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Food as Food: Some Are Art, Some Are Not

In this paper, I shall argue that food and the process of cooking can be art and that cuisine and culinary arts should not be excluded from the art world for their range in artistic qualification and value, nor for the use of gustatory sense. I will be analyzing food through Tolstoy, Collingwood, and Korsmeyer's definitions of art and Gaut's cluster theory. There are two different kinds of food I will be talking about: food as food, and food as art. Food as food involves the gustatory senses, while food as art changes or removes its identity or role as food to instead be art. I will argue that food as food is capable of being art as well.

I. Food as food vs. Food as art.

I define food as food as that which is made with the intent of being consumed and includes the process in which it is made. I draw here the parallels between chef and painter and the act of cooking to the act of painting as both processes of production which are sometimes performances and take a greater role in the consumer experience. Food as art, however, is food in which physical consumption and gustatory senses are not meant to be involved. This includes foods that act as materials for a work of art and its edibility is thus no longer a purpose or core aspect of the overall form. An example is chocolate sculptures that are meant to be seen and enjoyed as a sculpture rather than as chocolate, even if its edible

material adds meaning or aesthetic value. Food as art is also food that is similarly elevated to the status of a “work of art,” meant almost entirely for decorative purposes while still being outwardly recognizable as food. Food as art often ignores the sense of taste, such as decorative chocolate, sprinkles, or fondant that either tastes bad or is entirely tasteless.

II. Discounting one form of consumption for the other: Aesthetic senses.

The main issue that most people will take with accepting gastronomical forays into the art world—especially that of food as food rather than art that involves food—is regarding the way one must use the sense of taste to experience food. Traditional and widely accepted forms of art like painting and music involve the sense of sight and hearing, both of which are considered objective and trustworthy, more so than with gustatory senses like taste and smell. Taste and smell seemingly encounter difficulty in establishing a “standard of taste” as they are considered highly subjective since everyone’s taste buds are different, while the other senses intake information from the world and environments on the basis of perceiving material reality.¹ Thus, the distinction between bodily and intellectual senses became also that of aesthetic senses—vision and hearing—versus worldly senses like taste and smell, with disregard to touch. This is, however, a conflation of “taste” as a personal preference with the sense of taste which relies upon one’s sensory organs as much as any other biological sense. Korsmeyer also contends this bias, stating that “increasing scientific understanding of...sensation supports the idea that there are many common foundations of taste experiences, no matter how diverse preferences can become.”² She cites B.C. Smith and Shaffer in this, arguing that gustatory taste enables normative standards due to its

¹ Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Aesthetic Value, Art, and Food,” *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, 2014, pp. 13-14, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0929-4_23.

² Korsmeyer, “Aesthetic Value”, 15.

ability to refer to properties of objects—such as if something is salty, bitter, or sweet. One's sense of taste relies upon their receptors as much as hearing or vision does theirs.

Human beings' sense of taste does vary, an example being how some children hate broccoli or bitter foods but may grow to tolerate them more. This is because around 4-14% of people possess the OR6A2 olfactory receptor gene that causes them to receive bitter sensations in greater intensity, a commonality between subjects that had unpleasant reactions towards coriander and cilantro in scientific studies.³ Children, in particular, have more taste papillae regarding sweet, savory, and bitter reception which results in children less often enjoying broccoli which, given possession of a bitter-taste phenotype,⁴ may be parsed as bitter and thus unpleasant.⁵ This sort of variation is not exclusive to the sense of taste than it is in hearing or vision, however. Just as we lose density in taste buds through aging, we also experience natural loss in hearing sensitivity by aging due to the natural loss of hair cells (hearing receptors) in the inner ear.⁶ One's lifestyle also affects this, through loud noises either through environment or music, and some forms of hearing loss are hereditary as well.⁷ The same goes for visual sense, where some people are born with or acquire bad eyesight through life, such as the frequent usage of digital screens or exposure

³ Xiaoming Song et al., "Coriander Genomics Database: A Genomic, Transcriptomic, and Metabolic Database for Coriander," *Horticulture Research* 7, no. 1 (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41438-020-0261-0>.

⁴ Kendra I Bell and Beverly J Tepper, "Short-Term Vegetable Intake by Young Children Classified by 6-n-Propylthiouracil Bitter-Taste Phenotype," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 84, no. 1 (January 2006): pp. 245-251, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/84.1.245>.

⁵ Bibiana Garcia-Bailo et al., "Genetic Variation in Taste and Its Influence on Food Selection," *OMICS: A Journal of Integrative Biology* 13, no. 1 (2009): pp. 69-80, <https://doi.org/10.1089/omi.2008.0031>.

