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Upsetting Stomachs and Systems: The Relational Experience of Power in Food Art

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Abstract:

Food systems implicate complex entanglements among physical bodies, symbolic meaning, and patterns of interaction that can lead to the emergence and apparent stabilization of power relationships. Yet these dynamics—including the given knowledges and regimes of corporate, cultural, and institutional food—can also be understood as fluid and mutable. In addition to producing disempowering contexts for individual producers and eaters of food, food systems also comprise the potential for resistance, intervention, and hacking. This article probes these ideas through a research-creation–based, reflexive analysis of the authors' experiential artwork, *Orchestrer la perte/Perpetual Demotion* (OLP/PD), an installation/performance involving robotic and digital technologies, human eaters and observers, edible matter and microbial life forms. Using as interpretive lenses Jean-Marie Schaeffer's understanding of *aesthetic experience,* Bruno Latour's interpretation of *agential translation*, and Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke's fusion of *hospitality and ethics*, we reflect on and discuss several moments over the lifetime of OLP/PD. From these, we draw insights into the confederate and mutable nature of agency within food-system power relations. By paralleling experiential art with other performative and representational contexts of food, we aim to prompt others to imagine how food, humans, and power might be collectively reframed and refigured.

***Keywords*:** food art; digital art; experiential art; power; agency; relationality

Introduction

Food systems implicate complex entanglements among physical bodies, symbolic meaning, and patterns of interaction that are both scripted and improvised (Blay-Palmer, 2010; Hammelman et al., 2020; Szanto et al., 2022). These elements include edible matter, technologies both digital and mechanical, and human eaters, including our sensing capacities and the discursive frameworks that help us interpret sensation. One of the outcomes of such imbrications is the emergence and apparent stabilization of power relationships, many of which come to be perceived as inherent to a given food context. Examples include the imposed and often moralistic paradigms of "good" and "bad" taste (Guthman, 2003), the given knowledge of "nutritionism" (Scrinis, 2013), the medicalization of bodies and wellness (Brady et al., 2021), and the numerous hegemonies that articulate corporate, cultural, and institutional "truths" about food.

In the lived experience of food production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and waste processing, these articulations can lead to the over-valorization of technocratic, neoliberal, and perverse "solutions," such as the digitization of large-scale agriculture, the politicization of trade agreements, and the replacement of one monocultural production with another in the name of sustainability (Barrett & Rose, 2020; Duina, 2019; Soluri, 2021). At the scale of the individual eater, it can seem impossible to resist or act against such apparently inexorable power structures.

Some scholars have invoked the term "food regime" as means of portraying the broad influences and controls that industrial-governance actors wield in large-scale contexts (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Tilzey, 2019). Yet this notion tends to imply that such powers are incontrovertible and immutable. Instead, food systems also comprise the potential for resistance, intervention, and hacking (Caldwell, 2019; Heynen, 2010; Wang et al., 2015), meaning that power relationships are not as stable as often assumed. This in turn means that alternatives to given knowledges and behaviours are often already present—though perhaps latent—within food systems. As such, alternatives might be surfaced through the efforts of "non-regime" actors—food activists and artists, participatory communities, creative organizations—eventually leading to reconfigurations of agency and what is considered agential. At a more abstract level, this potential underscores that no individual agent in a system is a lone mediator of power, but instead that power is distributed, a "confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants" (Bennett, 2010: 23).

Experiential art is one way of making manifest such confederacies, given how it can parallel the material, discursive, and processual entanglements of more complex food systems, and do so in more manageably observable ways. Further, experiential art also engages with two key aspects of edibility: *aesthetics*—the interpretation of and response to sensory inputs; and *experience*—the embedded and engaged nature of such acts as eating (Dewey, 2005; Eco, 1989; Perullo, 2016).

Arts philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer—who expands on John Dewey's articulation of experience—considers the aesthetic qualities of a given interactive or media context not as properties or "possessions" of that context, but instead as forms of *giving attention* (2015b) in ways that are "rich in the sense of opening up the possibility of an intense and open processing" (2015a: 162). In this interpretation, by attending to a given artwork, an audience brings into

being its aesthetic qualities. Moreover, by varying that attention—as well as the limits on what is considered the "audience" within an experiential setting—the hedonic valences of the art experience also change. Ultimately, by examining the conditions and contexts of aesthetic experience and the elements that compose it, alternative ways of perceiving power as relational may be imagined and, eventually, enacted.

This article probes these ideas through a reflexive analysis and interpretation of the authors' experiential artwork, *Orchestrer la perte/Perpetual Demotion* (OLP/PD), an installation/performance involving robotic and digital technologies, human eaters and observers, edible matter and microbial life forms. Our approach falls within the iterative cycles inherent to research-creation, a scholarly-artistic practice that figures making and thinking, feeling and doing as integrated practices (Badani, 2015; Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012). Specifically, the text presented here takes the form of "research-creation-reporting" (Szanto, 2015; Szanto & Sicotte, 2022), a process of making public the artists' observations and reflections on their own experiences as well as those of the people who witnessed their work during its construction, installation, and presentation.

The article is therefore intended as neither prescriptive nor determinative, but rather as exploratory and propositional. Distinctive to research-creation, the reporting process serves two purposes: it informs the evolution of the authors' own work and prompts readers to imagine ways to deploy the authors' insights in their own practice. This "report" thus presents a series of snapshots and explorations, a complement to the heterogeneous experience of the artwork, and a step toward future practice and theorization.

In what follows, we offer a discussion of several moments during the project's presentation at seven international arts festivals, starting with a genealogy of the work and a post hoc theoretical framing of the power dynamics we observed. This framework incudes Jean-Marie Schaeffer's understanding of *aesthetic experience*, Bruno Latour's interpretation of *agential translation,* and Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke's conflation of *hospitality and ethics*. Through this assemblage, we consider how OLP/PD's aesthetic and experiential aspects demonstrate the ways in which agency—both toward and away from individual empowerment—is "translated" among actors (both human and non-human) during moments of interaction (Latour, 2005).

