

Eating My Words: Talking About Food in Performance

Yael Raviv

*Speech leaves no mark in space. . . . But writing contaminates;
writing leaves its trace, a trace beyond the life of the body.*

—Susan Stewart, 1993

Following a recent presentation of Miwa Koizumi's installation *NY Ice Cream Flavors* at *Umami: food and art festival* (2008) I heard an audience member comment on Koizumi's lox ice cream: "this could use more acid." This remark, though insightful from a culinary point of view, seemed somehow irrelevant in this particular case. When I later tried to understand why the comment disturbed me, I realized it embodied many of the questions I had regarding the discussion and analysis of food in the context of artistic performance. The slippage between food as artistic medium and food as culinary medium is most pronounced in live performance, particularly performances involving actual consumption. This ambiguity calls into question the tools we currently use for the analysis of these performances: whether we use terminology borrowed from the culinary world or from the art world, we seem to lose an important part of the work in the process of description and analysis. By examining some of the projects presented at *Umami: food and art festival*, I would like to call into question the way we read and interpret these performances, considering the role of food as an artistic medium rather than as subject or material.

Umami brought together artists who use food in their work with food professionals. This two week long event, co-produced with Roulette in SoHo, was created in 2008 to promote a two-fold mission: to encourage non-commercial, time-based art, showing that art is an integral part of everyday life and accessible to a wide public, and to

* I would like to thank the following people who not only contributed greatly to *Umami: food and art festival*, but also to my thinking on food and art: Ame Gilbert, Annie Lanzillotto, Fast Forward, Einav Gefen, Judith Levin, Will Goldfarb, Anne McBride, and Caron Smith.

present food as a powerful, relevant medium. The festival focused on artistic creations that are multi-disciplinary, multi-sensory, and grounded in the everyday. By focusing on food, *Umami* was able to promote art that is accessible on a variety of levels (leading to a different notion of the “value” of art) and to draw attention to issues of consumption in our society. One of the main goals of the festival was to promote collaboration and dialog between artists and food professionals in order to possibly lead to new insights, new ideas, and to enhance both artistic production and culinary practice.

As the producer of *Umami*, I was privileged to work with some wonderful artists and food professionals, and benefited from the aid of several local organizations from both the art and the food worlds, including the James Beard Foundation, Franklin Furnace, the Fales Collection at NYU, and the Experimental Cuisine Collective, among others (as well as the generous support of several food and beverage manufactures and purveyors). I enjoyed the position of participant-observer: not one of the artists, yet intimately familiar with the work; not quite belonging to either world, but privy to the insights of thoughtful practitioners from both. In a way, my position embodies my project in this paper by straddling the worlds of both art and food.

In this paper I will explore the blurry boundaries between food in culinary settings and its use as an artistic medium. I want to suggest that food can serve as an example of the need to rethink our ideas about what constitutes art, how we assign value, and how we form a division between art and life, and between artistic medium and craft. Granted, the debate of “what is art” is long and extensive and, not being a philosopher or an art historian, I feel ill-prepared for tackling the full range of its related questions. However, I wish to come to this debate from a different viewpoint, focusing on what the notion of food as medium can add to this larger question.

This discussion seems particularly timely due to the recent changes in the food world and their impact on the way artists employ food in their work. Certain “conceptual” chefs, such as Ferran Adrià of El Bulli in Spain or Grant Achatz of Alinea Restaurant in Chicago, have contributed to a public perception of food as a creative medium by positing food as works of art as well as merely dinner. As the chef became more like an artist and the restaurant became a site for

unexpected surprises and multi-sensory experiences, artists who used food began exploring the medium with new insights and interests. Mimi Oka and Doug Fitch, for example, began their careers as “sustenance artists” by staging fantastic feasts inspired by F.T. Marinetti’s *Futurist Cookbook*. In such works, the audience dined in the middle of a pond or excavated their food out of baked clay sculptures. By working with food, Oka and Fitch examined questions of consumption, consumerism, and the value of art. Food provided a tool for the creation of time-based projects that force their audience to pause and think, to reexamine everyday objects and acts. In recent years, though still focused on consumption, Oka and Fitch have turned more and more towards inedible objects or refuse (what remains of food after it is digested). They are still interested in exploring similar questions, but their earlier work focused on the act of consumption and enjoyment, which seems redundant compared with the experience at certain restaurants today. Kelly Dobson is another example of an artist whose work with food blurs the boundaries between art and life, and forces the audience to look at everyday objects in a new light. Dobson’s work utilizes her engineering background to produce “talking” household machines.¹ Whereas Oka and Fitch move from actual consumption towards an exploration of inedible or refuse products, Dobson’s work circumvents the problem of working with food today: her interactive blender forces her audience to focus on the mode of production, on the process, and on sound, rather than on consumption of a product, or visual presentation. She thereby positions herself further away from the realm of actual culinary production and the restaurant world, a seeming necessity in order for her works to be deemed as art.

