

What's That in Your Mouth? The Performativity of Taste
David Szanto, Concordia University

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My thanks to the First Nations on whose territory this conference is taking place, and with apologies for not having asked first.

I'd like to read you the abstract I submitted to the CAFS conference organizers:

While taste is generally framed as an experience that takes place on the tongue, the sensory perception of food or drink in the mouth may better be considered as multi-modal, multi-sited, and emergent, contingent as much on temporal and spatial relations as it is caused by physio-chemical stimuli. In this paper, I follow Richard Schechner's notion of the "co-authored performance" and Jane Bennett's "vital materiality" of non-human things in order to reframe what is conventionally called *tasting*. Based on research-creation work conducted during two iterations of the performative sensory environment "Displace (Mediations of Sensation)", a collaborative art-and-anthropology project installed in Montreal and The Hague in 2011 and 2012, I propose "gustation" as the ecology of perceptions that take place when edible matter approaches and enters the mouth. By exploring gustation as a performance of assembled material-discursive agencies—including cultural heritage, the built environment, social interaction, food materiality, human physiology, and the combinatory effects of the sensorium—my aim is to destabilize the fixity of standard definitions and create opportunities for new interpretations of other food-based conventions at the extended sociopolitical scale.



Rereading this now, I have to laugh a little, because while it is indeed one way of describing what I am about to talk about, it all emerged from an event that raised a question that puzzled me rather strongly and for quite some time. It even hurt a little. (A little.) You see, what happened is that a lot of people started spitting out some food that I had made. And this is odd, because I'm a pretty good cook. So I started to explore the whys of the sudden and rather violent expulsions that I was witnessing, and I began to interrogate the framings of some rather simple notions—or better, some simple *seeming* notions: that is, "cooking", "food", and "taste". I already knew that

the things I had given those people to put in their mouths were neither quite “cooked” in the conventional sense, nor quite “food” in the way that they embody both sensory and symbolic attributes. But what was curious is that the tastes that those things carried were quite readily identifiable—not so off-the-charts as to cause the scenes of disgust and drama that I witnessed.

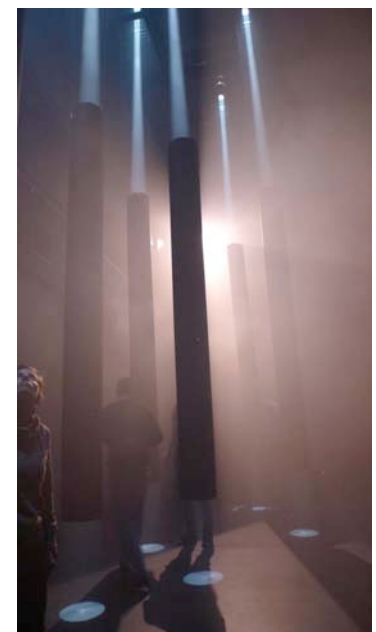
My purpose with this talk, then, is to propose a reframing of “taste” within the milieu of performativity, and to formalize a few thoughts about the ways in which taste may be better viewed as a performance of multiple and distributed agencies, rather than a reductive series of causal relationships between food biochemistry



and human neuro-physiology. In fact, I will also suggest that it is the *human as well* that is performed during tasting, and that *taste* should be decentered from both the food ‘object’ as carrier as well as the mouth as a singular site of perception. Taste, rather, might better be conceived as an assemblage that emerges from the ecologies in which it takes place. And, as I have noted in the rather turgid abstract I just read, by reframing the relatively simple notion of taste through this lens of performativity, I intend to build towards the possibility of reframing other, much more complex constructs within food systems. So, as I reflect on why so many participants in my recent projects seem to have a hard time ingesting what I have been offering them, I also hope to elicit some response and feedback from you. Perhaps my words will be somewhat easier to swallow than my food.

