Practice.
A Research Proposal

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ABSTRACT. After the blooming of cooking as art and food as an artistic medium, we have to find the reasons that justify the inclusion of taste within the aesthetic dimension. By using traditional art theory with respect to the gustative question, we are probably assuming that an aesthetic experience is taking place through non-metaphorical taste. An approach based on the gesture of eating could be both a richer way for the aesthetic thought and a more accurate procedure for reflection on food practices. It situates the eating body at its centre and defines art as an emerging condition. As key points for further research, we find the eater as a living creature, the body as a cavity, the transformation of matter, the sensitive body and its plasticity and the passive temporality.²

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² This conference is part of the research for the doctoral thesis "Eating: from sensation to language", directed by Gerard Vilar and Joan Maria Minguet Batllori, within the framework of the 2019-2022 project MICU PGC2018-093502-B-100: "Research artistic and aesthetic thinking. A meeting point between philosophy, art and design" at the UAB Department of Philosophy, under the auspices of the FPI 2016 / MINECO FFI2015-64138-P scholarship.

1. Once Again... Is This Art?

Over recent years, we have witnessed the blooming of cooking as art and food as an artistic medium. Enumerating the artists who have worked with food and their motivations for doing so, or justifying the introduction of cooking in the art world has become unnecessary. In the end, aren't we facing a paradox, when we agree that "art is over" and, at the same time, we extend its concept to the edible? In one of his first articles about the end of art, Danto himself mentions gastronomy as one of the examples of "happiness", which will arrive in the post-historic period (1984: 54). According to his point of view, as I understand it, given that anything can be art, there is no need to strive too hard in order to define a practice as art. Art has freed itself from the quest of its own concept. The same occurs with any practice, which could be lived as art (let's say as an aesthetic form) without suffering a challenging discussion with the tradition of Art and, at the same time, without having to deny or exceed any previous practices with its discourse.

Nevertheless, assuming that everything could be art and, going further still, that everyone can be an artist, theorists still have to find the reasons behind the current inclusion of taste within the aesthetic dimension. The hierarchy of the senses has been one of the first and main issues dealt with since the beginnings of gustatory aesthetics (see Carolyn Korsmeyer or Michel Onfray) til the ongoing research, which tries to connect sensitive and

conceptual thought.³ The position can be summarized as follows: tradition has avoided taste in any theoretical discussion, mainly due to its relation to the body and its compulsory trespass of the subject-object distinction, among other reasons. After an important philosophical shift with respect to the body's significance, minor senses (taste and smell) can be reconsidered for philosophical work. Their features can play a fundamental role in discussions which previously were considered only in relation to visual and auditory practices. Going back to Danto, we have to admit that “the indiscernibles” were visual and objectual; thus, they are linked to a very specific art tradition that takes into account only some aesthetic conditions. “Food as art” or “food for thought” could become the impulse for an expansion in the aesthetic inquiry.

Not looking for criteria at all, we still have to work on the question of how the edible can be art. Even if we don't connect art to an end (neither its end in history), we usually agree that it has a sort of function (linguistic, sociological, emphatic). We cannot define it, yet we usually assume it. In other words, we do know there is something within a work of art that radiates outward: there is a push, a re-consideration or even a nascent point

³ Having considered art through the crystal of language, recent research attempts to account for the creation of meaning through the body (see Thompson, 2007, 2019), a way of special use for gustatory aesthetics. Now, to what extent will the body and, especially its brain and neurons explain the meanings of taste (see Shepherd, 2012)? The concept of “the gesture of eating”, which will be explained below, seeks to draw bridges between sensation and language (see Bocos, 2016: 15-28).

of view, which can open up unexpected territories. The question I want to propose is how the edible or the gustative can be such a catalyst.

