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## Can Food Be Art?

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### ABSTRACT

According to the ‘Consumption Exclusion Thesis’ defended by Hegel, the fact that food is consumed means that it cannot be considered a proper art object: art is supposed to be timeless and lasting, two characteristics that food lacks by definition. According to the ‘Interest Exclusion Thesis’ defended by Kant, when judging a work of art we should not have any kind of interest towards it, because aesthetic appreciation is characterized by disinterested pleasure. In order to defend the idea that culinary objects can be art objects we will challenge both theses by proposing a definition of art able to explain how culinary objects do last in time even after their consumption, and how our approach to them can be disinterested even if we are physiologically attracted by the food.

Art and food matter for different reasons. Typically, we associate art with beauty, emotions, and creativity, while food is considered our principal means of sustenance (it is our fuel, providing energy to make our bodies work). In a nutshell, food stands at the crossroad of several main aspects of life: energy (what food is), creativity (the ways food can be prepared), and pleasure. A question that emerges from several essays of this issue of *The Monist* is whether these two apparently distant universes have something in common, so that food may be included, in some sense, in the vast universe of the arts. Can food be interpreted as a work of art? Can the properties usually applied to understand and interpret artworks be used to philosophically explain food as well?

These questions fall within the broader domain of the philosophy of art which, over the last fifty years, has placed particular attention on two fundamental issues: the first concerns the identity of art, the second concerns the inclusiveness of the concept of art.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the early twentieth century, art has repeatedly posed the question of its identity, and philosophy has not failed to accept the challenge, reasoning widely and from different perspectives on the issue of its definition. Is it possible to formulate a definition of art that is sufficiently broad to include twentieth-century artistic productions, i.e., objects that seem to share many properties with common things rather than with works of art? Where, exactly, can we draw the line between the domain of art and that of simple things? This line, indeed, marks a very clear

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separation, that between ordinary objects and artworks, where the latter are commonly considered extraordinary both in terms of ontology and in terms of axiology.

The ontological question became relevant once artists claimed that the artworld should include strange objects such as readymades: together with other creations, such objects ended up deconstructing all or part of the Vasarian interpretative canon,<sup>2</sup> which had underlined the narratives of art history for centuries.

The Vasarian canon, along with the mimetic theory, had worked quite well to explain art and its variations up until the twentieth century, when cubism, the avant-gardes, abstract expressionism, up to performing arts and posthistorical arts—as Arthur Danto called them<sup>3</sup>—seemed to definitively deconstruct the ontologies and theories of art known until then, which had offered a good explanation to answer the question<sup>4</sup> of what art is. Now, in a landscape in which artists deconstruct art on the formal level, depriving it of the properties that traditionally distinguish it from ordinary reality, one may wonder whether food may have a place within the domain of art. What we should consider now is whether this question is indeed legitimate and what theoretical foundations underlie it. It will therefore be necessary to look a little more closely at some theories that have addressed the question about the identity of food.

So first of all, let's start by giving some definitions in order to define our field of research. What do we mean by 'food' when we ask the question of whether food can be art?<sup>5</sup> If 'food' is understood as 'cuisine', we could say that it obviously involves the creative act of mixing its components together and subjecting them to different types of processing; also, food can be arranged on the plate in a way that is very similar to drawing a shape or making a sculpture. Nonetheless, there seems to be a fundamental difference between culinary products and paintings, sculptures, or music: in fact, however unpleasant a life without art may be, it is impossible to die because of a lack of aesthetic experience, whereas food is directly related to our physiology and is absolutely necessary for our survival.

For this reason, even if food can be said to have aesthetic value, we have a very natural and physiological inclination towards it. But how can we feel a disinterested form of pleasure for something we know is indispensable for us? This point is stressed by the 'Interest Exclusion Thesis' defended by Kant,<sup>6</sup> who maintains that aesthetic pleasure towards a given object should not be based on our desire for that object. He considers the pleasures of eating to be *agreeable* but not beautiful (a judgment analyzed in this issue by Nick Zangwill). Let's now ask some questions:

- Is it possible to be disinterested when it comes to food and beverages?
- What does 'disinterested' mean when applied to food?
- Consider Ferran Adrià's statement that "People do not come to *elBulli* to eat, but to have an aesthetic experience." What does that mean?