The change in the food world, as well as in these and other artists’ approaches to working with food, seems to demand a corresponding change in the language of speaking and writing about food as a medium. It implies that we must expand our view and definition of food as a creative medium. The range of responses, approaches, and multi-sensory experiences generated by artists working with food today not only emphasizes food’s power and range as a creative medium, but also forces us to reexamine the way

¹ Kelly Dobson, 2003-2004, <http://web.media.mit.edu/~monster/blendie/>, last accessed January, 2010.

we view food in a culinary setting by putting it in the context of artistic creation.

MISE EN PLACE

This paper focuses on artists who use food as a *medium*. I wish to distinguish these artists' works from those of artists who use food as their *subject*—for instance, a painting of peaches by Paul Cézanne, Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can*, or Juzo Itami's movie *Tampopo*. The works I discuss here also differ from these examples in that they are performance-based. These live events emphasize all that is unique about food as a medium, amplifying some of specific characteristics relevant to this discussion. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has demonstrated, cooking techniques, dining rituals, and culinary codes are already highly elaborated, charged with meaning, and theatrical. Food, like performance, is "an art of the concrete . . . alive, fugitive and sensory."² She argues that in order for food to perform as art it must go through a series of dissociations: dissociation of food from eating and eating from nourishment.³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines the work of performing artists who use food as their medium by dividing them into categories according to their relationship to the food system: to what part of the food cycle do they refer, do they work with it or against it? She refers to a previous survey by Linda Montano who also discussed artists who use food as a medium, dividing the work into categories such as "food as political statement," "feminist statement," or "sculptural material."⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett questions Montano's system, stating that, while descriptively accurate, it is not instructive or illuminating regarding the relationship between different works. In light of the recent changes in the food world, it seems appropriate to review and perhaps add another layer to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's analysis.

Coming from the discipline of Performance Studies, which focuses on the study of temporal, multi-sensory, live events, I never

² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium," in *Performance Research* 4:1 (Spring 1999), 1.

³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 3.

⁴ Linda Montano, "Food and Art," in *High Performance* 4:4 (Winter 1981-2), 46-55.

questioned food's legitimacy as an art form. Other scholars who contemplated food's relationship to art often began by considering the problem of a temporary medium to qualify as Art—a question that for someone engaged in the study of live performance has already been answered.⁵ Other scholars who may follow the aesthetic theory that Art should offer an experience for its own sake, with no “instrumental” value, would also immediately discount food as a candidate for this category. Philosopher Noël Carroll's critique of the traditional Western notion of aesthetic experience examines the centrality of the idea of an aesthetic experience as one “valued for its own sake” in Western thought and questions its validity for defining and experiencing artwork.⁶ I would suggest that the traditional Western concept of the artwork as having no instrumental value has hindered the viewing of culinary products as artistic creations.

When Carroll contemplates how to identify art, he states that “[c]lassifying a candidate as artwork . . . is integral to determining how we should respond to it.” Namely, should we interpret it or clean it up (or in this case, interpret or eat it up)? Carroll continues to suggest a way to define works of art, particularly in cases when, “the suspicion is abroad that it is not art (such as in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, Merce Cunningham's choreography, or Damien Hirst's work).” His suggestion can be useful here: “We classify a candidate as an artwork by placing it in a tradition.” We tell a historical narrative that places the work in relationship to previous, already agreed upon art objects (either as a development or as a revolt against a previous practice). One of Carroll's central assertions regarding this method of classification is that narrating rather than defining art stresses the important role of artistic aims, or intentions. It positions art as a social practice.⁷

The fact that food is transient and utilitarian has contributed to some scholars' positioning it as a “minor” or “low” art. The philosophical debate concerning the distinction between high and low art, or between traditional forms and new forms, “serious” art

⁵ See: Glenn Kuehn, “How Can Food Be Art?”, in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. A. Light and J.M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 194-212.

⁶ Noël Carroll, “Aesthetic Experience, Art and Artists,” in *Aesthetic Experience*, eds. R. Shusterman and A. Tomlin (London and NY: Routledge, 2008), 145-165.