2. The Insufficiency of Theory

Practices involved with food have been a fundamental part of all cultures. From an anthropological point of view, an aesthetical dimension for eating is a primary reason in order to explain the particular development of cooking in time and space. *What* and *how* we eat are material phenomena, but it is a conceptual register that goes beyond hunger and accessibility which accounts for the many efforts humanity has taken to define the edible, to present it in certain ways, to relate it with a precise occasion, to envelop it with rituals, myths...and so on. Its current definition as art could be understood as the recognition of the practice itself as a conceptual practice, which medium had been used for embodying discourses from religious, political and other normative spheres and now released to its own purpose. Chefs have been the most accurate in pointing out what its purpose could be. In fact, we can consider their work as a research on it. As an example, consider what Ferran Adrià noted as one of the most astonishing proposals: Mibu’s strawberry (Japan). The elaboration consists of a strawberry served with its red and sweet part on one side, and the white and acid on the other⁴.

⁴ For a quick reading, <https://www.gq.com/story/ferran-adria-5-best-meals>. Consulted January 13, 2019.

The interest here lies in the possibility of distinguishing the taste of a strawberry in its different modes while eating, calling to mind Hume’s explanation about how taste (in both a metaphorical and literal sense) is about perceiving details (1757).

As chefs explore a gustative explanation on language and try to characterize its features, modern cuisine can in many aspects be understood as modern art. Furthermore, thanks to the rise of the chef as an author, and his elaborations as *oeuvre*, we can reconsider past culinary expressions as art and promote the conceptual transmigration from ethnographic studies to the history of art in food medium, too. Food critics could point to and describe the aesthetic dimensions of every well-known elaboration. By doing so, they would help include sensorial aspects within philosophical discussion. There are some attempts in this sense, which basically follow wine critics’ consideration on qualities and its long history on tasting and evaluation of wine. However, there are still few comments about how any gustative quality such as spicy, hot, fresh, crunchy, vanilla fragrance or greasy are the channels for an ever-evolving thought. Isolated qualities will indeed not cross the dense path to the understanding of how the gustative can be perceived as art. Despite the efforts of sommeliers to focus on nuanced fragrances and tastes, to adopt a standardized vocabulary and to understand it on the basis of a cause-effect relationship with the vineyard,⁵

⁵ One of the issues that the world of wines offers as a matter of study to gustatory aesthetics is the understanding of taste/flavour in terms of causality (“from the vineyard to

the *terroir* and wine making techniques, none of this information they will certainly help understand an aesthetic experience – a question that would takes us back again to the eternal discussion of whether or not knowledge and information are indispensable for the appreciation of art.

The need for reflection on gastronomy could be approached from an art theorist’s perspective. There are many levels we could consider. To begin with, we could think of the “art world” as a “best restaurant world”, and make a blueprint of its dynamics until we could explain how a raw strawberry on a dish is art in a restaurant and not at home. The restaurant itself could be understood as the machinery for art: linking its origins to the gallery’s appearance in Diderot’s time, we could pay attention to its democratic meaning in the context and ask for its effects in the current social and urban fabric.⁶ Examples such as *El Internacional*, run in the eighties by the Antoni Miralda and Montse Guillén, go further and place the restaurant as a space for art to happen. Their strategy was to present Spanish food, along with its cultural, anthropological and religious background, in New York. Customers got involved in both routine and novel gestures, such as drinking wine with a *porrón*. It was not only about food, but also about

the glass”). From this perspective, qualities are wine’s qualities and not qualities of its tasting. Thus, a concrete position on the process of knowing is defended. Thanks to concepts such as “saboer”, the action of eating seems to be able to argue its arguments (see Moraza, 2009).

⁶ Recent projects work in this direction, see as an example the *Dreijahre Dining Room Project*: Bonino, P., “For a Good Time. *Dilettantin produktionsbüro*: Transitory Spaces of Art Production, Presentation and Distribution” in van der Meulen, N. And Jörg Wiesel, 2017: 189-206; and Bippus et al., 2012.

the *atmosphere* that enveloped it.⁷ We could sum it up by explaining that the atmosphere is created mainly by the architecture and the design, its relationship with the past and the present, the alteration of the communication system, as well as the continuum of actions, happenings, performances –even the unplanned, spontaneous ones... Through these elements, we could introduce many art theory concepts to the restaurant and extend preceding definitions of art to the edible. Would any of them, however, account for its specificity? How does a gustative approach grasp a symbolic and conceptual theory? Does it necessarily use an external apparatus (such as the atmosphere) for doing so?

