

Chadwick Prize Runner-up: Oliver Bridle

Is food not art because it is not expressive, not representational and incapable of interpretation?

Traditionally, food and its preparation have been seen as artisanal skills and no matter how expert the practitioner, food never attains the status of art [4]. The enjoyment of food and drink has been reviled as decadent, something which makes appeal only to pleasure through the medium of the baser, indiscriminate, bodily senses of taste and smell. Thorny moral issues also impinge on our thinking about food. How can it be right that half the world grows obese while the other half starves? [3] Mass production of food has been blamed for causing distress to animals whilst poisoning large swathes of the planet through abuse of pesticides and fertilisers to maximise crop yields. Public health scares connected to food have increased our anxiety about what we consume, while at the same time health gurus tell us what to eat to ward off cancers or colds. There is not the space here to cover these wider problems and for the rest of this discussion I will put them to one side. I merely wish to point out how complex and fraught our relationship with food has become and that against these concerns, worrying about whether food is art or not may seem trivial. However, I believe food's status as art presents an interesting philosophical problem and one which has already generated significant debate. Historically, the French food critic Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) was an early writer to consider serious scientific and philosophical problems arising from food and its consumption [1]. Subsequently a number of thinkers such as Telfer and Korsmeyer have tried to defend food as a form of art [5, 8]. I will try to show here that food cannot be expressive, representational or capable of interpretation in any deep sense and is thus disqualified from being art.

To begin the discussion I will show how food is capable of producing aesthetic reactions and why this does not in itself qualify food as an art form. Subsequently I will try to show how food can only be representational in a very limited or metaphorical way. This section will suggest why food is incapable of the kind of interpretation associated with art. I will then argue that food is not expressive in the same way that, for example, music is. I will conclude by trying to show why these deficiencies make food currently inadmissible for being called art.

When considering food in this essay I refer to the productions of a chef rather than raw ingredients which simply occur naturally. It is clear that food can produce aesthetic reactions. The qualities of taste, smell, texture, visual

appearance and even sound (the top of *crème brûlée*, when broken, simply must break with a satisfying snap) can all be assessed when considering food quite apart from the merely functional quality of providing nutrition [6]. In fact food engages all the senses. Most philosophers have concentrated on taste and smell as the two senses appropriate to the discussion of food. This is a mistake, the visual appearance of food has much bearing on how we judge it. However, it would equally be a mistake to assess the artistic value of food just based on its visual appearance. It is possible to create strikingly elaborate confections from food such as the spun-sugar and pastry temples created as centrepieces by the famous chef Antonin Carême (1783-1833), one such piece (complete with edible palm trees) being described as follows [2].

'...six columns, the top of which were decorated with white flowers made from *pâte d'office* or marzipan or light pink icing. The palm leaves [were] pale green icing, and the roof of the rotunda masked with spun sugar...the floor of the rotunda [was] made with nougat and the base garnished with *petits madeleines* and lemons.' [1] p. 40.

Artists such as Aelst, Borman and Heem have painted tempting still life pictures of succulent fruits and crisp baked loaves. The problem is that in these cases we are just examining the appearance of food. To assess food purely on its visual appearance would be to classify it as a form of sculpture not intended for consumption. This is not the way I shall be treating food in this essay, food here no matter how refined, is something created for tasting and devouring. I think it is also uncontroversial to state that food can invoke sensations of pleasure, disgust, curiosity and the like which add to its aesthetic appeal. However, although an object may be aesthetically interesting this does not make the object artistically interesting or something we could rightly call a work of art. As Telfer (following Urmson) suggests, art objects are primarily created to produce aesthetic reactions which somehow then repay further reflection and thought [8]. This may give us a way to avoid the trap of saying that all food is art just because it produces aesthetic reactions. Consider the difference between mass produced fast-food in polystyrene boxes and an exquisite dinner prepared by a Michelin starred chef. Both produce an aesthetic response, however the latter meal will have been carefully planned, skilfully executed and intended to be thoughtfully considered by the eater. In short it is designed primarily to produce complex aesthetic responses in the eater rather than just fulfil a need for fuel. In spite of this distinction however I will argue that even such complex aesthetic reactions are still insufficient to allow food to be classed as art because even careful and thoughtful reflection

upon food fails to yield up the kinds of meanings and complex interpretations encouraged by genuine art.

In summary we can say that all art objects are aesthetically interesting but not all aesthetically interesting objects are art. An aesthetic response is necessary if we are going to be stimulated to think about, analyse and find meaning in an object. Without such responses there is nothing to trigger our minds or imagination, we simply don't bother to think about objects which fail to distinguish themselves to our senses.