Genealogy and Context of OLP/PD

Orchestrer la Perte/Perpetual Demotion is an experiential artwork in which human visitors are spoon-fed one of a series of edible pastes by a three-armed, industrial-style robot. As a human approaches the installation, the robot's facial-tracking software enables it to bring a paste-filled spoon to the person's mouth; the human then chooses to accept the food or not. Once contact is made with a mouth, the robot retracts the spoon and hands it off to a human attendant, who places it in a dishpan of soapy water. The robot then picks up the next filled spoon and the cycle repeats. When the nine pre-placed spoons are all used, the attendant refills and resets a new set of nine. (See Fig. 1).

OLP/PD was first exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) in 2014. In the ensuing years, it was installed at six other arts festivals in Canada and Europe[1]; the piece would also have been part of the U.S.-based Emerge 2020 festival had it not been for the COVID pandemic. (Notably, although the Emerge presentation did not happen, the lead-up to that event provided several moments of insight that are addressed in this text.)

As an experiential artwork, OLP/PD is an assemblage of sensorial elements, texts, intentions, and concerns. It includes a custom-made delta robot and computer circuitry, a humble kitchen table and mini-fridge, hundreds of metal teaspoons, and myriad pasty foods. It is also an amalgam of visible and non-visible scripts: facial-tracking software, art-experience expectations, norms of eating and being fed, museum regulations, operational guidelines, food safety training, and written descriptions. Further implicated were several more abstract elements—taste and disgust, anxiety and enthusiasm, the fluidity of artistic practice and presentation, and human bias. And, as a socio-technical performance, the work always involved the interactions of curators and gallery managers, eaters and spectators, we the artists, and the human attendant who served the moment-to-moment needs of the robot.

Figure 1: *Orchestrer la perte/Perpetual Demotion*
at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art (2014) (See also:
https://youtu.be/5MGROYTsNjA.) *alt text: two images showing robotic arms bringing a paste-filled spoon to a visitor's mouth and a wide shot of a delta robot mounted to a wooden table*

Physical and material, while also conceptual and experiential, OLP/PD disrupted many of the patterns of domination and nurturing that are present when one body feeds another. While these patterns may seem implicit within, say, a parent providing sustenance to their offspring, they are mutable. For example, a child may firmly clench together their teeth, refusing penetration by a purée-loaded spoon; a parent may abandon "sensible eating" habits and instead encourage a kid to explore and innovate with their food; both, in moments of frustration or play, may invert feeding roles and discover what it is like to play the other. At the same time, and because of the many forms of socialization and reinforcement that come with human experience, these "mutations" of power can also be understood as normative. Similarly, and as described below, the ways in which OLP/PD both confounded and reproduced the norms of art experience offer clues to imagine broader understandings of power and agency within food.

The concept for OLP/PD emerged through an evolutionary process of discussion, experimentation, and reflection on our part, prompted by the broad, power-related issues noted in the introduction above. As media artist (Simon) and food scholar (David), we share a desire to peel away the surfaces of things, whether technologic or edible. By "looking under the hood" in this way, we try to question the immediate, common, and given understandings that gloss our fields of exploration, generally aiming at disrupting norms so that alternative forms of interaction might arise. Our robotic installation/performance was thus a means to examine how technology and humans and food are mutually nurturing *and* dominant, and, in Zornitsa Dimitrova's words, an occasion to "[reinstate] the status of automata as counterparts to 'humans' and [invite] biological bodies to reassess their place in a world" (2017: 162). In this way, we wanted to draw parallels to the ways in which normative structures like convenience foods, smart-phone apps, kitchen technologies, pasteurization, and supermarket chains both simplify and support human lives, as well as deskill and disempower us. Within that simultaneity, we sensed a space in which power is not singular and fixed, but distributed and malleable.

Over the course of its lifetime, OLP/PD acquired and lost momentum through its interactions with different material-discursive contexts. In this way, we understand the artwork itself (and our own selves) to have been dominated and nurtured by the spaces and agencies of art exhibition. Some of these were more predictable, such as frictions over our use of the word *slave* to describe the human attendant to the robot (see discussion of this term below), or the resistance that many curators had to our inclusion of a mini-fridge in the visible elements of our installation. Others, including material fragilities like the custom-drilling of an IKEA kitchen table or the need to 3-D print replacement parts, emerged because of the frequency with which the robot was programmed into festivals. Yet some of these power dynamics were surprising and delightful, largely because we as "creators" of the artwork had under-anticipated the numerous audiences and performances that would be engendered around the project, both in its formal moments of exhibition as well as those less planned.

Edible and Experiential Art

Scholars and artists alike have documented an extensive history of art and performance works that engage with food as subject, medium, or both (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999; Martin, 2005; Szanto, 2017). While a comprehensive review of food art is beyond the scope of this article,

several themes from the literature inform the ways in which we understand the agency of food in art gallery and festival contexts. These include: that food blurs the lines between nature and technoculture (Howells & Hayman, 2014; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1997); that galleries can present both prompts and impedances to "eating the art" (Gonzales-Torres, 1991; Saltz, 1996); that food can highlight material/sensorial parallels to the human body (Finley, 2000; Sterbak, 1997); and that food art can nudge its spectators into more active engagement, triggering their direct implication in the creation of experience (Abramović, 1979; Zampollo, 2016).

Given these interpretations of distributed agency in food art—and the broader understanding of holistic systems on which they depend—we draw on three other frameworks to undergird our reflections and interpretive analysis of OLP/PD. The first derives from Schaeffer's understanding of *aesthetic experience*, itself a compound notion that unifies sensing and attention (i.e., aesthetics) with "a set of interaction processes that are cognitive, emotional, and volitional, and that constitute our relationship with the world and with ourselves"[2] (i.e., experience) (2015: 39). The second is based on Bruno Latour's portrayal of agency as fluid—becoming both transferable and transmutable in the moment of interaction among bodies. For Latour, these moments constitute "translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations" (2005: 108), rather than pre-scripted conditions in which power is uniquely situated within one or another body or discursive construct.

