



AN INTERNATIONAL
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INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
& FOOD SYSTEMS

/ Singapore /

A Pile of Performances

Thinking about and doing things with food through the lens of *performance* offers an opportunity to unpack a lot of common assumptions and expectations about gastronomy. It helps us consider food cultures and food systems in ways that are less human-centered and more attentive to other beings and bodies. It also makes us attend to the constantly changing nature of these things—the ways in which food is ecological, relational, transformational. And it raises a lot of great questions about power, including the power that is implicit in going to a place like Singapore, for an institution like UNISG, and within an initiative like the Eco-Gastronomy Project (and then going on to write or talk about it).

The eco-gastronomy ‘event’ in Singapore was actually a series of events, each linked to the others through the notion of performance. They took place over the course of two weeks (*minus three days in Timor-Leste*), and involved many different partners, participants, and venues. Together, these events are a useful array of examples that illustrate how broadly the concept of performance can be understood. Ranging from the social to the artistic, the educational to the dramatic, the scripted to the improvised, they also show how performance incorporates the question of *perception*: that is, what’s performance to some might be ‘just food’ to others.

In writing about these examples, I have made numerous choices as the author: I followed a chronological ordering; I framed each section within a performance-related sub-title; I excluded some details and focused on others; and I used *words* (rather than images or other forms of communication) to describe them. Those choices constitute another kind of performance—the performance of representation. To tell, to write, or to evoke a moment in history *is to translate lived experience* into another, subsequent form of experience. And as the communications scholar and filmmaker Liz Miller says: “The interesting thing about translation is that something is always added, and something is always taken away.”

Food as a Family Performance

The Eco-G time in Singapore intentionally coincided with Chinese (or Lunar) New Year, creating the opportunity to both research and report on the performative nature of that season. While CNY celebrations vary from country to country and family to family, they typically start with a “homecoming” dinner on the first evening, followed by visits to family members’ homes and the exchange of symbolic gifts over the days that ensue.

Generally, the visits start with the most senior family members—grandparents, usually—later moving on to the homes of other relatives and friends. The visits may also progress from more formal and ritualistic to more casual and unstructured. Pairs of oranges are offered to both hosts and guests, as

gestures of gratitude and hospitality, while senior family members give younger relations “red packets” that contain various sums of money. Good fortune is the theme of the season—both in the form of luck and prosperity—as well as respect for family heritage and relationships.

Food always plays a significant role in CNY celebrations, from the homecoming dinner to the meals and snacks offered at each home. All of these dishes and bites are infused with symbolic meaning: the “fortune” theme emerges once again through food. Making and sharing it, accepting offers of this or that edible, and eventually politely declining more (once one’s belly is full)—each is an act infused with significance. Food performs an evident role during this time, partly as a prop, partly as a stand-in for emotional expression, and partly as a main character. While such performances are not formalized in a written script, a clear understanding of what to do and how to do it is shared by the community.

As a whole, the New Year celebrations can be thought of as a *social performance*. They reiterate and reinforce collective and individual identity, they follow implicit patterns of speech and movement, and they shape and are shaped by both time and spatial elements. Those who participate *become themselves anew* by performing with one another, despite having no distinct, external ‘audience.’ Culture and heritage are reproduced and transferred, renovated and relearned by all of the generations involved.

Yet Chinese New Year also has a performative impact beyond the immediate family society. As anyone who has traveled in Asia during CNY can attest, [airport, train station, and highway traffic increases dramatically](#), which produces plenty of economic and environmental effects. The urgency of marketing and retail activity intensifies as well, contributing various residues that ripple outward, both within the celebrating society and beyond. In these ways and others, a social performance like CNY does what all performances do: it resists being limited by the imaginary boundaries we create, and instead interacts with (and influences) a series of larger ecologies around it.

The Research Apparatus as a Performer of Results

French philosopher [Gaston Bachelard](#) once wrote that, within scientific practice, it may be the *apparatus itself* that produces the results of the experiment. That is, rather than being a device by which we measure a phenomenon, an apparatus actively participates in constructing ‘reality.’ Physicists such as Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein understood this possibility, which contributed to some of their most radical breakthroughs in shaping our understanding about the worlds around and inside us. In recent years, the ‘performativity’ of non-living things (such as technology and language) has been examined by people in many areas of study, from science to arts to philosophy. Broadly speaking, the idea relates to the ways in which our tools of knowledge are not neutral or transparent, but have an influence on the very shape of what we know. In other words, they perform.