The first important problem here concerns appreciation. Kant sees aesthetic appreciation as a *disinterested pleasure*: in fact he maintains that when seeing a painting we do not want to *consume* or *own* it; in aesthetic appreciation we do not satisfy a desire in the same way as we do when we eat.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant maintains that judgments of taste are both *subjective* and *universal*.<sup>7</sup> They are subjective because they are pleasure responses and do not essentially involve any claims about the concept of the object itself (what matters is not the picture I see, but rather the pleasing effect of the picture on me). However, they are universal and not merely personal, because they must be *disinterested*. When I am appreciating a painting aesthetically, I am not thinking about how much money it is worth, or whether it is a portrait of a family member, or even about who painted it.

The serious (if not to say critical) problem presented by food from a Kantian perspective is that it, too, is instrumentally valuable. We cannot really appreciate food aesthetically, and consequently food cannot be considered a work of art because we need food in order to survive. And Kant says that the aesthetic judgment needs to consider an object's intrinsic value and not its instrumental value. But the point is, if an artwork has an intrinsic value, that does not mean that it cannot *also* have an instrumental value! Consider the example made by Nelson Goodman in *Ways of Worldmaking*: we could use a painting by Rembrandt to replace a broken window.<sup>8</sup> In this case, clearly, the painting would have an instrumental value, but this would not change its intrinsic qualities. An altarpiece can be an object of worship as well as a beautiful work of art.

The Kantian problem concerns the objective judgment of the qualities of artistic objects: if the object is valuable in itself and not in relation to anything else, we are allowed to consider its qualities on those grounds alone, feeling free from any instrumental temptations. But is that true? Is it true that in order to have objective judgments we need to focus only on the intrinsic qualities of an object? And, even so, could we not consider the intrinsic qualities of an object that *also* has an instrumental value? I could eat something because of its tastiness or presentation, if I am in an aesthetic frame of mind, or I can eat it simply because I am hungry, considering the object exclusively in its instrumental value. It seems that we are indeed able to approach eating from an aesthetically-minded standpoint: functional objects can be submitted to a purely qualitative appreciation. In fact, we can approach food also from a cultural, religious, or sentimental standpoint, therefore without focusing on its being pleasurable or indispensable for us.<sup>9</sup> There seems to be no good reason to denigrate the genuine aesthetic experience that food may provide. Thus one of the standard grounds on which food is denied the status of art is unconvincing. It seems possible to have disinterested experiences of objects that have other, additional uses, and food is a case in point.

Let's now consider the second thesis, defended by G.W.F. Hegel,<sup>10</sup> concerning consumption. According to the 'Consumption Exclusion Thesis', food cannot be a genuine artistic medium because the object of culinary art is consumed when it is enjoyed.<sup>11</sup> A cake exists only so long as we do not eat it, whereas proper art objects exist forever or, if not, at least for a long period of time. This thesis is based on the idea that genuine art is timeless, raising a question about the object's identity: if normal artistic objects such as paintings and sculptures last over time, how could we give the same status to objects—such as culinary ones—whose appreciation seems to cause their disappearance? Or, in different words, is duration a necessary

condition for genuine art objects? If so, clearly there is a problem, because this condition does not seem to be satisfied by culinary objects: the act of eating destroys and alters the object of our gustatory delight.

In order to defend the idea that culinary objects may legitimately be considered art objects, we need challenge the Consumption Exclusion Thesis, as we have already done with the Interest Exclusion Thesis. This can be achieved by considering these two points:

1. The Consumption Exclusion Thesis depends on a dubious conception of artistic objects.
2. We need explain how culinary art can and does last beyond its consumption.

Are all legitimate works of art primarily made of matter? No. It is not difficult to find examples of artistic objects depending as much on immaterial conditions as on their material components; suffice it to think about music, theater and dance, or, in general, about all performance arts. The Consumption Exclusion Thesis does not consider the latter, namely arts that depend on their structure more than on their material conditions. In performance arts, typically, the imposed structure is different from the material components in which or by which it manifests itself: in other words, the structure is distinct from any particular material instance. And it is precisely by recognizing the formal structure of performance arts that we are able to identify them. Therefore, a duration condition essentially based on numerical identity cannot apply to these kinds of art objects, and not even to other objects essentially lacking an enduring structure, such as improvisational jazz, dance, and songs.