Our third framework interprets acts of hospitality—and specifically food making and eating—as intersubjective and mutually productive dynamics. As philosophers Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke express (2016), hospitality is neither simply a host receiving nor an invitee being fed, but is instead a shared and co-constitutive ethical process. Care, attention, and power flow between their bodies—rather than being contained in the one or the other. While this is "a messier and less definitive [approach] than the more logically rigorous one…" it prompts reflection "when we face real, irreducible clusters of elements in tension" (2016: 64). Together, these three framings suggest that power dynamics can be characterized as *emergent* (i.e., coming into being through relationality and exchange) and should therefore be interpreted through a compound and dynamic lens.

Experiential art provides occasions in which to observe the ways in which these propositions play out. It serves as an experimental sandbox that is less about "proving" how power moves and morphs, and more about wondering what is taking place beneath the tidy surface of things, and then using those questions to inform future practice. Importantly, because experiential art is not generally considered utilitarian or directed towards an explicit outcome (paralleling Schaeffer's sense of aesthetic attention), it allows the participant to "wander" in a mental-emotional-sensory space (Szanto & Sicotte, 2022).

Through such conceptual meanderings, witnesses can become aware of their own use of attention, and the ways in which attention, sensation, and the material "realities" before them are partially of their own making. This "densification of attention" (Schaeffer, 2015b: 24) is what saturates aesthetic experience with potential; as the perceiver attends to the context more intensely, its aesthetics acquire greater nuance. Rather than "ascending" to a god's-eye view of truth, the witnesses to experiential art drill deeper into its quantum nature. At this scale of

differentiation among sensing and interpretation, the agencies that together form patterns of power can become more granular and thus be reconsidered as both confederate and motile.

In the case of OLP/PD, the experience was ostensibly centered around food and eating. The robot, with its complex apparatus of machined aluminum, software, people, spoons, furniture, texts, and social scripting presented edible material to gallery-goers through a network of attention-attracting components. These things, each in interaction with others, produced an experience of diversity and therefore diversion. Together they thwarted more normative socio-gastronomic codes: no listing of ingredients[3] (including potential allergens and taste expectations); the infantilization of eaters (spoon-feeding by a strange machine); eating as an exceptional rather than mundane act (in a gallery, surrounded by an audience). At the same time, they rattled many conventions of museum and gallery experience, encouraging not only touching but also ingesting the art. The visitor's attention was thereby scattered, defamiliarized—*where do I look? what should I do? how do I respond to the emerging unknown?*—while also remaining within the familiar context of "hospitality," albeit an unusual strain of such.

By rendering more opaque what is usually translucent (eating) and making more evident what is usually hidden (the mechanics of an artwork), OLP/PD provoked an intensification of the visitor's attention. Their internal sensations, bodily positioning, social apprehension, and cognitive processing all constructed the aesthetic experience of performing their own role as "human fed by machine." In this staging, their experience is the artwork, and the artists—monkeying with domination and nurturing—cease to be the site of creation. The question of *who* or *what* was in power thus becomes: When and how is power translated?

From these propositions regarding experiential art, we turn to our second system of thinking, grounded in Latour's understanding that agency is translated among actors through interaction. Extending his notion of "following the actors" in order to witness the social patterns they trace out and thereby "catch up with their often wild innovations" (2005: 12), Latour offers an equally networked interpretation of agency. This includes a differentiation between *intermediaries* and *mediators* that names the former as a "black box" that "transports meaning or force without transformation" and the latter as composite or confederate assemblages that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (39). As examples, he notes that a computer in good working order, while complicated, is an intermediary, whereas a conversation (even a banal one) is "a complex chain of mediators where passions, opinions, and attitudes bifurcate at every turn" (39).

In the case of OLP/PD, many of the individual components may be understood as intermediaries—the arms of the robot, the descriptive texts, the mini-fridge, the Tupperware containers. They performed their roles relatively straightforwardly, transporting without transforming various agencies. As a whole, however, the installation was more mediator, a Latourian conversation about the "banalities" of being fed, which produced and reproduced power in divergent ways and, importantly, in divergent bodies. As both human and non-human actors participated in this conversation, they became part of a complex system, one in which no single element was mediator, but which enfolded and made them complicit in the mediations of power.

Around these two theorizations we wrap a third: the Boisvert-Heldke notion that "hospitality is ethics." While eating unnamed paste from a robotized spoon in an art gallery may not lie within everyone's interpretation of *hospitality*, the sharing of a food-related experience in which some actors do the feeding and others are fed can be understood as a variant of this practice. As performance scholars have addressed, both audience and art co-produce a shared experience (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Szerszynski et al., 2003). Despite different points of view on "what happens" (and subsequent descriptions thereof), performance is not a transmission of a pre-scripted story, but is instead mutually constituted in time and space. By understanding hospitality as a social performance, we also understand OLP/PD as a co-production of ethics (and aesthetics). In the context of the current analysis of the work, we therefore view our "ethical" role within OLP/PD as one of several.

In what follows, we deploy these propositions within our discussion of OLP/PD. Through this sequence of reflections, we hope to portray the confederacy of agencies that compose the experience of our artwork, including the ways in which translations of power took place. Through our analysis, we also hope to help imagine ways to see food system power as more relative and relational, fluid and mutable. To structure our reflections below, we loosely follow Schaeffer's understanding of the five elements that construct experience, that is: (a) knowledge through sensation; (b) perceptual, linguistic, and image-based representation; (c) the subjective nature of phenomena; (d) cognitive, affective, and volitional interaction; and (e) the crystallization of human capacity within physical spaces.