⁷ Noel Carroll, “Identifying Art,” in *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (NY: Routledge, 1999), 249-64.

and mass art or entertainment (film, photography, the internet, and many other new forms come under such scrutiny) is wide-ranging, but it is worth mentioning here, since the question of food's status as art is often related to it.⁸ Glenn Kuehn's critique of Elizabeth Telfer's work on food examines Telfer's assertion that food is a "minor" art. Kuehn attempts to refute this point by using John Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience, asserting that an aesthetic experience is based on interaction and can be found in everyday experiences.⁹ Dewey's assertion that ordinary experiences within everyday life could be appreciated as aesthetic experiences, and that traditional classifications of "Art" hinder our appreciation and understanding of new forms, is particularly useful here since the artists this paper describes make a point of working the blurry division between art and life, and, in fact, have chosen to work with food because of its relationship to both, allowing them to mine the slippage and ambiguity between the worlds of art and everyday life, between the categories of "high" and "low."¹⁰

Carolyn Korsmeyer's work on the concept of taste illuminates the implications of employing the word "taste" to the evaluation of art. "As a bodily sense, taste is inevitably linked with pleasure or displeasure [providing] a sensory response that tends to carry a positive or a negative balance."¹¹ In other words, objects are not only perceived, but also liked or disliked, emphasizing the subjectivity of the experience. Since taste is one of the five senses, it also implies the necessity of a first-hand experience (direct contact) for making an aesthetic judgment. Both the notion of the subjectivity of artistic experience and the need for direct contact play an important role in evaluating food-performances. The concept of taste, as analyzed by Korsmeyer, emphasizes the significant contribution that a discussion of food and performance may offer to the wider debate on the nature of art and the art experience.

In Korsmeyer's further work on food, she demonstrates that the most significant element in appreciating food as an aesthetic category lays in its "meaning-bearing qualities that give food its cognitive

⁸ For example, see: John A. Fisher, "High Art vs. Low Art," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. B. Gaut and D. MaIver Lopes (London and NY: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ Kuehn, "How Can Food Be Art?"

¹⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 2005).

¹¹ Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Taste," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 269.

significance,” positioning the subjective pleasure we derive from food as secondary.¹² This argument is important in the context of this paper, since I propose that one of the innovations in the work of new or experimental chefs is that they are conscious of these “meaning-bearing” properties and employ them deliberately in their creations to give the diner pause and make her think. As stated above, the work of chefs like Ferran Adrià or Grant Achatz have influenced the way artists use food today, and should therefore also influence the way we think and write about food and art. Attending meetings of the Experimental Cuisine Collective, a collaboration between the Chemistry and Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health Departments at NYU and professional local chefs such as Will Goldfarb, I often witnessed discussions on the relationship between the “new” cookery or, as it is sometimes known, “Molecular Gastronomy” and science.¹³ However, the more I learn about the thinking and influences behind this “new” cooking, the more I see its connection to the world of art. These chefs may employ new techniques, equipment, or substances borrowed from laboratories, but what they produce with these tools are culinary creations that are designed to surprise, to provoke, and to make us think. I want to emphasize that not everyone who uses gelling agents or creates foams is necessarily an artist, but some of these chefs attempt to make the diner stop and think, see a substance or a dish in a new light, and reevaluate her preconceptions. They do so by using food as a medium, by dissociating eating from nutrition, by blurring the boundaries between life and art. Ferran Adrià’s apple caviar or dried fish in cotton candy are not just playful, but also thought provoking.

This paper will focus on the work of Mimi Oka and Doug Fitch in *Orphic Memory Sausage*, and on Miwa Koizumi’s *New York Ice Cream Flavors*. Both were presented as part of *Umami: food and art festival*, 2008. These artists use food deliberately, as part of a larger project to alter our perception of the everyday, by blurring the distinction between art and life. By looking at these artists’ work, I

¹² Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Taste, Food, and the limits of Pleasure,” in *Aesthetic Experience*, 128.

¹³ Inspired by the work of Hervé This in France, the collective meets on a monthly basis to discuss issues at the intersection of food, science, and professional cookery, particularly exploring what is known as Molecular Gastronomy.

will highlight some of the distinctions between using food in a culinary setting and employing it as a medium for artistic expression. I argue that, because of its precarious position between art and life, the discussion of food as a medium lacks a more specialized language and tools. We have developed a sophisticated vocabulary for analyzing food in a restaurant or in culinary settings and we have complicated and subtle ways of talking and writing about art. We tend to borrow language from either realm for discussing food in the context of artistic performance—"It needs a little more acid," for example—but often what we need is some synthesis of the two. We need a vocabulary that can adequately refer to taste and smell sensations in an aesthetic context, and this will help us to narrate them into a (hi)story of art. These tools can serve not only toward a better understanding of artists' work, but also may be applied to the work of chefs who use food as a medium in a culinary context, helping enhance our understanding of what constitutes art.