Let's follow Goodman again, considering his suggestion to distinguish between autographic and allographic arts.<sup>12</sup> Culinary objects share a kind of formal structure that parallels the one found in certain performance arts: instead of calling it a score, a choreography, or a script we call it a *recipe*. The recipe structures the way in which food elements are combined, creating the overall object of our appreciation. The recipe makes the dish what it is, and its structure is distinct from the material ingredients in which it manifests itself. A culinary art object is the unique combination of a set of material ingredients through a formalized method or preparation, where the formalized method is the recipe structuring the ingredients so that they will produce the given dish. As happens with musical melodies, culinary objects are also characterized by something more than the ingredients or basic elements that make them up. We eat the instance (particular) and not the recipe (universal). In this way the consumption problem is solved.

Indeed, what is a recipe? The way in which a dish is recorded or somehow symbolized. According to the principle of universalization, we should treat similar cases alike. Given the similarity between culinary objects and performance art objects (consider the performances by Marina Abramović and Tino Sèhgal), and given the fact that performance art objects count as proper art objects, we can classify culinary objects as proper art objects as well.

Needless to say, there are important differences between food and performance arts: food is eaten while performance art objects are not (or better, they are not

usually eaten, even though they can be. Consider the famous *Untitled* [1991], by the Cuban artist Felix Gonzales-Torres: a work made up of a 175-pound pile of candy, from which visitors are encouraged to take samples).<sup>13</sup> Food has a nutritional value in addition to its aesthetic properties. However, they can both be seen as belonging to the category of art objects.

So now, after having argued against both these classical thesis, what kind of definition of 'Art Object' should we propose (in order to include culinary objects in it)? We would like to suggest a definition that may solve these two problems as well as similar ones—that is, a definition able to solve the classical questions posed by so-called unconventional works of art. Our definition may help clarify why these objects—among which we include food—could be considered, under particular conditions, as proper works of art.

First of all, it is important to note that the category we generally call 'food' is very broad, including at least three different kinds of objects. So the question should be modified as follows: can all objects that we consider *food* fall under the label 'works of art'? The straightforward answer is no or, at least, not necessarily. The category of 'food' usually includes: a. natural objects (i.e., things like tomatoes, potatoes, vegetables, meat, grapes, and so on); b. artifacts (i.e., pasta, bread, pizza, wine, and so on); and (our thesis) c. works of art. The most interesting cases are those in which the same object could be positioned in all these three different groups.

Let's consider a tomato. The very same tomato can be, at the same time, seen as belonging to all three different groups, depending on certain external conditions. It may be: (a) A natural object; (b) An artifact; and (c) A work of art. Let's take a closer look. The first case is simple. A tomato on its plant is a natural or hybridized object; that is, an object produced by nature or hybridized by men. In the majority of cases, natural objects as such are not works of art, but they may become artifacts in a very simple way.

Now let us consider a second tomato. It is indiscernible from the first one and hangs from the same plant. But, in this case, the plant is in an apartment and the owner uses it as an ornament for his decorative roof garden, removing it from the earth and placing it in a large yellow pot positioned with other pots of different colors and shapes. The result is a beautiful roof garden, a kind of impressionist painting for an observer who knows the history of modern painting. As such, the owner uses the roof garden as a pleasant place to take refuge from his busy life.

Let's now consider a more complex case with a third tomato, which has a very different destiny. The owner loves the tomato plants in his garden and is also a lover of the well-known cocktail called Bloody Mary. It is a very cold evening and our man, whose name is Henry, has run out of tomatoes but does not feel like going out to buy more. So, regretfully, he takes a tomato from his plant. He then squeezes it to make tomato juice, which he mixes with two parts of vodka.

We now imagine two different variations to our scenario. In the first, Henry is down-to-earth: he drinks when he is thirsty, and eats when is hungry. When possible, he prefers to take tomatoes from the fridge; but when this is not possible, he picks them from the plant. He does not know the history of Bloody Mary, all he knows is that once a friend made that drink for him. He still remembers the recipe: three parts

tomato and two of vodka. The memory of that superb beverage helps him reproduce that drink without making significant changes to the original recipe.