Reflections

Sensing/Knowing

Like much food art, OLP/PD confounds both sensing and knowing food by extracting edible matter from its normative places of consumption and placing it in environments more conventionally reserved for hands-off (and mouths-off) spectacle. Moreover, the "food" the robot serves up takes the form of various beige, orange, red, and black pastes, all of which are prepared in order to muddle conventions around colour, taste, and texture.

Such "dissociations," in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's framing of the term (1999), create the opportunity for both artist and eater to re-sense food as partially "de-cultured" and to refocus attention on its non-gustatory natures. These include haptics, visuals, and sound qualities—those sensations that can be experienced prior to eating. Further, for those who did not participate in eating, and only observed the installation-performance, the food's symbolic/discursive characteristics displaced its material qualities, implicating a noumenal "knowing" rather than a phenomenal "sensing" of eating. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Material elements of OLP/PD in Lyon, France
(alt text: four images showing the filled spoons, edible pastes, agar-agar pads, and used spoons of the installation)

For OLP/PD, the edible pastes that David developed were always site-specific, based on a cultural or social history of place and interpreted through the lens of domination/nurturing. In Montreal, the tensions between salubrity and innovation inherent to commercial food provisioning became the basis for a series of three pastes that would eventually be named *lab whiz, plum vs. apricot,* and *cheesecake factorial.* Each was a type of "battle royale" among microbially active ferments and cultures and their analogues in the world of pasteurized, industrially stabilized products. *Lab whiz* was thus a combination of labneh, sourdough rye bread, and *nước mắm* (fish sauce), puréed into orange-beigeness with equal proportions of Cheez

Whiz, Wonderbread, and Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce. *Plum vs. apricot* melded *ume* (a type of pickled plum of Japanese heritage) with sulfured dried apricots; *cheesecake factorial* involved fermented lemons, cream cheese, and graham crackers. For one visitor to the MACM installation, the *lab whiz* tasted like "my grandmother's fishy pâté," while another commenter (an artist with whom David has collaborated) named the pastes "weird shit" and refused to partake.

For the most part, while curators were willing to forgo the signing of waiver forms or the listing of ingredients and potential allergens, visitors invariably had both questions about and critiques of the pastes' anonymous makeup. We as artists chose not to respond, instructing our hired assistants to also remain mute when faced with inquiries. Our intent here was to parallel other art forms: it is rare that a gallery-goer would require an understanding of the material apparatus of a painting or sculpture before looking at it. While we also recognize that such artworks are not ingested, we wanted to draw attention to the reality that all artwork is absorbed in some way by human bodies, both emotionally and intellectually, as well as through sound and light waves.

At the exhibition in Lyon, France in 2018, a number of parents expressed concern about one paste being too spicy for young palates. *Feu fumée* was made from fresh breadcrumbs, panko, cultured butter, margarine, smoked paprika and liquid smoke, and was a nod to the city's gastronomic heritage as well as a wink about contemporary French restaurateurs' reliance on industrially processed foods (Alderman, 2014). Minimally piquant, the paste was nonetheless bright red, suggesting a fiery taste akin to its naming. The Lyonnais parents' sentiments were re-articulated in 2019, during a classroom discussion about OLP/PD with students in a food and performance course at Quest University in Squamish, British Columbia (see Szanto, 2021). While not faced with the edible pastes in questions, students in the course nonetheless raised questions about the ethics of feeding gallery-goers when they had not explicitly been informed of the makeup of the food. Their concerns included both audience consent and participant inclusivity: without "knowing" what was in the pastes, eaters would not be able to formally consent to consume it[4]; given potential allergens or intolerances, some visitors would be excluded from eating.

These moments demonstrate, at a first level, the ways in which food art is also subject to the pre-participation disclaimers and trigger warnings that have now become part of more conventional museum and theatrical events. This points both to the normalization of edible performance and installation, as well as the affective, emotional, and physical impacts that all art can produce, whether visual, auditory, or gustatory. At a second level, however, we recognize that the dissociative experience of eating in art spaces can alter a more usual understanding of the relationship between sensation and cognition. The sensing organs of the human body might thus be understood to be projective as well as receptive. Rather than being mere input devices for the "executive functions" of cognitive processing (i.e., intermediaries), they are *mediators*. In this way, sensing becomes an *exchange* with the surrounding environment, a relational set of translations between agents "outside" the body and those "within." Or, taking a more ecosophic framing, sensing is "an ever-shifting social and historical construct" (Bull et al., 2006: 5) in which neither subject nor object are uniquely in charge of what has been experienced.

Representation

In crafting the three-armed delta robot for OLP/PD, Simon drew on open-source designs freely available online. Delta robots are standardly used in industrial applications—including food processing—and are capable of extremely rapid, "pick-and-place" operations. (For more, see Wikipedia, 2022a.) Generally placed in a horizontal orientation above a production line, such robots are pre-programmed to move, grab, and deposit components in order to assemble the finished product. In the case of OLP/PD, the orientation was vertical, with the three arms converging on a head featuring a hemispherical one-way mirror.

Behind the mirror, a video camera provided the inputs for Simon's facial-tracking software. A small magnetic projection, attached to the head just below the mirror, served to pick up one of nine metal teaspoons placed on the surface of the wooden table to which the robot was mounted. The top arm included two narrow metal rods, paralleling a human ulna and radius, and enabling the robot to partially pivot its mirror-head as it approached a mouth. Similarly, the two side arms included elbow-like articulations that supported backward-and-forward movement as well as variations in side-to-side displacement. The net effect of these mechanics produced a kind of choreography that, while fully robotic, also echoed of humanness. That the hemispherical mirror came to within a few inches of the eater's face and reflected that face, distorted, back to the individual, also partially humanized its appearance, albeit perversely. (See Fig. 3.)

