**Ice, Manna & Burnt Offerings - Climates of Taste**

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**Panel Presentation**

**Food Cultures and Sustainability**

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I was last in Melbourne several years ago for a conference on dramaturgy, Peter Eckersall and I attended a presentation at the Malthouse Theatre about the ‘greening’ of the theatre and theatre’s need to address climate change and its own carbon footprint. Although laudable in its aspiration the dramaturgy of the presentation was woefully naïve and the dislocation of intent to context bordered on the surreal – on a scorching hot day, in a tin-roofed loft of the Malthouse (no insulation) and with the Air Con in overdrive we were shown images of Polar Bears clinging on to ice flows, seemingly at risk, certainly precipitously poised. I think this was one of them… START SLIDESHOW

As the lamb is to the alter, in the original sacrificial burnt offering, its flesh scorched with substance ascending (embers remaining) a symbol of sacrifice and actual slaughter; so the Polar Bear on ever-reducing fractured icebergs appears as a symbol of potential loss and danger: in one scenario an innocent new born is slaughtered, quartered and burnt - in the other a magnificent beast is endangered with the disappearance of its habitus, ice melts, ice burns. One is intended, prosecuted and rigorously enacted through ritual precision the other catastrophically implemented by human folly, selfishness and disregard. The look of both animals toward the human generates compassion and compels one to care, but sentimentality and anthropomorphism create complex compounds.

For all its outlandish staging and hypocritical context those Melbourne Polar Bears (on a hot tin roof) have stayed with me for years and obliged me to think through Ice.

Ice is captivating. Suggesting strength yet fundamentally fragile, seemingly monumental yet essentially impermanent, arresting development, preserving and destroying life, capturing time with clinical disinterest and yet releasing time in unpredictable measure through melting and sublimation, of thawing duration, traceless disappearance. Ice freezes time (encapsulates it for thousands of years) and ice, like fire, transforms life.

Ice as material. A defiance of time, a frozen moment, a shard, an interval, a hesitant duration, is also through thawing, through melting and evaporating to disappearance (leaving no trace) a sign for time, a metaphor for life (life-time), a physical realization of occasion, the passing of time, from epoch to eternity, a juncture in age: duration and decay.

As material with ‘strong presence’ and rapidly diminishing size, ice has been used in performance for an integer of time and for the process of its own disappearance. And ice, with the taste of calcium, purifying, cleansing neutrality, and pure, has always formed part of the food process, as preserver, participant, integer and conveyor. Ice is both symbol and form. In this short presentation I want to explore how food can represent – ‘illustrate’ – catastrophe and climate change but most of all I want to argue for taste (against illustration) to deserve greater attention.

I will explore the catastrophic in cooking but first let’s start with the sublime and In Utopia.

This is the last two paragraphs of my conclusion to a presentation I made in CUNY, New York *Lost Suppers*, that ended as it had begun in the intimate Sushi restaurant of Jiro Ono, Suki-ya-bashi Jiro in Tokyo. **Jiro Image**

**Jiro**

I concluded:

What if we turned the lens the other way round? What if we apprehended theatre as if it were food? What if we understood theatre composition through a culinary optic: performance as if it were a form of cooking, the kitchen as laboratory – the studio as kitchen, technique as mastery of material, with precision and dedication, alacrity and respect - the preparation of subsistence, of necessary nourishment, invigorating sustenance: food of the gods, as if manna from heaven.

SHOW JIRO VIDEO

Theatre as if it were a strange food from another world that like one of Ferran Adria’s creations provoking bewilderment, rekindling enchantment, inspiring awe and curiosity… lo and behold… as if it were a miraculous food, to be shared not just through an act of collaboration and co-participation but as an act of commensality… of being together to share and partake. Theatre as if it were manna necessary in times of wilderness, alienation and social upheaval… appearing on the stage like a hoar frost, tasting like bread tempered with oil, like flour with honey, a foam, a suspension of seeds… seeds of change, for perception and the imagination; as if we might digest theatre as if we might devour theatre.

**Cut Video Figure in Light**

**Manna Title**

**Manna Manna 6 Manna 7 Manna**

Throughout this last year Manna has remained an urgent provocation to me – how might theatre function as if it were manna necessary in times of wilderness. **Manna 1** This fascination has pushed my research into mythical and historical terrain, turning to painting and art history, beyond the initial 20th century focus. **Manna 2** This perspective is developing in concert with an insatiable curiosity as to how we taste, what we taste and how taste not only triggers memories from the past (nostalgia and a sense of loss) but also instills and directs imaginings about the future. **Manna 3** Taste can generate a desire to encounter other cultures and countries and contributes to a storehouse, a databank of pre-nostalgia – a longing for fuller sensorial experience to come. **Manna 4**

From the King James Bible: Exodus 16

***14 And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.***

***15 And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.***

***~~:~~ and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.***

**\* Cockaigne Title**

**Land of Cockaigne**

In talking of climates we should not limit ourselves to global warming and shifts in weather, but also climatic change in the social, political and philosophical, recognizing the need for artistic and culinary shifts, ruptures and reinvention, generating hope and seeds for change amidst desolation and alienation; creating sustenance and rejuvenation.