ORPHIC MEMORY SAUSAGE

Mimi Oka and Doug Fitch describe themselves as "sustenance artists." They share a background in theater as well as having studied at the Cordon Bleu in Paris. Each one had independently been impressed with Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook* and, after reconnecting in Japan, they joined forces to create work inspired by it. Beginning with edible objects and progressing over the past thirteen years to entire feasts, Oka and Fitch have created a series of events they refer to as "Orphic feasts." The word Orphic is derived from the art movement Orphism: painting for its own sake, not meant as a representation of anything else. In the same vein, Oka and Fitch wish to explore food as a medium for its own sake, calling their creations "art in edible media."¹⁴ In other words, Oka and Fitch define themselves not as sculptors, or performers, or photographers that happen to focus on food in their work, but rather as artists whose medium *is* food. Whether they create an edible object, present it in a gallery and invite the audience to consume it as part of the exhibition, build an enormous sandwich with an entire village in France and

¹⁴ <http://www.orph.us>, last accessed January, 2010.

consume it with the community, or offer their audience an elaborate meal around a floating table in the middle of a pond, Oka and Fitch use food to extend our perception of art. The fact that their medium is consumable in the most literal sense is central to their work. Oka and Fitch also exploit the communal nature and layers of meaning associated with different foodstuffs, but the edibility of their chosen medium was essential to their work until very recently—when the work of some current chefs made them feel that they needed to find new avenues of exploration.

For *Orphic Memory Sausage* (2008), Oka and Fitch invited the audience to bring objects that evoke a memory. This could be anything and everything from dried fish to shoes, computers to hair—any kind of souvenir that “you would like to turn into a sausage.” During the performance, the objects were pulverized, mashed, chopped, or ground by the artists, the audience members, and a few volunteer assistants. Everyone worked together using tools from hammers and wire cutters to food processors. The mashed objects were mixed with a kind of papier-mâché paste, stuffed into sausage skins (pork casings), and hung to dry. Different corners of the space, on the edge of the central area of activity, offered opportunities for people to speak about their objects on camera or write about them on a long scroll. At the end of the event, each audience member could take home a “link of collective memory sausage” signed by the artists.

Memory Sausage was a performance of conflicting impulses: violently breaking up objects that supposedly carry cherished memories; aggressive, loud actions like smashing, cutting, or grinding followed by a gentle act of mixing everything by hand into a soft paste and carefully stuffing it into the sausage skins; a communal action juxtaposed with the telling or writing of individual stories; turning personal, discrete objects into a communal mass and then back again into distinct objects that can be “owned” again by individual audience members (though signed by the artists). These incongruities complicate the relationship between individual and community, inside and outside, the personal and the public.

This performance used kitchen equipment and techniques, and some kitchen materials alongside other methods to create an *inedible*



food object. However, the influence of food as a medium was apparent in more than simply the technical process. Even though there was no actual consumption, the performance was very tactile and sensual, insisting that the audience interact with the material in an intimate way, using their hands to break, mix, stuff, and shape, always remaining close to the action, as well as smelling, hearing, and touching. The performance employed the community building aspect associated with many traditional food activities (bringing a group of people together to “cook” or manufacture or harvest). The use of the traditional sausage stuffing equipment that the artists brought from Portugal enhanced this aspect.¹⁵ Insisting on signing these communally created objects raised interesting questions of authorship: Who was responsible for this product? Is there room for communal work in today’s art market? What makes a product into a work of art? What gives it its value?

In *Memory Sausage*, Oka and Fitch continue their exploration of themes such as consumption, the value of art, and the relationship between art and the everyday, which they had examined in previous

¹⁵ This performance was originally devised and performed in Portugal as a free, outdoor event (2006) and was adapted to New York for the Umami festival.

works. In an earlier project *Good Taste in Art, pasta paintings* (1999 and 2000), the artists created hand-made, colorful pasta that was then composed into framed pictures. The paintings were displayed in a gallery where the audience could purchase them and then choose whether they would rather take their new acquisition home to hang on their wall, or whether they would rather take it next door, where chef Daniel Boulud would cook and sauce it for them to consume on the spot.¹⁶

In this project, Oka and Fitch did not only create a piece of visual art made of pasta, they also proceeded to involve their audience in the work, forcing them to make decisions that highlight their culpability in the process of consumption. The edibility of their medium was essential to the project. Their audience could not contemplate the work from afar, but was rather directly involved with the piece and the consequences of its consumption in the most intimate way. The artists did not try to transform food into art by making it “last,” by using pasta instead of paint or clay, but rather the nature of their medium, its “reason for being,” its edibility, was essential to the project.

Memory Sausage inverts some of these ideas, seeming at first glance to be radically different from the earlier work in its inedible nature, but in fact posing similar questions. Their move away from a celebrity chef and a fine dining setting to rely on a communal project and a “lowly” food product (traditionally made from “scraps”) emphasizes the power of food as a medium in any setting; i.e., the “art” is not located in the work of the professional chef, but rather can be found in the most common object, and in the work of lay-people. This is another example of Oka and Fitch’s reaction to current trends in the culinary world: a move from staging events that echo high-cuisine and fine dining to events based on traditional cooking and communal work. The fact that a sausage should be edible is not incidental; the fact that it is made to be un-edible and lasting is a powerful comment: were the artists to grind together these “souvenirs” and shape them into a communal book or picture or chair, the project would not carry the same layers of meaning. The transformation of a transitory, perishable, time-bound object into a lasting, constant artifact speaks to the nature of memory and of art,

¹⁶ More information and images from this project can be seen on the artists’ website <http://www.orph.us>.



and to the place and status of transitory products in the art-world. The fact that sausages should be edible and that they are traditionally created as a group (not individual) endeavor is essential to the project. Their nature as a communal product draws attention to the absurd nature of the individual artist's signature on the final product.



