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Food in the Metabolic Era

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The Death of the Experiment

I spent many of my summers at Fondazione Morra, Naples, going through pictures, stage materials, and films of The Living Theatre. Known for the organic integration of scenography and fashion into their text, dramaturgy, and performance works, the company, founded in 1947 in New York by actress Judith Malina (1926–2015) and artist Julian Beck (1925–1985), remained active until 1985. The film documents of these performances reveal what made this group emblematic for over two decades. The footage, though not always in the best of conditions, is a unique document of an experimental practice based on radical transformations of social and gender values. These very speculative plays move away from scripts, relying on the possibility of integrating the spontaneous performances of both the actors and the audience. However, as much as their confidence in dramaturgy compels, one senses in their work the increasing impossibility of relying too much upon “experimentalism.” Perhaps even more tellingly, all of these filmed performances *look* “experimental.” They assume the possibility of denying or accepting the basic assumptions that constitute our world experience. They test through feeling. Sitting there, watching for hours, I thought that this way of giving one’s self up to experience has radically changed.

For me, these exercises of a body on stage, invoking freedom, peace and, above all, a will to transmit these values via a vocabulary of gestures, recall the anti-psychiatry movement. I became aware of the social and political language of this movement thanks to the research and works of Dora García (1965) and Luke Fowler (1978). So I decided to watch Fowler’s films on R. D. Laing (1927–1989) again. Of course, while watching the filmed performances of The Living Theatre, a million images from the 1960s counter-culture movements appeared in my mind, along with Carl Gustav Jung’s (1875–1961) theories on The Age of Aquarius and Wilhelm Reich’s (1897–1957) Orgone Chambers. However, these images appeared to me set in relation to the environment of crisis that has been growing around us over the past ten years. They had LSD and the anti-psychiatry movement and had lived through the Great Depression, which remains the greatest financial crisis in history. How will our current crisis make us react? What are the mind and body’s answers to this feeling of living inside well-defined limits?

Of the films that the Scottish artist-filmmaker Fowler made about the controversial figure of Laing, *All Divided Selves* (2011) interested me the most in the context of my current thoughts. The film looks back at the vacillating reactions to Laing’s radical views and the unforgiving responses to his late career shift—from eminent psychiatrist to enterprising celebrity. Fowler’s film is beautiful and dense, weaving archival footage with his own filmic observations, and leaves us with the feeling that the days of experimentation are over, as well as those when the performance of experiments was a means of testing the boundaries between dissimilar groups and classes composing the social body. The film elaborates upon Laing’s transformation into a public persona, the radical approach he took to channeling his views toward increasingly broad audiences, and the almost decadent way

in which he made himself into a media star. In a scene toward the end of the film, Laing appears on screen, singing. The image is surprising, it looks as if he were delirious.

In 1977 and 1978, Laing's collaboration with composers Ken Howard (1944–2016) and Alan Blaikley (1940) resulted in the album *Life before Death* (1978) with lyrics in the form of sonnets, many of them quite compellingly stupid, written by Laing. At the time, Howard and Blaikley were well known in the United Kingdom, the authors of a number of hits there during the 1960s and 70s. One of the most famous tracks from the album goes:

*It's all correct, and crisp, and keen and bright
A place of order, form, and right design.
A haven, in this world of dark, of light.
A Where to start a long and clean straight line.
It would be nice if all around we saw
The grace, decorum of the antique mind
Brought forward to the present as a law
Instead of our cacophonous and brutal bind.
It should not need to hearten me so much
To come across a little worth, among
The slush and drivel, dross and mulch
Which would be better formed of honest dung.
The game's not up. Some children still can sing.
Go tell the falling leaves it'll soon be spring.
There's light and love and joy and freshness yet,
There're those who have something to celebrate.
There can be times we hope we'll not forget.
A helping hand is not always too late.
Up really high there's still clear perfect blue.
Morning must dawn as long as there is night.
Without the old there's nothing to renew.
Occasionally, it almost feels alright.
Although I know that light needs dark to shine,
I don't expect to tell what atoms mean.
The universe is fine without being mine.
The flowers of countless valleys grow unseen.
What is above subsists on what's beneath.
The world is not entirely blasted heath.
The freedom that you seek is in the mean
Between opposing tensions in your soul.
Achieve the integration of the whole
And then you are, and not a might have been.
Remember that to live is to metabolize.
So don't forget en route to the sublime
To check on your mouth-anus transit time
Look at the ground as well as at the skies
You've heard it all before? That's fine.
Reiterated truths soon sound absurd.*

