

The Solipsistic Stomach:
Aesthetic Recipes for the Self in Molecular Gastronomy

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Abstract

In 1988, the French physical chemist Hervé This began quantifying the aesthetic experience of cuisine into an empirical formalism, a discipline he named “molecular gastronomy”. Through comparisons to food aesthetics in modern sculptural and performance art forms, this essay examines how molecular gastronomy offers an isolationist, static philosophy of the self. The essay will also criticize philosophical thought’s disparagement of taste as a conduit of aesthetic experience. As an alternative to molecular gastronomy’s formalism, this essay offers a relational, progressive model of solipsistic culinary aesthetics that encourages creative collaboration and innovation.

Keywords: molecular gastronomy, aesthetics, solipsism, taste

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INTRODUCTION

SATIATING THE AESTHETIC AND NUTRITIONAL APPETITE

The affluent human omnivore has the luxury of choice when it comes to cuisine. When eating is considered a willful indulgence, rather than only a sustaining necessity, it becomes a malleable medium for creative interpretation, while also retaining its ability to perpetuate life. But cuisine, the stylized framework for what humans eat, is paid little attention in the history of aesthetic theory because of its retained survivalist utility. Pragmatism is unavoidable in eating, and therefore its primary sensory mode, taste, receives a discounted aesthetic value. In her book, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Carolyn Korsmeyer judiciously and methodically explains taste's historical disrepute as a too-corporeal, too-subjective sense, and its subsequent exclusion from the evaluation of aesthetic objects considered as art. This certainly has not discouraged artists from using food in both plastic and representative forms, nor has it encouraged a utilitarian model of high cuisine. But food as art carries an undeniable potency, using materials that sustain life towards conceptual rather than solely functional ends. Raw materials are plucked from the earth and reconstructed through cooking to create an object that invites demolition through intended consumption. How does one evaluate an art form that, after production is complete, is necessarily transformed through eating and then destroyed by digestion? It is not the aim of this essay to convince the reader that cooking should be considered a "fine art". The hope is simply to align food's aesthetic qualities with its survivalistic ones, both as strategies of self-formation. That being said, it is not my aim to argue for an aesthetics of "world cuisine" that assumes a single system of aesthetic value for food; given the variety in resources, value systems and societal norms, such generalization would run counter to the diversity of food cultures that exist in the world. To this end, the scope of food art and cuisine examined will be limited to Europe and America from the twentieth century onward. A further

limitation of this analysis is that the food in question is willfully aestheticized because the particular agents can afford it—that is, this is not a discussion of populist, purely functional or industrially produced cuisine. The data is limited to subjects that consciously conflate art and food, in explicit contexts of either art or cuisine.

Notions of art and food converge with the arrival of “modernist cuisine”—an approach to eating that manipulates or disregards traditional cuisine practice in favor of a liberalized non-regional, non-cultural food object.¹ A manifestation of this general practice, and the main culinary focus of this discussion, has been termed “molecular gastronomy”, a reference to the empirical culinary studies conducted by French physicist Hervé This. The practice of molecular gastronomy, as distinguished from the cuisine of the same name, is a study of the chemical properties and transformations that compose certain food objects. The cuisine itself is not a product of This’ research: that it uses traditional laboratory equipment in its food production became reason enough to conflate the culinary movement with This’ empiricism.² As cuisine, molecular gastronomy establishes concrete aesthetic aims for the food object, but as a scientific discipline, it obsesses over empirical description. The goal of the science of molecular gastronomy is to provide an objective rubric for food evaluation through the creation of a common, empirically descriptive language. By providing such a language, aesthetic interpretations of food could be formalized so as to mediate among the subjective experiences of eating and thus establish a shared dialogue. This descriptive analysis of the aesthetic food object through a formalized language ultimately seeks to control and contain that object, implying a

¹ Lancaster, John. “Incredible Edibles: The Mad Genius of “Modernist Cuisine””, *The New Yorker* online edition.

² Hervé This further explains molecular gastronomy’s differences and similarities to the movement in high cuisine in “Molecular Gastronomy, a Scientific Look at Cooking”.

linguistic ownership of creative production and a conception of art as somehow complete and separate from the agent's body.

Molecular gastronomy's formalism is essentially grappling with the anxieties that food in art raises: forcing the individual to confront the somatic mechanisms (digestion, excretion) that operate out of the control of the cognitive self. These autonomic processes are necessary for survival, and operate independently of the conscious will, in that they are indifferent to the individual's self-conceived identity. Identifying as vegetarian will not keep the stomach from digesting meat. The conflation of these two selves, the self-conscious and the somatic, becomes explicit in the aesthetics of cuisine and the act of eating, as the passive, direct experience of taste is translated into critical, cerebral interpretations of taste. Further complications arise from the synesthetic qualities inherent to eating, that the taste experience is never purely separated from visual, tactile or olfactory stimuli. This substantiates another important distinction in the discussion of food aesthetics: the *approach* and the *encounter*. The *approach* encapsulates all that precedes the actual destructive consumption of the food object, including how it is designed, cooked and presented. The *encounter* begins at the mouth, at the juncture of integration with the body. There is a sensorial rift between the *approach* and the *encounter*, from visual stimuli to gustatory ones, but the *approach*'s affects inevitably bleed into the understanding of the *encounter*, as attention paid to visual and aural presentation can influence taste appreciation. The converse is true as well, as gustatory memory can guide future visual confrontations. The *encounter* phase is what actively identifies the object as food, for food occupies a unique performative capacity to become itself by being eaten. Such fluid realization of form further frustrates the evaluation of food aesthetics, as it confuses the differentiation between object and surroundings.

Straddling the rift between *approach* and *encounter*, aestheticized food forces a confrontation between the self-conscious and somatic sides of the self, forming explicit phases of a possibly dissonant identity and demanding that art be actively experienced through the individual's engagement. Food and eating embody the realization of the body in itself, as both a willfully analytical self and a mammalian body. While food aesthetics face a bias towards unsustainable art forms that integrate object and individual, "the proof of the pudding is always in the eating"³, as artistic evaluation only becomes possible once the object is actively experienced instead of passively observed. Food aesthetics exhibits the self in its examination of self-conscious and somatic identity, and exposes how creative constructions of these two domains through cooking render humanity's sense of its own mortality.

³ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 43.

FOOD AND PHILOSOPHY: REPROACHING TASTE IN AESTHETICS

In the hierarchy of aesthetic senses, taste and its media, food, are given little credence. Wrapped up in the ordeal of the body and inextricable from daily life, food is an object of performance: not only involved with the ritual act of eating, a food may exist as simply the utility to sustain life. An object becomes food only once it has been eaten, regardless of culture, flavor, organism or necessity. Understanding an object as food by the performance of consumption muddles the sense memory of the food object, forcing a conflation of before-eating and after-eating stimuli: how is the experience of the *approach* to the object related to the *encounter* of actually eating? This realization process of the edible object as “food” is confused further by the necessity of integration—once a thing becomes food, it also becomes part of the diner’s self, incorporated into the eater’s body. This corporeal integration necessary for the experience of food bewilders and distresses philosophical accounts of eating, and in general serves to discredit the critical assessment of taste and food aesthetics.

In particular, categorizing the body’s access to and integration of the world beyond the somatic boundary, post-Enlightenment philosophical thought renders a strict hierarchy of the senses. Sight is given the superior position without hesitation⁴, as it is the most qualified to validate and enact the central tenets of aesthetics discourse. Two philosophers who have developed extensive theories on artistic appreciation and aesthetic evaluation are Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and their theories in respect to taste and eating will be explained in regards to the devaluation of food as an aesthetic experience. While neither Kant nor Hegel could have possibly experienced the variety or elaborateness of modernist cuisine,

⁴ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 61.

both are concerned with the fundamental act of tasting: an integration of an object into the body that necessitates destroying it.

HAVING THE CAKE BUT NOT EATING IT: KANTIAN DISINTERESTED AESTHETICS

Kant's conceptualization of beauty as achieved through aesthetic means hinges upon the strict and maintained separation between the self and the art object. Neither aesthetic appreciation nor evaluation of beauty is valid when the individual is somehow physically involved with the object. By compromising the separation between the self and the object, the individual's perception will necessarily be skewed away from *Vorstellung*, or the "pure pleasure in the presentation of the object of perception".⁵ Instating the necessity of presentation suggests an incredibly strict definition of the art object based on containment—on the separation and discreteness of the individual and art piece. If there is any conflation between the subject and object, then the interpretation of the art object is compromised and no longer "pure". Maintaining distance here preferences sight above all things, as the eye may observe from a variety of perspectives without touching, while the physical contact necessary for gustatory sensation breaks the contract of containment and separation. This theory then dignifies only half of the eating experience: the *approach* is evaluated, but the *encounter* is refuted and denied. Taste is given zero application in such a model, as its enactment (and the diner's satiation) relies on the stimulus of flavor.