Chef Ferran Adrià's work has been publicly marked as art by his inclusion in the 2007 Documenta art fair in Germany. This change in high-end dining (both in the chef's approach and in its perception and classification by the public) has forced artists who work with food in a similar way to rethink their use of food.¹⁷ In an interview, Oka pointed to the recent changes within the food world pushing the

¹⁷ A few random examples of dishes served at Ferran Adrià's El Bulli restaurant as part of the 2007 Documenta event: capsules of virgin olive oil or apple that look, feel, and are served like caviar; a single bite of a perfect quail egg yolk enclosed in caramel; a spring of virgin olive oil caramel served in a jewelry box, Tai pink grapefruit risotto with coconut and white sesame; frozen parmesan air with muesli. These examples and a detailed examination of Adrià's work at Documenta can be found in *Food for Thought, Thought for Food*, eds. Richard Hamilton and Vicente Todoli (Barcelona and New York: Actar, 2009).

dining experience in some restaurants in the direction of the work they used to present in their Orphic Feasts.¹⁸ Creating small scale feasts for a limited audience, offering multi-sensory stimuli, presenting food that prompts the diners to rethink preconceptions and familiar notions, exploring the sense of taste and smell as well as texture, providing an interactive experience—all of these points aptly describe Oka and Fitch's Orphic Feasts, but could also be applied to the culinary work of Ferran Adrià, Grant Achatz, or several other chefs today who confound diners' expectations.

Fitch and Oka are still interested in taste and in consumption, but they are less interested in the type of event that involves an actual feast. The shift from creating "art in edible media (like the feasts or the pasta paintings)" to inedible art using culinary techniques and methods is part of a larger process for these artists. The shift in focus from product (a meal) to process (in this case, sausage making) in their most recent projects is partly an economic choice: creating elaborate feasts is expensive, time consuming, and can only accommodate a small audience; but these economic considerations reflect a broader concern with the exclusivity of these events.

Relying on the communal aspect of food preparation, on traditional methods, on creating art whose relationship with consumption is more complex, Fitch and Oka are moving away from small, "elitist" events to more inclusive projects.

In preparing for the performance, Oka and Fitch were very particular about structuring the space (originally, a white walled gallery space) as a clearly marked "performance space," i.e., black walls, focused lighting, accompanying live music, and costumes (white lab coats). Since the event is so close to an everyday cooking/sausage manufacturing event, it needs special markers to distance it from everyday life. The everyday actions and subject matter could take on additional meaning and function as artistic creations only if the audience perceives them clearly as an artistic endeavor. Creating an inedible object rather than a real meal also helps support the artists' intention framing the project more clearly as an "art event" rather than a culinary one.

Oka and Fitch strive to change the way we think about everyday experiences. They use food and taste as a way to retain the communal, collaborative interaction with the audience, and the

¹⁸ Phone interview with author, New York, July, 2008.

interdisciplinary and inclusive approach to everyday objects and actions. As food in high-end restaurants moves toward the performative, Oka and Fitch turn to traditional processes, exploring rural, communal based production of food—approaching the food chain from the reverse end.

NY ICE CREAM FLAVORS

Miwa Koizumi, like Fitch and Oka, uses food as an artistic medium, but unlike Fitch and Oka's larger scale, communal performance events, Koizumi creates more intimate installations. For Koizumi, food is only one of the everyday materials she employs in her work: her projects range from sculptures made of plastic water bottles and kites made out of shopping bags to tasting flavored air and capturing images of taste experiences a few months after the event, when they have begun to deteriorate and decompose.¹⁹ These materials, however, seem to be largely the least valued, marginal, or overlooked (plastic bags or bottles, rotting food)—like Oka and Fitch's sausages. Koizumi says she is drawn to food because it allows her to focus on the chemical senses (taste and smell) that she feels are generally overlooked in artistic experience (in line with her interest in the marginal), and to explore their relationship to memory. She is concerned with the traces of events, with the memory of temporary objects and actions. Food allows her to bridge these interests with a more recent concern in cultural diversity and difference, and immigrants' experiences. In a recent email conversation Koizumi remarked: "food has a way of both cutting through cultural differences and underlining them with a directness that is difficult to equal in another medium."²⁰ A generalized name for a dish such as fried chicken, chicken-noodle soup, or meatballs signifies a specific combination of ingredients, spices, and techniques within diverse cultures and cuisines. Not only does the makeup of the dish change, its context and meaning (home or professional cooking, holiday or everyday, upper or lower class, etc.) also shift. These tremendous

¹⁹ PET project, 2005, Kite Project, 2008, Spritz-Spirit, 2003, Gouttes à Goûts, 2000. <http://miwa.metm.org>, last accessed January, 2010.