The Research Context

A little context: This reporting is based on two iterations of a research-creation project in which I have been collaborating for a number of years. Displace is an immersive sensory environment in which visitors pass through a variety of spaces that each produce a number of different effects in and on the bodies of the individuals. Senses of touch, smell, sound, vision, and gustation are activated, as well as those of proprioception,



thermoception, and other modalities including, for some, synesthesia. The project was conceived and is co-directed by Chris Salter and David Howes—professors of computation arts and sensory anthropology, respectively—and TeZ, a sound artist and media arts professor. In its first iteration, Displace was constructed at the Hexagram-Concordia Centre for Research and Creation in Montreal, as part of the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting. The conceit was to create a kind of “gymnasium for the senses,” as David Howes called it—a training ground for anthropologists to tune their capacities for using more than just their eyes and ears in doing ethnographic research. Visitors—mostly delegates from the AAA conference—moved through the installation in groups of six, spending periods of time in a series of chambers that were mostly very dark, and culminating in a light-and-sound performance that took place on a vibrating hexagonal platform. Other senses were stimulated throughout, including with the use of a series of liquids and gels that I produced. These were intended to disconnect the sensory experience—in the eyes, nose, hands, mouth—from readily identifiable cultural referents. The colors, tastes, and smells of the liquids mostly did not line up in ordered framings in visitors minds. The agar gels—multilayered, and simultaneously slippery and dry—produced both surprise and disgust, and once again confusion. All of the gustibles were plant-based: I used hibiscus flower, chilies, seaweed, leafy greens, mushrooms, berries, onion and celery, citrus, and cinchona bark in their making.

The second iteration of Displace took place in September 2012 at the TodaysArt Festival in The Hague in the Netherlands.



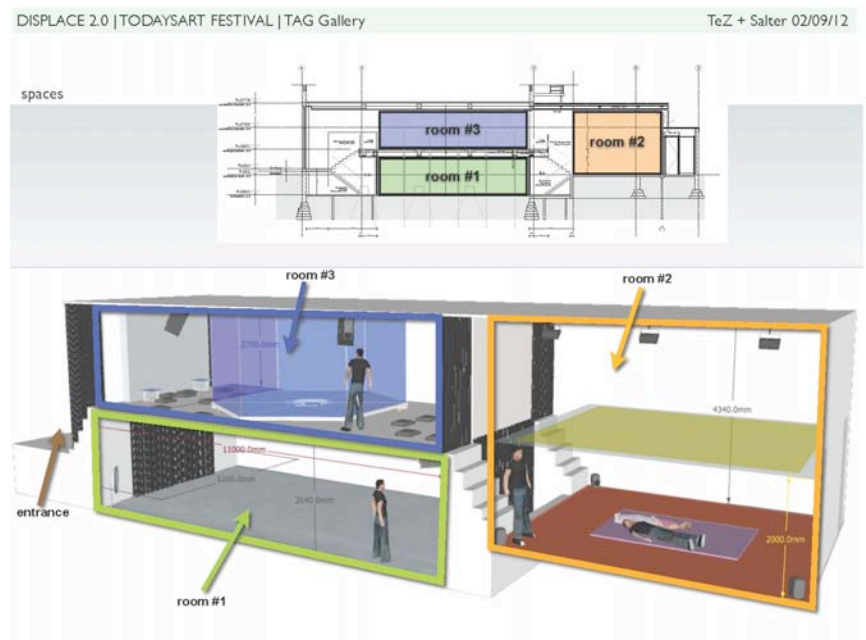


Rather than just a small number of anthropologists, here the audience was more than 800 experiential art fans. Our purpose with Displace v2.0 was to focus on the combinatory effects of sensory stimuli, and to investigate both the localized and diffuse agencies of material in the construction of an environment. Specifically, an environment that, rather than performing itself, performed the *individuals* who entered into it—that is, it made the human actors the site of the art. Rather than confuse the tongue and the mind, my own aim was to use much more familiar “tastes”—the relatively universal sweet and salty—and then adjust complementary gustation modalities such as texture, trigeminal sensations, and color. I again

produced liquids and solids, aiming for strong sensations that would act in concert with the other stimuli that were present. In terms of physical space, we took over a former art gallery composed of

three distinct rooms, each at a different elevation within the gallery. Again, visitors moved from one chamber to the next, but in this case there was no limitation on group size, nor a specific length of time spent in any one area. The first space consisted of an entirely dark room, lit irregularly and infrequently by ultra-short bursts from a strobe light. The floor was entirely covered in rock salt, and parabolic speakers produced a sharply defined