This discreteness between person and object is what distinguishes the Beautiful from the merely agreeable (Kant's binary). An object is agreeable when it is specific to the individual's

⁵ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 55.

opinion⁶: some may find pickled cabbage delectable, others, revolting. The object attains the “beautiful” descriptor when it can provoke a pleasurable, subjective experience that nonetheless aligns itself towards a universal necessity,⁷ implying that if something is beautiful then the pleasure it creates should be universally accessible. Taste standards contingent upon cultural diversity and biologically inheritable flavor preferences create very clear rifts between certain cuisines, and their accessibility to “universal necessity”. Regardless, the pleasure that the beautiful kindles is created through an encounter of “disinterested pleasure”,⁸ evoking again the necessary separation between the subject and object. The disinterest refers to the physical and therefore critical distance that is necessary in reliably evaluating the spirit of an art object as opposed to its craft. Kant classes the gustatory as the absolute inferior on the hierarchy of senses, because it belongs to the “private and subjective” realm of the body, and therefore cannot ever come to claim “universal validity”⁹ amongst humanity. Evaluating an art object’s beauty has two phases: firstly, does it evoke a subjectively pleasurable experience, and secondly, can it do this universally—can it infinitely produce a sense of pleasure despite subjective experiences. Tasting and eating cannot do this because it conflates these two phases and collapses the critical distance between individual and object: the tasting experience is also the pleasure object. In order to experience the pleasure, the object must be subsumed entirely and irretrievably, forbidding the possibility of universal appreciation of that single art object.

⁶ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 54-55.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Delville, Michel. *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*, p. 1.

THE CALF THAT WOULD BE VEAL: HEGEL AND ARTISTIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

The essential precipitate of Kant's Beautiful object, as distinguished from the merely aesthetic, is a gap—a negative more than a positive necessity. Establishing a distinct separation between subject and object is necessary in order to preserve the artistic integrity of the object, as well as the validity of the subject's experience and interpretation. This physical distance is evoked but also transcended in Hegel's discussion of the art object. Hegel's argument accepts the sensory stimulation necessary in order to experience art, but asserts that art is ultimately a spiritual endeavor.¹⁰ The bargain is that through sensorial experience of an art object, the spirit will become conscious of itself—that the art object will provoke a translation of bodily senses into spiritual consciousness. Eating as a gustatory-sensory experience is again, similarly to Kant's conclusion, disregarded as a valid art form because it does not fall in line with the two-phase paradigm, of translating the physical/sensual into the spiritual/artistic. Food is necessarily destroyed and integrated into the self when it is eaten, denying its potential as an art object. Eating and digestion fuse the subject-object distance necessary for artistic consideration, because they transform the externality of food into a "self-like unity"¹¹, the interior enveloping the outside.

In conjunction with the prerequisite of critical distance, the concept of presentation is also integral to Hegel's evaluation of the art object. The *encounter* with the art object is necessarily an exhibition (similar to Kant's *Vorstellung*) that preserves both critical distance and object singularity. In an important distinction, Hegel conceptualizes art as a presentation to the senses,¹²

¹⁰ Delville, Michel. *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*, p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 60.

rather than a sensory action, placing agency upon the art object rather than the body. Aligning itself against the senses instead of within them, art becomes self-justifying, and exist for its own sake,¹³ not to serve a practical or functional purpose (such as the necessity of eating to survive). Rather than fulfilling a pragmatic function, art is instead a casualty of what Hegel calls the “Spirit”: the ephemera of human life and the progress of living thought, manifested in the flux of human culture.¹⁴ When this Spirit becomes conscious of itself through humanity, the product is art. This self-reflective consciousness alone would not necessarily exclude cuisine as art, as cultures are perpetuated and transported in part through synechdocal edible pieces—the festival food, the ritualistic dish, the seasonal treat. But Hegel excludes food in its natural incarnation (fruits, vegetables, grains, etc.) from art because nature is incapable of this self-consciousness¹⁵.

*CULTIVATING CONSCIOUSNESS: POST-HEGEL LOCALISM AND THE INDUSTRIAL
STANDARD*

Nature as completely without consciousness is, incredibly and disturbingly, no longer entirely true. What Hegel could not have possibly predicted is the pervasiveness of genetic modification in consumer foodstuffs, and the market regulations that conform the aesthetics of a certain food to a legal standard. The demands and technical advancements of industrial agriculture have allowed producers to breed their crops selectively: to isolate, magnify and reproduce the most desirable aesthetic quality of the food for the market. The European Economic Community, the 1958 precursor to the European Union, subjected twenty six fruits and vegetables to a set of “uniform standardization parameters”, in an effort to facilitate cross-

¹³ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

border trade by establishing a shared produce grading standard¹⁶. More often than not, the standards have nothing to do with taste: they are entirely based on visible characteristics of the fruit or vegetable.¹⁷ This technique is a directly political one, responding to demands for foodstuffs that show quality by their predictability, with minimal imperfections and maximized desirability. Certainly there is a distinction between food as art and food as a commodity, and in this case the genetic engineering is justified by industrial standards of consumer products. But undeniably, visual aesthetics are a concern and now that they have become malleable at the genetic level, nature is no longer completely without a “consciousness”. It may be an enforced consciousness, one that bends to the will of popular demand, but it is no longer an unchanging constant in the evaluation of food aesthetics.

Even before the advents of the industrial grade, nature imbued its flora with the particular biochemical characteristics of the earth in that specific, inimitable plot of land. The concept of *terroir* (French for land or soil), originating in oenology, describes the effects that soil, topology and climate have on the taste of a particular grape¹⁸. Extrapolated, *terroir* connotes locality, where the crop is an expression of its environment’s idiosyncrasies. The crop then begins to embody its unique flavor of place. Whether or not *terroir* is a strong enough quality to give nature a degree of Hegelian consciousness, it has become in some cuisines a desirable factor to rival industrial uniformity. A certain crop can become prestigious because of its embodied place, bestowing a singularity upon the food and separating it from unfamiliar relatives, such is the case with the particularly sweet Vidalia onion from the eponymous American Georgian city.¹⁹ The isolated variable here is the specific origin space of the food, the derived pleasure and aesthetic

¹⁶ Westphal, Uli. “Edible Geography: The Mutato Archive”.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Oxford English Dictionary Online, “terroir”.

¹⁹ New Georgia Encyclopedia Online, “Vidalia Onion”.

value based on unique earthen expression rather than uniform predictability. This valorized localism stands in direct opposition to the enforced national marketing standards as previously listed by the European Union or the United States' Department of Agriculture²⁰. In these cases, uniformity creates a reliable supply, and perpetuates a monotony of a supposed idealized food form. In the case of *terroir*, an assertion of unique locale distinguishes one food form from the next, establishing a physical-ecological identity as separate from its botanical other. This assertion of local personality bestows some glimmer of consciousness upon the land, questioning Hegel's assertion that nature lacks self-consciousness and is therefore incapable of creating art. The edible products of *terroir* or industrial agriculture are unquestionably manipulated aesthetic objects, but whether this qualifies them as expressions of the human "Absolute Spirit" is unlikely. However, the distinction between the natural and the man-made is increasingly blurred in Western, twenty-first century food economies²¹, convoluting the idealized form of natural beauty and desirability.

²⁰ United States' Department of Agriculture: Agricultural Marketing Service "Grading, Certification and Verification. April 30, 2008.

²¹ for more information on European produce standards see the art and website of Uli Westphal.

IN THE MOUTH OF THE BEHOLDER: TASTE EMPIRICISM AND CATEGORIZATION

Complex standardizations have been developed in order to evaluate a food's appearance, but such a rubric is harder to apply when it comes to actual flavor. How the sense of taste is understood is restricted to the harshly reductive paradigm of the five tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. The four classical tastes (excluding umami) are conceived in reference to clinical laboratory tests, far removed from the natural activity of eating. Scientific identification of "tastes" involve flavor solutions administered so far back in the throat that the flavor does not stimulate the nasal passages, ensuring the pure "tasting" of the flavor excluded from aroma²². An encounter with a raw foodstuff is not simply a blend of these four (or five) flavors: instead, individual components of flavor interact differently depending on the food, producing a highly nuanced flavor that is more dynamic than accumulative²³. In scientific evaluations of flavor, two foods that may possess the same amount of quantified bitterness still express that bitterness as different flavors—similar to how an flute's timbre can distinguished it from a clarinet playing the exact same note. The classical four tastes are more helpful as reference points, rather than flawless classifications, in how humans evaluate flavors²⁴. The diction available to taste evaluations is incredibly limited, and in no way indicative of the vast diversity of flavors that are edible.

This reductionist scientific approach to the human experience of taste perpetuates a clumsy descriptive method that downplays the complexities of taste and flavor. Similar to

²² Further descriptions of how flavor scientists evaluate taste stimuli can be found in Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. p. 76.

