

Amuse-bouche: Insights into an Exhibition on the Taste of Art

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The ingesting of food is first and foremost existential, deciding over life and death. Our ability to perceive different aromas through the senses can, however, also make eating a pleasurable experience. For centuries, therefore, food and the act of eating, along with the associated cultural and social aspects, have been the subject of fine art. Our culinary culture, how and what we eat, opens up heatedly debated areas of discussion that, especially today, can also be ethical in nature.¹ So it is not surprising that in recent years there have been numerous art exhibitions about food as artistic material, *Eat Art*, or a historical examination of the transformation of our culinary culture.²

In contrast, *Amuse-bouche* focuses rather on the sense of taste. In what form can this fascinating sensorium—with which we take manifold facets of the universe into the body through the mouth, tongue, and nasopharynx—become part of the aesthetic perception of art at all? This show breaks with the usual museum practice of addressing primarily the sense of vision and instead offers a diversity of art-historical, phenomenological, and empirical encounters with our sense of taste. Several of the works can be experienced in a participatory way and tried out as part of special tours and performances. In addition, however, works of art are represented that evoke the experiences of taste solely with the aid of the viewer's imagination.

"You eat with your eyes first," as the saying goes, and indeed our sense of vision plays a crucial role in assessing the taste of food. That our perception of taste is influenced by a number of multisensory impulses has long since been known and proven scientifically by studies of the psychology of perception like those of Charles Spence (see also his contribution, p. 30). How does our gustatory sensorium, which is closely linked to our memories and emotions, operate when it is activated solely by visual stimuli, that is, when we view food or the act of eating in works of art as rendered only? Does a new level of aesthetic experience really open

up when we try to taste art visually on the basis of our storage of knowledge, personal experience, and feelings? What does a work of art taste like when we are allowed to lick it with our tongues, when we can drink and eat the ingredients from which it was produced?

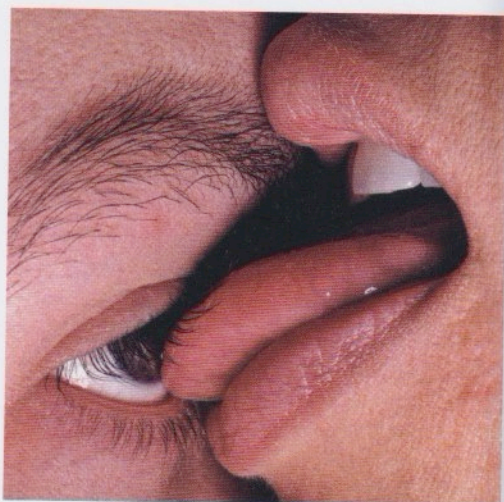
In the exhibition *Amuse-bouche*, we encounter situations that we know from our daily life and come across works of art from the past and present, though they are not arranged chronologically. Their arrangement is based rather on the common tastes that we can perceive via different receptors: bitter, sour, salty, sweet, and umami—the latter a term coined by the Japanese scientist Kikunae Ikeda in 1908, which can be best described in English as "savory" or "rich" (on this, see the discussions of Jeannette Nuessli Guth and Maren Runte, p. 40). The works shown produce a whole spectrum of evocations, from pleasure to disgust, from "sugar-sweet" to "bitter earnest." For example, the sweet section of the exhibition has works made of chocolate or sugar, as well as *Ein Pfund Erdbeeren* (A Pound of Strawberries, 2005) by Hans-Peter Feldmann, a seductively fruity-sweet work composed of thirty-four color photographs, and *Gib mir Honig* (Give Me Honey, 1979) by Joseph Beuys. By contrast, assembled in the bitter section are exhibits that begin with the objects illustrated and the materials used to address disgust, processes of decay, and death. At the same time, accents have been placed on themes such as "The Taste of Desire," "Sensory Deception," and "The Taste of the Other."