corridor of binaural sound across which the visitor would have to traverse. Prior to entering, visitors removed their shoes and put on thin plastic booties in order to sense the rock-salt floor, and were then handed a small chunk of rock sugar coated



in a thick layer of very finely powdered table salt. In the second chamber, no mouth-related activity took place, although two scents—one ‘sweet’ and one ‘salty’—were present, along with light, sound, and haptic elements. The final space was where most of the food-ejection took place. Once again, a hexagonal platform served as a central site of experience, with a similar sound-light-vibration composition running in a continuous loop. Around the space were a number of “gustation stations”—containers with my salty and sweet liquids and solids. The



sweet liquid consisted of an ultra-high concentration of sucrose, corn syrup, and glucose, to which I added an extremely bitter cinchona-bark and hops extract. The liquid was then tinted blue-green. The salty liquid—a strong saline solution—was acidulated with citric and tartaric acid, and then dyed red-orange. Both were served in shallow glass cups—tealight holders from IKEA, in fact. A sweet solid—once again colored blue-green—was also offered. In this case it was *tire éponge*, or sponge toffee, with the addition of cayenne pepper and ground birdseye chilies. The final element, the salty solid, paralleled the sensory modalities of the other gustibles: they were intensely salty and minty agar-agar gels, cut into one-centimeter-thick hexagons and, like the salty liquid, bright red-orange.

Visitors frequently tried the liquids first, before proceeding on to the solids. This was likely partly due to their placement—the liquids were available first

when entering the third gallery space—and partly because they were pre-served in the shallow cups, suggesting a more immediate invitation to consume. The solids, conversely, were placed in large glass cylinders accompanied by serving tongs, which the visitors had to use themselves. Lighting may also have served a role—the liquids were more immediately visible than the solids because of the limitations of the light tables on which the gustibles sat. The taste of both liquids, while intensely sweet or salty, appeared to be more easily accepted than then the solids. The bitter and sour additions seemed to reduce the overall intensity and increase the complexity of



the flavor experience. Both solids, however, produced much stronger reactions. The sponge toffee—crunchy, brittle, and crumbly—dissolved gradually in the mouth, creating a mouth experience that was at first sweet and caramelly, followed soon after by an ongoing burn from the chilies. Depending on the individual, this burn either increased to the point of displeasure or faded until another bite of toffee was taken. The salty-minty gels were similarly crumbly in the mouth, but because agar agar does not dissolve in the same way that animal-based gelatin does, they required more chewing and mouthwork to make them swallowable. This increased the total surface area of the gel, *intensifying* the salty taste, even as the chewer was likely expecting a reduction in the sensory experience. My own perception—knowing full well in advance what to expect—was that of taking in an enormous mouthful of seawater and a suffocating noseful of menthol vapor. It was, for me, a sensation that I associate with drowning, but in two ways simultaneously, and all due to my own actions.

And yes, it was mostly gels that I witnessed arcing from peoples' mouths that day. But not only the gels—the other gustibles as well. And at the same time, not all visitors found the gels unmanageable. In fact, several people I witnessed quite liked them and went back for more. And so here is where the questions of taste, perception, and combinatory environmental effects started to emerge.



The Theory

Two chunks of theory serve as a basis for this discussion—the first relating to performance and performativity theory, and the second focusing on material agency.

J. L. Austin's collection of lectures from the 1950s, *How To Do Things with Words* introduced the notion of the *performative speech act*, a discursive utterance made within certain conditions so as to bring about some kind of change in the world. (A common example is that of a religious leader pronouncing two people as wed during a marriage ceremony.) When the book was published in 1962, it was in some ways a performative act in itself, producing a space of discourse and perhaps triggering a subsequent ongoing and more complex interpretation of performativity across the scapes of society and the human body—among other places. Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler are two notable contributors to this discourse. Performativity has since been discussed in the context of food, often overlapping with actor-network theory and other ecological approaches that view food systems as diffuse assemblages of interactions among various living and non-living congealments of agency. A nascent 'performative turn' in food studies may even be taking place—or perhaps it already has, and will be formally historicized at some point down the road. In any case, writers like Julie Guthman, Peter Atkins, Becky Mansfield, and John Law point to performativity theory as useful in discussing how food systems appear to produce effects on both themselves and the actors they comprise, in non-linear and emergent ways. Some of these—John Law in particular but also taste historian Viktoria von Hoffmann—have in particular highlighted the performativity of *text acts*, that is, that the writing about food systems can alter their nature and the ways in which they produce phenomena.