Figure 3: Facing the robot, facing the self
(alt text: a visitor's face reflected in the hemispheric mirror of the robot's "head")

At the same time, however, the robot was nothing like the humanoid representations popularized in science fiction and that are increasingly part of robotic innovations in the domestic market. The aluminum structure, hand-machined by Simon and polished to a chrome-like finish, sang of mechanical and not biological origins. Its sometimes-jerky movements, occasional inaccuracies in finding a mouth, and abrupt descent to pick up spoons and then hand them off (once used) to the attendant, all reinforced its nature as technology. These sets of visual cues—at once human and not, robotic, and not, clumsy, elegant, intentional, and not—produced a kind of estrangement for the human visitors. What were we, the artists, trying to communicate with these qualities? A sense of parental caring, a feeling of disempowerment before technology, a need to resist and participate at once? All of these, in fact: a complex and perhaps chaotic conversation-mediation.

Our choice of the word *slave* to describe the human attendant who served the robot's needs followed a similar pattern of muddling meaning and provocation. Initially drawn from our assembled lexicon of domination-related terms, "slave" also referenced the nature of electronic circuits in which some components are subject to the control of a "master" device. We were further invoking the ways in which art and festival assistants are sometimes treated, both by artists and the institutions that employ them. Frequently art students themselves, such assistants take work in support of more established art-makers, often for low pay, and often in pursuit of the community contacts that help them develop longer-term professional relationships. Although art employers are increasingly sensitive to their own labour practices, the overall experience of such assistants may not always be particularly empowering.

Our intent in using this term was to prompt reflection about the nature of slavery in history and its less-evident, though ongoing presence in contemporary contexts, including human dependence on digital technologies and, more pointedly, within food production and transformation (Sellers & Asbed, 2011; Vandergeest & Marschke, 2020). Over the years during which OLP/PD was exhibited, however, the term became increasingly fraught, partly due to ongoing (and increasing) evidence of racism in North America. Although slavery and its impacts have existed throughout time and geographies, we became more sensitized to our ethical position in the use of the term, and now refer to the human assistant as the robot's "attendant."

In the case of OLP/PD, the attendant was both enslaved and not; their script included no responsibility to the human gallery-goers and eaters, and instead solely related to the robot itself. The attendant only attended to the robot's needs—filling and washing spoons, cleaning the table and occasional messes, replacing agar-agar pads, and ensuring safe shut down and start up. When a person approached the robot and asked the attendant what to do, they were supposed to smile blithely and allow the visitor to figure it out for themselves. If asked what was in the pastes, or about the meaning of the piece as a whole, they were not to respond. In this way, while "slave" to the "mastery" of the robot (and partially that of the artists who had pre-scripted the various roles), the attendant was free of any direct responsibility to the eater.

These efforts, like the perceptual cues of the robot's visual aspects, also muddled visitors' understanding of what was going on, who was in charge, and what role they were to play. Host, invitee, voyeur, paying customer? Although unstated, the choice in how they played their ethical/hospitality role was theirs. That the attendant had at their disposal an ordinary mini-fridge

and a simple chair on which to sit (plus a plastic wash basin beneath for depositing used spoons in soapy water), only added to the disruption of expectations and roles. Were these elements meant to communicate kitchen or laboratory, factory or art space? Depending on how the visitor directed their attention, what they mused upon and filtered out, the artwork was mutable, translated into an experience of, in part, their own making.

Subjective Phenomena

What *is* a feeding robot? And what is it for? These questions threaded through a number of moments during the presentations of OLP/PD, often when it came to relatively straightforward logistical issues such as describing the piece to curators and audiences, or setting it up in a gallery or exhibition hall.

At the Maker Faire in Ottawa, Ontario in 2015, the hackers and digital innovators gathered together largely saw the robot as a prototype towards developing an applied technology for feeding people in care. Rather than perceiving an artwork that conceptually probes human-food-tech power dynamics, they thought about practicalities: a robot that helps people with disabilities eat autonomously; a replacement for human labour in assisted-living facilities; a tool to aid busy parents in morning multitasking. The context of the Faire—solution-finding through bricolage—had already partially framed our artwork as part of what we had set out to critique.

Rather than being seen as a representation of what is problematic within technocratic solutions to human challenges, OLP/PD became part of those solutions. Nonetheless, as the day wore on and the fragilities of our custom-built machine began to show themselves, the robot-as-prototype increasingly became seen as an experience for reflection. The shuddering aluminum arms, the ways in which the spoons bounced, the constant re-provisioning of pastes in small, non-satiating quantities—all of these showed a mechanics of failure, rather than a prototyping of innovation.

Similarly, the elements comprising the robot's support apparatus troubled conventions of art installation. For our first presentation at the Hedonistika/BIAN/Elektra exhibition at the MACM in 2014, David dutifully reported to the museum's loading dock—a mini-fridge, Tupperware containers of edible pastes, bagsful of teaspoons, attendant snacks, and cake-decorating tools in tow. There, he was greeted by a museum official with an inventory form to be completed. Photographs would also be taken of all the support materials. The same process had taken place when Simon arrived earlier with the robot, computer technology, and support structure; a parallel version of the process would occur when we left. All this was quite understandable, an effort to ensure that none of the museum's other artworks left when we did.

To the administrator's consternation and David's mild amusement, however, we soon realized that while the pastes were coming into the MACM in plastic containers, they would be leaving in the bellies of exhibition visitors. (Or, in some cases, spat into garbage cans or flushed down the toilets of the museum's bathrooms.) Ultimately, the food was not photographed, but through this negotiation of documentation, we the artists started to wonder about the foodishness of the food itself. Whereas the *lab whiz* and *plum vs. apricot* had fairly definitively been food at one point in their lifetime—ingredients purchased, mixed, tasted, packaged, and kept cold—had

they become something else through their material translations over time? Did the pastes remain food when they were removed from their plastic wrap and squeezed by an attendant into a metal-and-plastic syringe? What about when they were extruded onto spoons, themselves placed on agar-agar pads on a semi-sanitary surface in a room-temperature, white-walled gallery? When they confused a palate, missed a mouth altogether, or were spat into a kleenex, did their edible nature start to erode? To these questions, the answers seem to be both yes and no. *Pâté* became *paste*, yet to some, *paste* was still palatable. Again, as in the Maker Faire example, the experience of each individual, the space of experience, and the attention that varied continuously all produced an often divergent set of interpretations.