⁶ David N. Furness, "Molecular Basis of Hair Cell Loss," *Cell and Tissue Research* 361, no. 1 (2015): pp. 387-399, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00441-015-2113-z>.

⁷ A Eliot Shearer and Michael S Hildebrand, "Hereditary Hearing Loss and Deafness Overview," trans. Richard JH Smith, GeneReviews® [Internet]. (U.S. National Library of Medicine, July 27, 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1434/>.

to bright lights. More importantly, the most common form of perception-altering and hereditary predisposition is color blindness, which has various forms based on the types of absent photoreceptors that affect what colors one is able to perceive. The most common type is red-green color blindness, which in those of Northern European ancestry, as many as 8 percent of men and 0.5 percent of women experience.⁸ I argue thus that like one's general expectation of most others to be able to perceive that a chair is colorful but crooked or a song is loud but slow in tempo, most people would also be able to perceive, just as objectively, that a sugar cube is sweet or that a cup of unsweetened lemonade is sour. Just as humans' sense of taste may vary due to genetic or other predisposed states, so do the other senses, and all of these are equally exceptional. A painter may adjust the paints they use to appeal more towards those unable to see red or green, just as someone may add dairy to their coffee or alter the preparation of broccoli to serve to those sensitive to bitterness.

Gustatory taste and gastronomy have, still, more in common with the current art world and what is already accepted in the aesthetic field. The topic of ethics is highly debated and discussed in both traditional aesthetic considerations and in food. Does the content of the work affect its aesthetic value on an ethical basis? To what extent should the formal qualities, including the quality of technique and skill involved, dictate the quality of the piece, and should ethics even be involved in the judgment of art at all? In terms of food, most people would agree with moderate formalism or autonomism wherein a delicious steak is delicious regardless of, or in spite of its origin from a sentient being butchered for the sake of consumption or of art. Some, like Eileen John, may judge a book's morally flawed

⁸ Bang Wong. "Color blindness." *Nature Methods* 8, no. 6 (2011): 441. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed December 27, 2021).
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A258435202/AONE?u=nysl_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=ca873e77.

content to enhance her aesthetic experience rather than detract from it.⁹ Similarly, some people may appreciate a meat dish more for the life that was given for it, and thus the experience may be deepened and enhanced for these complex sentiments. This is the same for ethics regarding religious abstinence¹⁰, source of non-meat ingredients, and other contextual elements like the chef themselves or the consumer's own socioeconomic opportunity to enjoy the dish, as all of these things affect the enjoyment or perceived quality of food, much like traditional art.

III. Food through definitions of art: The aesthetic sieves.

The definition of art itself is still controversial and thus we will be investigating food through different definitions and theories of art—that of the aforementioned philosophers: Tolstoy, Collingwood, and Gaut. In a very short summary, Tolstoy's critical criterion for art is in successful communication of a feeling or emotion, with sufficiency and quality judged through individuality, clarity, and sincerity.¹¹ Collingwood recognizes true art as necessarily intentional only in the creation of art as an exploration of the artist's self, where they work through something internally oppressive via artistic expression.¹² The produced work of art cannot be made with the intent of a certain genre. Gaut refuses to define art and instead proposes an approach to identifying or recognizing art instead with his cluster theory,

⁹ Eileen John, "Artistic Value and Opportunistic Moralism," *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 2006, pp. 331-342.

¹⁰ Korsmeyer, "Aesthetic Value", 13.

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, "What Is Art? and Essays on Art", trans. Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude (London, UK: Brotherhood Publishing Co, 1899).

¹² R.G. Collingwood, "The Principles of Art," in *Aesthetics a Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Stephanie Ross, and Sandra Shapshay (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 341-356.

which consists of ten criteria—none of which are either necessary or sufficient.¹³ His criteria are as follows^{14,15}:

1. Possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as “beautiful,” “graceful,” or “elegant.”
2. Being expressive of emotion.
3. Being intellectually challenging.
4. Being formally complex and coherent.
5. Having a capacity to convey complex meanings.
6. Exhibiting an individual point of view.
7. Being an exercise of creative imagination.
8. Being an artifact or performance, which is the product of a high degree of skill.
9. Belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, etc.)
10. Being the product of an intention to make a work of art.

Let us first look at what can be easily agreed upon by most to not be art—a McDonald’s Big Mac. Although food can be art, not all food is art. Gaut’s cluster approach is the most lenient due to its general and nonrestrictive nature, but an ordinary Big Mac fails to fulfill even one of them to any considerable degree. The critical element of a Big Mac that causes its almost automatic elimination from aesthetic consideration is in its necessarily

¹³ Berys Gaut, “Art’ as a Cluster Concept,” in *Aesthetics a Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Stephanie Ross, and Sandra Shapshay (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 461-474.