At National University of Singapore, several scholars in the [Science and Technology Studies \(STS\) cluster of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences](#) are turning their attention to food. It was in this context that I gave a talk hinged on Bachelard’s proposition. Entitled “Apparatuses of Gastronomy: Scale, Bodies, Performance,” the presentation used a number of examples of art, design, and performance-based research to demonstrate the agency of various academic practices. In this case, I used “apparatus” to mean the physical instruments of our food research, the packages of theory we deploy, and the means by which we portray our results. The aim was to probe whether a distinct “gastronomic process” might someday be elaborated, one that can help produce new knowledge while also shining a light on the effects introduced by gastronomy’s apparatuses. The presentation was partly an account of past food-representation experiments, and partly an invitation to help develop these ideas further. Eventually, it turned into a lively debate about eco-philosophy, taste, and the limits of contemporary scholarship. Quite a performance it became.

Alumni as the Performance of a University

Charles Darwin once posited that natural environments can be understood in two ways. The first is as a product—the material structures of landscapes and living things. The second is as a process—the interactions among landscapes, organisms, and climatic factors, which together create the environment’s material structures. Darwin’s idea was about the performativity of ‘nature.’ By extension, the human ecology of a

society or institution can be thought of in two ways: first as the relationships it comprises, and second as the outcomes or residues of those dynamics. In the case of UNISG, does that sound familiar?

What Carlo Petrini has called “the beautiful network of friends” (that is, the UNISG alumni) is indeed one residue that has been produced by our university. In Singapore, six members of this network met up during different events—an [information session](#) for prospective students, a performance evening, and a [convivial \(and extended\) lunch](#). We called them “the first UNISG alumni events in Singapore,” and they promised not to be the last.

In retrospect, however, I saw the six of us as a kind of *performance outcome* of the university. The many times and places (Bra, Colorno, Pollenzo), the programs and cohorts (triennio, biennio, FC, IGT, SG), and the individual experiences we all had now constitute an elaborate, [decade-long performance cycle](#). The alumni network, now reaching towards 2000 members, is diffused across the planet, yet when we regroup, it becomes a tangible (and strongly connected) resource. We were performed into gastronomes by UNISG, and now we extend that performance into our new communities. Is this some kind of survival of the fittest? (er, I mean, *fittest*...)

Performative Learning

For a two-day workshop at [Lasalle College of the Arts](#) (dealing with sensory storytelling and food performance), my collaborator Carmen Wong and I led a great group of students through a series of exercises, explorations, and experiments. We wanted to bring their attention to how space and materials tell stories, to the ways in which humans perform movements but environments also perform humans, and to the idea that activating more of the sensorium can lead to rich and layered narratives about (and with) food.

It was intense and sometimes uncomfortable, but productive and exhilarating at the same time—including for Carmen and me. During one exercise, we asked the students to walk around the luxuriant Lasalle campus, directing their attention through their different senses, letting intuition guide their movements, and, later, making up rules for pathfinding (and then following or breaking their own rules). During another exercise, we tasted two kinds of chocolate and, in pairs, placed each other's bodies in [postures that we felt represented the taste of the chocolate](#). For lunch, the students brought copies of the breakfast they had eaten that morning (sometimes just an empty bowl), which they then de- and re-constructed, learning to eat with non-habitual practices and tools.

On both days, we followed patterns of divergence (opening up, ideation, exploration) and convergence (narrowing, synthesizing, editing) in order to move toward the performances that would constitute the Day II showcase. We also moved between practice-based, reflexive learning and certain theoretical frameworks of storytelling, performance, and enactment. These cycles helped remind us that product and process are interrelated: creating a performance is also a means of learning. A hybrid form of knowledge was produced—in the minds, the bodies, and the emotions of each student.

Student Performances

By the time Thursday evening rolled around, the sky seemed to have decided to stop torturing us with its periodic rain showers. It was now dry(ish), and the four performances were (almost) ready. Visitors would be there between 6:00 and 7:30 pm, and each group or individual work would have to be executed either continuously during that window of time or sequentially. We had a program—including a map of the Lasalle campus—showing the names, descriptions, and locations of each performance. We had a little nervousness and a lot of documentation devices. (At some moments the performances of cameras and tripods and iPhones seemed to take over....) And we had a very memorable evening. It included: an evolving table-top food tableau; an interrogation (through feeding) of dominance, resistance, nurturing, and acceptance; an urgent dynamic of cleaning and dirtying rice; and a soulful contemplation on hunger, loss, and memory.

[A gallery of images is online](#) for those who wish to see traces of what was performed. (If you want to touch, taste, hear, or smell what happened, however, you're out of luck.)

Performing Myself

Having failed to become the professional actor I often wished to be, I am now bemused to note that performance is a central part of my food research. Among other things, performance helps me not just *know* the ways in which ‘self’ and ‘other’ are entwined in scholarship, but also *feel, sense, and embody* those ways. The performances I do are always experiments in destabilizing divisions—those between audience and actor, between activism and academia, between mind and body, and between food and humans.