²⁰ Email interview with the author, September 2008.

variations within a seemingly familiar frame can offer unique insight into another culture.

In the project I would like to focus on here, *NY Ice Cream Flavors*, Koizumi not only explores taste and smell as triggers of memory, she also focuses on a particular kind of memory: on foods that are culturally specific, with unique ethnic associations which she frames deliberately in the context of immigration, rather than as an originary affiliation. While *Memory Sausage* mined the tension between fleeting, intangible memories and preserved, lasting products, between individual memories and communal property, *NY Ice Cream Flavors* focuses its investigation on the tension between the familiar and the other, and between concrete, sensual perception and ephemeral, conceptual response. While Fitch and Oka create temporary communities within their culinary performances, Koizumi's work speaks to the connection between her audience and a larger community, a community outside the realm of the specific performance. She creates a very intimate event that, through the use of food, links her audience with a specific ethnic community while simultaneously calling this connection into question.

In *NY Ice Cream Flavors*, Koizumi created ice cream flavors based on different New York neighborhoods. She presented the audience with two complementing flavors in each installation, serving the ice cream herself from a small ice cream cart. The cart itself is a nod toward many immigrants' start in the food business in New York as pushcart peddlers. The flavors presented at *Umami* were sour cream and borscht ice creams representing the East Village, and smoked salmon and bagel ice creams standing in for the Lower East Side on different evenings. Some of the other flavors Koizumi created in the past include goat cheese and fennel, congee, and curry. It is important to understand that Koizumi's ice cream is not a generic custard-based concoction with the addition of some odd flavors. Rather, they are very particular food items turned into ice cream form: not bagel-flavored ice cream, but bagel turned into ice cream. In this way, her work is evocative of the work of some current chefs playing on the audiences' preconceptions, substituting familiar textures and temperatures to give us pause, such as Nils Noren's French Onion Soup dessert (made with a pastry crust and ice cream) or Ferran Adrià's Textured Soup (made with chilled corn and cauliflower mousse, peach granita, almond ice cream, basil jelly, and beet foam). Each audience member, in turn, receives a small ice-

cream cup with two scoops, one of each flavor. The flavors are meant to be consumed together (bagel and lox, borscht and sour cream) and complement each other. The combination of the two flavors is meaningful within the cultural context (lox without bagel could be “read” differently perhaps), but are also important from a culinary perspective: the bagel toning down the fishiness of the lox ice cream, the sour cream gets a “kick” of flavor from the beet.

The link between food and immigrants’ experience has been a theme in both scholarly writing and fiction (see Krishnandu Ray, Hasia Diner, or Jumpa Lahiri to name just a few), and the sources that discuss food and culture are even more numerous and varied (from Roland Barthes and Arjun Appadurai to Amy Trubeck and Jefferey Pilcher). What does Koizumi’s work add to this conversation? How does her work with food fit into an exploration of the links between food and cultural difference, and food in a global context of change and migration?

The act of serving ice cream allows Koizumi to create a shared memory with each audience member.²¹ Since she is literally feeding the audience, the exchange becomes very intimate. It requires a degree of trust since the flavors may seem foreign or out of context. Once on your tongue, a process of identification begins: is this ice cream? Is this a bagel? The addition of the second taste: where have I tasted this before? Where have I tasted something like this before? What happens when I taste this and think about the Lower East Side? Does it make sense (both intellectually and physically)? Does it evoke other senses and sensations?

Koizumi’s ice cream cart is an island of serenity. She distills a neighborhood into specific flavors, subtle tastes, and textures. The taste of each particular ice cream serves as a trigger, to conjure up the rest of the smells, sounds, and sights of a unique community. Koizumi’s ice cream allows her audience to “visit” ethnic communities, and to consume them, literally, but this experience is different than simply dining at an ethnic restaurant. Because the ice cream takes specific regional or national flavors out of their original context and presents them in a familiar guise, they serve as a sample or souvenir of a larger ethnic experience and community; they raise the question of what constitutes an “authentic” experience and blur the line between the original event and its traces.

²¹ Email interview with the author, September 2008.