*To be blasé is not beatitude.
It's just your glutton tongue can't taste the wine.
One in a million hears the blatant word
Before it echoes into platitude.*

What is more important than the lyrics is the impulse that led him to sing. Why did Laing sing? In an article published in *The Observer* just a few days before the album's release, author Caryll Faraldi pointed to the fact that Laing had always been interested in the voice (and in music) and that the record could be linked to a previous voice recording he made with Georges Cunelli, a voice expert, theorist, and close friend of James Joyce (1882–1941). It was only natural that Laing was interested in the voice, for, as both a psychiatrist and a media personality, he was perfectly aware of how a presence and a voice produce an effect on listeners. Singing, however, is a different story. The voice that speaks is not quite identical to the voice that sings. Even the control one can exercise as a trained speaker can be lost in the singing voice, since the latter requires a wholly different (though equally thorough) training in breath control and rhythm. The singing voice does not form spontaneously. Thus, when singing Laing was revealing himself much more than when he spoke, both in his (lack of) technique and in his personality, since the very act of singing stressed that he was a performer aware of the stage and that the subjects from his counseling were transformed into an audience.

The surprise in seeing him singing in Fowler's *All Divided Selves*, however, lies in the fact that, at the beginning of the 1980s, the days of "experiment," as understood by The Living Theatre, together with the idea of unmediated expression and self-expression, of experiencing the world as a "naked human," were coming to an end. This musical performance by a very well known psychiatrist is not just an anecdote; it was a result of the radical transformation of expression into a more metabolic response. It was also the result of transmuting information into a totally different substance—one that is more complex than knowledge, since it is a form adopted by life that avoids contact with the naked body, or the influence of LSD or any other substance. This singing is crucial because it does not proclaim or state; it addresses us from the inside. It is pure queerness as an accepted form and as an acknowledgment of the complex relationship between information, wisdom, and culture. It revealed a need for a change that would go beyond action, that would live in us, transforming us first and then the world.

Remember that to Live is to Metabolize

During the 1920s and 30s, a branch of scientific research appeared that focused on understanding the human metabolism. The isolation of vitamins started in the second half of the nineteenth century and multiple experiments in the 1920s explained the role of vitamins A and D, while further studies isolated vitamins C and K. Thus, interest in diet took on a new form and food was redefined not only in terms of accessibility, class, or tradition but also in terms of health and self-control. Especially relevant in our context is the work and research of Catherine Kousmine (1904–1992), a Russian émigré who studied in Lausanne and developed a theory and practice for cancer treatment based on food or, more precisely, diet. Her first diet protocol, based on a 1949 case study describing the treatment and cure of a patient with intestinal cancer, was highly influenced by the research of another woman, Johanna Budwig (1908–2003). Throughout the 1940s, Budwig, a German biochemist, studied fatty acids and their influence in curing cancer. She published her first diet protocol in 1952, which expounded the virtues of consuming flaxseed oil, low-fat cheese, and meals rich in fruits, vegetables, and fiber while avoiding sugar, animal fats, oil, meats, butter, and especially margarine. Even if Kousmine was following up on the discoveries and the precepts of

Budwig's diet, she was also a pioneer in a new understanding of the properties of raw food for our health. She put a special emphasis on the health value of cold-pressed oils. During World War II, seeds were pressed under heats ranging from 160 to 200°C, allowing up to 70% of the fat from the grain to be extracted. This resulted in a dark, strong-smelling liquid that required further processing and refining and, though this oil lasted forever, it was, as Kousmine put it, "dead." Cold-pressed oils, on the contrary, produced by simple physical processes like decanting and filtration, are alive; but they are sensitive to light, become quickly rancid and require refrigeration once unsealed. Kousmine's texts are intensely eloquent in their explanations of how a simple food had been transformed by industrial processes and how the loss of fatty acids, also known as vitamin F, plays a fundamental role in the weakening of our cell membranes' protection against external attacks, resulting in, for example, immunodeficiency disorders.

There is, of course, no proof that following diets, even those as rigorous as the Kousmine method, can cure cancer. I do not intend to present these methods as effective, but to note the parallel growth in understanding, at the start of the twentieth century, of both drug use and diet. The common denominator is clear: an effect on our metabolic system.