Can food represent anything? That is to say, stand for anything beyond itself and shed a new light on the things represented and increase our understanding. Discussion of what is represented by a work of art forms an important part of our interpretation of that work. The problem of how food could represent something is considered at length by Korsmeyer who suggests two main lines of argument by which food may be said to be representational [5]. Firstly, certain foods are designed to look like something else; white chocolate mice would be a trivial example. More importantly than mere mimicry, certain foods imitate shapes in order to symbolise or commemorate an event. Korsmeyer gives us the example of the Croissant. This bun is shaped like a crescent to symbolise the occasion when the Ottoman Turks failed to take Vienna by siege. According to Korsmeyer, the act of devouring a croissant represents this victory, the aggressors, as it were, being consumed. This idea of the mimetic quality of food being important to its status as art is also considered at length by Sweeny [7]. A second argument for foods ability to represent comes from its use in various religious ceremonies, perhaps rather to serve as a metaphor rather than directly mimicking the look or taste of something else. For example the wafer of the Eucharist represents the body of Christ. I do not believe that either of these lines of argument demonstrates that food can be representational in a way that allows sophisticated forms of interpretation. A painting such as Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' is rich with complex symbolism but what the painting actually represents and the interpretation of this work is disputed. Different critics may expound equally plausible but different interpretations of the same picture and give cogent arguments to support their views. There is no 'correct' interpretation it seems. What the work represents is not closed to discussion but always remains open to further analysis. This ability to use complex representation to excite debate and changing interpretation seems to be a feature of art. This is not the case with food. Examples of representational food such as sugar mice, jelly babies or chocolate logs, whilst often clever or witty are designed to surprise and delight by their representation of other objects. They don't invite complex interpretation. Examples like the croissant or the Eucharist are unsatisfying examples of representation for a different reason.

The croissants are a symbol of a fixed historical fact that most people nibbling these pastries for breakfast would be utterly unaware of. Their enjoyment of croissants is unlikely to be substantially increased or diminished by such culinary trivia. What a croissant represents is 'fixed', not open to debate or interpretation in the same way 'The Ambassadors' is. Even in the more serious example of the Eucharist the same problem arises. The representation of the blood and the body of Christ in the form respectively of the wine and wafer are again fixed. Indeed, they are made quite explicit in the words of the liturgy.

Korsmeyer fails to demonstrate that food can be representational in the same way as art. What representational capacity food has is confined either to superficial mimicry or the type of symbolism that has only a previously well defined meaning or factual history. Because food is incapable of sophisticated representation it is also incapable of detailed interpretation and does not give rise to the same kind of discussion that surround and address genuine art objects. Despite being non-representational could food still express something?

We are often moved by works of art and a common feature of great art is that it can create a strong emotional response in the listener or viewer. It is not clear that food can do the same. Food can bring about some emotions as noted earlier. I think a good chef can certainly produce joy and delight in eaters through their food. It is harder to see how grief or hate could be expressed through food, although perhaps not impossible. Take for example the macabre scene in Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus' when Tamora's sons are served up to her as a pie -

Titus: Why, there they are both, baked in that pie;

Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,

Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

- (Titus Andronicus, Act V, Scene III)

Perhaps this does count as hatred expressed through food, it certainly suggests that food can also bring about feelings of disgust. In some circumstances a particular food may seem to provoke a very strong emotional response, such as when we are confronted with a taste that reminds us of some aspect of our childhood. Does this involuntary reaction to a food mean that food can move us in the same way as art? I see two problems with such a suggestion. Firstly, this kind of response is dependant

on a prior familiarity with a particular taste. Without that prior familiarity and its particular associations no emotional reaction would occur. By contrast, we do not need to have previously been acquainted with a particular painting or sculpture in order to be moved by it. A second problem is that our emotional responses to food are highly individual and will depend completely on our personal history. Again, this would make it hard to have a discussion about the emotional and artistic qualities of the food. The critics discussing the interpretation of 'The Ambassadors' can always hang their arguments on objective features of the painting observable to all. Not so with our own personal experiences.

A potential confusion here would be to explain expression in food as coming from the motivations of the chef who created it. You could produce a meal from love of somebody, but it does not seem that the food itself by its aesthetic qualities could make this intention sensible to the eater and move them to strong emotion. How could food inspire feelings of grief and loss that appear to be embodied in musical works such as the final movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony? Food has only limited scope to move us and is not truly expressive.

We have reached a point at which it has been argued that food is not representational, expressive or capable of interpretation in ways we usually associate with art. What then is the difference that separates food from art as indicated by these three deficiencies given that they both have aesthetic interest? The essential difference appears to be food's inability to produce a sophisticated discussion about interpretations and meanings. Food simply does not give rise to the kinds of discussion that surround great works of art. Clearly, food is discussed a great deal in restaurant reviews, cookery books and on many television programmes. However, it is not the interpretation of food that is being discussed, nobody is taking pains to describe the pathos of eating a cheese soufflé or analyse what an omelette might symbolise. The discussion that is occurring does not address food as if it were an art object. There have also been a number of attempts at a detailed and highly objective analysis of how different flavours and textures operate in food and how cooking changes the chemical and physical properties of ingredients [9]. Again however this does not lead us into discussing food as art.

In arguing that food is not art there is no need to belittle the amount of pleasure that may be got through preparing and eating food, nor denigrate the prodigious skill of cooks. Nevertheless, until food produces objects capable of sophisticated and changing analysis it cannot be classed as art - not even as a 'minor' art as suggested by Telfer [8].

Word count = ~2500

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