

8 Ways to Cook the Books: Art, Politics and Food

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Introduction

The blurred boundary between art and food has been present within my practice for many years. Such a concern is born out of a long lasting interest and ambivalence towards Italian Futurism, of which Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *The Futurist Cookbook* published in 1932, remains in my view the most pertinent and unresolved. This has prompted me to consider the conflation of art and food in my own work, with *8 Ways to Cook the Books*, a hand printed limited edition book of cookery and political satire being the most recent outcome. It is the culmination of a developing area of interest in the congruence of politics, the aesthetics of food and cultural identity. Moreover, it is an attempt to respond in a contemporary manner to the multi-layered intentions of Marinetti's *The Futurist Cookbook*. The paper presented herewith, introduces *8 Ways to Cook the Books* within a relevant historical and socio-political context.

Throughout the history of humankind the availability of food has ebbed and flowed, resulting in corresponding times of peace and conflict. When circumstances allow provision beyond basic requirements of survival, it becomes possible to indulge in what Abraham Maslow refers to in his model of a hierarchy of needs as "Peak Experiences". At this point the aesthetics of food and eating can come into being. But there is a muddled division between food for sustenance and food for aesthetic experience and I am interested in how art and politics become entangled in this. Starvation in our current era is more a consequence of commerce and politics than it is of climatic influence and it is becoming clear that food shortages will become the concern of all the worlds' nations in the very near future. The meta-language of *8 Ways to Cook the Books* indicates this.

I am interested in how the aesthetics of cooking and the attendant cultural identity therein becomes archived and distributed through books, television and the Internet. I am positing the view that written recipes are multiples and that printed cookbooks act as a codex for cultural identity. I use the word 'codex' both in the context of a bound document and as a constitution. This is relevant because of the significance of books existing as objects whilst simultaneously cradling ideas and information. The traditional stitched and hardback covered manufacture of *8 Ways to Cook the Books* is an intentional symbol for solidity and physical presence. The electronic publication of the book on the Internet contrasts with its physical presence but represents infinite access to the information contained within its pages.

The Politics of Food and the Origins of the Cookbook

It is not possible to know exactly when food was first cooked. Whether it was meat accidentally dropped into the fire or an inspired experiment, that moment signifies a giant leap into the aesthetics of eating over and above the basic needs of survival. In nomadic society, possessions are less important than the shared experiences of spiritualism, art and food. This is surely something that we have all but lost sight of in our busy lives.

Over time, as hunter-gatherers shrugged their nomadic lifestyles and settled into small farming communities, it became possible for them to intensify production, to store food, to specialise, to preserve food, to amass excess and develop bartering power. Power also over each other by virtue of accrued knowledge of husbandry or techniques of preserving and power over neighbouring communities where surfeits of produce would ameliorate a corresponding dearth. With this power came wealth and the means to build social infrastructure. The production of food (and perhaps most importantly in the context of this paper, the specific nature and characteristics of that food) served as an identity for the community, be it a village, a valley or a country. The communal buildings common to all sedentary communities provided a forum for sharing this identity. This is not a utopian situation as history is punctuated with accounts of civilisations throughout the world reaching the maximum level of production from their land and resorting to war and the sublimation of adjoining civilisations. Whilst today the demand for energy is at the forefront of contemporary conflict, food production remains prominent on the agendas of the world's governments.

Undoubtedly, the first methods of food preparation would have been learned by observation or by verbal communication. When recipes are not written down, variations occur as a result of interpretation. Pit roasting with rocks heated from the fire is a good example of prehistoric cooking methods that have survived into contemporary gastronomy, with variations surviving around the world and still making appearances on TV cookery programmes. The recording and codifying of recipes through text and image represents a fundamental stage of evolution and an instrumental element in the definition of culture. The reliability of reproducing the same culinary outcomes reinforces the comfort of identity. In a contemporary context, the 'recipe' and the 'cookbook' become templates for edible cultural multiples, shared experiences to be relived and replayed time and time again. The Canadian scholar Elizabeth Driver has published a number of books, which survey this territory and highlight the significance of culinary discourse in defining culture.