Interaction

Like the administrative interaction that David had at the MACM loading dock, "putting food where it doesn't belong" tended to raise unaddressed issues and activate latent frictions that sit beneath the surface of the art world. Many of these relate to the points noted above, including the regulations that dominate food preparation and service in public contexts, the tensions within the term "slave," and curatorial expectations for the physical appearance of "art."

While the organizations and institutions with which we interacted in Canada and Europe gave us relatively free reign to make and serve our pastes with minimal oversight, our experience with the COVID-postponed Emerge 2020 exposition was far more regulated. Despite existing training and extensive food preparation practice and care, David had to jump through a seemingly endless sequence of food-safety hoops, including online certification in commercial food preparation, the identification of a HACCP-certified[5] kitchen, eventual occupation (at the event) of a three-walled tent with hand-washing station, and the use of disposable gloves during handling of the pastes, both on-site and off. Dozens of emails, hundreds of dollars, and numerous hours of time were expended on these requirements.

The long-distance performances culminated in a Kafkaesque phone conversation between David and the Maricopa County (Arizona) food-safety manager, just days before the event was to have taken place. Crouched in a disused storefront doorway on a blustery Montreal winter morning, David found himself responding to a series of questions about the project, the food that was to be prepared, and why, ultimately, he hadn't opted to use a local caterer rather than going through these myriad efforts to do it himself. After a simplified explanation of the themes of the project—including brief references to the structural dominations of food-safety regulations, but excluding any implications about the agencies of food-safety administrators—David finally said "It's an art thing." The Maricopa County manager replied, "Ah, okay," and the conversation came to a close.

While the Emerge organizers themselves had concerns about "slave" appearing in the printed promotional material for the event, they consented to its use during the live performance, recognizing it as an intentional provocation and opportunity to engage in a broader discussion. It was at the Ailleurs en Folie festival in Mons, Belgium, however, where our use of the term produced a more complicated effect. There, one of our designated attendants was a person who—as we understood it—owed a certain amount of public-service time to the municipality, in

repayment for the social assistance they had received. In this sense, our helper's enslavement to the city, the arts festival, and ultimately to us (and not just the robot) augmented the impact of the word *esclave*. Moreover, as the person did not come from an art-world context, the nuances and provocations of our project—both conceptual and linguistic—were not as apparent to them.

Training brought its own complications, as it became evident that the attendant was uncomfortable with both food handling and technical mechanics: at one point, they mis-assembled the food syringe, causing a relatively time-and-ingredient–intensive slab of edible paste to fall onto an unclean surface; on another occasion, their tentative-yet-brusque handling of the robot itself caused a piece to snap off, requiring Simon to improvise and eventually 3-D print replacement parts. The contextual displacement of this person from the frameworks of "slavery" that we had initially conceived led to a perverse inversion of who and what was enslaved. As we responded to their shortcomings, we started to recognize our own dependence on the attendant's ability to play the role "correctly." Deprived of conceptual art knowledge (and/or patience for and interest in the field), and without the manual dexterity or will to acquire it, the attendant became highly agential, requiring the artists and their context to relationally adapt to the attendant's disempowerments.

In art-world discourse, the "white cube" of the gallery and "black box" of the theatre are constructs that have long been debated (Bianchi, 2016; Bishop, 2018). The ostensible purity of these spaces is intended to allow the art to be spotlit, both literally and figuratively, while the background (including the apparatus of art, the artists themselves, the audiences, and the outside world) perceptually falls away. Contemporary critics tend to dismiss these "purifications," recognizing that, whether white, black, or grey-scale, the spaces of art presentation are never neutral (Schechner, 2003). Indeed, over time, visitors to white-walled galleries tend to become affected by the hands-off cues that whiteness projects. Similarly, participants stepping into a black-draped hall will pick up on and engage with the affordances that turn spectacle into performance. OLP/PD thus became both object and process, sculpture and theatre, depending on the environmental aesthetics around it. Crisp, white spaces discomfited eaters, inducing hesitancy and embarrassment among those who stepped forward to engage with the robot. Darkened rooms with sound-insulating velvet curtains seemed to encourage attitudes of performance and excitement, an opportunity to step "into" the artwork, play with it, and then eat. In part, because of curators' expectations for visual purity, we were invariably asked to hide the fridge and less-pretty elements of our set-up; equally invariably, we demurred, explaining our reasoning for their inclusion, both artistic and logistic.

Notably, at the WRO Biennale in Wrocław, Poland, OLP/PD was installed in the not-yet-renovated *mikvah* (ritual bath) of the newly rededicated White Stork Synagogue. The space, a combination of humbling history and crumbling stonework, was neither white nor black. Mostly, it was dusty and a little gloomy, dotted with warnings of rat-poison stations that made the prospect of eating robot-delivered pastes somewhat daunting. Nonetheless, and supported by strategically placed signage, lighting, and the usual apparatuses of mini-fridge, attendant chair, spoon bin, and IKEA table, the space eventually acquired a sense of domestic *and* artistic reassurance. Whereas the unconventional aesthetics of the more mundane parts of our installation had been considered distracting in the white cubes and black boxes of previous festivals, here they enhanced the "artness" of the space.

Spatial Skills

Artists who install a given piece in a variety of contexts, as well as those who create site-specific works, invariably find themselves adapting to the space around them and improvising with the agencies it presents. OLP/PD, while generally fairly consistent in its deployment, always had to be adjusted to some extent to fit within its context. We noted a variety of anecdotal examples, largely relating to our own technical experience, but over time, a composite and more intriguing example relates to the social experience of our attendants.