At one point on the way through the exhibition, Urs Fischer's *Noisette* (2009, **fig. 1**), a realistic-looking pink tongue, suddenly sticks out of the wall at eye height, having been triggered by a motion sensor. The effect of the motif in Janine Antoni's *Mortar and Pestle* (1999, **fig. 2**) is equally disturbing. With unapologetic directness, the photograph points the eye toward an intimate scene between two people: one sees an extreme close-up of one person touching and licking another person's eyeball with her



Fig. 1 Urs Fischer
Noisette, 2009
Hole in the wall, silicone,
motion sensor, electric
motor, mechanism,
Dimensions variable,
Private Collection,
Courtesy of the Artist

Fig. 2 Janine Antoni
Mortar and Pestle, 1999
C-print, 121.9x121.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist
and Luhing Augustine,
New York



tongue. The work's title lends the moment captured a taste of physical violence. Yet the eye is open, and so the tongue appears to be touching it so gently that the eyelid does not reflexively protect itself by closing: "I thought that I was making a very sweet and tender image. [I wanted to] taste [my] husband's vision,"³ as the artist herself describes her intention. In *Mortar and Pestle*, mouth and tongue seem to take over the task normally reserved for vision: capturing the world. Is it going too far to read this work as symbolizing the contribution of vision to our sense of taste?

Seductive Tasting and Lustful Noshing: Of Gingerbread and Flowers

Even before entering the exhibition proper, an installation on the outer longitudinal wall of the exhibition architecture invites us to nosh. Around twenty-two meters long, one can try to nibble on the work *Goose-bump* (2011, **fig. 3**) by the Australian artist Elizabeth Willing, which is made of gingerbread cookies and white icing. It turns out to be more difficult than it looks, because the small, round gingerbread cookies with icing are firmly glued to the wall and can only be bit off where they protrude. Gradually, the sweet-and-spicy gingerbread cookies of this interactive and temporary work of art are eaten up by the visitors, and the initial white

relief structure in a uniform linear pattern is transformed over time into a wall with irregular brown remnants of the gingerbread and the traces of eating and impressions of bodies that remain. The artist was inspired by the gingerbread house from the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*. The work's title, *Goose-bump*, also refers to the polarizing moment of good and evil in the story by the Brothers Grimm: the threat of Hansel and Gretel dying inside the house due to the witch's cannibalistic intent is countered by the seduction of the sweet shell.

On the front wall of the exhibition architecture is *Hortus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delicacies), a new project by Marisa Benjamim on the taste of flowers (pp.126–31). Here, Benjamim has installed a temporary "kitchen" consisting of a raised bed of flowers in the form of a table, standing in front of a wall clad in floral tiles—showing deference to the traditional buildings of her Portuguese homeland. From the "flower kitchen," one looks out through the window façade onto a greenhouse in neighboring Solitude-Park. Various edible plants and flowers are growing there, which the artist has turned into sample canapés. Benjamim wants to encourage us to think about our relationship to plants, nature, and their resources. Perhaps we have already eaten flowers, which we saw as colorful



Fig. 3 Elizabeth Willing
Installation view of
the interactive work
Goosebump, 2011
Pfeffernüsse (frosted
gingerbread) and
icing on a wall,
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
and Tolarno Galleries,
Melbourne

decoration on dishes. But the idea of eating a dish consisting entirely of flowering plants—however seductive and beautiful it may appear—might fill us with mistrust. Valuable knowledge about flowers that are actually edible and delicious has been lost, and not just in our cities. During her performances in Benjamim’s “flower kitchen,” we have the opportunity to taste plants such as cowslip, clover flowers, broadleaf plantain, or the seductively sweet and almondy meadowsweet.

The Taste of Desire: Of Bananas and Pomegranates

In allegorical depictions of the sense of taste and in still lifes, foods often symbolize seduction, excess, and lack of inhibition. Often these images feature a close connection between, if not an equation of, the gustatory sense and erotic pleasure. Assembled at the very beginning of the exhibition, in a section titled “The Taste of Desire,” is a selection of related works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and documents of the avant-garde from the early twentieth century, for instance by Marcel Duchamp and the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Found here is also artwork from the 1960s, such as *Mario Banana #1* (1964) by Andy Warhol, and works by contemporary artists. Baroque depictions of the senses suggest that the animalistic sense of taste, which largely evades reason, has a dangerous seductive aspect. In allegories of *gustus*, an often tightly embracing pair of lovers, feeding each other sweet fruit, unmistakably points to the close tie between the gustatory and sexual lust. In a copperplate engraving by Peter Overardt from the first half of the seventeenth century, this negatively connoted sensual-physical desire, whose temptation is supposed to be resisted, is further underscored by a depiction of the biblical scene of the Fall in the left background of the image [fig. 4]. Over time, representations of personifications of the sense of taste were replaced by other images, in the form of genre scenes of still lifes. The virtuosic skill of painters such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem sometimes went so

far as to make the food seem so real in terms of its color, materiality, and consistency that one’s mouth literally waters (on this subject, see also the contribution by Karin Leonhard, p. 68).