At about the same time that Austin's writing on performativity was emerging as being of interest to a larger audience, intersections of sociology, anthropology and theatre were starting to produce extended discussions on the theory of *performance*—a notion that is distinct from performativity, but nonetheless related. Erving Goffman has written on the "performance of self" as a kind of unscripted role playing that is both brought about by, and constructive of, society. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* and *field* complex can be read as a system of producing the capacity to act—that is, to perform—in a series of "regulated improvisations," to use Ben Highmore's wording. Victor Turner and Richard Schechner then usefully

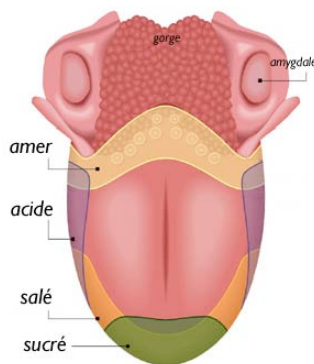
demonstrate the interdependent and parallel worlds of social drama and theatrical drama, ultimately portraying performance as being *co-authored* by human spectators and audiences. According to Schechner, a performance takes place “between” members of the assemblage, rather than being sited specifically within



one or another of them. As his discussions of environmental theatre also express, the spatial and built environments also come into play in what is performed.

This leads usefully to the question of material agency, which has been discussed extensively in both foodish and non-foodish realms. My favorite description of the resistive power of matter comes from Peter Atkins’ writing on milk and other edible substances. He talks about the “sheer bloody-mindedness” of food, “the obstinate reluctance of the material...to cooperate in the process of analytical exploration.” An alternate version of things comes from Jane Bennett’s work on the “vital materiality” of so-called *dead stuff* like food. Bennett portrays food “as actant inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer-producer of salient, public effects.” However, like many scholars who have dealt with the capacity of matter to act, my purpose in invoking these references is not to suggest that food has some kind of independent intentionality or free will, but that its capacity to produce effects has been both underestimated AND arbitrarily insulated from the larger ecologies in which it participates.

All right, so let’s put a pin in all this perform-y theory and consider for the moment the concept of *taste*.



As a sense, taste is conventionally framed as taking place on the tongue, with ‘the basic tastes’ understood as sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. In the last decade or so, the Japanese notion of *umami* has crept into Western discourse and been named the ‘fifth taste’, while in 2005, a team of French scientists named *fat* as a sixth. Yet non-European food cultures also consider *acrid* and *pungent* to be among the basic tastes (among others), and a whole range of textural and other mouthfeel experiences contribute to what we describe when food enters the oral cavity. These include heat and cold, as well as the trigeminal sensations of astringency, piquancy, and metallicness. What is more—and as anyone with a cold will tell you—the sense of smell is intimately linked to our perceptions of taste. Odors enter the olfactory

system through the throat and the palate, but also of course via the nose, and so tasting might be said to initiate significantly before opening our mouths. So too do sight, touch, and even hearing precede taste, and each with their own combinatory effects. And as recent research across fields as disparate as psychology, French history, and food marketing have shown, text and its symbolic representations of meaning become interwoven with taste, long before any food may even have been prepared. Many other theorists on the way we perceive and represent—from Barthes to Mauss to Bourdieu to Deleuze—support this position. Taste cannot be taken as pre-given, isolated either within the food matter or within the taster's body: we do not “taste” molecules directly, and the socio-physio state of each person is contingent on the ecological relations in which he or she is located.

So how to figure taste from this extensive apparatus of elements? Becky Mansfield has described food “quality” in similar terms—emerging from “sets of interactions [within a production-consumption web] that create different constellations of what counts as quality.” I borrow from Mansfield's notion of the *geography of quality* and the “complex sociomaterial



relations” from which it emerges when considering the ecology of taste. Taste then becomes a diffusion of interactions, rather than a rigidly framed or sited bodily experience. In fact, I think it is preferable to get away from the word taste altogether (for now, anyway), and introduce “gustation” as a way to—somewhat ham-handedly—underscore the complex system of conditions that come to produce it. This is not to say that I reject that food has physio-chemical properties and that humans have neuro-physio sensing organs. Rather, it is to allow a more heterogeneous set of agencies involved in gusting to come forward.