The earliest manuscripts containing what we would recognise today as recipes are those of the Roman historian Marcus Gavius Apicius who collected the scribbled notes from the kitchens of wealthy Pompeians in and around the first century of the common era. These recipes appear in printed form in *Apicius de re*

Quoquinaria, first published by Guillelmus le Signerre of Milan in 1498. The ingredients listed in many of the recipes collected by Apicius represent the extent of the Roman Empire, stretching from Mesopotamia in the east, north Africa to the south, Hispania to the west and Britannia to the north. For many years, Apicius's collected recipes appeared in various imprints and different languages throughout medieval Europe and formed the blueprint of a European culinary history despite the unorthodox ingredients, methods of preparation and cultural incongruence. To the majority of ordinary medieval working people in Europe, the abundance of ingredients and complex array of herbs and spices in Apicius's recipes would have been ridiculed and would possibly have even been perceived as witchcraft. The medieval palette was more accustomed to simple food derived from local sources and the cessation of hunger was paramount.

It is with the Renaissance that the aesthetic pleasures of eating become valued again in Europe although largely the preserve of the nobility. The first cookbooks appear in Europe with the advent of the printing press. The first English cookery book entitled *The Booke of Cokery*, 1500 was printed by Richard Pynson, a contemporary of Caxton. It is a collection of recipes that reverberate with the geography of classical antiquity. In an account of "How to Make Fish Potage in Egg Sauce", one is instructed to: "Take loaches and clean...Take dates, raisins or currants...Add powdered pepper, cloves and prunes and raisins of Cyprus currants. Colour thy potage in saffron...stir in a little vinegar mixed with garlic and ginger. Place thy fish in this and pour on thy syrup and serve it...". The limited production of this and other similar books would have been in direct relation to the tiny proportion of society with the means to purchase the ingredients, the vast majority of European people still relying on basic, local and seasonal sources of food.

The mechanical means of reproducing books signifies the start of a mass dissemination of information and within these early cookery books, as the seasonal produce and traditional methodologies of preparation are archived, the protean substance of culture becomes fixed and its people more firmly located. The produce available to the medieval European would have been limited but the trade developed during the age of exploration from the 15th Century onwards introduced new produce and methods, which in turn became assimilated into the culture of ordinary home cooking.

The evolution of the cookbook parallels every significant era of European history. The Age of Enlightenment is reflected in the manner of delivery adopted in *The Modern Cook*, 1733 by Vincent la Chapelle, where the first reference is made to households. Modernism and the Industrial Revolution is embodied in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, 1861. Arguably, Elizabeth David's many publications, perhaps most notably *Mediterranean Food* published in 1950 are the first signs of late Modernity (or the onslaught of Post-Modernity). And our contemporary global situation of confused Late-Modernity or Post-Modernity or

Altermodernity appears to be exhaustively illustrated and critiqued by the proliferation of celebrity chef publications and broadcast material.

Books of cookery have equalled any other subject worthy of publication throughout history and the committing of recipes to lasting memory is as fundamental to culture as language itself.

The 'F' Word

For the wealthy inhabitants of the world, the all year round availability of produce coupled with our knowledge, either directly through travel or vicariously through books, television and the Internet, enables us to replicate in our kitchen something that approximates any global culture. In fact, we can buy this as a readymade if we wish, a packet that we can microwave or reheat in the oven, bringing every corner of the world to our table. But it should trouble us, that as we stir the fresh prawns into our Thai Curry, the Thai farmers who once grew rice in their paddy fields now farm those very prawns and receive only just enough money to buy imported rice for their families.

As global food prices rise and multi-national companies increase their control of production and distribution, we all lose out. It's a dilemma, should we source locally, perhaps even growing our own food or should we be mindful of maintaining the livelihoods of global producers. Surely the economically developed world can reconcile its colonial past in an ethical way by supporting Fair Trade and celebrating this at the table. If there is a problem with the food companies exploiting farmers and promoting intensive production, it is equalled by our demand for exotic and un-seasonal produce which in turn is partly a consequence of cookery programmes and books.