²³ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. p. 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 77.

marketing strategies for consumer “health” products that reduce nutrition to the accumulation of good and bad things²⁵, relying on a divisive framework of sense perception limits not only our understanding of how taste works, but how we may aesthetically take charge of such a sense. Flavor evaluation is often skewed by visual perception, creating a cognitive dissonance between what flavor is expected and what is actually experienced: without the food coloring, Cheetos taste less cheesy²⁶. Limiting the linguistic descriptors of food to a handful of tastes assumes that tasting lies entirely on the tongue, and is not a multi-sensory cognitive experience. Relying on these rubrics to describe the pleasures derived from eating, and perhaps to eventually consider the beauty of a food and its flavor, recalls an empirical model similar to John Locke’s conservative cognitive theory. Championing an accumulative empiricism of experience, Locke countered the Cartesian assumption of innate qualities and pushed an experiential approach to knowledge: all human thought was to be culled from the outside world, through the sensory organs of the body²⁷. New ideas are simply more complex reconfigurations of an accumulation of simple data from the physical environment, resulting from further mental operations or reflections. Locke’s conceptualization of ideas and creativity is symbolically molecular: that out of a handful of simple forms (atoms), the brain may configure ideas (molecules). But this does not explain the potency of the actual connection—how these ideas are put together and what holds them that way. This rejected dynamism in favor of a two-dimensional accumulative model surfaces in the restrictive four-flavor standard. The conservation of forms becomes particularly problematic in the form of cuisine, as a creation to be understood by composition but also edible experience: appreciating form and application. As a performative, pragmatic and unsustainable

²⁵ for more data on the reductionist nutritional philosophy, see Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food*.

²⁶ More information on the affect of perceived color on taste sensation can be found in “Colorless Food? We Blanche”, Gardiner Harris, NY Times, April 2, 2011.

²⁷ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. p. 46.

object, food is discredited from the philosophical realm of art, but is nonetheless a humanistic and cultural entity worthy of aesthetic discourse.

TOO MANY COOKS IN THE LABORATORY: MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY'S CULINARY FORMALISM

An explicit appeal to the classical arts is not this discussion's prerogative for the most part, but the world of so-called "modernist cuisine" has recently been butting its head against a set of fine-art comparisons, embodying the modernist ethos of "a rupture within the history of the art form".²⁸ Chefs that employ a slew of technological innovations in order to innovate and economize their edible productions rely on scientific techniques that are in no way exclusively culinary, but still distinguish them as "modernist" chefs. Often, these newly enfranchised tools of the kitchen are borrowed from the chemical laboratory, an influence neatly encapsulated by the proverbial label of "molecular gastronomy". This term conveniently hybridizes the environments of the laboratory and the kitchen, but it has been highly convoluted in the public eye by the popular press and prematurely attached to chefs who have no faith in the term as it reduces their dishes to "scientific party tricks".²⁹ It is also in no way a modern concept: all cooking somehow transforms a food object's molecular composition, so there is no such thing as specifically "molecular" cuisine. Such interest in "kitchen science" surfaced in the 1960s, with the likes of Nicholas Kurti, a French specialist in low-temperature physics, lecturing on the effects of heat sources on soufflés.³⁰ The term "molecular gastronomy" is not a style of cuisine, but an isometric embodiment of study and practice: it describes the molecular-chemical qualities of a dish, as well as how these qualities may be harnessed to create new food objects.

²⁸ Lancaster, John. "Incredible Edibles: The Mad Genius of "Modernist Cuisine."” *The New Yorker*, online edition.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

The former component of molecular gastronomy, as a study of the chemical technicalities of cooking, is the main concern of Hervé This, a colleague of Kurti and French physical chemist. This credits himself with the coinage of “molecular gastronomy” in 1988³¹ and has written handfuls of books and articles on the subject, as a way to dissect and evaluate the processes that cook food on as precise a level as possible: in the epistemological tradition of quantitative rationalism, this boils down to the molecular. This is less concerned with developing cuisines based on the science of molecular gastronomy: his attention is focused on precision and repetition, understanding the make-up of the food object on the most scrupulous scientific level, not managing a restaurant.

Molecular gastronomy as a discipline arises from the tradition of methodological laboratory science, as This explicitly states in his constructivist approach to cooking, *Building A Meal*. A collection of precise case studies, the text explores the molecular procedures behind flawless execution of a dish in chapters devoted to individual dishes in a meal, ordered sequentially from appetizer to dessert. The discipline aims to identify the chemical and physical processes of “culinary transformation”³² that take place during cooking, beginning with a deconstruction of traditional kitchen dictums’ efficacy³³. What begins with a fascination with the everyday and common practices of the kitchen, such as boiling an egg³⁴, builds into an obsession with technique—how to repeatedly create the perfect hard-boiled egg. The model of molecular gastronomy is not meant to transcend the laboratory into the chef’s home kitchen, but eventually hone the purist definition of what a given food object is through objectively technical descriptors. Burrowing as deeply as possible into the precise and molecular, This is ultimately

³¹ This, Hervé. *Building A Meal*, ch. 1.

³² Ibid. p. 8.

³³ Ibid. p. 37.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 13.

concerned with the mystery of the “ideal” food object; how one can construct perfection in food that may only be realized by tasting it. Focusing on the construction of the meal rather than the eating of it, This understands that technical precision in the food object is controllable only up through the *approach*, and not the *encounter* phase of dining.

The sticky business of the perfect food object emulsifies itself in the philosophical language of beauty, as (in Hobbesian terms) an aestheticized delivery system of self-serving pleasure.³⁵ Art is not yet quite the standard here; any correlation between beauty and art is not explained explicitly by This, although he does off-handedly refer to the idea of the “culinary arts” repeatedly.³⁶ The focus instead is on precise renderings of an ideal form, through the disciplinary approach of molecular gastronomy. The aesthetic standards of This’ methodology are conceptualized in varying terms, but he always defers culinary beauty to a determination of taste, not image³⁷. While the aims of molecular gastronomy as a discipline place it decidedly in the *approach* to food, the standard is validated in the inimitable *encounter*. The construction of the dish may only be validated as “beautiful” once it is destroyed by the diner’s taste experience; a food is beautiful when each flavor in a pair “enriches the other”³⁸ through the taste experience, concretizing the unsustainability of food as art. This does not try to further explain what culinary beauty is, only how to prepare for it through molecular gastronomy’s strategy for aesthetic control and creation.

While This’ idea of culinary beauty hazily evokes a harmonious, utopian model where tastes “enrich” one another, he is more concerned with creating a rubric of culinary techniques than with understanding a single ideal product. A precise methodology would allow for the

³⁵ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, p. 47.

³⁶ This, Hervé. *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*, e.g. p. 57.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 13.

creation of any form, in any standard of culinary beauty. He does, however, want to dispel a few standards of cuisine that he finds to be insufficient barometers. The most prevalent of such quality controls belongs to Maurice Edmond Sailland, penname Curnonsky, a writer, journalist and celebrated French gastronome of the 20th century. The Curnonsky standard revokes the chef's agency in culinary aesthetics, and places all determination in the representation of individual ingredients.³⁹ A food object becomes beautiful when the ingredients most closely mimic their known form (broccoli embodied with the emblematic "broccoli"), and cuisine should aim to develop each individual ingredient's ideal form⁴⁰. This explanation of beauty, as a thing being most like itself, skirts a pressing issue pertaining to the criticism and description of food: Food lacks a comprehensive, standardized descriptive lexicon by which it can be discussed, and instead relies on appeals to the other senses, most commonly, hearing⁴¹. This, in his writings, refers often to the notes, harmonies and tones of food⁴² as a recapitulation of the taste experience through the language of sound and music. Such communication is ultimately unsatisfying, as it requires a sensual translation and therefore dilution of the experience, related through the language of another corporeal receptor. This analogical basis of food evaluation is not sufficient if its aesthetics are to be legitimately communicable. By Curnonsky's standard, there is no analogous sensual language to describe the food. His theory is ultimately fruitless, there is no explanation, only existence: the beautiful food appeals back to the food itself, a self-reflexive reinforcement of an ideal that is never understood, only instated.

³⁹ This, Hervé. *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*, Hervé This, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 67.

⁴¹ Carolyn Korsmeyer lists common usage of audible terminology to describe taste phenomenon in chapters 4 and 5 of *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*.

⁴² This, Hervé. *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*, Hervé This, p. 99.

Curnonsky's standard plays upon classic Platonic conceptions of beauty, invoking the purist assumption that an idealized form of beauty exists, and cosmetic objects work to imitate that form.⁴³ But any inheritance of Platonic thought in Curnonsky's theory is undercut by the Hegelian prohibition of nature as art—if imitation of the ingredient's pure form is the goal, then human intervention in cooking should aim to recreate the food object's origin: nature. All edible ingredients arise somehow from nature's flora and fauna, whether on a macro or micro level. Mimesis of nature is an imitation of forms that lack the self-consciousness necessary for Hegel's art object. And ultimately an imitation of nature in cooking is futile—according to This, cooking as technical intervention disallows any possibility of “natural cooking”.⁴⁴ Therefore Curnonsky's beautiful prefers that which Hegel dismisses, emphasizing the problematic use of nature as a barometer of the beautiful.