¹⁴ Berys Gaut, “Art’ as a Cluster Concept,” in *Aesthetics a Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Stephanie Ross, and Sandra Shapshay (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 461-474.

¹⁵ Sandra Shapshay, “Let’s Stop Trying to Define Art: ‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept” (2000) by Berys Gaut,” PHILO 258: Aesthetics (class lecture and PowerPoint, Hunter College, 2021).

uncreative, uniform construction by design. Both the recipe and the way one must create a McDonald's Big Mac dictates no variation or individual creative expression because it is a fast-food franchise menu item. The chefs making this construction-style sandwich dish must use premade patties and pre-prepared ingredients measured as closely as possible to the expected end product. Being a Big Mac necessitates its creation by a McDonald's employee, who is not only discouraged from "getting creative" with their orders but also punished for it. Any additions to a Big Mac would change it fundamentally from being a McDonald's Big Mac by definition—it would then be a modified Big Mac or a sandwich that resembles a Big Mac or is based on one.

For a McDonald's Big Mac to be what it is, it cannot be used to work out the chef's internal conflicts as Collingwood describes, or communicate any message or feeling as Tolstoy desires of art, since its purpose and intent is only for satiety. It holds no capacity to convey complex meanings, challenge intellectual faculties, be made with the intent for the creation of art, nor be formally complex and coherent. With the greatest generosity, some may perhaps gaze at an ordinary Big Mac and judge it in possession of positive aesthetic properties, claiming its form to be beautiful or elegant. Although a Big Mac can be made with a high degree of skill or technical sandwich-assembly ability, it is not a part of its definition nor core identity. It is extraneous and merit of the employee that made the no longer ordinary McDonald's Big Mac rather than the sandwich itself.

In contrast, many people might more easily accept or consider elite, gourmet dishes from high-end Michelin star restaurants to be works of art. Gourmet dishes in restaurants are expected to be presented in an aesthetically pleasing manner with elegance and can

afford minimalist styles due to the culture and expectations of wealthiness. What makes a dish gourmet is a combination of high-quality ingredients, high culinary and technical skill, and above all, aesthetic presentation. A wonderful dish can be made from great ingredients and by a skilled chef, but it is a requirement and expectation for dishes from high-end restaurants to be visually pleasing or appear to be formally complex. The high status of such gourmet dishes is noted in how they are referred to as dishes and not as food. It is also indicative of how they are considered elevated from regular food similar to a chair being elevated through skilled, elegant craftsmanship showcasing aesthetic properties. Such food may not be considered art through Collingwood, however, as they are still menu items and thus set out to recreate a recipe, as like a genre. These dishes are not necessarily conveying of any particular message or meaning either, and can similarly be argued to be lacking individuality and independent sincerity by Tolstoy's standard of art. It does fulfill multiple criteria in the cluster theory though, giving support to the image of gourmet chefs and culinarians that consider themselves artists. Although a menu item abiding by recipe, many gourmet chefs create each dish with the intent of making art, and the recipes themselves may have been designed to portray certain emotions or evoke certain feelings both in presentation and through taste. These dishes are also necessarily formally complex, and as they are made for and in high-end restaurants, there may be some level of creative freedom. Unlike a Big Mac, every ingredient is often only roughly the same intended size, as not every lamb chop or filet mignon is equally sized, and some recipes may be guidelines with requirements for the end-goal without strict instructions for every component involved. For

example, a gourmet steak dish requires certain ingredients, but the arrangement of the sauces or garnishes might be left up to the chef.

This lack of true individual creative freedom and expression in most gourmet food from high-end restaurants is of far less concern when it comes to gourmet private chefs. Rather than work entirely off a menu, they have the most creative freedom in high-end cuisine due to working for individuals and creating independent dishes and meals. As such, they may be requested to come up with a dish befitting their client's mood, according to a theme, or simply figuring things out themselves for what to serve. Although conveyance of complex message or expression of emotion is not necessary, they are nonetheless able to during work. Some clients may allow full creative freedom, lifting their own burden of choosing what to eat, thus allowing the chef to more explicitly work out anything internal and express it through the act of cooking if they so wish. Personalized gourmet cuisine comes closer to fulfilling the criteria of all three philosophers, as dishes are more able to be created with individual expression, creativity, and experimentation.