Most of the reflection on gustation has dedicated its efforts to connecting it to a tradition of so called Art (there are many books whose narrative goes from still life to chefs), and this has also been the museums’ strategy for including degustation in its rooms. Explaining its nexus with the already known, gustative thought has found reasons why food can be understood as art. One possibility has been the borrowing concepts from other fields within art theory, as in the case where some dishes are called “minimalism” or chefs that classify themselves as being “postmodern”. Another frequent option has been the alliance to certain definitions of art, which take into consideration actions, bodies, and relations... In this

⁷ The atmosphere was one of the ten ingredients commented on *El Internacional* newspaper. The definition they offered said: “The Atmosphere: An architectural and cultural wonder dedicated to yesterday’s charm and tomorrow’s convenience” (Miralda and Guillén, 2016: 23).

respect, we cannot forget how relational art was described mainly by Tiravanija’s action of eating together in a gallery. Even so, from a theoretical point of view, we can agree that gustative particularities *per se* are not taken into consideration. By using traditional art theory on the gustative question, we are assuming that the aesthetic experience is taking place within the sense of taste.

The history of the word “taste” may show some kind of connection, that we can trace at least to the times of Hume, Voltaire and Kant (Jaques, 2014: 63). This archaeology shows, nevertheless, that the sense of taste may be out of the so-called metaphorical taste, or at least that its reasons are still to be found. There is no doubt that this is a broad issue. While bringing to the discussion the reasons why a mouthful (in its specific context) can be considered as an artistic experience, we are taking part of a definition of art, in a way that may involve the acceptance and the denial of the philosophy of art’s corpus and its most representative theoretical problems. At this point, I wonder: in order to talk about taste’s aesthetic dimension, do we need to step back to such discussions about art? Or are we instead intending to refresh them, giving them a new opportunity to engage in the conversation?

3. The Gesture of Eating

Taking into consideration Mibu’s strawberry again, I will try to point out what I consider to be a more satisfactory way of addressing how the edible

could be art. By satisfactory, I mean both a fertile way for an aesthetic thought and an accurate procedure for reflection on food practices. For doing this, we will need to shift the question from art’s definition and aims to a more humble understanding of the sensorial, which I have been calling “aesthetic dimension”. Due to the historical meaning of the first, and its vindicated *non plus ultra* capacity in terms of a conceptual discussion, a lower and more extended ground seems to be needed in order to address our concern. At this point, I would like to follow Gerard Vilar’s conclusions about the art as a must for human beings:

I believe, anyway, that art is a need because it is one of the most fundamental ways we have to think the world and transform it. The need for art surely has its anchorage in the learning process in which we got ourselves as a species many tens of thousands of years ago. I am referring to the learning process in symbolization and communication of all kinds of conceptual and emotional content (Vilar, 2010:18).

Certainly, we need to step back to the human being as such, a perceiving, acting, living creature (Dewey), in order to admit ingestion as an aesthetic practice. Doubtlessly, we can imagine eating and cooking practices being part of the growing complexity in symbolization and communication. Just consider smoke and the incredible symbolical power of being able to control

and produce fire⁸ or the intense conceptualization that storage introduced in society. Both social phenomena stand beside gustative exploration and definition, that is, gustative thought and gustative transformation of the world around. We could understand food as art when cooking and eating look for something beyond the known, when they offer novel perspectives that open up new meanings, which point further. Obviously, there is a historicity of what we can consider art, since artistic discoveries become part of culture (e.g. culinary foam).