On occasion, I have been criticized for being unscientific, or narcissistic, or too broad (and therefore too shallow as well). Performance allows these comments to be both true and false—and everything in between—because the ways in which people perceive my work is also, always, part of its reality. Because a performance is never solely what *I* do and think, it nudges me to do and think more attentively. It makes my theory more practical and my practice more thoughtful. By placing my body where my words are, I can be vulnerable and messy, and hopefully become a catalyst of knowledge-making in other bodies, rather than pretending to be a singular site of expertise myself. Do I succeed? It depends, I guess.

At the home of another UNISG alum (and her family), I performed *Where Où Firma?* during the evening of Friday, February 19. More accurately, perhaps, I should say that many things performed this short piece—including the other people, the house and its furniture, the food I used, the heat and humidity, the traffic of Singapore, the Eco-Gastronomy Project, a history of migration, a printed program, and on and on and on. [An online re-rendering of that performance](#) also now exists.

Communally Performing Knowledge

Might it be that, over generations of eating things like Wonderbread and Vlassic pickles and Philadelphia cream cheese and Budweiser, the diversity of the microbiomes within us has been attenuated, leading to reduced affective connectivity between humans? (Hmm, that’s kind of a mouthful....) More simply, could we say that the industrialization of food has made humanity less socially resilient? And if so, how might poetics and science meet in order to do useful research on this theme, but without having to ‘prove’ any definitive results?

These somewhat provocative queries formed the departure point for a final intervention during the Singapore Eco-G visit. At [HackerspaceSG](#), a lively hub of fermentation, coding, and cultural re-engineering, I talked about [art, affect, and the agency of food](#) with a lot of very biodiverse individuals. Biologists, makers, food technologists, theorists, poets, and computer geeks fed different ideas into the discussion. Together, we didn’t really answer the questions I came with, nor did any obvious next research steps resolve into clarity. But the contributions that people made to the conversation did situate new, divergent, and cross-modal knowledge in each of us. No one walked away with the same experience of the discussion, and each of us will do different things with that knowledge in the days and months to come.

For what it’s worth to those now reading this account, the discursive contributions (that I remember) included the following: wearing suits made of fungal decomposers; the affective nature of killing; difficulties across languages in talking about illness; insect-based ferments; toxoplasma and traffic accidents; sake, soy sauce, and serotonin; drunken donkeys; gourmet cells and food demons in the manga *Toriko*; and the biomes of sewers and lovers. At a certain moment, I think some of us started to panic: *Where was this conversation going, and why?* I decided to perform my authority right about then, by closing down the discussion and thanking everyone for coming.

Then we went for a beer.

Singapore as a Performance of the Body

Singapore was not an easy place for me to like. I was overwhelmed by the closely packed tall buildings, too hot and sweaty most of the time, anxious about mosquitoes and dengue fever, and generally unable to cook for myself. The ways that the city-state *performed me* resulted in uncomfortable relationships among my body, my psyche, my sense of self. I was different in Singapore because Singapore was different in me. Much as I loved the food I ate (*the laksa! the marinated soft-boiled eggs from 7-Eleven! the deep-fried bread*

beans!), and much as I admired the people I worked with (*the students! the hackers! the alumni! the artists!*), I wasn't very easy in my own skin.

At other moments during the Eco-Gastronomy Project, I have delighted in the sensations and impressions that new places induce in me. Seoul made me smell myself differently; Mexico City created new vibrations in my psyche; Dili softened my feelings of otherness. But in Singapore, I felt de-integrated, a corporeal jarring sensation, timid. I cannot blame the place for doing it to me, but instead understand these changes as a co-performance of my surroundings and my self. If I return to the city, the performance will be different. Residues of the previous trip will be new parts of me, and they will be part of how the city performs me again.

The Eco-G Project in Singapore amounted to a pile of different performances, some more theatrical, some more routine, and some in between. In past, I have had students ask, *If anything can be framed as performance, then why does thinking about performance matter?* Is it necessary to define what is, and what is not, a performance?

One answer to the second question is *No*. Taken literally, to define a thing is to carve out one singular meaning for it, and thereby put an end to the discussion. But what seems so useful about performance is that it muddles things and dynamizes them, drawing attention to their fuzziness. It raises questions, rather than settling them with finality. For that reason, the objective might not be to define performance, but to explore things through it. This is perhaps also the response to the first question.

Performance matters because it leaves us a little uncomfortable, on our toes, and attentive to the unexpected. U.S. performance scholar Rebecca Schneider has said that it's a way to keep things "on the slip" in academia. That is, performance makes it necessary to question our authority and privilege as thinkers and doers. For food work, that seems like a pretty good state to be in—a good middle space, given how many different things matter in making our food worlds what they are, as well as what they are becoming.

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