Among the technical examples were ongoing hardware and software adjustments made during installation. Highly dependent on the light bouncing off the face of an approaching visitor, the facial-tracking coding had to be calibrated to accommodate the different atmospherics of each venue. The placement of robot table, attendant chair, and mini-fridge varied as well, occasioning the need to rework both the physical logistics and scripting of the attendant's role. Depending on where a cleaning station was located, whoever was responsible for the spoon-washing cycles had to solve for the logistics that would allow the robot to operate according to the given schedule.

Culinary adaptations also counted among these technical examples. Generally, the pastes for each iteration were planned, developed, and tested in David's home kitchen in Montreal, while the actual production phase of the food took place on site (except in the case of festivals closer to home). Cooking equipment and spaces had to be sourced, permissions arranged for their use, controls set up to keep the food prep and storage salubrious. David adapted to shopping in unfamiliar cities and improvised within stripped-down kitchens.

Exceptionally, for the WRO Biennale, the conceptualization of the pastes took place just days before the event, during a public workshop at a café in Wrocław. The workshop was an attempt to think and act through a more relational mode of hospitality, to foreground local perceptions of how Poles witness domination and nurturing in food, rather than relying on David's outsider perspective. Instead of advance-planning three stereotypical, potato-based foods, he wanted to honor local knowledge and experience. Amusingly, after a series of exercises intended to open up possibilities and explore lesser-known ingredients, the workshop participants resoundingly declared that potatoes were, indeed, central to Polish cooking and an icon of their own "culinary enslavement."

Beyond these examples of spatial skills development, however, a very pertinent experiential adaptation came from the attendants themselves. On several occasions, we discovered that they had used their task checklists (our nod to the administrative domination of paperwork) to create visual and textual critiques of their "art-slave" experience. As noted above, the needs and agencies of assistants who volunteer or are paid to participate at art festivals can sometimes be minimally considered. In a Latourian sense, they are relegated to the role of intermediaries, denying their potential as translators of art, meaning, and power.

The OLP/PD attendants, while dutifully filling out the times and dates of spoon-washing, robot-cleaning, and paste-replenishing assignments, also created their own scripts and (semi-private) community of practice. Upon collecting the completed task checklists at the end of the

MACM exhibition, we found that they had used the paper and pen to amuse themselves (during exhibition down times) and to communicate with the other exhibition assistants (who rotated through the position during opening hours). Notes, comments, and drawings populated the checklists, documenting a parallel performance to our more formally intended one. This pattern repeated itself at other venues, most notably in Wrocław, where again our attendants were art students. (See Figs. 4 and 5.) We now interpret this expression of "spatial skills" as a kind of resistance to the sense of domination they may have felt—subject to museum schedules, visitor queries, artists' requirements—but also to their clear role as mediators with agency that we had not foreseen. In other words, the attendants' task-sheet artistry both extended OLP/PD's themes while also challenging them.

Figure 4: The task list sheets from the MACM installations
(alt text: several task list sheets, showing an evolution in the attendants' note-taking, doodling, and critique)