In times of extreme hardship, poverty, food scarcity and brutality the collective mind often turns to envisage Utopias – so it was in Medieval Europe with the Land of Cockaigne. \***C Map 1**This the land where rivers flow with wine, where the sky rained basted plump geese, fish leaped out of the sea ready cooked and roasted pigs wandered the earth with knives in their sides willingly surrendering chunks of crisp fatty flesh. I encountered the Land of Cockaigne \*Cran Youth through Cranach: first this painting at the Gemaldegalerie, Berlin, focusing less on the abundance of food and more on the rejuvenating qualities of its water: here the Fountain of Youth 1546.

*Point out aspects* \*Cran Youth Detail

At the Gemaldegalerie the Fountain of Youth looks across to Cranach’s much earlier work The Last Judgment \*Cran Hell inspired by Hieronymus Bosch. Dystopia faces Utopia. The Last Judgment for all its seemingly nightmarish and surreal details perhaps more accurately capturing the brutal reality of medieval life.\*Cran Youth The Fountain of Youth painted by Cranach towards the end of his life projecting hope for a paradise on earth the Land of Cockaigne.

\* Irish Manuscript of C

This is an extract from a poem **The Land of Cockaygne**: (from an Irish manuscript of 1330 - Author unknown)

***..Cockaygne offers better fare,***

***And without worry, work, or care;***

***There are rivers great and fine***

***Of oil and milk, honey and wine***

***The house has many rooms and halls;***

***Pies and pastries form the walls,***

***Made with rich fillings, fish and meat,***

***The tastiest a man could eat.***

***There you can come and eat your fill,***

***And not be blamed for your self-will.***

**\* Breughel L of C**

This is Breughel’s painting entitled Land of Cockaigne (1567) in Dutch Luilekkerland (Lazy Luscious Land) and here we see a clerk, a peasant -farmer and a soldier, satiated and in slumber having gorged themselves of all they could fill – note the egg still wandering, spoon poised to self serve and the pig conveniently prepared as a perambulatory street or field food, the roof of pies and the open mouthed knight waiting for the next ready meal to fly his way. Here the landscape invites all to over-indulge but through the comic Breughel points to a spiritual emptiness encouraged by gluttony.

And here a more detailed Italian maps of the Pays de la Cuuccagna **\* Map & \* Map Detail**

And fabulous drawings of food structures and fantasies **\*\* 7 Images**

**\* Naples Parade**

In mid eighteenth century Naples the stories, poems, maps and paintings about the Paese di Cuccagna developed into processions, massive public structures of food fountains, momentary festivals of abundance and civic celebration. **\* Constructions** Machina Cuccagna were developed, these edible monuments were displayed and then paraded, serenaded and then consumed. This developed into what today we might call civic sculptures or Public Art; massive freestanding structures, temporary wooden fortresses adorned with food that as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has remarked ‘ enact there own ephemerality … when the King gave the signal the gathered crowd scaled, attacked and destroyed a Neapolitan Cuucagna.

**\* Table Decorations**

This tradition of elaborate edible monuments then transferred from the public sphere into the banquets of the aristocracy. In grand dining rooms and banquet halls across Europe, ingenious, opulent structures caused the oak tables to groan. **\* Broadside Image** Ever more inventive – the pie with four and twenty blackbirds released to fly skywards once the crust was cut – some inedible due to their architectural structure, some purely confection (for the eye only) and some made from sugar and confectionary for a spectacular end of a meal. The host would invite the assembled guests not just to leave the table but also to destroy and consume all that towered upon it.

**Taste \* Taste Tongue Slide**

Aristotle first began to categorize taste – identifying both sweet and bitter as formative co- respondents. For centuries it was accepted that there were only four primary tastes – similar to there being three primary colours where mixing red, blue and yellow generates secondary colours and then through further mixing of hues tertiary colours are generated; multiple combinations of primary tastes produces numerous complex compound tastes. Umami the Japanese concept of savoury or meaty was first identified earlier in the 20th century but only recently adopted/accepted.

**\* Taste 3 Maps**

It is surprising how much disagreement still surrounds the foundation of 5 or 7 or 9 primary tastes and how culturally determined they are, developing through acculturation and maintained through specific and local cuisines which help form home, family and a sense of belonging. It points also to the intimate and subjective nature of taste and the difficulty in western societies to elevate gustatory taste to the level of philosophy. It was also a shock to me to discover that there have only been two books written on a philosophy of gustatory taste and of course entire libraries on moral taste. Brillat-Savarin’s, *The Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, (1825) \* Book Image remains the most remarkable texts on taste and founded the genre of gourmand essay writing.