Let us now turn to the second scenario. Here Henry is a totally different man. He is very sophisticated and chooses the tomato for his cocktail with great attention. He knows that there has to be more than five drops of Tabasco, and he also knows that it is fundamental to use the right kind of lemon—perhaps one from Sicily, not too ripe. He often uses gin instead of vodka: he prefers it because of the juniper berries, which give the drink a particular taste. When asked why he loves that specific cocktail so much, he usually answers that it is because of the color, whose intensity reminds him of paintings by Titian, and because of its strong and vigorous taste and, finally, because of the legend of Bloody Mary, the Queen. The red color of the tomato juice symbolizes the violent temperament of Queen Mary, who started her life as a happy girl and then fell prey to a fury of destruction. Anger and revenge are violent emotions, and their representation is necessarily red-colored. Another story comes to Henry's mind every time he makes the cocktail: some claim that Bloody Mary, if invoked three times in front of a mirror at night, reappears, with bloody hands, to kill the person who evoked her. How many stories have been represented by that color!

Now let's get back to our thought experiment. Our theory is that the drink in the third scenario is a case of food transfigured into an artwork. That is, food here has the same ontological structure as a work of art. How can this structure be described? A useful concept here is that of semantic vehicle:<sup>14</sup> food is used as a semantic vehicle, that is, as a vehicle for the mental representations of the person making the Bloody Mary and for the appreciation of those who drink it.

In all our examples the tomatoes are in themselves indiscernible. In spite of this, in one case we have a natural object (the tomato on the plant); in another case, where the tomato becomes an ingredient of the recipe for Bloody Mary, it is part of an artifact—in other words, a natural object intentionally modified by the maker of the cocktail. Finally, Henry's own Bloody Mary is an authentic work of art. That is, it follows a recipe, whose properties are intentionally modified following a particular idea—Henry's idea. This idea depends partly on Henry's creativity, partly on the history of cuisine, and partly on the taste of people living in the same context. The second Bloody Mary, unlike the first one, is a work of art because (1) it embodies a series of meanings, deposited in the history of cuisine by the first maker of the cocktail and recreated by Henry, who also (2) revisited, at least partly, the cocktail's taste by changing the physical composition of the cocktail.

To summarize what we have said so far, it is possible to treat food in the same way as other ordinary objects that have been included in the class of works of art. And this is true even though food is a particular object in many respects, because it exhibits properties that are vital functions for our survival.

So let us go back to our starting question: can food be art? The answer is: yes, in some particular cases. Is all food art? The answer is no, for the reasons explained above. Our idea is that a good definition has to involve a bundle of conditions regarding, at least, the physicality of the object, the intentionality of its creator and the history of the practice in which the object is used.<sup>15</sup> To generalize the considerations made so far in terms of philosophy of art, we can put it in these terms: in a way, as

we have verified, anything can be included in the class of works of art. Artists have demonstrated this by using readymades and producing a whole series of works that are indistinguishable from their ordinary counterparts. However, we would be wrong if we considered these common counterparts as truly indistinguishable in every respect from works of art. There are differences; one only needs to know where to look for them.

Our thesis is that sometimes these differences belong to the object itself, other times to properties that concern the object in some particular respect. These properties can be traced back to what we will call the ‘standard conditions’ of art. These conditions, together, have always defined the class of artworks. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, art has produced objects that have led us to rethink the ontology of art, in most cases broadening and enriching it, and to revisit traditional theories of art—a process that has evidently allowed us to consider food as a good candidate to belong to the class of works of art. This was possible because the standard criteria were interpreted or applied in substantially different ways from the Vasarian model.

An articulated discourse on the standard criteria would obviously fall outside of the present scope and requires a broad reflection that cannot be developed here.<sup>16</sup> However, we can at least list them and make a few detailed considerations about the question of food as art. A first list of standard conditions for art includes:

1. the *object* (that is, the work of art; obviously the term ‘object’ is understood in its broadest ontological meaning);
2. the *subject* (in the dual sense of the artist and the public);
3. the *possibility of interpretation* (which includes, but does not coincide with, its aboutness);
4. *normativity* (i.e., the vast set of rules, conventions, and uses that give shape to artistic practices and, in the best cases, allow for the formation of a style);
5. the *institutional framework* (i.e., the dynamics of contexts where art has value, which can be more or less institutionalized);
6. a *story* (or the narration that revolves around art);
7. the *market* (i.e., the demand and supply of works of art, whose dynamics have acquired great importance in the world of contemporary art, showing characteristics that are typical of financial markets).