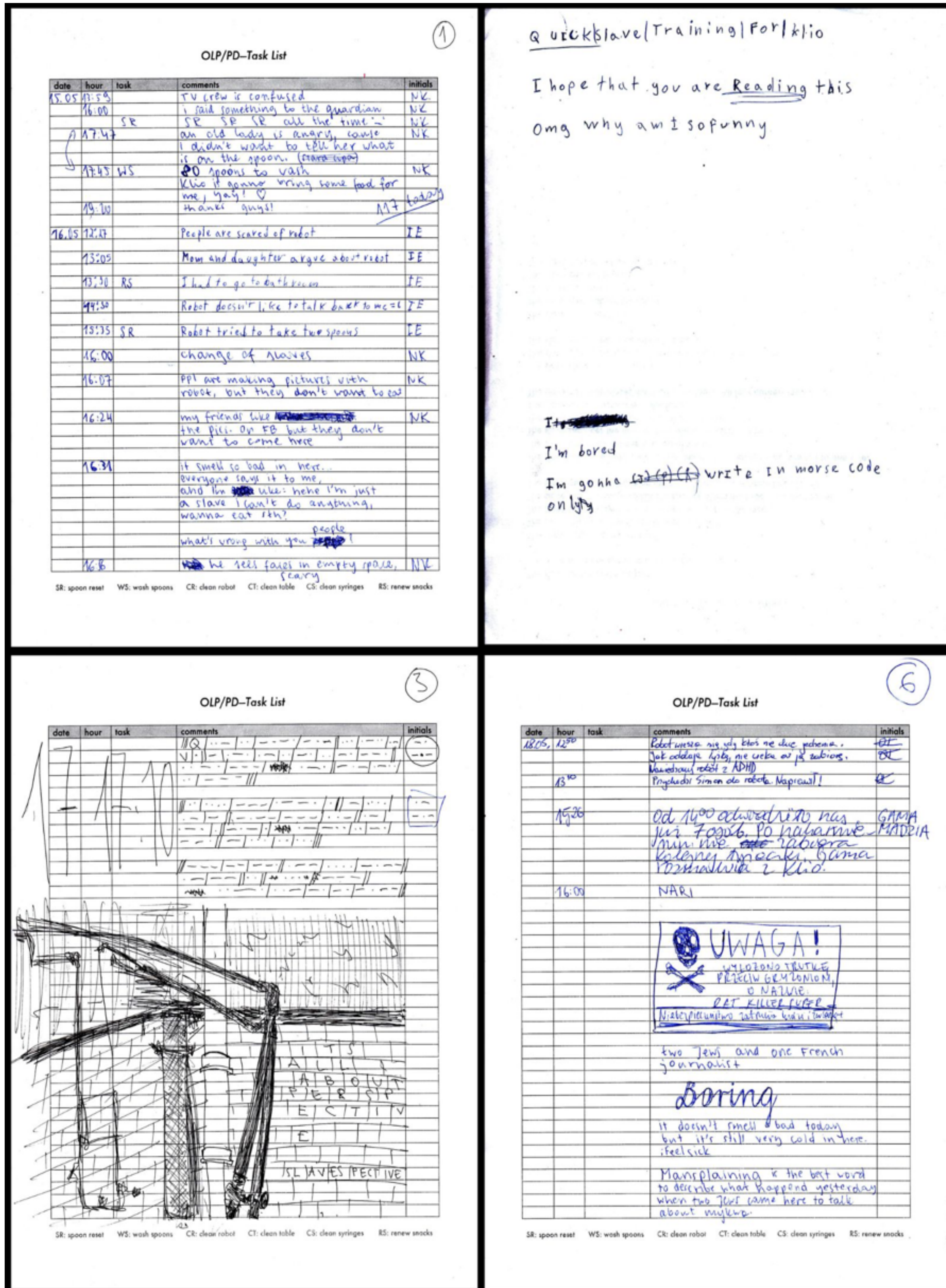

Figure 5: The task list sheets from the Wrocław installations
(alt text: several task list sheets, showing an evolution in the attendants' note-taking, doodling, and critique)

Conclusion

Throughout the many experiences that OLP/PD comprised, the normative meanings attributed to (technological) objects, (artistic) contexts and (food) practices were diverted and refigured. We observed "the same artwork" perform itself in a wide variety of ways and create a diverse set of power relationships, gustatory experiences, and relational interpretations of "hospitality." We also observed "different audiences" respond to the work in both very similar and highly divergent ways. What evolved was thus only partly of our own making and is best interpreted as the outcomes of multiple agents—human, non-human, material, discursive—and their translations of power.

In some cases, our theme of domination-and-nurturing played out in normative ways, with relationships among edible matter, technology, and humans paralleling those that are standardly observed elsewhere in food systems. Yet as the reflections above demonstrate, we often found ourselves witnessing the theme invert and pervert itself. That these iterative re-versionings of power dynamics were unpredictable and unintentional suggests that a similar potential exists in other food milieus as well, such as commercial, political, and cultural settings. We therefore ask: What if those potentialities could be activated more often, outside the gallery and museum, and towards a greater collective good?

What if, for example, we dissolved the boundary between sensing and knowing food, and allowed the subjectivities of sensory experience to be more often acknowledged as truth, rather than "explaining away" gastronomic divergences through biophysics or attributing them to a lack of taste education? What if the perceptual, linguistic, and image-based representations we make to communicate food's meaning were more broadly understood as *mediators* of lived experience, participants in the transformation and distortion of food "realities," rather than *intermediaries,* that is, literal (and neutral) expressions of truth? What if the confederate nature of food milieus were the starting point for an ethical re-interpretation of the processes of production, consumption, and waste habits, rather than a post hoc explanation of provisioning and incorporation? What if the collective experience of agricultural labourers were always shared through communication tools of their own making and enactment? And what if this led to a refiguring of labour—rather than ownership—as dominant? And finally, what if the "expertise" of culinary, marketing, governance, and academic professionals were seen as always already situated, an efflorescence of a socio-technical context, and not a singular agency uniquely held by a privileged individual?

Many of these *what if?* questions have been and will continue to be addressed by others in the spheres of food systems, particularly those examining the ways in which power relationships are mediated and depicted. They are, and remain, critical to building greater justice and empowerment at the scale of the individual. Through the creation and analysis of experiential artwork, however, we hope to add an additional perspective to such discourse and, potentially, a next set of questions and paths to follow. By considering aesthetic experience as relational—a production of audience attention, spatial affordances, a context set up by artists, and other, more subtle agencies—we can imagine artistic practice supporting these broader processes of self-reflection and investigation. That food itself can be understood as having its own agency is not new. Yet by thinking through the ways that this agency is translated through

interactions with the many mediators in food contexts, perhaps a novel sense of food system power relations can emerge.

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Endnotes

1. OLP/PD was programmed at the following festivals/venues: Elektra/BIAN, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montreal, CA (2014); ArtEngine, Maker Faire Ottawa, Ottawa, CA (2015); Ailleurs en Folie, Mons, BE (2015); Biennale WRO, Wrocław, PL (2016); Elektra/BIAN, L'Arsenal, Montreal, CA (2016); Festival Mois Multi, Québec, CA (2018); Mirage Festival, Lyon, FR (2018); Emerge 2020, Phoenix, AZ (2020, cancelled).

2. Citations of Schaeffer's French-language work have been translated by the authors themselves.

3. Our choice not to provide ingredient listings was intended as a provocation to underscore that art is not universally accessible. Although edible food art physically penetrates the body (and thus raises questions about salubrity, personal taste, and food intolerances/allergies), all forms of art penetrate the body in some way, through vibrational, light, and sound waves, as well as through emotional, affective, and cognitive impacts. In cases where such penetrations can induce physical harm (such as the use of strobe lights), a warning is often provided at the entry point the art space. Yet many other situations involve potentially risky exposures without such warnings, and all art contexts are access-limited to a certain extent, whether due to admission fees, mobility limitations, the inherent privilege associated with experiencing and appreciating art, and other, more subtle barriers. In our case, we chose to drive attention onto the often-restrictive nature of art context and the reality that experiencing art implicates both agency and responsibility on the part of the witness. All pastes were nonetheless made with attention to most common allergens, and in some cases, when a visitor stated their intolerance or food risk explicitly, and then asked either David or Simon if it would prevent them from eating, we advised them accordingly.

4. In retrospect, we note that that question of consent to eat (within obscured conditions), mirrors the deliberate obfuscation of the Terms of Use in many end-user software licensing agreements. While our own obfuscations are not intended as nefarious, this parallel suggests a range of realities when it comes to consent, rather than a clear-cut set of standards that are equally agential across contexts. For more, see Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018.

5. HACCP stands for "Hazard analysis and critical control points" and encompasses a system of food-safety standards and practices first developed in collaboration with NASA for the preparation of astronaut food (Wikipedia, 2022b).

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