Explicitly dispelling mimesis as a viable method for culinary beauty, This tries to reinstate the cook as the agent of culinary beauty and revoke the Curnonsky standard. The cook should not appeal to the imitation of the ideal flavor, because “*the* flavor of a food does not exist...the only thing that matters is the idea that the cook forms of its flavor”.⁴⁵ Whatever the object of imitation, the food object is no longer a vehicle of ideal forms because there is no ideal form. The elemental flavor does not exist; the food object is instead a conduit for the cook's agency, subjected to the human manipulation and suggestion. This' idea of the cook and the food object evokes a performative standard of food aesthetics that celebrates the cook's power of argumentation: the cook explains an idea in a dish that, by being eaten, convinces the diner of that idea. Food then has an embodied message coded in eating, and translation of that code from

⁴³ Plato, *The Republic*. The Internet Classics Archive. n. pag.

⁴⁴ *Building A Meal*, Hervé This, p. 79.

⁴⁵ *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*, Hervé This, p. 99.

the experience to language requires a standardized descriptive lexicon—one that molecular gastronomy hopes to anticipate in its cooking formalism.

*CUISINE'S NATIVE LANGUAGE: DEVELOPING THE FOOD OBJECT'S DESCRIPTIVE
FORMALISM*

A food object's code is often grafted onto the analogy of narrative: that the food served and the order in which it is presented tells the diner some sort of story. In experiencing the food object (tasting), the diner comes to understand a narratological procession of ideas, being put through a sequencing of flavors. And while tasting may still lack a defined lexicon, whatever descriptive tools employed conform to a certain plot, to be determined by the cook. Even Curnonsky explains the idealization of pure mimesis in terms of narrative, ceding that chefs assemble ingredients in order to tell some sort of tale.⁴⁶ His point is shared with This, who conceptualizes the entire act of cuisine as a story, beginning with the chef in the kitchen and ending with a satisfied diner.⁴⁷ Whether narrative is not only the analogical descriptor of food, but also a standard by which to hold it, is not really of concern to This. He is most fascinated with methods; precise comprehension of the transformations within the food object enables infinite variation in form, whichever ideal may be cast. If food is a story, then molecular gastronomy is the glossary of definitions to support the story's grammar.

Embedded in the underlying transformations of cooking, molecular gastronomy seeks to identify and communicate the chemical and physical properties that create food objects as the

⁴⁶ This, Hervé. *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*, p. 66.

⁴⁷ This, Hervé. "Food can be explained as a story, with a beginning—the ingredients are organized into a dish—and an end: when the plates are empty and the guests satisfied," from "Food for tomorrow? How the scientific discipline of molecular gastronomy could change the way we eat", *European Molecular Biology Organization Reports*, Vol. 7, No. 11, 2006.

cook desires and the diner experiences. The language of the discipline is still in its infancy, created by This in order to parse instructive communications into objective goals, akin to a chemical process' formula. First, the semantics of culinary knowledge (as embodied in the recipe form) are classified based on function: This distinguishes between “definition”, “culinary precisions”, and “nontechnical information”.⁴⁸ The definition of a recipe is an exact stipulation of the food object desired, communicated in the chemical grammar of molecular gastronomy to be presented later. Besides the definition, the remainder of the information contained in the recipe is not obligatory: its “culinary precisions” are useful but not compulsory information helpful to the completion of the dish, i.e. old wives' tales, and “nontechnical information” refers to the dish's context, such as its sociological or anthropological import. The three-category structure of a recipe's text occupies three levels of molecular precision and necessity: the definition is mandate, while the “culinary precisions” are mainly supplementary and the “nontechnical” aspects are more like parameters of comparison. Within the lexicon of molecular gastronomy, these “definitions” are the primary communicative tropes by which This hopes to distill the food object into common understanding. Locking down embodiments of culinary objects in definitive terms hopes to create a taxonomy of edible forms, casting a divisive system for different cuisines.

Further down the scale, approaching the most minute of categories, are the variables and terms of these definitions. So-called “complex disperse systems” (CDS), aka “soft matter”, and “nonperiodical organization of space” (NPOS) categorize types of food based on their physical states: solid, oil, water, plasma.⁴⁹ Rules cover the grammar of such language, stipulations on

⁴⁸ This, Hervé. “Molecular Gastronomy, a Scientific Look at Cooking”, p. 577.

⁴⁹ This, Hervé. “Food for Tomorrow”, p. 1065 and “Molecular Gastronomy, a Scientific Look at Cooking”, p. 578. The following is an example of This' terminology in descriptive application: $O_{(6+274t),t=0\dots 1}/W_{20}$, where t is a “dynamic parameter” (time, energy) and the constants are such

alphabetical arrangement, notations for quantity and frequency, and “kinetic and dynamic parameters” that describe the limitations of the processes as applied to the food object. At this most precise scale, the language of recipes and culinary processes may be distilled into a complete formalism that encapsulates the food object into the most exact terms of chemical embodiments. The purpose behind such formalism is not only to establish a universally comprehensible standard of food comprehension, but to affect research into food studies and eventually “study the art component of food”.⁵⁰ Such description through physical-chemical states aims to isolate and label a precise phase in the transformation of the culinary object, halting the development of the cooked object at a particular moment of being and categorizing it as complete. The ideal food object is not allowed to progress past these demarcations, conceptualizing cooking as a linear progression with an implicit final destination.

This’ formalist description for these definitions modernizes the language of cooking from the colloquial to the chemical, specializing the data to fit a precise technical terminology of chemical reactions and states. The language of a recipe, the referential text for cooking, is an instructive one, simultaneously an explanation and a command, refined by repetition and successful execution. A reliable execution depends on the minimization of scope, dismantling all interpretations save for the isolated goal. The molecular method aims at unilateral consistency between instruction and execution, encapsulating expressivity to the precise chemical formula. This’ delineation of the most rigorous approach to a food object is cast as a necessary benevolence for the improvement of cooking as a discipline, cutting off personal improvisation and removing the encounter’s context as much as possible (dismissing the “culinary precisions” and “nontechnical information” as unnecessary fluff). In the tradition of French chemist Antoine

that when the process ends, the emulsion is at its limit. More can be found in This, Hervé “Molecular Gastronomy, a Scientific Look at Cooking”, p. 578.

⁵⁰ This, Hervé, “Food for Tomorrow”, p. 1065.

Lavoisier, This assumes that in order for a discipline to improve, so must its accepted language⁵¹, a perpetual feedback loop of scrupulous code that hopes to eventually distill an objective account of the food object. Molecular gastronomy is conceived as a language of instructive improvement to make chefs better creators, but its formalism values an industrial standard of flawless execution more so than one of human creative expression.

Rather than stipulating what precisely should be done to the food object (by the cook, or by a technical apparatus), molecular gastronomy's formalism is a cryptogram for the desired state of that food object. The form takes the syntax of declarative description, rather than commanding methods, leaving technological application up to the chef's discretion. It then arises as a cumulative analysis of the food object, as contingent upon all methods leading up to its execution. If such a formal language were to become embedded in the food culture, inextricably so as to not only be communicative but also standard, then an objectivist terminology of criticism could be made for cooking. Eating and the description of flavor would remain mysterious, for the formalism of molecular gastronomy can only predict the components of a dish and not its destruction by an infinite selection of physiologically unique human mouths. But once the dish is completed, still yet to be consumed, it can be said to possess certain unequivocal qualities. The chef's influence on the food object is completely documentable, if not infallible in determinations of actual flavor or taste experience. Criticism may not be perfected in eating, but the language of creation may be distilled in molecular gastronomy's formalism.

⁵¹ Lavoisier, Antoine. *Traite elementaire de chimie* (1789) found in *Building A Meal*, Hervé This, p. 38.

RECIPE FOR COPYRIGHTS: POST-THIS CULINARY CREATIVITY

Artistic implications aside, developing a full-fledged descriptive language for food objects could allow for definitive conceptions of what food is physically composed of, at a more precise level than listing nutritional compounds or ingredients. What is allowed by language is not just transmission of information, but also ownership by creative distinction and copyright. When a dish may be distilled, replicated and evaluated by precisely objective formulas, it can be personally distinguished and championed by its creator. Copywriting food can commoditize the object as a commercial one, but may also soften its survivalist edge: the creator is bestowed with a certain authorship and control over the food object, diminishing the control that the food object holds over human life by offering sustenance. Nature, already imbued with human agency through genetic engineering and industrial agriculture's market selections, comes more under the sway of human possession as it can be described and embodied in language like never before. Hegel's dismissal of nature as art is weakened further in modern food production, manufacturing and consumption, as the sophistication of culinary language approaches the level of molecular reality. Hervé This, by investigating the chemical processes inherent in a food object's creation and existence, allows for an alternate epistemological understanding of food where novelty may be possessed through definite chemical language.