Both interests, in drugs and in diets, are related to the exploration of the possibilities of enhancing our capabilities. The world of drugs centers on the brain, the possible chemical transformations that enable us to explore this organ and, therefore, the way we sense the world. Comparing the rise of interest in vitamins and raw food to drugs seems nonsensical at first sight. Food may indeed have an effect on our organism, but isn't it too slow, too long-term a variable to provide a basis for proper comparison with drug use? Yet after nearly 100 years, such thinking has allowed food to acquire the social and media relevance it has today. The revelation of the importance of food, not as gourmet cooking but as an actual source of and structuring method for life, bears a strange but powerful relation to all sorts of experiments on "freeing the mind," with the psychiatry and anti-psychiatry movements of the last century, as well as with modernism and the avant-garde and the idea of controlling the body, fueling it not too little and not too much in order to maintain productivity. The science of nourishment not only aims to avoid an ill body, allowing us to live longer and increase the productive years of humans; it goes beyond attempts to strengthen the body-as-machine and toward the generation of a paradoxical state in which the human organism is not merely healthy enough to do more work, but to make us feel we are in a state beyond labor: the body as resort. If drugs treat the mind as a skyrocket ready for takeoff, escaping the damaged body, the metabolic cult and super foods posit a body capable of making the mind stay put.

Post-Junkie Years

This transformation in the scope of diet's influence on humans is part of a larger, radical shift in our understanding of the social and aesthetic conditions that determine our current relationship with the body and gender. It is defined not only by a tendency toward more freedom but also toward increasing control, which in turn leads to shifts in the notions of gender that are central to art. Here, gender is not understood as constituted by a dichotomy of the male and the female, but as an intelligent means of addressing the issue of the dichotomy of the inner and the outer. This is gender as a language that we can adopt to grasp the possibilities of consciousness. This is gender as another name for art.

To imagine that great things can result solely from self-disciplinary mechanisms is difficult. Food is surrounded by confusion. It is hard to remove cultural and geopolitical factors from the discussion, and even more challenging to discuss food without invoking the names of star chefs and the exploration of the senses through food. The rise of the celebrity chefs has much to do with classical experiments in self-expression and an avant-garde or modern understanding of subjects able to

cross their boundaries through taste and express their relationship toward an inside and an outside in a radically new way. This is completely determined, however, by the dramaturgy of the plating and the restaurant, in the same manner that, with *The Living Theatre*, the stage determined the extent of the experiments. I am more interested in a different relationship to food, that expressed by Kousmine's research, which studies the ingredients of a diet and considers diet as an act of absorbing nourishment that has nothing to do with aesthetic pleasure but, rather, with the strong intention to slowly affect the human system.

While there exists a vast body of research on drugs and the many other means of exploring the limits of our mind in its relation to science, literature, music and, later on, every other form of subculture, there exists almost nothing written on how these early biochemical experiments relate to culture and to art. The gendered aspect of this field must also be noted, for the history of research on food and diet as a means of altering life is peopled almost exclusively by women. Although there is as yet almost no existing artistic production in the form of raw food or vitamins, an unstudied aspect of art production is based on the same principles as this new metabolic way of living.

Heroin and Calorie Counting

It was 1995 and I was in New York City. It was before the days of online newspaper reading, so I got myself a copy of *El País* for the long train ride from Uptown to Brooklyn. I read it nearly front to back, neglecting only the film section. The train ride continued, and was boring, so I decided eventually to read the film section as well. There, a critic used up an entire page smashing *Waterworld* (1995, remember that one?). The critics were nearly unanimous in their dislike of the film, and this particular piece used humor to critique it. The dystopia, the critic pointed out, was set following an ecological disaster and yet the bad guys were known as the Smokers. The Smokers! In a world of water where humans are almost fish: how did they manage to keep the tobacco dry? Though the article was quite funny, I could not concur with the critic's argument, since I come from a place, Galicia, where tobacco is preserved under water. This region of Spain has a particularly rough coast line; piracy was common there for centuries and, during the dictatorship, Galicia was famous for the smuggling of goods over its border with Portugal. Economically underdeveloped on levels difficult to portray here, the region's water and land had a virgin character that facilitated many farming initiatives. From the late 1970s into the 80s, we saw the number of floating wood platforms drifting on the waters of the estuaries increase. These platforms, known as *bateas*, served primarily for the farming of oysters and mussels but also for smuggling tobacco. From here, the name "Winston de batea" was coined, designating the tobacco illegally entering into the country that shared with the shellfish the cold, nourishing waters of the Atlantic. This same coast saw, some years later, tons of heroin and cocaine introduced into the country, producing both a total imbalance in the local economy and the genocide of a whole generation of drug users. These were the same drugs that inundated both lower and upper-class nightlife during the first years of democracy in Spain. For a whole decade, beginning from the age of sixteen, I co-existed with junkies in many ways. The village I am from and all the others like it were actively witnessing how drugs could shape life. On the opposite coast, the relatively tepid consumption by hipsters at the high schools co-existed with increasingly visible signs of a dependent population in the streets—the public spaces, clubs, bank lobbies and food markets where, every morning, junkies would beg to housewives who in turn prayed to God that their sons and daughters would be spared such a fate. Heroin was bridging the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through this trade.