As with many current elaborations, Mibu’s strawberry points to this expansion of the possible on taste’s aesthetic dimension. Somehow, Hiroshi Ishida’s approach pushes our edible concepts further: it makes us consider the edible in a particular and novel way that can open new horizons. Thanks to the chef’s proposal, we cannot simply describe the taste of the strawberry, but consider that, while eating, we are building the conception of taste as such. By the decision of how to mix, modulate and incorporate its different nuances into experience, the eater gives form to the conceptual taste *through* the strawberry and not simply due to it. Ishida is recognized for its Zen consideration on the practice of cooking. I shall not extend myself on this point, but I would like to bring to the discussion the fact that the Zen priest Dogen (XIII century) not only wrote about how to cook (considering it one of the main lessons on the practice of *zazen* he received in China), but also

⁸ At this respect, I profoundly recommend the film *Quest for fire*, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud (1981).

about how to eat.⁹ Undoubtedly, behavior within the community is the chief issue here, but this is an aspect consistent with the fact that “food is dharma”, that is to say, a way to enlightenment. I am not capable of doing a profound or significant reading on the importance of practice in Buddhist philosophy. My focus aims to take care of another side, that is, the possibility of eating as a medium for achieving conceptual, philosophical even religious enlightenment.

As I have written somewhere else (Bocos, 2016), we shall consider the practice of eating as a gesture by which meaning emerges in our body at the same time as it emerges in the field to which the body is a center. The gesture makes every perception or construction conditional to itself and establishes the positions upon which the whole device is defined. If something edible opens a door to a never-ending conceptual exploration, we shall delineate that door in our gesture of eating, being our body, its active actions and its passive reactions the fundamental medium for the aperture to happen. I do not mean that the body requires only itself to look for a breakthrough into a wider reality, nor claim that an aesthetic attitude is a prior condition to appreciate the edible as aesthetical. What I consider a matter of further research is the fact that a sensibility profoundly rooted to our body as living –and, therefore, voracious creature– it is also the starting point for a conceptualization in which we frame the edible as such and the

⁹ “Fushukuhanpo” included on Dogen, 1996: c.1227-1247. I thank professor David Casacuberta for its help on Buddhism philosophical understanding and his generosity on gustative thoughts and precious examples.

world as having gustative features. We also draw the real and its imageries through our tongue. As the child described by Hegel, who enjoys its capacity to transform the surface of the water by throwing stones on it,¹⁰ we reflect ourselves on what we taste and drool on the world in the quest for our own taste. The possibility of a theory on eating that follows this path goes beyond the conditions in which degustation takes place or the qualities we can perceive and describe: it opens an unattainable space of desire (never to reach), of encounter (attendance of the other), of sensitive reflection (taste as reflected and reflective). Now, we can understand food as art not because it expresses or shows, but because it makes our own image of tasting and, therefore, because it implies a practical thought about our tasting in its context. Gustative particularities emerge in the discussion since our body relates to them in a specific way.

4. Drawing the Diner Figure

For further research on this topic, which I would title “Eating as an Aesthetic Practice”,¹¹ I propose five key points to take into account and to reconsider alongside the aesthetic tradition:

¹⁰ “Already the first impulse of the child carries in itself this practical transformation of external things; the boy who throws stones in the river marvels at the circles that form in the water, like a work in which he gains the intuition of his own ” cited in Vilar, 2009: 63.

¹¹ These key points are research subjects of “Eating: from sensation to language”, PhD research at the UAB. FPI 2016 – MINECO FFI2015-64138-P: The generation of

1. The aesthetic subject is a living creature, being the aesthetic dimension one of the main tools it has in order to recognize reality and make decisions on it for its own benefit. We certainly can consider art as one kind of higher experience but, as Dewey pointed out, for better comprehension we cannot separate art into an autonomous sphere, but consider it just as the tip of an iceberg. Reducing aesthetic qualities to what “we can see above the sea” means to ignore that its power lies below. In this respect, gustatory aesthetics may have to once again re-examine the kantian disinterest and its translation on hunger, since hunger and appetite are not pre-conceptual definitions of the edible, but bodily conditions of ingestion.