Whilst new world powers (The G20) head the vanguard of economic progression, the G8 countries seem desperate to decipher the unknown language of the 21st Century, deploying ever-greater measures to regain the status quo. The G8 have fanned the flames of greed in the pursuit of growth, numbing us all with debt. With the current avalanche of global crises, extremism and greed, one might ask what we have learned from the past. Has humankind been gripped by amnesia foregrounding a repeat of early 20th Century meltdown?

When Marinetti published *The Futurist Cookbook* in 1932, it was set against a backdrop of economic uncertainty and rising Fascism. The comic nature of Marinetti's declarations fed the bitterness of right wing extremist ideology, a sweet and sour recipe for arrogance and war. What Marinetti tapped into was the deep-rooted cultural love of food coupled with a growing need for nationalistic unity and pride. The loss of colonial outposts and the disaster of the First World War denigrated the historic legacy of the Roman Empire. The Risorgimento saw the unification of the various states and although not universally popular, by 1920

saw the birth of modern Italy. Pride in an Italy of Dante Alighieri, of The Roman Empire and of battles won and lands obtained changed the twentieth century map of Italy to include the lands it believed it rightfully owned through its history. The map of Irredentism includes territories to the east, north and west with aspirations through collaboration for an expansion beyond the Roman Empire. The alliance with Germany put this plan into action.

Just as Apicius records the produce of the Roman Empire in *Apicius de re Quoquinaria*, 1498, so Marinetti eludes to in *The Futurist Cookbook*. His recipes are irredentist proclamations of gastronomic destiny with references to dates, olives, kumquat, spices and herbs. Separate the politics from the culinary experiments and Marinetti's exuberance becomes a fascinating exploration of the aesthetics of eating and arguably a project worth continuing. But as a consequence of our fast developing sense of culinary aesthetics and adventurous approach to cooking, we come back to the issue of airfreighting exotic produce halfway around the world at the expense of global ecology and localised economies. What would be the implications of a Norfolk dish of Cromer Crab and Thai Prawn fish cakes? Even if it tasted sublime, the arrogance and wastefulness of the dish would outweigh the aesthetics and if we are what we eat, do we need to be so global? Some contemporary cookery books gently return us to sense and promote sustainability, seasonal and regional availability as well as aesthetics.

8 Ways to Cook the Books and other works

I have produced *8 Ways to Cook the Books* out of frustration and in response to our current global situation. It is a satirical comment on the financial mismanagement by the G8 countries. I have chosen signature dishes of the eight countries but I have subverted the recipes by the introduction of books, pamphlets and magazines into the ingredients and methods. For example, the joint of meat in the traditional British roast is substituted for a tome, signifying a stodgy leaden bureaucracy whereas in contrast perhaps, the classic Italian Osso Buco not only becomes Osso Booko but is also served with a soft porn Tagliatelle. The distortion of these nationally beloved dishes illustrates the malevolent consequences of greed and misanthropy. I quote from the foreword of the book:

“The heart of every population is nurtured by its food, but that extends beyond the warmth of the hearth and the comfort of the kitchen table. The socioeconomic ‘army’ must march on its stomach. Growth and progress must be fed as well and this diner has an appetite for fine nutrient. I fear this will leave the table sparse; all complexity of tastes and textures reduced to bare means. I urge you to try these recipes. They tell the ordinary story of the people that serve their nation and toil for its survival. You can substitute some of the ingredients if you wish but make sure you source locally.” *8 Ways to Cook the Books* (Rowe, 2009)

Over a period of a month I prepared all of the eight recipes and photographed them for the book. The performance aspects of this, complete with strange odours and unconventional methods of preparation, were not recorded but do form the basis for future work. The photographs were enhanced and digitally separated in Photoshop and subsequently screen-printed using four-colour separation. Each image is accompanied by a list of ingredients and the method on the facing page. The book is stitched and hardback bound in Library Buckram. The style is reminiscent of the 1970s, which is significant in that it reverberates with the death throes of Modernity and old colonial world order.