In her work on nostalgia, Susan Stewart writes of the souvenir as an example of an object serving as a trace of an original, authentic experience. A souvenir, collected by an individual tourist, generates a narrative. The combination of the “sample” of the original experience and the personal narrative that accompanies it speaks to an event whose materiality escapes us; it generates nostalgia of an unattainable, original experience. A souvenir of an exotic location or experience signifies the tourist’s survival outside her familiar context, her ability to conquer or appropriate distance and the “other.” It speaks to the gap between the origin of the souvenir and that of its possessor. These objects allow tourists to appropriate and consume the cultural other.²² Koizumi’s work speaks to the same logic of Stewart’s souvenir, but inverts the process, blurring the boundaries between “tourist” and other, original experience and souvenir. Unlike some other mediums, Koizumi’s work with food, much like Fitch and Oka’s, forces the audience to take an active part. They cannot remain observers, but must participate in the performance, literally consuming it (or, in Oka and Fitch’s case, even bring part of the performance with them as they leave). The very fact of this intimate participation in Koizumi’s work highlights its limitations: the distance between the audience and the ethnic groups represented in the project, the complexity of the interaction between them, the actual distance that remains despite the ability to consume the products of the “other.”

The focal point of Koizumi’s project is the tasting experience. The aesthetic experience is broader, comprised of the interaction with the artist, the ice creams as objects, and the relationship to the neighborhoods they represent, and, through them, to the larger communities. But the tasting is the most significant element in the work, the one that all of the other parts lead to and support. The dissonance between our preconception of what borscht and sour cream or bagel and lox should look, taste, and feel like, and their ice cream incarnation is what gives us pause: the taste, texture, and temperature are different from what we expect. Koizumi’s choices of dishes are easily identifiable, clearly marked ethnic foods. Her decision to recreate them in ice cream form stems from a wish to present them in a “friendly,” familiar guise, one that would

²² Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 133-139.

encourage people to experiment and engage with the products. Unlike the work of Ferran Adrià and other experimental chefs whose culinary creations might elicit similar responses, Koizumi's work is very approachable and accessible. It is not offered in the context of a high-end dining establishment, but rather served out of a pushcart. It might be presented within the space of a gallery, but it is very deliberately affordable and available to a wide public. Her target audience is not that of gastronomes or "foodies," or those with expense accounts: her work is approachable both in financial terms and in concept (familiar dishes, reconfigured as another familiar dish).

Koizumi's work also differs from these chefs' creations in another way: it is presented as art. It was created by an artist and offered in a gallery space as part of an art event. As such, the audience should be more willing to interpret it as an art piece, to "read" it as art and analyze it accordingly. How did the change in form and texture impact the view of the dish and all that it signifies? How successful was the piece in conjuring memories, associations, feelings, and thoughts about ethnic communities, culinary traditions, and their change over time and distance, or about the consumption of the "other" by the West (to name a few possibilities)? In her ice cream creations, Koizumi tries to present a good-tasting product; she is guided by certain culinary concerns in creating her ice cream, wanting to make them palatable, but their degree of deliciousness is not her central concern. Her first concern is how they speak to the overall context of the work, how the flavors trigger certain associations and memories, and raise particular social issues.

Koizumi uses food in a unique way. Her work, to me, is the ultimate example of using food *not* as a subject or a vehicle, a useful tool for a different goal, but as a medium for artistic creation. Koizumi's ice creams are obviously not your everyday vanilla, but they are not exciting culinary inventions either (like olive oil or yuzu ice cream). Their taste must not be off-putting, but they cannot simply be judged according the same criteria by which other ice creams are judged. Her innovation lies not in the culinary realm, but in the way she uses the sense of taste and the cultural affiliations and associations of food to transmit another message.

The performative element is indeed more pronounced and more common in the restaurant dining experience today—an open kitchen, an elaborate presentation on the plate, or a caviar tin miraculously full of green globules that explode in your mouth with



the most intense apple flavor. However, at the end of the day, we look for a restaurant meal to be delicious. A chef's philosophy might involve allowing simple, local ingredients to shine or coaxing surprising and multi-layered flavors out of exotic substances, but the ultimate goal in either case is that it tastes good. This must be the first consideration of a chef, even chefs whose culinary creations are meant to surprise the diner, to make her pause and think. This is not to say that an artist who works with food cannot create something delicious, but it is, in a manner of speaking, a difference in priorities. A chef's mission, a basic trait of the profession, is to create good food, the most delicious food (another reason for this difference, which I would be remiss not to mention, is that chefs run restaurants; they run a business that needs to support itself—to date, chefs cannot apply for grants and must rely on customers to survive). The same set of considerations does not apply to the artist. Whether or not the food tastes good is a secondary concern. Did the taste alter our perception? Did it add to our understanding of New York/community/ethnic groups/immigration/life? Those might be our primary concerns in evaluating Koizumi's piece. Despite this

difference, the fact that some chefs are able to do both—create delicious food that is also thought provoking (a more successful art piece?)—pushed some artists who are interested in food to explore other stages in the food cycle (as shown above in the discussion Oka and Fitch).