**Smell & Taste**

The connections between the olfactory and gustatory to memory are well established and well documented; smell and taste are strong and sometimes overpowering triggers for memories, on occasions pleasurable, nostalgic, whimsical and romantic, at times terrifying, traumatic and unbearable. For Proust his Madeleine instantly evoked memories and emotions from childhood, there is no selection process operating here, we are hard wired from smell to memory to emotion and 80% of taste is dependent upon a capacity to sense smell.

In western culture, smell and taste are the most undervalued of all the senses. Their demotion in western cultures, in line with the advances of rationalism and sanitation, would appear to be concurrent with a similar ‘deodorization of theatre’ that occurs with Naturalism.

**Dysfunction Slide**

These are the medical terms for dysfunctional states of taste – my contention is that theatre/performance suffers from dysguesia

**\* Title Cooking Catastrophes Cooking Catastrophes**

The project Cooking Catastrophes that I saw (smelt, ate, heard and touched) at the HAU, Berlin in January 2014 is part of a grander project evolving through the collaboration and direction of Eva Meyer-Keller and Sybille Muller with a team of international cooks and video artists. The premise is simple to create edible structures, broths, brews and stews that replicate natural disasters (some caused by climate change); to stage the moment of their explosion, eruption, destruction, liquefaction, drowning, erosion or pollution and to film close-up and project in high density display the catastrophic and irredeemable.

The work functions as inter-medial performance consisting of: seeing the action; seeing the live filming of the action; and seeing the simultaneously projected film of the action – all three generating different perspectives, sometimes in illuminating and profoundly insightful ways; and at other times becoming a rather tedious re-iteration.

The cataclysmic and the calamitous were prepared, charged, and detonated; we saw chefs working at several stations and heard (through dull and earnestly read texts) descriptions of seismic shifts, glacial melting, oceans rising, tornadoes and volcanoes, earthquakes and oil spills. As an audience we were scattered through the room in the first phase watching the model landscapes and seascapes constructed, in the second foraging through the aftermath of edible disaster, constructing a buffet of debris and discharge. Eva Meyer-Keller and Sybille Muller engage some very experienced professional chefs from a variety of culinary and cultural traditions, some of their creations are ingenious and delectable some purposefully repulsive.

The piece evolves through the staging of ten different catastrophes, earthquake, tsunami, oil spillage, glacial melting, pollution, volcano eruption; the sequential and somewhat predictable structure points to a dramaturgical weakness. The two halves of the event also militates against the potential of dramatic catastrophe – the denouement of the tragedy and the cycle of tragedies witnessed to unfold or take place – rather we were invited to share and partake of the disastrous delights in a light humored finger buffet – should we not be made to feel uncomfortable scavenging amongst the remains of these climatic calamities, should volcanoes taste so sweet (delicious chocolate), should the quakes earth be such an exquisitely seasoned risotto – or is this reaction itself falling into the problematic of illustration. Cooking Catastrophes is a courageous collaboration with professional chefs with an admirable climate change agenda but somehow despite such powerful evocations of taste, smell and sound the work still manifested mainly as visual illustration of global issues – how can food reference political and social issues without directly illustrating them?

The work was, however, tantalizingly close to fulfilling my quest to experience performance that operates on all senses and through more ancient integrated sense perception but ultimately it submitted to the visual and was perhaps seduced by its own inter-mediality.

In our time of change (political, social and climatic) artistic endeavor attempts to address the issues of our current conditions and their greater implications: awareness of impending global disaster; profligacy, disregard and waste. Perhaps we need a return to Aistheisis, so that we might imagine, and create, fully sensorial performance that reflects better the temper and climates of our time.

**Title Slide Aistheisis Aistheisis**

From *aisthesis* (meaning full, total sense-perception) aesthetics was born. Heidegger reminds us in ‘Being and Time’ (1929) that *aisthesis* was related to the process of revealing and concealing (alethea). Physical sensory perception was trusted as knowledge – knowledge received through all senses and formed, shaped, processed through the ‘mind in the belly’. **Aistheisis Quote**

However, aesthetics’ origin in aesthesis becomes forgotten, delaminates and takes an independent trajectory. So sense perception (especially taste and smell, gustatory and olfactory) become separate from reason and logic (logos) and to quote Caroline Kyle:

‘Through the Age of Reason we see the final subordination of all aesthetics to the categories of representation’.

What concerns me is that although working with food as material, gustatory taste and the olfactory, much of artist generated works with food manifest in terms of representation, illustration, and are primarily visual – ocular with symptoms of dysguesia. How might a return to full sensory perception a visceral understanding (aesthesis) be negotiated and reconstructed? How might performance reach beyond the visuality of its theatricality?