I trained as a printmaker and have always favoured the multiple over the unique. The potential for dissemination is a driving force in my practice and I have recently been using video as a means of mass-dissemination, utilising non-art public places to present the work as well as the Internet. Prints and artist's books are usually produced in limited editions and fail to be as democratic as one might hope them to be. *8 Ways to Cook the Books* is printed by the artist and published in an edition of 50, making it fairly exclusive. However, I was lucky enough to get funding not only for the book but also the cost of printing a postcard flyer in an edition of 1000, which can be freely distributed. The cards have a web address, allowing anyone to download an electronic copy of the book from my web site. The qualities of hand-made paper and the richness of the screen-printed surfaces may be lost in an electronic copy but the concept and content are accessible in infinite measure.

I have referenced cookery and food production in my practice for many years. It started back in the 1970s when I was still a student with an interest in the Futurists and Marinetti, an early result being a vacuum cleaner bag roasted complete with contents. More recently, I have made work in response to Piero Manzoni's 'Merda d'artista (1961) with a ready-made multiple called 'Import-Export' (2005) where I used tins of peaches imported to Japan from Italy and re-labelled them with 'Import-Export' as part of an exhibition called 'Made by UK' at Visions Gallery in Tokyo. Part of that same exhibition was a piece entitled 'My Global Market.com', which represented a Google image search for supermarkets around the world. The images were turned into postcards, sorted according to geographical location and pinned to the gallery wall in such a way that they construct a map of the world. It was a low-tech modelling of commercial cyberspace and a graphic depiction of the availability of food globally.

In 2007 I collaborated with the artist Simon Davenport on a live Internet TV programme for Contemporary Arts Norwich entitled 'Ready Steady Marinetti'. Here I followed the format of the well-known TV programme, inviting the public to bring me bags of produce, which I then proceeded to prepare and cook in an unorthodox manner, reminiscent of Marinetti's approach. The three-hour performance included 'celebrity bags' supposedly from politicians and world leaders, foregrounding the satirical elements of *8 Ways to Cook the Books*.

In 2008 I showed a video called 'Tempura' in a shop window as part of the Aurora International Film Festival. In 'Tempura', dressed in a suit, I dip watches and clocks into tempura batter and deep-fry them, bringing the mechanisms to a violent halt. The same year I curated an installation of six video works in a shop window entitled 'Salivate' where each artist responded to the Pavlovian action of involuntary stimulation at the sight of various images. My film included the preparation of melted chocolate, crushed fruit and coins served on a revolving 12" vinyl record of salsa music.

In April of this year, I gave a performance entitled 'Bad Stock' at Stew gallery in Norwich. For this, I screen printed a poster depicting a recipe for making 'Bad Stock' which referenced Milton Freeman and the sour consequences of the 2008 credit crunch. The posters were pasted across a ten metre section of wall and the audience were invited on the opening night to throw rotten fruit and vegetables at the wall, suggesting by virtue of double entendre that Neoliberalism itself had been put in the medieval stocks.

The references to cookery are explicit but the work also predicated on the use of readymade, mechanical reproduction and wide dissemination. I am concerned with reaching new audiences and recognise the universal hook of using food and cooking methods as a suitable process to deliver the content of the artwork. We all eat and most of us cook, so here there is the point of access through some sense of familiarity. This is what Marinetti exploits in 1930s Italy, challenging the very heart (or stomach) of its cultural past. Leaving the Fascist ideology aside, I would compare Marinetti's artistic and aesthetic skills with Rirkrit Tiranavija's 'relational aesthetics' of cooking and eating and his shock tactics are perhaps comparable to Celia A Shapiro's powerful photographs of death row meals or Beagles and Ramsey's hugely controversial blood puddings.

My art is satirical and political but not pedantic. I use humour in place of evangelism and I aim to subvert rather than convert. *8 Ways to Cook the Books* uses the symbols of comfort and homeliness to deliver its satirical pun. In some ways (politics aside) it is like Marinetti's Futurist Cookbook, in so far as it occupies the territory of the familiar and slowly contorts it. John Roberts assesses the skills of the contemporary artist in his book *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007) and eloquently articulates the openness of skills appropriate to contemporary fine art practice. If I think about it, I have invested as much time in developing cooking skills within my art as anything else in the last ten years. Why? Because I believe art should emanate from the fabric of society and from that, the politics of food, the cultural currency of food and the aesthetics of food are inextricable.

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