Reconfiguring tastes that are associated with particular social or ethnic groups and presenting them in an unexpected yet familiar culinary form, as Koizumi's ice creams do, forces the audience to pay attention to taste in a new way: taste is the central sense imbuing the piece with meaning. Because it is a chemical sense, i.e., ephemeral and subjective, it causes the focus of the piece to shift from the object to the immediate experience or sensation. Audience members have a unique, private experience inside their own mouths. The experience highlights the subjectivity of any performance event and the difficulty in documenting or analyzing this project using traditional tools. Koizumi's work is not about food, but takes food and does something deceptively simple with it: it forces us to rethink our perceptions of art and taste, and how they might both be recast in new ways.

Trying to describe Koizumi's work emphasizes our lack of useful vocabulary for talking about food in an aesthetic context. We have a highly developed vocabulary and tools for analyzing food in a restaurant, a tasting, or other cooking/eating contexts, but when it comes to discussing food as an artistic medium and taste as an aesthetic mode, we are woefully lacking. Although there is no lack of discussions of food in art, they focus on food as subject of the work and not on food as a medium, as a vehicle for meaning independent of the subject of the piece. The difficulty in writing about performance and about food (collaborative, interdisciplinary, ephemeral events) is compounded by our lack of analytic tools for the evaluation of food in an art context. Rendering the food inedible helps force us to treat it as any other art object (as in Oka and Fitch), but if the performance involves actual consumption, it appears very difficult to think about it in terms that are not concerned with its "deliciousness." We are accustomed to think about food in terms of flavor and aroma, and to evaluate it, as we would in a restaurant or tasting, on the merit of its flavors and aromas: Does it taste good? What would make it taste better? We are not usually called upon to think about food in other ways (with the obvious exception of nutritional analysis) and thus have not developed ways of thinking about food as we would of other aesthetic mediums. Returning to Noël Carroll: when we encounter food as a potential candidate for an

art object, do we interpret or eat it? I argue that in cases that call for both, we need some additional tools for analysis.

Writing about ephemeral events and about taste and smell in particular highlights the need for subjective, individual voices and new ways for describing and thinking about performance. Since our perception of these experiences is subjective, our senses of taste and smell unique, they render the very idea of an objective account suspect. The notion of “thick description” for the discussion of a performance event is problematic, since we are lacking the proper vocabulary to make such a description meaningful. Leslie Voshall’s work on smell, for example, shows us how individualized our sense perception is, how the same substance can smell sweet and floral to one person, and musty and revolting to another.²³ This is more than just a question of individual “taste”; it is a biological difference that forces us to rethink our ideas of an “objective” account.

When I began writing this essay, I thought my central argument would focus on the stakes for developing a new vocabulary for discussing food as an aesthetic medium and its implications regarding our need to develop more subjective and diverse voices within academic writing and performance analysis. However, thinking through these issues and these artists’ projects, I realized that developing tools for thinking about food as an aesthetic medium could also contribute greatly to our understanding of the work of some of the new chefs working in high end restaurants today. A variety of terms such as Molecular Gastronomy or scientific cooking was invented in the media to describe and categorize this new work, but, as the recent treatment of Adrià’s previously mentioned work implies, treating their work as performance might be more illuminating.

When appreciating art, we know that one can admire a painting’s beauty, color, or composition without any prior knowledge or training. We also know that our pleasure in experiencing a sculpture or a concert can be increased with greater learning and understanding. The same holds true for these chefs’ culinary creations. I am referring here specifically to chefs whose work is similar to that of other artists in that they wish to make us stop and think; they try not only to create delicious food, but also to do so in a way that alters our perception, confounds our existing notions, and expands the way we view the world. Preparing food is

²³ Leslie Voshall, “Different Smells for Different People: The Effect of Genetic Variation on Olfactory Perception,” lecture at the Experimental Cuisine Collective Annual Symposium, May 18, 2009.

most often a craft: sometimes a craftsman can be extremely skilled and produce breathtaking creations. The distinction here is between those who use food as material and those who use it as medium. The same distinction applies to artists: those who use food as a subject or material and those who use it as an aesthetic medium.

These chefs not only force visual or performance artists who use food as a medium to rethink their work, they also highlight the need to acknowledge food as an aesthetic medium and the importance of developing a way of thinking and interpreting projects in which taste, smell, and texture play the central role, of developing work that leaves no trace to be contemplated later, work that is perceived subjectively and unique to each audience member. We may be able to learn from other (non-Western) cultures, where the hierarchy of the senses differs from our own, and where food has been regarded as an aesthetic medium for centuries.

Because food performances are ephemeral, multi-sensory, closely related to everyday life, and consumable, they force us to contend with our notions of the value of art, and how we consider performance or time-based art in particular. They underscore the need to allow for a variety of subjective voices and perceptions in scholarly research and analysis. The stakes for developing a vocabulary for interpreting food-work is not restricted to a greater understanding of art, but also to a greater understanding of some of the work within the culinary world. By combining insights from both realms and creating tools for interpretation that meld the culinary with the performative, we can help the appreciation of taste, smell, and touch in Western society catch up with that of sight and sound.