2. The body is *passible* to matter in a gustative way; in other words, it is affected by the materiality in a gustative order. We can consider being *passible* as being affected by that which is not broken down, analyzed or expected (Lyotard, 1988: 113). This aspect is totally involved with knowledge and, more specifically, with the kind of knowledge that the aesthetic experience provides: non conceptual or, better said, beyond the conception. At the same time, the body produces effects on what affects it: just consider that every time we taste something we also taste our saliva. We could describe the way the body affects and is affected as *plastic*. Within the framework of a set of interactions of reciprocal affectation, the plasticity is the capacity of shaping and formation that accounts for the material

knowledge in artistic research: towards an alternative explanation. A meeting point between philosophy, art and design.

resistance and, at the same time, for its transformation (Malabou, 2010: 87-89). Here, we have to consider not only what we eat as a material, but also what we are, and, to sum it up, the *states* we reach while eating as a material condition.

3. Ingestion is the opening (of the mouth) to the materiality of the body. It withdraws an internal silhouette – the ingestion process – only comparable to respiration. So, eating not only describes our position and action (gesture) in the world, but also the cavity that we are, a cavity that we can consider also ontological¹²: the cavity of being always forming, needing matter, or in other words, the cavity by which we activate and give form to our *indigent freedom* (Jonas, 1994: 123).

4. Far from considering food as and object (we do not eat objects), we need to redefine the importance of matter in aesthetical thought, considering it as *a matter of acts* – that is to say not a representation, nor a lattice on which to place concepts, but irreducible sensation (Deleuze, 1981: 5). On the one hand, matter shall be understood in its process of dissolution, admitting every appearing feature as a quality. Following the research on material technology applied to the edible, matter matters since we see and touch it, until the aftertaste it creates with every new mouthful (Rosenthal, 2001). On the other hand, dissolution must not be understood as dematerialization: the edible includes a wide range of changes of scale that

¹² For an ontological consideration of eating, see Mellamphy, Dan and Nandita Biswas Mellamphy, “Ec(h)ology of the Désêtre” in Negarestani and Mackay, 2012: 413-435.

must be taken into account. Only this variation in the order of magnitude can provide a consistent explanation to what is edible and what is not (e.g. poisons, which are such only after the ingestion process has concluded). If we insist on food as ephemeral, long-term effects on our body remain ignored.

5. Last but not least, a theory on eating relies on concepts of time: since eating is an action, it moves in time. Indeed, it crosses different time scales by opening a mouth-anus transit¹³ that refers to different temporalities, measured in different scales, occurring in different registers, levels of action and significance unattainable to each other. Temporality has to do with passivity (Osswald, 2016): before appearing to the conscious subject, sensitive contents establish the continuum of a present moment upon which every association arises, such as the definition of “this tastes like this”.

Exploring these topics will bring us close to a sort of “phenomenology of the edible”. By viewing the figure of the eater as such, I believe we can consider the implications of being a subject for art *by way of our mouth*. We can no longer simply approximate the eater to the spectator, at least not without considering profound issues on “being subject to” and especially on

¹³ Consider the song “Life before death” (1978), by R. D. Laing (All divided selves, 2011): “Remember that to live is to metabolize./ So don’t forget en route to the sublime/ To check on your mouth-anus transit time/ Look at the ground as well as the skies”. Cited in Martínez, Chus. “Food in metabolic era” in van der Meulen, Nicholas and Jörg Wiesel, 2017: 164.

“being alive”. In our case, the artistic experience needs to be explained as something that emerges from within us, not only through sensual appreciation, intellectual reasoning or a spiritual dimension, but also through the body itself. The eater as a subject for art invites us to reflect upon the biologization of the transcendental (Malabou, 2017) within the aesthetic thought.

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