If the aesthetic execution of the food object is to be quantified through molecular gastronomy's formalism, this privileges a structuralist approach to food, favoring the form of the food over its function (in this case, function would be to allow a pleasant taste experience, by whatever contextual standard it is determined as such). In specializing the formalism to the approach to, rather than the encounter with, a food object, molecular gastronomy provides an aesthetic technique to consider food as media. The chef/artists as the creator uses food insofar as

creating an object, where that art object is experienced through Kantian presentation rather than consuming experience. Once the phase of taste and ingestion are initiated, the food object is performing its duty as itself and may become art by its own identity, but an evaluation system of such an experience is out of the reach of molecular gastronomy. Eating is undeniably divisive; as a happening it is necessarily unsustainable in that it must be destroyed. Evaluating the aesthetics of actually tasting is a frustrated discipline, subjected to the combination of infinite physiological idiosyncrasies and other varying stimuli, and the material fact that the exact same food object may only be experienced discretely by a single person (two can't share the same bite). The solution may rest in the preparation, which is at least what molecular gastronomy hopes. That to remove as many subjective variables as possible, the chef should desire to execute, in flawlessly replicable form, a rigorously understood and mediated food object. This is the possibility offered by molecular gastronomy, allowing for both objectively aesthetic physical evaluation, as well as creative copyright authorized by human control—an art of stringent and separating language.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE GALLERY: EDIBLE MATERIALS AND UNSUSTAINABLE FOOD ART

If philosophy eschews the aesthetics of flavor as base, physical and irredeemably personal, then cuisine's disqualification from art seems automatic, as the food object's aesthetics are embodied for taste. But if cuisine is not an art, how then does art use food? Just as certain artistic media may take on roles of another, such as emphasizing the sculptural capacities of oil paints or forming collages of found objects, food may be applied as the conceptual vessel for artistic expression. Food objects as visual representations of flavor, images of their embodied sense, have commonly been used in modern art forms, in such classic images as Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans" (1962),⁵² Henri Matisse's "Dishes and Fruit" (1901),⁵³ or Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991).⁵⁴ The use of food media here could be purely for the eye, in so far that the food does not actually have to exist in an edible fashion to be understood as food and interpreted accordingly. In the form of still-life painting or sculpture, the food object becomes representational, an allusion to concept. That concept may indeed evoke a taste experience, instigating if not realizing a sensual flavor encounter between subject and object, but it is sustainable: the food object is not destroyed in its representation to the audience, and the Kantian premium of artistic presentation is maintained. As soon as the food object meets destruction by consumption, it becomes unsustainable and transitory, subjecting the audience to a fluctuating critical analysis as well in trying to track a moving target that may not be retrieved.

When that separation is collapsed and the food object is destroyed by consumption, the point of reference becomes unclear: is it the visual image and representative quality of the food

⁵² See appendix A for image.

⁵³ See appendix B for image.

⁵⁴ See appendix C for image.

that is the art object, or the performance of its consumption, or the inducement of the flavor experience? What becomes the focus of the destruction? Eating, a necessary fracturing of the food object, splinters the artistic interpretation into confusing directions, disorienting the audience by presenting a multi-sensory map of artistic terrains and affects. A universal experience so quotidian, so necessary, eating is transformed into an almost alien performance, where the food object is reassigned into art by being used as such, no sculpting necessary. And while the use of a food object in an art performance radicalizes the food's function, this does not inhibit food's survivalist capacity from functioning in the piece: food to eat, that aligns itself with an artistic oeuvre. Dining becomes artistic performance, a restaurant transformed into a gallery (or vice versa), and the audience is forced to consider an alternate normative reality where food performs multiple performative roles.

Colonizing the everyday for artistic function, food art come in multiple forms, as photography, curated performance or dinnertime at a restaurant. Exhibiting food art in a variety of contexts suggests and provokes a spectrum of questions concerning the solipsistic assumptions of reality—Hegel's conception of eating, as an incorporation of an externality into a "self-like unity",⁵⁵ muddles the distinction between inside and out, between self and non-self. Eating brings anxiety as a literal integration of the outside (foreign) into the body, and by calling attention to digestion, an autonomic process, the self is forced to confront that which the body unconsciously controls. Scrutinizing the autonomic systems of the body widens the rift in the mind-body duality, and the self's ownership of its body is called to question. In his writings from *The Use of Pleasure*, Michel Foucault explains the techniques by which humans form conceptions of the self, described as a constantly fluctuating combination of ethical and aesthetic

⁵⁵ Hegel, (Morton 221), found in *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption*, p. 2.

considerations.⁵⁶ The persistent flux of these two components support an idea of the self as an “aesthetic project”, one that is constantly being reformed and chosen by that self. Foucault imagines that, like sex, diet “can also be a technology of self-appropriation, self-transformation, or an ethico-aesthetics of the self”.⁵⁷ Selfhood is a possession and a reconstruction of worldly sustenance. Food becomes a narcissistic mirror, an imagining of all that connects desire and need (the survivalist aspect of food) to operations of choice and self-construction: of how the subject constitutes itself through survival, through choice of the food object. Anxieties naturally arise, as the diner/individual is stirred into self-study and questions not only how they may construct themselves, but also self-separate from what they are not, marking externalities to not convert into union with the self. The Cartesian standard is revised to “I choose what I eat, therefore I am.”

Solipsistic philosophies then, as both personal and sociological studies of human identity, become particularly potent in food-based art forms. Much like in the evaluation of flavor aesthetics, of first concern is the descriptive form of the experience, contextualizing the piece to an extent. The formalism of molecular gastronomy is employed to this end in the formation of the food object, but not necessarily its experience. Determining a descriptive language specific to each art form may make conceptions of the self more easily relatable. The language of description is contingent upon the ends to which food is being exploited in the art piece, especially in light of the previous distinctions between *approach* and *encounter* in the dining experience. The following explores molecular gastronomy’s aesthetic implications through food’s integration in art of the modern era, varied in exploits but referencing a shared anxiety in solipsistic consciousness.

⁵⁶ Foucault, “Dietetics” from *The Use of Pleasure* (72-73), found in “Eating my Words”, Raviv, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 78.

PRESENTATION AND CAPTURE: SPOERRI AND PROCESS ART

Associated with the Fluxus movement during the middle of the twentieth century, Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian-born Swiss artist, captured the procedural eating experience in his *tableaux-pièges* pieces.⁵⁸ Spoerri made such “trap-pictures” by affixing a diner’s leavings to the dining surface, and then extracting the surface entirely and mounting it on a wall.⁵⁹ These *pièges* represent a concluded process, the set pieces of the meal’s production and presentation, arranged in a topographical map of the diner’s unconscious. Such a capture displays the diner’s navigation of the meal as an expression of personal choice: what and how things were eaten. The *mise-en-place* of the table setting is an orientation of affects and reactions to the stimuli presented in the food, less about the visual aesthetics of the food itself but a token from the actual consumption. Separate from the still-life genre, Spoerri’s *pièges* are not patient renderings of static symbolic objects that convey socio-economic status or cultural heritage. They are procedural navigations of the self, orienting the tableware as idiosyncrasies that denote a personal identity. A freeze frame of the Foucaultian ethico-aesthetic process of the self is made explicit through the deconstructive process of dining; an accumulation of the self through depletion of food, literally working through the media.

That Spoerri’s pieces are framed in a traditional orthogonal way, signed and then mounted on the wall preserves classical artistic rituals, of putting the embodied self on display in a synecdochial embodiment vis-à-vis the person’s meal. That Spoerri captures others’ meals and not exclusively his own exaggerates this seizure, as it takes from the ethico-aesthetic

⁵⁸ See appendix D for image.

⁵⁹ Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*, p. 114.

construction of another person a sculptural topography of that person. This capture of the diner, the self in the moment, is a piece of physical evidence, static in time, for consideration of what is and what is not the artist—contained separate from Spoerri, captured by him. It becomes a way to reference that diner in a more physio-logical rendering, recalling the actual diner's body and therefore its authenticity, as well as its distinction from the artist's. Food is referenced in its connection to the body, becoming the most forceful rendering of the diner's living self.