These seven conditions, which, as we said, are necessary, are quite stable in the sense that we find them in all historical epochs, no matter the given concept of art. The first four conditions are related to the work, or to the space of the work, while the last three are external to the work and related to its context. Our thesis is that even though these are standard conditions, they have been shaped, interpreted, and applied in different ways throughout history. This, on the one hand, explains why the concept of art has undergone such significant variations over time, but on the other hand also records a state of affairs, that is, the great productive creativity that has always been the *raison d’être* of the world of art. In other words, in relation to

this list of necessary conditions, contemporary art—under the guise of the multiple currents that have taken shape and form since the beginning of the twentieth century—has not really introduced radical innovations, or markedly new conditions. Rather, contemporary art has: (1) shaped the standard conditions differently or, (b) reframed the standard conditions in radically different terms, or else (c), given new weight to each of the standard conditions.

Coming back to food and the issues opened up by our Bloody Mary thought experiment, we can argue as follows. The second Bloody Mary is an art object because of the bundle of proprieties that differentiate it from the first one. These properties concern the material composition of the cocktail, the intentionality of the person who makes it, its history and some particular aspects, partly overlapping with the history of art, regarding for example the aesthetic appearance of the cocktail or the peculiar declination of its taste. Our creative Henry, when creating his own version of a Bloody Mary, aspired to combine different skills: his ability to make a great cocktail and his extraordinary competence in the history of art, but also his capacity to change the material preparation of an ordinary Bloody Mary by introducing some variations in the ingredients used.

Both skills are important to transform an ordinary Bloody Mary into Henry's peculiar Bloody Mary. Of course, Henry would hardly have thought of combining his culinary skills with his artistic knowledge had he not received suggestions from the artworld (which has become incredibly wide and hospitable) and from that of cooking, which aims not only to achieve technical perfection, but also to enhance the role of the senses in food tasting. The point is to integrate the experience of nutrition, therefore the functional aspects of food, with aesthetic experience (perceptive, gustatory, olfactory and generally sensory) which, when food is truly transfigured into art, becomes an artistic experience.

Consider *One and Three Chairs* (1965) by Joseph Kosuth: in order to understand the work it is necessary to make the medium transparent, i.e., to disregard the artefactual characteristics of the medium as well as their references to the usability of the artifact. In the same way, for the transformation of food into a work of art to take place, it is necessary, to some extent, to disregard the functionality of food. Functional properties, which evoke standard ways of approaching food, must be assimilated to the background properties of the object, exactly as happens with readymades. This theoretical operation allows for the transfiguration of the object without (only) transforming the internal properties of the object but rather (or mainly) reconfiguring its relational or external properties.

This brings us to our last point. In order to understand what a work of art is, we should overlook neither the knowledge of the recipe, nor modern history, including history of art, nor the particularly significant dynamics of today's artworld. When, then, can food be a work of art?

*In all those cases in which it can be seen as a social artifact embodying a representation in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent. That is, a medium that needs to be interpreted in order to fully understand the new object which that particular food has become.*



## NOTES

1. For an overview and a discussion of the main theories of contemporary art, see Carroll (1999) and Andina (2013).
2. Vasari 1991.
3. Danto 1997.
4. Plato 1993, Book X.
5. On the relationship between food and art on the one hand, and food and philosophy on the other, from an aesthetic point of view, see Sweeney (2017). Sweeney offers an impressive historical overview of the philosophy of taste—from Plato, Aristotle, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Kant, Brillat-Savarin, up until postmodernism and analytic philosophy—and, in the last part of the book, sketches the main lines and arguments of the current philosophical debate on these topics.
6. Kant 2000, §§1–5.
7. Ibid. §§6–9.
8. Goodman 1978, 67–70.
9. See Telfer 1996, especially ch. 2–3.
10. Hegel 1975.
11. Cf. Korsmeyer 1999, 62; as for the problem of consumption and the solution suggested here we follow D. Monroe (2007, 133–44).
12. Goodman 1978.
13. Felix Gonzales Torres's work is subtitled *Portrait of Ross in L.A. (1991)*. It was made in memory of the author's lover, Ross Laycock. When healthy, Ross weighed about 175 pounds, and the shrinking of the candy pile mirrors how Ross wasted away until he eventually died of complications from AIDS (Gonzalez-Torres also died from AIDS in 1996, at age 39.) The installation has been on display in varying forms since 1991, and its themes have appeared in Gonzalez-Torres's work for many years.
14. See Danto 1981.
15. For the idea that art is a cluster concept, but in a disjunctive form, see Gaut (2000, 2005).
16. For a broader discussion see Andina (2017, 54ff).

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