Based on this somewhat abbreviated overview of taste, as well as the agencies of matter, of doing, and of discourse, my point is that the phenomena that emerge when food approaches and enters the mouth are best perceived as an ecology. That is, an inextricable set of articulations between humans and their sensing organs and their histories, spaces both built and conceptual, other material stuff and its sensorial qualities, language and symbolic representation, and the processes that these confederations tend to make possible.

In the Displace installations, therefore, the experimental apparatus existed both within the gallery space and outside of it, within the participants and their cultural background, and within the gustibles as well as their placement in the context of food. The crunchy texture of the rock salt underfoot in the first chamber, combined

with the crispy binaural audio corridor and flat milliseconds-long strobe burst, made the gusting experience of the salty sugar crystal even more intense. As the powdery salt layer dissolved on the outside, an urgency was created to crunch into the crystal, yet it was unknown what the effect would be. Similarly, the lightless room—with no visible exit except during the strobe burst—produced an urgency in the mind. Upon leaving this first area, the visitors passed through a heavy velour curtain, infused with a rose and spice aroma that was both comforting and suffocating. The smell of lime and cedar from the second chamber, then, and the



wash of LED-light on the ceiling above, constructed a new set of sensory overwhelms, the foundation for the visitors' arrival in the final chamber with the gustation stations and the most intense visual and sonic environment. Here, the almost cocktail-party-like set up, including the self-serve "food" offerings, was the most empowering. Yet the modalities of color and texture, particularly in the gels and sponge toffee, were reversed from conventions of industrial foods. The red-orange gels connoted berry-flavored candies, soft and chewy and reminiscent of childhood sugar binges. The actual in-mouth experience was highly contradictory, so while the salty-mintiness was theoretically bearable, as a complex of visual-taste-history-environment-expectation, it needed to be spat out. Yet, as I said earlier, not always. Reactions ran the gamut from coming back for more to vertiginous leaps down the gallery stairs and into the street, where more than just a single gel emerged from unhappy oral cavities on more than one occasion.



What was happening in people's mouths and bodies and minds during Displace cannot be said to have been exclusively sited in those humans. Rather, it is better conceived as a congealing, dissolving, and re-forming series of performative emergences. The environments performed the bodies and the effects within them; the bodies performed as actors within those environments; the histories of food



colors and shapes, sensory art, and cultural expectations performed as a field of improvisational potential. And taste was performed *between* all of these articulated agencies.

My own role in this apparatus was to set up a number of what might be called *performative taste acts*. Rather than words coming out of the mouth within felicitous conditions, I made it possible for food things to go into the mouth. And because of the articulations between those mouths, bodies, histories, discursive and sensorial environments, real-time processes of interaction, and the combinatory effects of all of it, the conditions in which the food performed were, as often as not, *infelicitous*. That is, “taste” did not perform according to conventional

expectations, and so those food things came flying back *out* of the mouth shortly after entering it.

The Upshot

So what? You may now be thinking. David always says that his work in gastronomy isn't about cooking, so why spend so much talking about people's reactions to his food?

My purpose in destabilizing taste and re-locating it in the *performative between* is part of a larger project. For taste, and the expertise of certain individuals who are trained and skilled and sensitive in it, have become another dominant structure that tends to centralize power and attention. What are created are tidy, smooth-surfaced concepts, so insulated from other agencies that they acquire the perception of being singular truths. These tidy and smooth surfaces tend to resist challenge to their truthiness, which is why I think the tools that performativity provides us with are so useful in food studies.

Performativity helps to destabilize framings and rough up the surfaces in order to create opportunities for interrogation. These rough patches become affordances on which other systems of thought or experience can take hold, ultimately destabilizing whatever concepts may have acquired too much fixity and power. Whether they be taste or obesity or the financialization of food or cultural heritage or agricultural

policy, allowing for the messiness of performance brings forward all sorts of interesting affordances, making these constructs more porous and more open to articulation with other ideas and other concepts from other zones of food.