Works in which food and its eating are to be read symbolically are found in art history not only in the Baroque era. In her photographs and videos, the artist Farah Al Qasimi, born in the United Arab Emirates, works with a symbolic visual language that triggers the sense of sweetness and exoticism. One example of this is *Lunch* (2019, see the cover illustration of this publication), in which the artist presents above all sweets and exotic fruits spread out seductively on a cloth in pastels and floral patterns, including bananas, a cut papaya, and a pomegranate, which for centuries has been a famous symbol of female fertility. In *Pomegranate* (2016), too, Al Qasimi focuses our gaze on a freshly cut pomegranate, the temptingly streaming red juice of which promises a syrupy sweetness.

Gustatory Illusions: From Sugar-Sweet to Bitter Earnest

Our vocabulary for describing specific aromas is relatively limited (on this, see also the contribution by Jeannette Nuessli Guth and Maren Runte, p. 40). At the same time, in our ordinary language, we employ metaphorically countless expressions related to taste in order to describe mostly emotional states, for example, “went sour” or “bittersweet.” German commonly uses such formulations as *zum Fressen gern haben* (loving a person enough to eat him or her), *in den sauren Apfel beißen* (lit. “biting the sour apple,” meaning “biting the bullet”), *Honig ums Maul schmieren* (lit. “smearing honey around someone’s mouth,” meaning “buttering someone up”), *süßes Nichtstun* (dolce far niente), or *bitterer Ernst* (bitter earnest). The question of shifts in meaning also comes up in several works in the exhibition *Amuse-bouche*: in works of art whose sugar-sweet taste suggested by the material becomes bitterly earnest with an eye to the history



Fig. 4 Peter Overadt
 "'Gustus' or Taste", plate
 from the series *The Five Senses*, ca. 1600–50
 Copperplate engraving,
 25.2 x 29 cm
 Graphische Sammlung,
 ETH Zürich

of the work's origins. For example, the minimalist pieces by the Yugoslavian conceptual artist Mladen Stilinović, for which he employs sugar as an artistic medium. The titles of the works are correspondingly simple—a monochrome white board covered with a layer of crystalline sugar or a metal ladle filled with sugar cubes and chewing gum: *Secer* (Sugar). From the first moment, the viewer intuitively gets a feeling of seductive sweetness. But this is way off the mark. For the artist, who realized these works in the early 1990s in the middle of the war in Croatia, the white monochrome symbolizes emptiness, loss, and pain. "What is the color of pain?" Stilinović asks. "White is the color of silence, very intimate, and pain is an intimate thing."⁴

Daniel Spoerri has engaged with the illusory maneuvers of our sense of taste. The founder of Eat Art deliberately tracks down the arcane, the inverted, and the abnormal in order to play with our familiar view of things and to call it into question (see also the contribution by Felix Bröcker, p. 88). In his performative *menus travesti*, which he has already served a number of times in different ways, everything tastes different than it looks. The palate plays against the eye. His new experiment *Nur Geschmack anstatt Essen* (Tasting, Not Eating), first presented on the occasion of our symposium (see pp. 96–97), aims to perplex our senses: it is a four-course menu composed of identically colored cubes of aspic. Probably no artist of the twentieth or twenty-first century has engaged as intensely with food and the act of eating as Spoerri. As Karl Gerstner aptly wrote: "Spoerri saw eating neither as only a need, nor as only a feast of the senses. That, too, but above all as a reflex of the spirit."⁵

Taste between Life and Death:

Of Milk Fat, Mold, and Bitter Poison

Revealingly, our life outside the womb begins instinctively, not yet seeing properly, usually just feeling and smelling, absorbing vital nutrition in the form of breast milk

through close physical contact (see also the contribution by Thomas Macho, p. 118). Normally, we cannot remember what it tasted like; it seems strangely foreign to us. In *Butter* (2019), the Basel-based artist Alexandra Meyer works with precisely this fatty source of energy. She processes breast milk, which she mixes with animal milk, into a roughly shaped clump of butter, which she presents on a cooling base along with a depiction of the Roman Charity and a brief video. The latter shows a close-up of the butter being scraped from the block very slowly by a special blade pulled continuously, resulting in a wavy form that is pushed out of the field of vision.

Although the title of the exhibition is *Amuse-bouche*, it does not just contain tasty, appetizing bites of art. Our sense of taste famously also serves to indicate to us insalubrious, spoiled, even poisonous and life-threatening food. This is associated with negative emotions, including disgust and even existential aspects of our life, such as decay and death. These taste experiences with negative associations are manifested, for example, by Dieter Roth's *Grosses Schimmelbild* (Large Mold Picture, 1969, **fig. 5**). Whereas in that case years have passed in which organic material has transformed into a dark, undefinable mass, the process of decay can be followed in time-lapse photography in the fascinating video *Still Life* (2001, **fig. 6**) by Sam Taylor-Johnson. The motif of a platter of fruit recalls a Baroque still life with fruit and reflects on the vanitas theme of such a *nature morte*. A clever use of time-lapse photography enables the viewer to experience in just under four minutes how a once seductive mountain of ripe and sweet fruit decomposes and collapses on itself. As they decay, the fruits increasingly dissolve into initially round, cloudy, soft-looking forms of mold. In the course of the process, fruit flies flit rapidly past the screen. The looped playback multiplies the decay, calling attention to the constantly repeating cycle of life and death. The only thing that does

not change during these four minutes is the blue plastic ballpoint pen at the lower right corner.

Of Famous Flavor Enhancers and the Unfamiliar Taste of Kola Nuts and Sufferhead Original

There are several unmistakable aromas that have made an unimaginable march of triumph across the whole globe, especially since the second half of the previous century until the present—despite all of their alleged negative health effects. In *Amuse-bouche*, one encounters the famous bottle of Maggi seasoning, which in the edition *Ich kenne kein Weekend* (I Know No Weekend, 1971) by Joseph Beuys forms a pair with the Reclam edition of Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (translated as *Critique of Pure Reason*). And looking at Andy Warhol's series of prints *Campbell's Soup II* (1969, **fig. 7**) usually evokes in us, despite the many ingredients listed on the label, the uniform aroma of meaty, bouillon-tasting monosodium glutamate.

Perhaps one of the most famous tastes in the world is “the real taste of Coca-Cola.” While preparing for this exhibition, I ran across a whole series of interesting attempts to come to terms with Coca-Cola in art, for example, the critical, political action *Coca-Cola Project* (1970) by Cildo Meireles.

We are astonished when we first perceive on our tongue the bitter taste of the kola nut, which was once used to produce Coca-Cola. Compared to the taste of Coca-Cola anchored in our minds, the bitter taste seems very strange. The kola nut is also the subject of *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* (2012–ongoing) by the Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga: a multimedia installation that is activated by her in performances with the public [**fig. 8**]. It is based on artistic, anthropological study in which Nkanga uses botanical drawings, maps, and photographs in various narrative strands to tell us the historical journey of the kola nut. This journey leads from West Africa to the remote world of the commodities of colonial states, which



Fig. 5 Dieter Roth
Grosses Schimmel-
bild, 1969
Wooden frame covered
with glass on both sides,
layers of moldy organic
materials of different
colors, 121 x 82 x 8.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel,
gift of Emil Wartmann,
Basel, 1986



Fig. 6 Sam Taylor-Johnson
Still Life, 2001
One-channel video
(color, no sound) on
monitor, 3'44" loop
Edition 5/6
Courtesy Sammlung
Goetz, Munich

annexed the fruit out of purely financial and economic interests. The artist, who wears white gloves during the performance, reverently opens a fresh kola nut and begins to eat it in a concentrated way, sharing it with the person in the audience sitting opposite her. As she does so, Nkanga explains the motifs and the content of the many reproductions and maps placed on nine tables in the room. The kola nut, a natural resource full of energy with a high percentage of caffeine, antioxidants, and other substances, is explained to the audience during the performance with regard not only to its botanical quality but also to the complex role that the fruit plays in the social interactions of the Igbo.