While both are procedural in approach, Spoerri and This' attachment to culinary aesthetics are radically different. Their phases of consideration are distinct: This obsesses over the creation of the meal, while Spoerri revels in its completed consumption. This' proceduralism is aimed towards flawless execution, so precise construction at the lowest level of abstraction is paramount. Spoerri's process is more ephemeral, the form of the approach leading to an encapsulated moment in the act of eating that partially embodies the eater's personality, that is then extracted and presented on a wall for artistic consideration. Implied in the pair's approach to culinary aesthetics are divergent methodological constructions of the self: This' form is a precise assemblage of individual elements to a definite end point, whereas Spoerri's is a negative imprint, a sculptural form where the self is expressed in a depletion of a set resource. This' formula starts with nothing and accumulates, whereas Spoerri operates within a limited framework of choices, to either conserve or expend. These assumptions of the creation of a culinary object carry opposing solipsistic philosophies, questioning what methods the individual has at their disposal in the construction of the self. Seen as two necessary sides of the food object, the creation (cooking) and destruction (eating), the omnivorous self may either exist as a transformation towards a certain end (This' formalism), or as an array of depletions approaching nothingness (Spoerri's *tableaux*). Molecular gastronomy is then a solipsism of progress towards

a directive end, and that final stage of becoming may contained within the precisely regulated food object.

THE RESTAURANT ALLEGORY: “THE HOLY PALATE” AND SYMBOLIC MEALS

Enmeshed in political activism and fascist tendencies, the Italian Futurist artists embraced a broad scope of media as viable modes of propaganda, including painting, sculpture, music, architecture and food. Author of the “Manifeste du futurism” (1909), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti also wrote a manifesto on Futurist cooking, *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932), its recipes realized by the dishes served at the Futurist restaurant, “The Tavern of the Holy Palate”, opened in 1929 in Turin, Italy.⁶⁰ As unbending proponents of industrial modernity, the Futurists advocated for the creation of a new human for a new age, and naturally food was an integral part of the creation of such a human. This necessitated the opening of “The Holy Palate”, where diners could experience the “quintessence of modern life”⁶¹ as embodied by symbolic foodstuffs. That is, food at “The Holy Palate” was made for purely allegorical aesthetics: the flavor palate is disregarded in favor of the ideological one. Futurist food drains food of its nutritional and flavor import, leaving it plastic for artistic assertion of Futurist ideals—as pure aesthetic media, devoid of functional or sensual necessity. In spite of this, the food is served in expectation of being eaten, of absorbing these art objects to become the new modern human.

Dishes offered in “The Futurist Cookbook” are neither practical nor delicious necessarily, but are constructed mainly for their symbolic value: the recipe for “Chickenfiat” calls for a

⁶⁰ *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*, p. 13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 15.

boiled chicken stuffed with steel bearings, served with a dollop of whipped cream⁶². The chicken is literally imbued with industrial flavor, becoming partially transformed into a machine and alluding to similar progeny in the ball bearings as mimetic eggs. The whipped cream is a poetic accessory, not added for sweetness or palatability, but as an insistently pure-white crown of modernity. These dishes are intended to be pieces of art that the diner experiences through eating, the Futurist propaganda operating on the assumption that by literally consuming the art form, the diner is transformed into a “self-made Futurist work of art”.⁶³

The attempt here is force-feeding; propagandist renderings of idealism for the population to consume, digest and accept. Eating Futurist food is complicit with its ideology and politics, and is aimed at aligning the human species with the modern age. Food is no longer the embodied personal self, unique to an individual, but an embodied political body, distinct to Futurist ideology. By Foucault’s ethico-aesthetic construction of the self, the ethics and aesthetics become one in the same, Futurism as both an aesthetic obsession with modern industrial form and an ethical modality concurrent with Italian fascist politics. The Futurist goal then becomes a conflation of individual and political identities into a self among the homogenized Futurist masses, in part realized through the consumption of food.

Any connection between Futurist aesthetics and the modernization of empirical cuisine as proposed by Hervé This is certainly not a political one. While a conflation of the ethical and aesthetic self in eating is not unusual (for example, veganism and humane treatment of animals), and molecular gastronomy shares Futurism’s attachment to affects of modern technology, the two approach entirely different domains of cuisine. Futurism, as concerned with the experience of symbolic consumption, weighs heavily on the *encounter* aspect of food, as opposed to

⁶² Ibid. p. 16.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 11.

molecular gastronomy's accumulative preparation in the *approach*. Molecular gastronomy is also trained towards the execution of a dish to flawlessly account for flavor, a control system for taste that the Futurists dismiss as secondary to symbolic propaganda. While the Futurists sought a union between humans and technology, molecular gastronomy affiliates human creativity and individuality with technology, its food objects as meticulously calculated embodiments of the chef's design.

*CONCORDANCE, RELATIONS AND UTOPIA: ALLAN KAPROW, RIRKIT TIRAVANIJA AND
THE PERFORMANCE OF EATING*

At odds with the Futurist strain of food art, which aims to subsume the individual in the ideological, performance-based art installations involving food can focus on the sociological abstraction of consumption. Instead of considering the individual elements of a meal as aesthetic symbols, the entire activity and process of eating is taken as aesthetically viable. In the development of performance art forms in post-war United States, the artist Allan Kaprow was heavily influential with his theories on "Happenings": situations staged with varying levels of spontaneity that often involved participation by observers or audience members.⁶⁴ Of particular interest to the use of food in art is Kaprow's concept of concordance: the stipulation that the audience must be compliant with being physically involved in the Happening in order for it to be successfully executed.⁶⁵ The concordant provision between artist and audience is to accept the terms of the art object, and in the case of the Happening, that includes physical involvement. In Kaprow's environment-based *Eat* (1964), installed in the Bronx's Ebling Brewery Caves,

⁶⁴ Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*, p. 109-114.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 111

patrons navigated their way through physical impediments to be fed apples, fried bananas, sliced bread and boiled potatoes by Kaprow's performers.⁶⁶ The concordance in this case is a procession, a literalized journey of ingestion through approach and encounter, where diners must face certain obstacles to gaining sustenance. In direct inversion of Kantian standards, the Happening denies the formality of the art object's presentation in physical separation from the audience, necessitating the collapse of that distance. Taking a food object and its encounter as art, eating becomes a necessarily concordant performance, as it cannot be experienced without the "involvement" of the audience through ingestion. Eating's concordance presents a contribution of the self to the art object, placing personal investment in the performance.

To compare eating to performance-based art forms suggests another similarity between the two: unsustainability. Neither consumption as art nor "Happenings" may statically persist in time, but instead necessarily decay. Their performance depends on the depletion of their resources, respectively being food objects and time. While the eventual depletion of the food object was of interest to Spoerri, and Futurism dwells on the mimesis of food and industry, Kaprow and "Happenings" focus on the interactivity between food objects and people, suggesting a relational model for culinary aesthetics – how food alters social interaction. Contingent upon audience presence in time, the performance art form develops a temporary community of shared experience, unique to the performance and people involved, similar to the shared dining experience. Food becomes a synecdoche for that inimitable presence within the present, its consumption a taking up of time and action within a distinct context. Art that relies on such contingency is, perhaps problematically to the aesthetics of molecular gastronomy, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Releasing the terms of experience in this way to the actual diners, even when the dish is created entirely by the hands of the artist, relates the aesthetics of

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 114.

the food itself to the status of a tool: instead of sustaining the individual, it is used by humans to cultivate community.

Food as embodied presence is the catalyst for the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, an artist whose installation pieces hybridize performance and the surrounding architectural space. In these pieces, Tiravanija sets the framework of the performance by cooking vegetable curry or pad thai in the gallery's exhibition area. In *Untitled (Still)* (1992), performed in the 303 Gallery in New York, he moved the contents of the gallery office and storeroom into the exhibition space, to coexist with the diners as he fed them all curry.⁶⁷ The first abstraction of the exchange that takes place in the gallery is built upon Kaprow's concordance, involving the audience of patrons and employees alike as "actor-participants"⁶⁸ whose presence both composes the piece and determines its affects. Distinct from methodical dining procedures of Spoerri and the Futurists, Tiravanija's work does not try to capture the actual mechanics of dining, but instead the social atmosphere that arises out of such edible instigators. His community-focused art work is elegantly developed by the use of food, the interaction between people engaging in the most basic human activity (eating) supporting the creation of societies.

While contingent upon a specific time and place, Tiravanija's installations are not aimed towards capturing the social atmosphere and community that arises from within the piece, but liberating the commons: the food is a means by which the people interact, but they are free to determine their community within the space. Distinguished from Futurist symbolic foods or Spoerri's constructivist meals, Tiravanija's curries are instigators of a certain presence, neither embodiments of that presence nor symbolic renderings of that particular existence within a space and time. The food's symbolic or semantic values are secondary; its actual substance matters

⁶⁷ Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", p. 56-57.