After moving to Barcelona, I was required, as part of a school-sponsored prevention program, to attend many information sessions and to volunteer at one of the largest methadone clinics in Europe. It was located in a neighborhood that no longer exists called Can Tunis, a hellish island

located behind the harbor, circumscribed on one side by a highway and on the other by the Montjuïc hill, both of which served to cut this section off from the greater urban texture. I have never seen a place so desperate and secluded. The permanent population consisted of between 80–100 Sinti and Roma families, who were accused of having created the biggest heroin market on the planet, even though they were the victims of extreme poverty and drug dependency. I started going there, scared to death, pretending to be a help to the organization while only managing to effectively cure myself of any desire ever to use such drugs. Indeed, my school's prevention program was highly effective. Methadone was presented at the clinic as the "solution," as a good substance that could replace the bad one and help one live a drug-free life. I was there every night for a year, over the course of which I discovered that methadone was an even worse drug than the one it was intended to replace. Actually, the whole operation was a means of controlling the Sinti and Roma communities and their links to drug trafficking, as well as a pretext for resettling these undesirables and expanding the harbor to its current size, effectively erasing Can Tunis.

Why am I recalling this episode? In my mind, the rise of the importance of food coincides with the drug war. I see these two phenomena as linked in a dance that began in the Basque region with hopes of peace, and on the Mediterranean coast as an attempt to absorb life and all its substances not through drugs but through food. Food was required to overcome traditions and go through a complex, almost alchemical ritual of reinvention. All of a sudden, it became socially necessary and historically crucial to translate and re-translate the most obvious ingredients, the most banal tastes.

Food and the Political Algorithm

Not long after my Can Tunis experiences came my first encounter with molecular cuisine. A friend took me to a seminar, during which we were presented with an egg whose yolk had been replaced by *café con leche*. Actually, though my friend remembers it this way, I am uncertain whether the memory is accurate; I am not even certain whether it was Ferran Adrià (1962) himself or a member of his team doing the "cooking" and presenting this new juggling act of taste and technology. Memory, not only individual but collective memory, always finds good reasons to collapse objective information. The group attending this meeting, consisting mostly of architects, product and graphic designers, web developers, as well as two of the most important advertising teams in the country, was truly shocked. However, this shock had nothing to do with food as a "dish" or culinary event. The cooking demonstration was received with as much enthusiasm, misunderstanding, and resistance as when a new discipline of knowledge is introduced. This egg containing a *café con leche* was perhaps only described to us, but it is an incredibly powerful image. It produced among my associates attending the seminar an endless series of jokes, repeated again and again, where the two original elements morphed into a thousand other combinatory variations, like a strawberry with a heart of anchovy. All society seemed, at this point, to be laughing at this extreme Pantagruelic game the chefs were performing with food. Imagine, the raw DNA of an animal product, the egg, was being replaced by a culturally made element, *café con leche* ! *Café con leche* ! Our breakfast staple had replaced the egg's "origin" point that, though still protected like the yolk before it, was transformed into a consolidated item ready to be swallowed whole without consideration, without thought. The ritual chain of small, familiar gestures, the unconscious steps taken from hand to mouth, had been, all at once, replaced by a single, determined act, as unified as taking a shot of liquor. The vast collective choreography of every Spaniard, every morning, across millions of counters, publicly performing the gestures of drinking their *café con leche*, had all of a sudden been replaced by the precarious substance of an egg.

Such transformations had nothing to do with food and instead much to do with a metabolic revolution that emerged from under the flood of drugs that had submerged Spain as unexpectedly as

a tsunami. The drugs were not merely there because of the convenience of Spain's geography and location, but also because of the intense appetite unconsciously created over many years of dictatorship, now made manifest during these transitional period into democracy. Such appetites were the product of senses that had been restricted from performing their normal functions for too long and further oppressed by the fact that the old system was neither removed nor contested, but was merely being allowed to die away. The rise in drug use and, after its peak, in the importance of a new food, played a fundamental role in creating the conditions in which a new self could be formed.