Finally, the Berlin-based Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh is also interested in explosive sociopolitical subjects related to the taste of the strange when he asks the question in the new Basel edition of his ongoing project *Sufferhead Original*: “Who’s afraid of black?” With his stout beer brand *Sufferhead Original*, which is produced using different ingredients depending on where it is brewed and is accompanied by ads he shoots himself, Ogboh addresses the themes of immigration, moments of arrival, assimilation, transformation, and fusion of cultural identities and taste preferences.

Going through the exhibition, one encounters works of art that evoke in us memories of familiar aromas and give off completely foreign ones. According to our personal preferences, we find attractive but also aversive tastes. *Amuse-bouche* is intended to offer us an opportunity to experience our fascinating sense of taste in its sensually direct, complex, and reflective qualities. The sense of taste that remains at the end can best be described as *dulce malum* (sweet bitter)⁶ and moves between the poles that determine our lives: Eros and Thanatos.



Fig. 7 Andy Warhol
Campbell's Soup II:
Tomato-Beef Noodle
O's Soup, 1969
 Screenprint on paper,
 81 × 47.6 cm
 Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,
 Graphische Sammlung,
 acquired in 1988 with
 lottery funds

Fig. 8 Otobong Nkanga
*Contained Measures
of a Kolanut,*
2012–ongoing
Performance and installa-
tion view in the exhibition
Szalon at the Logan
Centre of Arts, Chicago
(September 19 –
November 23, 2014)
Variable sizes of tables,
handmade 100%
cotton paper, inkjet
printed photographs on
Forex, wood, kolanuts,
extract of kolanut, glass
plates, knife, gloves,
cushions, decanter
and stand,
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist



1 Of the many available publications, we mention here only a few representative ones: Harald Lemke, *Szenarien der Ernährungswende: Gastrosophische Essays zur Transformation unserer Esskultur* (Bielefeld, 2018); Harald Lemke, *Über das Essen: Philosophische Erkundungen* (Munich, 2014); Wolfger Pöhlmann, *Es geht um die Wurst: Eine deutsche Kulturgeschichte* (Munich, 2017).

2 We mention here just a few publications accompanying these exhibitions: *Eating the Universe: Vom Essen in der Kunst*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, and Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (Cologne, 2009); *Food: Produire, manger, consommer*, ed. Adelina

von Fürstenberg et al., exh. cat. Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Milan, 2014); *Daniel Spoerri: Eat Art in Transformation*, ed. Susanne Bieri et al., exh. cat. Centro culturale Chiasso, M.A.X. museo, Chiasso (Milan, 2015); *Arts & Foods: Rituals since 1851*, ed. Germano Celant, exh. cat. Triennale di Milano (Milan, 2015); *FOOD: Ökologien des Alltags*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer et al., exh. cat. 13. Triennale Kleinplastik Fellbach (Berlin, 2016).

3 Victoria Tellechea-Rotta, "Artist Janine Antoni on her sweet, soapy sculptures," *The GW Hatchet*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2015/02/12/artist-janine-antoni-on-her>

sweet-soapy-sculptures (accessed November 16, 2019).

4 Quoted in Branka Stipančić, "Does the World Seek a White, Total, Lasting Absence?," in *Mladen Stiljnović: Nula iz vladanja / Zero for Conduct*, exh. cat. Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb (Zagreb, 2012), p. 162.

5 Karl Gerstner, "Hommage an Daniel Spoerri, der die Nahrung zum Thema der Kunst machte," quoted in *Aufgedeckt, aufgetischt: Rezepte und Konzepte der Kunst im Umgang mit Essen*, exh. cat. Kunsthau Langenthal (Langenthal, 1995), p. 194.

6 Very much in the sense of Ovid's topos of *dulce malum*; see P. Ovidius Naso, *Ars amatoria*, 2.9.26.