⁶⁸ Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde*, p. 266.

only so much as it is palatable enough to the audience, so as to not dominate the atmosphere, but instead allow for fluid community development within the space. This erases the Kantian notion of the physical, separate and persistent art object, treating food not as an edible item (Futurism) or as an objective (Kaprow's "Eat"), but as dining materials for model societies. Tiravanija's piece in this respect liberates the diner from the art object's interpretative hold, no longer mandating but enfranchising the audience's critical interactions and encouraging free discourse. Modeling situations for the creation of community is the utility, aside from sustenance or deliciousness, that Tiravanija's curries serve – a far aside from the rigid dining formalism of a traditional restaurant. This food aesthetic is aimed at liberation, not control of etiquette norms. Therefore it critically departs from the aesthetics of molecular gastronomy, which are rooted in absolute control and predictability of experience. Mastering of the food object is of no importance to Tiravanija; he is not trying to rigorously mediate the interaction between the art object and its audience, or even encourage a certain reaction. His piece relies on public involvement, not individual contemplation, and therefore the food does not turn the individual members of the audience back on themselves to consider their ethico-aesthetic relationship to themselves. Instead the piece foregoes individualistic renderings of self and instead proposes a collective model, that the self is formed in conjunction with a community.

An artistic impetus in the formation of temporary societies already has a model by the name of "relational aesthetics"; a term coined by French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud.⁶⁹ Relational artworks are seen as shared currency by which the audience may develop a community contingent upon their present reality, forging relationships among people rather than between the object and the individual. However, this model is highly utopian in its trust of organic audience-communion, and is criticized in Claire Bishop's piece "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics".

⁶⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 18, found in Bishop, "Relational Antagonism" p. 54.

Bishop proposes an adjusted aesthetic model that calls the observer's attention to the differences between themselves and the art object or performance, thereby calling the viewer to question their own identity in contrast to the piece.⁷⁰ In recognizing fields of overlap and friction with the art piece, the viewer exposes the aspects of personality that are repressed in favor of a consistent vision of the self, one that is constant and containable. Bishop names this mode of interpretation "relational antagonism", and suggests that it better suits a solipsistic philosophy that accepts constant dynamism and fluidity of the self⁷¹. Accepting the variable and perhaps contradictory aspects of the self powerfully scrutinizes the assertion that art pieces, or interpretations of a flavor, may be objectively good or bad. If the self is constantly in transition, then it cannot be a predictable reference point to determine relative taste criticisms. Food therefore, as an art object, is highly antagonistic in that it exposes what is accepted and rejected by each individual through direct integration within the body. The autonomic functions may be at odds with the cognitive self, despite conscious will ("I want to eat it, but it doesn't agree with me"). Food forces the diner to accept the fluctuations of the self, which heightens both personal consciousness as well as anxiety over what the cognitive self can and cannot control.

Molecular gastronomy may then be interpreted as an aesthetic of corporeal control, a method by which rigorous command of the exterior food object may extend its influence over the interior body, by an engagement with the autonomic functions of the body as to predict its responses in a consistent way. Eating as regulation of the body is a fairly obvious concept, but that control system is oriented on consumption rather than creation. The absoluteness with which This' molecular gastronomy designs food, rather than in determining how it is ingested, is how it asserts control over the self. The definitive formalism of molecular gastronomy may then

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 66.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 79.

transcend to a definitive systematization of the self, that such stringent adherence to precision outside of the body is seen as a mechanism of the individual's own precision, and both domains are brought under a certain containment that opposes Bishop's and Foucault's self-in-flux model. The assumption that there exists an "ideal" food object (by This' standard), and that through empirical analysis the chef may control the creation of that food object, is an application of self-control as much as it is food-control. Pinning down the processes of molecular transformation that create a certain food is a way to extend that control over the eventual digestion of that food and therefore, the non-conscious autonomic activity of the human body. As control is determined through the predictability of the product's execution, this assumes that there is a complete identity that has reached the final stage of creation. The practice of molecular gastronomy assumes that through rigorous design of the outside world, the interior self may also be created, instead of using food as a modulating currency of self-definition for the individual in perpetual flux.

Molecular gastronomy ultimately perpetuates a self-defeating process of self-definition in its casting of precise definitions of the food object. The objective proceduralism of molecular gastronomy presents a false idea of self-maturation, positing that there is a stage at which nothing changes. Molecular gastronomy's rigor is akin to a literal semantic analysis of all language, of adhering to dictionary definitions as mandate rather than reference point. Because it does not (and could not) account for the infinite physiologically variable chemicals of each eater, it ignores the actual application of the food object in eating as a determinant of its transformation and eventual destruction. A more flexible and deconstructionist definition of the food object as applied to the individual diner or the social context of the dish would offer not only a more humanist approach to food, but one that dignifies food as a societal entity rather than an isolated, preserved food-art object. Definition in reference to the diner, rather than the object itself,

expresses food in a more fluid solipsism but also in a more personable way, and implies a social understanding of the self rather than an isolated one.

THE BUSINESS OF THE SELF: ETHICO-AESTHETIC RESTAURANT DINING

If molecular gastronomy's formalism were to reference the experiential level, rather than the level of objective-form, it might encourage a more holistic process of self-definition that necessarily involves extroversive study. And relational and collaborative malleable renderings of selfhood are performed in the act of group dining, such as at a restaurant. The commercial restaurant's business model may necessitate a level of predictability in order to maintain a certain status, but blind replication of recipes limits the creative applications of the chefs. In a profile done by *The New York Times* in 2011, head chef and owner of *Alinea* Grant Achatz justifies the restaurant's constantly changing menu by asking, "Are we talking about the replication of a recipe, or the replication of a philosophy? We can't sacrifice deliciousness in favor of authenticity. Are we opening a good restaurant or a food museum?"⁷² The critical reference point becomes the customer, the dining populace of infinite diversity, and the menu a personal attempt at both appealing to and challenging that populace. Locking down a food object is secondary to the experience of taste, and Achatz recognizes that adaptation and transformation are necessary activities of the successful restaurant. But contrary to the machinations of Spoerri, the Futurists and Tiravanija, Achatz culinary aesthetics are concerned with the affective state of the diner: in taste, memory and emotion.

The culinary aesthetic model as proposed by molecular gastronomy is one of almost complete accountability and predictability, where the language of description emulates the level of control that the cook maintains over the food object's production. This model is highly desirable from a commercial perspective, offering both the possibility of creative ownership and economic reliability—an industrial model of cuisine design. But molecular gastronomy's

⁷² "The Perfect Menu: Now Change It", Julia Moskin, *The New York Times*.

obsession with the *approach* strands it at the horizon of the *encounter*: the chef's concern is not solely structural, but functional, they desire beauty in taste's affects. Conflating This' scientific empiricism with modernist cuisine practices dissolves at this juncture, where the obsessive preparation pales in importance to substantive experience: how the dish is actually eaten, and the responses that the food object effects in the diner. Similar technical applications aside, the chefs of modernist cuisine do not necessarily operate in the same vein as This. Achatz capitalizes on the symptoms of the molecular gastronomy study, if not the actual formalism. His dishes use technological procedures that are also found in the laboratory, but like many other chefs who are associated with the term "molecular gastronomy", he dismisses it as a moot point in his culinary prerogatives⁷³—regardless of technique, the chef is concerned with creation of a product, the food object that their patrons consume and in so doing, satisfy the chef's livelihood. The freedom of modernist cuisine allows the chef to assume any role and manipulate any material that enables the realization of their dish, without necessarily attaching themselves to This' formalism.⁷⁴

Without the resources available to actually personally experience *Alinea*, my research turned to the monstrous text *Alinea*, equal parts cookbook and manifesto on Achatz's approach to modernist cuisine. Authored by Achatz but with contributions from a variety of food critics' phenomenological accounts, the text will provide a vicarious supplement to actually dining at *Alinea*, substituting reading about eating for eating.

⁷³ "We may utilize science in the kitchen, but it doesn't appear in front of our guests. I consider what we do an art form, and art is in many ways the opposite of science." *The New Yorker*, from "A Man of Taste", n. pag.

⁷⁴ "hypermodern chefs may use similar techniques, each one aims to realize his own personal vision." From *Alinea*, p. 11, in reference to chefs Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal, who have both been attached to the term "molecular gastronomy".

THE ALINEA MARK: ACHATZ AND THE AFFECTIVE FOCUS

The sensuality of the world is tidily delivered within the ritual of the meal. A dish can present a barrage of stimuli to the diner, extruded through the procedural sequence of choice, transformation, delivery and incorporation—the journey of food found to food digested. That cuisine is predictable by procedure but infinitely varied by substance is part of what confuses its interpretive aesthetics. Eating is an appeal to personal taste, and also in complete ignorance of it: a willfully aestheticized necessity. Philosophical discounts on the experience of taste dispel food to the fringes of artistic integrity, banishing its quotidian pervasiveness to the realm of utility and pragmatics. The gripe lies within the media: as food enters the body, the distinction between art object and experience dissolve in an irreversible integration of subject and object. This hinged encounter between the external and the internal is exactly the juncture at which Achatz concerns himself—the point where physical taste sensation affects the emotional consciousness of the diner. As a chef this consideration may seem obvious, but artistically, critical observation is replaced by the necessary sacrifice of the object. Appreciation necessitates destruction, and the effect that integration has on the body of the diner is what interests Achatz.