Like a metabolic reaction inside the social body, this new interest in food possessed a distinctively synthetic character. It could be linked with neither a long tradition of cuisine, nor with the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it emerged, almost like an artistic movement, from an independent group. The molecular cuisine and its accompanying tendencies were somehow Kantian, focusing not on the food itself but on invention and a kind of social training. This cuisine set up as a goal, though of course an impossible one, to make us all eat through the mouth and sense through the nose in one special way. The very impossibility of this goal, that an entire culture would adopt an attitude toward eating that was deeply anti-culinary, made it a radical proposal to challenge the habits of an entire nation. It suggested that a new historical period should not start off with the same gestures and tastes as the previous regime. Food that is not food and recipes that are impossible to share are excellent antidotes to nostalgia. Almost overnight, a huge portion of the population was addressing food in a completely different manner and, thus, opening itself to new possibilities regarding how and what it was consuming.

In my memory, I see the fall of heroin use, along with the rise of a new food, coinciding with the emergence of feet encased in the first Camper and Camper-like shoes. In my mind, here too began the *Spaziergang* fever. The black rubber soles of Camper shoes that refused to stop at the limit of the foot's actual form, expanding pneumatically around it and abstracting the shoe's shape until it resembled a digitally enhanced paw, always fascinated me. These were friendly, democratic feet, without edges or borders, ready to traverse the asphalt plains of huge cities as readily as the dirt of the rustic Mallorcan countryside whence the shoes came. Their formed rubber shapes also recalled for me the dinghies so often used to transport bricks of cocaine, hashish, and heroin along the cold beaches of the Atlantic coast. Yet they were designed to convey a new era, never quite accomplished and now completely gone, in Mediterranean culture, populated by metropolitan neo-peasants who took to the markets and supermarkets to rehearse and proclaim their new values, wafting through the cities a balsamic-marinated social democracy. This unarticulated movement was powerful and widespread, even if, to this day, it remains impossible to interpret its promise or the stakes of its speculative energy. It was clearly there, however, and I dislike it now as much as then, perhaps because I blame it, albeit unfairly, for mixing nostalgia with resentment and for encouraging a very specific form of unguardedness and naivety. It was the diluted aftertaste of a movement, politically expressed through the worst kind of liberal defensiveness. It was the opposite of what the surrealist egg with its yolk of *café con leche* had wanted to announce. Something had gone rotten.

Gender Mousse

Everything troubling about the image of the singing star therapist, as the mutated by-product of the anti-psychiatry movement, can also be seen in what went wrong with molecular cuisine and its interpretations. And, as in the case of Laing, the first response may be to sing an ode to the incredible misunderstandings that "food" created at the core of the social body at a very particular historical moment. Like the leaf on Siegfried's back, a point of vulnerability was created that was

conquered by gourmet promises and comfortable, oversized rubber soles. Via the mouths of the middle class, a major transformation occurred that altered senses and modified tastes forever. I call it a tragedy because I am an optimist and I see, as Laing saw, that it might be good to be singing this drama for a while. Most likely, though we are still unprepared to understand, we are about to hear amazing news concerning a radical transformation of human sexuality. After the wave of drugs that promised both potency and resistance, but only exhausted the body to an unthinkable extent, exterminating its natural defenses and powers, food acted as an antidote. However, all elements of culture began to impact very directly upon our sexuality. The construction of the body during the Camper era did not happen by chance, but was an already corporate-approved reinterpretation of a post-therapy hippiedom, now fully integrated into the productivity chain with a democratic body ready to present itself in a post-sexual state. The new food appeared at a crucial moment in the transformation of a body eternally oscillating between diets, drugs, and anti-depressants, a transformation that is now moving us toward a completely different understanding of gender. Together, new food and fashion combined to produce forms of desire and anxiety that displaced sexual appetites. Corresponding with the rise of virtual realities and online pornography, a new phase started defined by a kind of disinterestedness toward sexual interactions, especially heterosexual, which allowed for a new sexual revolution. It not only resulted in gay marriage and rights, but also generated a new imagination in which gender and its functions are also a matter of choice. Gender has become a key aspect in the liberation of the body from modernity, labor, and *Leistung* (productivity). The slow but steady deprioritization of body-to-body sexuality is a metabolic process within the social body that will create the organic space necessary for this new gender reality. Producing, of course, all sorts of anxieties—from eating disorders to extreme surgical operations. Food, with its incredible capacity for transferring to the mouth some of our genital sense, can most successfully compensate for these lacks and losses. Camper's inflated rubber paws, though as rudimentary and nostalgic as our current ideology, appeared to signal this transitional era. It will not last, however. Like the phase of shedding old skin before the metamorphosis into a new creature, one whose form is as yet unknown to us, we are performing our old cultural-critical logic before acquiring a new one. We just need to sing it a little while longer.