



WINTER 2016

# On the Table

# EXHIBITION ESSAYS ON THE TABLE

## The Issue of Taste

BY WENDY PEART, CURATOR OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

*"Good taste is the first refuge of the non-creative. It is the last-ditch stand of the artist."*

- Marshall McLuhan

Taste is a shifty concept. It involves judgment: what is good or bad, delicious or disgusting, brilliant or trite, trending or passé. It is both personal and communal and has a long philosophical history of discussion and debate.

The exhibition *On the Table* considers our experiences with food: eating it, cooking it, growing it, digesting it, and playing with it. Eating, a primary human necessity, is highly sensory, engaging taste, smell, sight, touch, and sound. It arouses our pleasure centres, stimulates bodily euphoria and satisfies a deep intrinsic need for both nourishment and desire.

Because of this connection to

sensory and aesthetic experience, food as art has been a topic of debate amongst chefs, theorists and artists. Essayist Elizabeth Telfor argues that food is not art because although it may arouse an aesthetic experience, an experience that is beneficial for its own sake, it does not organize emotions, express ideas, or bring benefit to others on a broader level.<sup>1</sup> Countering this assertion is the thought that through the experience of food, we are lead to consider so much more. It is through our engagement with food that we experience art, it acts as a catalyst for consideration of the social, economic, political, philosophical and personal. Interestingly, like the Modernist movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the "foodism" movement of this current century is fostering an elite class of young connoisseurs, educated and forthcoming about opinions of style, taste, and



Jason Wright, *Tragedy of Open-Faced St. Sebastians or The Sacrifice of Artisanal Sandwiches for the Redemption of the Ethical Glutton*, 2013, C-prints on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.



aesthetics of cuisine, and who use social media as a primary space for expression and dissemination of their highly-held opinions.<sup>2</sup> With no lack of websites dedicated to food culture, and countless brick-and-mortar businesses specializing in designer cupcakes, farm-to-table cuisine, or live/raw food restaurants, we are clearly invested in the food experience.

Historically, philosophers, theorists and critics have used the notion of good or bad taste to legitimize hierarchies of power as they pertain to class structure, aesthetic knowledge and consumer culture. In Western art, the theories canonized by modern art critics like Clement Greenberg assert that aesthetic judgment and the nature of taste is involuntary, intuitive, universal, and derived through pure and objective experience with the artwork.<sup>3</sup> These ideas suggest that the value of any artwork and the acquired taste to enjoy it is fixed and settled within the structures of “high” or “low” culture. Over the last half-century, palates have evolved. Thankfully, we have grown to embrace what may have, at one time, been considered “distasteful”. We have done so not only to refute what has come before

us, but to more fully challenge ourselves, our sensibilities and our conditioning, to reconsider what art can be, and how it extends beyond the realm of the aestheticized art object.

Many of the artists featured in *On the Table* ask us to question our aesthetic limitations as well as how taste contributes to our sense of pleasure and critical judgment. The artists also invite us to consider how food can elicit a response that lives beyond immediate sensory experience and is indeed critical as well as aesthetic.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Telfor, “Food as Art,” *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

<sup>2</sup> William, Deresiewicz, “A Matter of Taste?,” *The New York Times*, Sunday Review, October 26, 2012, accessed December 7, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/opinion/sunday/how-food-replaced-art-as-high-culture.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/opinion/sunday/how-food-replaced-art-as-high-culture.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> Charles Harrison, “Introduction: The Judgement of Art,” *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* by Clement Greenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.





Victor Cicansky, *Life Cycle of a Potato*, 1990, patinated bronze; *Sprouting Potato*, 2011, patinated bronze, edition 3/7. Photo: Don Hall



**Color Chart**  
 This chart is a reference for the colors used in the artwork. It includes the names of the colors and their corresponding color codes.

**Color Codes**

Red	100	100	100
Orange	100	100	100
Yellow	100	100	100
Green	100	100	100
Blue	100	100	100
Purple	100	100	100
Brown	100	100	100
Black	100	100	100
White	100	100	100



*On the Table* exhibition view. Photo: Don Hall



# A cooking animal is still animal

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

*"The fact remains that all food is liable to defile."*

*- Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror<sup>1</sup>*

Food has the potential to delight or disgust; perhaps only eating and sex might provoke such visceral positive and negative responses. Both are highly embodied acts where we are aware of our capacity to experience sensory pleasure, the subjectivity of our tastes, and the permeability of our bodies. Food, excrement, and sexual fluids have an ambiguous relationship to the self, as substances that enter or emanate from the body without being part of the body proper. As such, they are abject, having "only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I."<sup>2</sup>

Whether a particular food is found to be delicious or repulsive is informed by our family habits, cultural practices, socio-economic

circumstances, and geography. We eat in accordance with our bodily needs, tolerances, and cravings. Our dietary decisions may be informed by ethical or religious imperatives. A preference for bland, sweet flavours is thought to be childish, whereas an adult palate may derive immense pleasure from bitter coffee, umami olives, pungent blue-veined cheeses, the mouthfeel of slippery raw oysters, slimy natto or okra, the brutal honesty of a rare steak, blood sausage, or a slab of liver.