Freed from the shackles of professionalism and workplace standards are the products of home cooking. When one thinks of art as in music, sculptures, and paintings, one thinks of culture. Similarly, food is a key aspect of culture, and it is in the home's kitchen that one may find the most culturally and emotionally meaningful foods be made. A marriage of messages of well-wishing, love, the evocation of comfort, and visual aesthetic appeal completes the ideal homemade Japanese bento.

Kyaraben ("character-bento") in particular, are lunchboxes with food made to look like popular, often cute characters like Hello Kitty or Doraemon. Homemade bento was

already often made with food shaped to look like various objects—most popular examples being apple slices cut to resemble rabbits and carrots cut to be flowers—and dedicated housewives would frequently make themed bento for their spouses and children. The rise of kyaraben appeared in reaction to the boom in popularity of cute characters permeating Japanese popular aesthetics.¹⁶ Made with a greater focus on decorations and character designs, kyaraben necessitates visual design as it involves not only the cooking of food and craftsmanship in shaping them to look like characters and objects but also overall aesthetic visual arrangement of the entire box. Since bento are traditionally made for one's working spouse or children for lunch, they are inherently meant to look visually pleasing even if not kyaraben or specially designed since they will be eaten in front of others at school or at work.¹⁷

They are made for one's loved ones to actually eat, so tasting good is as important (if not more so depending on the cook) as looking good. Not every single bento, or even kyaraben which are made with more attention, is made with the intention of conveying deep or complex emotions or messages, but the medium itself provides plenty of space for doing so. A common practice is the use of nori (dried seaweed) to create attachable, edible shapes such as eyes or mouths for creating characters' faces, often placed on cooked rice. Even at its simplest form of cut nori on plain white rice, one is able to write clear messages using nori.

¹⁶ Debra J. Occhi, "Kyaraben (Character Bento): The Cutesification of Japanese Food in and beyond the Lunchbox," *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (January 2016): pp. 63-77, https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.2.1.63_1.

¹⁷ Occhi, "Kyaraben", 64.

Bento has also been used by angry housewives to show their frustration or wrath towards their spouses by packing the lunchbox with nothing but white rice and maybe some nori as a topping if they're generous. Bento is typically made of a portion of rice and multiple side dishes to go with them—although called "side" dishes, they are what really makes up a meal. They show their anger by creating bento the complete opposite of a love-filled homemade lunch jam-packed with delicious and often favored side dishes as a show of affection and care. Similar to personal gourmet chefs, they cater to the individual but possess even more creative power and freedom because the relationship of the subject to the recipient is familial rather than professional.

Kyaraben is overall formally complex, necessarily aesthetically pleasing, and capable of conveying messages and expressing one's emotions both complex (displeasure, but amenable to reconciliation by including at least nori or one side dish) and simple (made with love). It thus fulfills plenty of criteria towards Gaut's cluster theory and shares the capability for personal expression of internal puzzles with the previously discussed private professional chefs. Although a high degree of technical and culinary skill is not necessary, the standard for a decent or better bento is by no means low, particularly with kyaraben which require also a greater skill with aesthetic arrangements and is often also shown on social media as like an artist with their art. Much like the traditional art world involving art galleries, kyaraben culture lives in the digital art world on social media and blogs.¹⁸ As kyaraben passes through the sieve of all three definitions or standards of art, this remains the strongest contender to be considered art thus far.

¹⁸ Klara Seddon, "Bento Blogs: Japanese Women's Expression in Digital Food Culture," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 3 (November 2011): pp. 301-319, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770x.2011.624798>.

Although the typical image of food as food seems difficult to reasonably envision in the same light as a Picasso painting or a Hadyn concerto, not all food is made equal or made to be art. Just as a Big Mac is incontestably one of the most emotionally sterilized, uniform, and standardized constructions of food, a Michelin star masterpiece that many may consider to be artistic and beyond “food” is still food as well. The components, style, quality, and aesthetic value of food vary greatly but the lowest common denominator should not invalidate food as a whole as being a potential medium for art. To render all food as incapable of being art in itself based on the incredible range of food as a category and medium or on bias against gustatory senses due to being atypical in the current art world would be reductive at best. By limiting ourselves to considering only art created entirely by hand for visual or auditory viewership, we exclude poetry and readymade art like the revolutionary Brillo Boxes (1964) by Andy Warhol or the Fountain (1917) by Marcel Duchamp. And by limiting ourselves by excluding works or creations that involve literal consumption and gustatory senses, we exclude the potential culinary-aesthetic revolution that might open the art world to even more aspects of art, aesthetics, and human ontology. Modern art has already been moving towards the ontological and metaphysical with performance art and self-aware exhibits.

We humans have five senses—why limit ourselves to, at most, three?

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