

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

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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

later 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 Peste* (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

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 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



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