These "difficult" foods are the ones we must overcome to enjoy. As Deborah Lupton explains, a sociobiological account of food revulsion suggests that we inherently distrust foods that are bitter, foul smelling, or visibly rotten, indicators of poisonousness.<sup>3</sup> A theory of abjection holds that sticky slimy, or viscous foods express liminality – neither solid nor liquid,



Sandee Moore, *It's Hard to Have an Original Idea and Not Just Endlessly Regurgitate Other's Art*, 2011, silicone rubber, cast hard plastics, urethane rubbers, glitter. Photo: Don Hall

these are the textures of bodily fluids and excreta – that which comes from me, but is not-me. Meat is dead flesh, a difficult truth for many eaters including omnivores, and hardest to ignore when it is raw, rare, or easily correlated to parts in our own living bodies.

All food, however, is “unclean, a highly unstable substance; it is messy and dirty in its preparation, its disposal; and its by-products; it inevitably decays; it has odour. Delicious food is only hours or days away from rotting matter, or excreta. As a result, disgust is never far from the pleasures of food and eating.”<sup>4</sup> We eat because it brings joy, or because we must, but the fact remains that the wrong food, too much food, spoiled food, or food we cannot tolerate will trigger nausea, retching, vomiting, and illness. And the sense memories of encounters with the abject – the nasty surprise of curdled milk touching the lips, the acrid sweetness of bile, the stench of shit – serve as powerful reminders of the corporeality of the body, also liable to defile.

“My definition of man is ‘a cooking animal,’” writes James Boswell.<sup>5</sup> We are the ones who cook, who enact this near-magical “cultural

transformation of the raw”<sup>6</sup> that tames nature to ward off the abject. Sometimes we are successful, sometimes not. *On the Table* addresses the experience of food on the social, cultured body without ignoring the fact that this body is nonetheless vulnerable and real.

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London, UK: 1996), 112.

<sup>4</sup> Lupton, 3.

<sup>5</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.: Including a Journal of His tour to the Hebrides* Vol. 2, (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1868), 1773.

<sup>6</sup> Claude-Levi Strauss, “The Culinary Triangle” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 29.





Kim Waldron, *Animal Heads*, 2010, stuffed animal heads. Photo: Don Hall





Peter Morin, *The World's Largest Gluten-Free Bannock Attempt*, 2016, performance. Photo: Eagleclaw Thom  
Presented in partnership with First Nations University of Canada and Sâkêwêwak Artists' Collective's 2016  
Storyteller's Festival



# Curiosity Fed the Cat

BY JENNIFER MATOTEK, DIRECTOR/CURATOR

The narrative of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is driven by the heroine's preoccupation with food and her encounters with mysterious edibles, as she moves through a dreamlike world. Alice, overcome with temptation, consumes unknown items labeled EAT ME and DRINK ME, transgressing the rule that one should never ingest an unidentified substance.

Alice's interactions with food emphasize the transformative dimensions of consumption. Each time Alice thinks about food or eats something, she undergoes profound mental and physical changes. The way she understands the world and her place within it fluctuates. She eats things around her because she is compelled to and because she is curious.

The performance-based

contemporary art works in *On the Table* pique viewers' curiosity, inviting them to engage in transformative and transgressive acts with food. The artists use food as their artistic medium, and frame food as something to be contemplated as well as consumed. Like Alice in Wonderland, audiences engage with food in ways that transcend nourishment. These engagements require a trust in oneself, a trust in the artist, and a trust in the presenting institution. Like Alice, we push through uncertainty to learn as we go along about the etiquettes of the various worlds created by the artists, established through their instruction and firm commands, spoken and unspoken rules. Like Alice, we may choose to eat and engage with food out of curiosity and not necessarily because we are hungry. Like Alice, we may choose to engage with something novel, to



Dean Baldwin, *Formerly Good Time Charlie's*, 2016, performative installation. Photo: Eagleclaw Thom

experience something outside of the “real world.”

There are five critical differences between Alice’s experiences with food in Wonderland, and the nature of audience encounters with artistic foodstuffs in *On the Table*. First, and most obviously, these events take place in real life, and therefore have real-life consequences. Second, the events staged in the gallery and offsite are anything but English Victorian – they are specific to the culture of the artists presenting, and contemporary to our time. As such, the works underscore how food is an important marker of cultural identity embodied with a literacy that can help us to understand social relations, class, and gender. Third, the time-based engagements that the exhibition provides are social, commensal experiences. Whereas Alice wanders through her journey alone – even in group situations, like the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, Alice is the odd one out – the performances here have inherently social dimensions. A fourth difference lies in the notion of invitation – where Alice falls into a Wonderland filled with a variety of edible situations as an uninvited (and unintentionally rude) guest, *On the Table*’s visitors are not crashing a party but are rather happily welcome

to engage with the works the artists have created. Also, where Alice’s encounters and preoccupations with food are often horrific realizations about mortality or manifested as symbols of childhood anxieties, the presentations in *On the Table* do not use food as symbols with singular meanings.

*On the Table*’s socially-engaged performances are largely about food’s capacity to facilitate convivial situations that may inspire personal growth and unanticipated connections. Just as Alice often uses food to engage the characters of Wonderland in uncomfortable conversations, the artists of *On the Table* use food to bait our engagement with their work. Visitors, like Alice, may possess an independent streak, but we have more agency than Alice. Food becomes the means through which we may transform ourselves, and understand our world differently, becoming, like Alice and using her words, “curiouser and curiouser”.



Amber Phelps Bondaroff, *Conjure Buns*, 2016, performance and ephemera. Photo: Eagleclaw Thom







Basil AlZeri, *The Mobile Kitchen Lab*, 2013-2016, sculpture and performance. Photo: Don Hall



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### COVER IMAGE

James Ostrer, *EF 124*, 2014, archival pigment print on Diasec mount. Image courtesy of the artist and Gazelli Art House.



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