A simple interest in deliciousness does not represent Achatz's aspiration for Alinea; such a goal is implicit in any careful preparation of food for commercial purposes. But in appropriating an artistic media of taste, Achatz straddles a potent issue in commercial art: palatability. In order to accept the art object, the diner must literally ingest the piece with a limited amount of struggle. The aim is to convey an idea in the dish, but also assure that the taste is descriptive enough to allow its idea to be understood. In the case of Achatz, the dish's palatability is the challenging limitation in the conveyance of an idea, specifically, in the evocation of emotion and memory. While emotional impact may be a questionable value for

critical analysis from the perspective of modern literary theory,⁷⁵ it is a powerful motivator in cuisine. Achatz, as head chef and owner of Alinea, stands by emotional impact as the restaurant's chief expressive aspiration: "what we try to do is search out that emotional trigger".⁷⁶ Along with an unequivocal consideration of cuisine as an art form,⁷⁷ an opinion shared by Hervé This, using food as an emotive vehicle can be seen as highly contentious for its infinitely subjective interpretations and biases. These two facets (emotive goal and cuisine as art) appear to cancel each other out in terms of philosophically valid art: regardless of the sense experience, the individual may not be personally invested in the art piece in order to critically evaluate it, and emotive expression is definitively a personal investment. Despite these difficulties, Achatz's affective cuisine occupies a distinct culinary aesthetic from This', referring to a culinary model that shares some of This' history but appeals to an opposing philosophy of the self.

By making an emotional appeal to the individual diner through his food objects, Achatz is not idealizing the object itself but the diner's own sensibility. His modernist cuisine does not pursue the isolationist, completist model of molecular gastronomy's culinary form, but conceptualizes the dish more as an emotive vessel which the diner experiences.⁷⁸ Alinea's dishes are not customized per se to each customer, but that the focus is on emotive capacity through external application instead of internal definition distinguishes it from This' ideology. The

⁷⁵ The "Affective Fallacy" excludes impressionistic reactions from a poem as valid evidence for critical interpretation of that text's meaning, and is outlined by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their New Criticism paper, "The affective fallacy". *Sewanee Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, (1949): 31-55.

⁷⁶ "I think we do a good job of evoking emotion through food and that's kind of our focus, our perspective." "A Man of Taste", *The New Yorker*, n.pag.

⁷⁷ "We may utilize science in the kitchen, but it doesn't appear in front of our guests. I consider what we do an art form, and art is in many ways the opposite of science." Ibid.

⁷⁸ Achatz's conceptual approach to dishes, particularly the idea of "Spring", is mentioned in "A Man of Taste", n. pag.

presentation of the dishes to the diner is designed as a “participatory theater”,⁷⁹ in which the table-stage is specific to each dish: the diner sits at a table set only with a napkin, and is given tools designed for each dish, sometimes limited to only the diner’s own mouth⁸⁰. This forced engagement with the food object completely rejects the stipulation of critical distance, and is specified to attain that emotive expression that Achatz desires. Nostalgic kick-starts, a la the Proustian madeleine, is not the goal, but engaged emotionalism—the diner’s investment in the dish.

Establishing the diner’s active participation alludes slightly to Tiravanija’s work, but its motivation is not to create a present community, but to provoke emotion through recalled memory. As the dishes appeal to the diner’s pathos, rather than be seen as personal embodiments of Achatz, Alinea’s cuisine is not a containment of the present chef’s self, whether defined as precise and total (This molecular gastronomy), or as a constantly transforming project (Foucaultian ethico-aesthetic project). Alinea is an appeal to a memorial of the past self, to a piece no longer present. It acknowledges that as life proceeds, the accrued memories do not necessarily follow a model of the self as either complete or fluctuating. Regardless of what ends the individual may meet, an artifact of the individual’s movement through time exists in the memory, and can be provoked through Achatz’s food. Alinea’s culinary aesthetics disregard any attempt at defining the present self and instead looks to the past, entreating the diner to consider what once was and is no longer. Prompting the diner to emote and recall the past, Achatz’s cuisine references a mortal existence with the very media of survival: food. Without necessarily adhering to any level of Curnonsky representational demands, the cuisine references both its own and humanity’s corporeality through the diner’s memory: it fulfills the double performance of

⁷⁹ “[Achatz] entertains with creations and serving pieces that force you to interact with your food and the person serving the meal. Dining at Alinea is participatory theater.” *Alinea*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Ruhlman, *Alinea*, 11.

sustaining mortality while embodying its progression. To eat at Alinea is to live an accelerated life through courses.

DIGNIFYING THE QUOTIDIAN: A PROPOSED MODEL FOR FOOD AESTHETICS

With a surplus of possible techniques and resources, the chef can use an enormous set of methods to achieve a given goal. However, with enfranchising laboratory tools and other materials in order to achieve culinary goals, chefs may come to choose techniques based on optimized functionality, rather than necessity or availability. The technology may not determine the artistry of the product, but it can indicate the object's origins: certain details can be traced to a methodical beginning, the process visualized. Given an increasingly expanding repertoire of techniques to produce food, it becomes less an expression of a communal group identity and more a representation of a microcosmic individual; one whose tactics eclipse cultural origins. This dislocates the chef from any restrictive environment or context, nullifying cuisine as an exhibition of a specific culture. At this point, the food object is distinguished through obsessively definite and precise study, and described by a rigorously controlling formalism such as This' molecular gastronomy. This relates the food object to the individual in isolation, rather than to a larger cultural or societal body. The aesthetic model of molecular gastronomy encourages this formalism of the self that isolates the individual towards a completist existence. Identity is conceived in development towards a particular end, and completion of that end is determined through empirical analysis.

If this model is accepted, that there is a definite ideal end state for the food object to aspire to, then creativity and expressionism may be limited to a certain deterministic assumption: that the artist's will is subordinate to that precise object. Achatz, in his emotive approach to culinary aesthetics, does not eschew visual standards of presentation, nor are his technological methods limited. But the fact that his food is ultimately an appeal to the diner rather than the object itself re-contextualizes his food and makes it relevant to a social community, instead of an

isolated ideology. Such a relational or societal model of food aesthetics, would encourage a similar solipsistic exercise, where the individual conceives of themselves as an actively integrated being in the world. A model that caters to the sensibility of the specific diner or emulation of the contextual space, rather than adhering to the dogmatic terms of molecular gastronomy's formalism, dignifies the individual as a fluid, ethico-aesthetic project in which to cultivate certain transforming tastes and desires. At one with the fluctuations of the surrounding world, the diner understands their own mortality in the transformation and destruction of the surrounding culinary environment.

Studying food aesthetics dignifies our most base choices, turning a necessity into a willful deliberation, a grasp at controlling mortality. Bringing aesthetic discourse and study in a desirable, precise, objective language of common usage (as molecular gastronomy aims to do) hopes to understand our balanced persona in food, the deliberations between the cognitive self and the somatic self, albeit in a restrictive and isolating formalism. If such discipline were to be applied to a descriptive analysis of relational cuisine, an aesthetic model for a collective humanity could be conceived through food, the very media by which the human community perpetuates itself.

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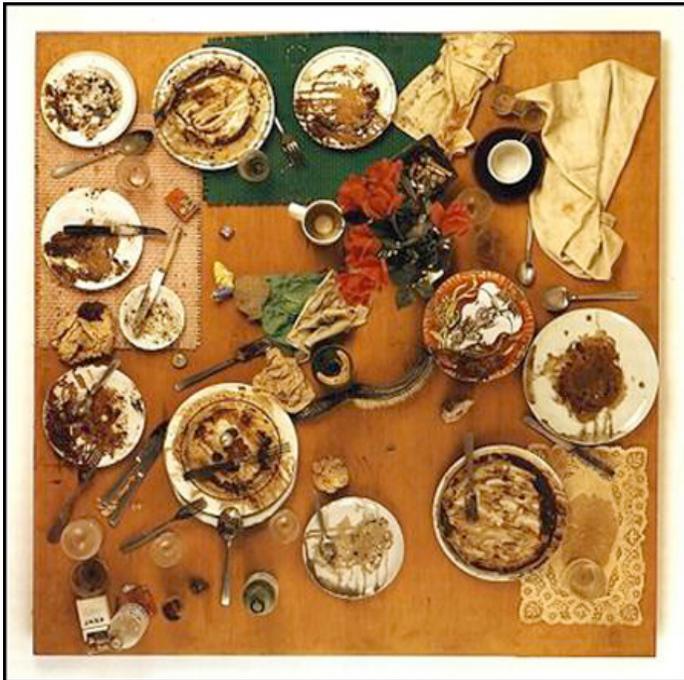
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