

# InTensions

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Food for Thought: Food, Embodiment, and Knowledge

## **Note from the Editors: Food for Thought: Food, Embodiment, and Knowledge**

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[1] The paradox of studying food is that scholars necessarily rely on the very instruments of discourse that reify a hierarchy of the senses designed to render food unworthy of serious thought: Images and texts appeal to the “higher” sense of sight; they “figure the material as intellectual, imaginative, symbolic, aesthetic,” Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson claims (2004, 17). Reason cannot be found in the “lower” senses while eating reminds us too much of our body’s needs. But Krishnendu Ray reminds us that “much of the sociology of the body continues to be devoted to theoretical argumentation focused on gender, sexuality, and disease, belying the sense that all social action {...} is always embodied” (2016, 26).

[2] This challenge has scholarly antecedents in anthropology. Paul Stoller echoes Ray when he argues that taste, the embodied, performative sensations that arise from placing things in our mouths, is problematic in Western philosophical traditions because “it is non-theoretical” (1989, 23). He calls for a “tasteful” ethnography, whose prose is seasoned “with the non-theoretical senses to evoke a world” (31). Recent scholarship on the anthropology of interiority (Grønseth; Ingold; Irving) seeks to examine and describe the everyday, or what some call our ‘lifeworlds,’ the complex and diverse inner life of individuals comprised of personal, social, cultural and historical narratives that are continually experienced, influenced, constructed and performed in everyday contexts, using food as one possible landscape and discourse. Lifeworlds are

primarily internalized and consist of “inner speech, random urges, unfinished thoughts, unarticulated moods, and much else besides,” yet cannot easily be expressed in discursive statements and, often, slips out of the realm of “theory” (Irving 22).

[3] Here, the problem continues: how do we, as scholars, communicate those interiorities — those ‘random urges’ and ‘unfinished thoughts’? For Ray, the scholar’s body and its critical-sensorial range is vital to challenging current epistemes of food scholarship, “even when at the end we have to reduce things back again to sign and sound according to the rules of a written academic text” (26). Perhaps missing here is recognition of the critical-sensorial range of the reader engaged in the embodied, performative act of reading, and a reconsideration of the temporal relationship between text and reader. Ariella Azoulay (2008) suggests rethinking the temporality of the photograph, asking what might happen if we viewed a photograph not simply as an index of something that was there, but also as that which *is still* there, still present and waiting for our affective engagement. The photograph, in this sense, is not an autonomous object; its meaning (or lack thereof) is not fixed but is produced through the performative act of “watching,” rather than “looking” (2008, 14). A photograph is a communication, a speech act, hailing a future encounter.

[4] This issue asks how performative engagements with food knowledge can become possible within the specific arena of the academic journal. Using the performative power of coding, we attempt to engage the reader in the kind of contingency and ephemerality inherent in food and its sensory and social liveliness. It may strike the reader that we lean heavily, if necessarily, on art, but we suggest that the artist/scholars whose work appears here are themselves encountering the problems of critical and sensory engagement and have joined us in this attempt to begin a conversation about the “rules” of academic food discourse.

[5] We attempt, first, to alter the “codes” of journal construction by building contingency into the journal itself. Every opening of the journal triggers a code response to randomize the contributors’ contributions, reorganizing and refreshing the content, thus making each reading different. The performativity of the journal becomes part of the engagement, layered on the performativity of each contribution.

[6] Artist/Scholar David Szanto clarifies the theme: “when clear-cut frameworks are placed on complex systems, they may not increase clarity, but instead obscure the value of disorder.” Mis/using the rules of the academic text, he makes the case for performance as method of investigation and means of producing complex knowledge. His performances, described here in text, video, and photograph, engage in the transformation of mourning, memory, loss, and belonging within intra-acting

constellations of food and people. Szanto carefully encounters the problems of documenting ephemeral events and explores how the inevitable failure to “stabilize” them is an opening, rather than a loss.

[7] Kyler Zeleny’s *Skipping* is a photo-ethnography of urban squatter’s practices of dumpster diving for waste food. Zeleny, also an artist/scholar, is critically informed by Marxist geography, but here extends his critical reflexivity to the tools of his scholarly trade. Using a camera purchased for one euro and some gifted, expired film, Zeleny develops an “anti-aesthetic” of waste recovery, that emerges from the unrefined culture of “creativity and self-expression through bricolage and culturally subversive activities” that his informants produce.

[8] WhiteFeather and Teresa Stehlikova explore the boundaries of film/video and the senses through their artistic investigations of Iceland. Stehlikova, a London-based artist/academic explores the boundaries of cinematic representation and embodiment. After months of research travel in Iceland, she teamed with neurogastronomists, food historians, chefs, and artists, to create a multi-sensory meal that linked the apparent permanence of landscape with the mobilities of travel writing, art, and food. The meal was recorded, and a short film made. The film, like the meal, attempts neither to report nor to represent. It is both documentary and fiction, poetry and narrative. Stehlikova reports that filming the cooking process allowed her to see food differently. Food is no longer a metaphor for landscape but becomes landscape itself. The film draws to consciousness the ways we literally incorporate food, landscape, text, and art.

[9] Whitefeather, also an artist/researcher, inserts her body into the landscape as both subject and problem. We see her explore the terrain for natural dyes, flora, fauna, and fibres from which she will produce a textile work. “The end (textile) result is never shown, the emphasis being on process as the creative work in focus, and the acquisition of new knowledge as one of the results,” she writes. The landscape is beautified by photography, but the “messiness” of her body disrupts sublime contemplation. The video challenges the temporality of research labour. Her work is presented as a past, but it also continues — possibly, even now. Digital video, like the landscape, promises no conclusion. Rather, it hails a future sensory encounter, which will itself be formed in part by the encounter with the video.

[10] Wency Mendes’ *Seasoned* are the digital remains of a sensorial, multi-media archive of food and conflict in India. Cupboards bearing ingredients drawn from conflict regions surround five tables, all in a room engulfed in visual, aural, and aromatic projections. Guests, who themselves bring an ingredient and its story (their story together) to add to the archive, dine on a meal made from the pantry. The meal is

filmed and mounted in the archive. These archival traces are then experienced in another embodied gathering, and again, now, here, in digital archive.

[11] Food knowledge, like food itself, travels — whether through institutional extraction, or from body to body through migration, hospitality, and exchange. What is the temporal dimension of that knowledge? What is gained and lost as it moves across digital space? We invite you not to read or to look, but to watch and to consume, and in doing so, acknowledge the continued present life of the objects, people, and ideas hailing your engagement.

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