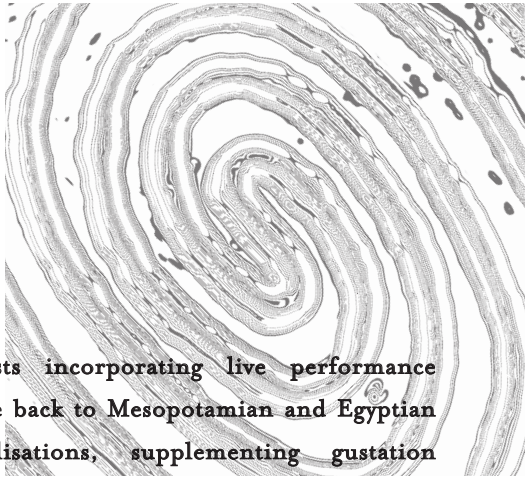


DIGESTING RITUAL
DR ADAM ALSTON

DIGESTING RITUAL

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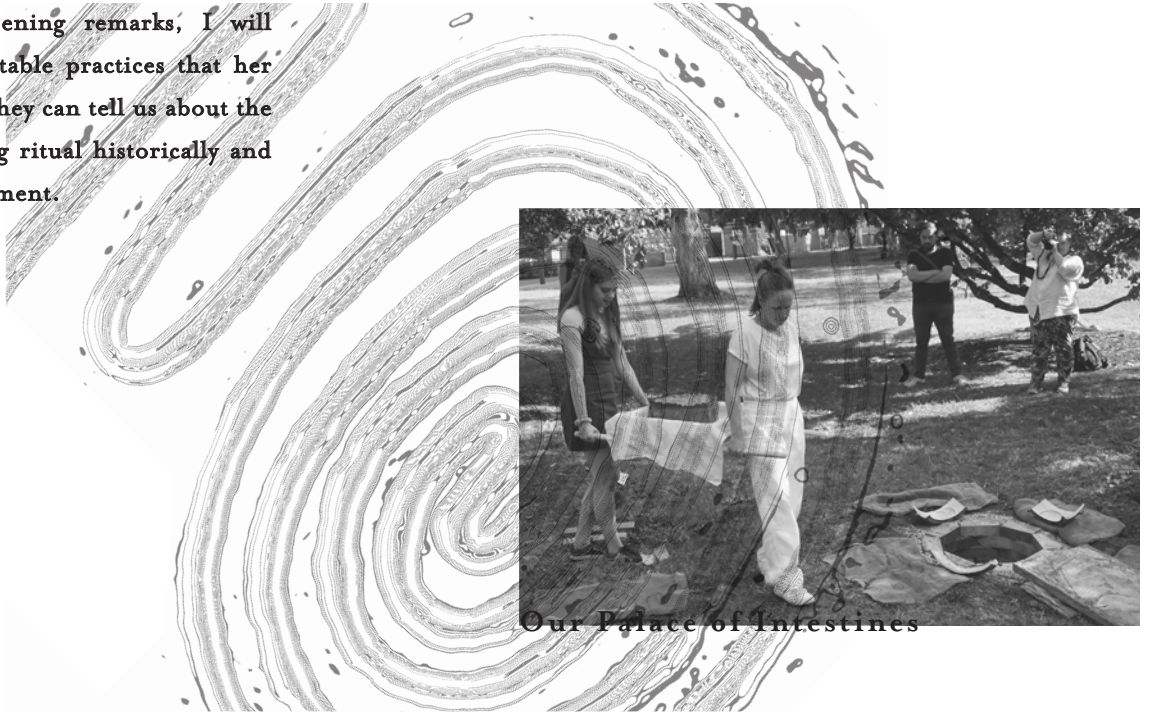


Feasts incorporating live performance date back to Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations, supplementing gustation with dialogue, debate and performance, often musical performances: a practice that continued in the ancient Greek and Roman symposia, and extravagant Medieval and Renaissance court banquets.

Rituals of digestion, and the consumption of rituals, continue to be innovated in contemporary gastronomy and food-based performances, and are regularly staged at international summits, conferences, religious festivals, and street parties in countries around the world. In each, experiences of eating food are codified, and different forms of ritual – for instance, the art of diplomacy, or live performance – are digested with food and drink.

‘Digesting ritual’ seems an apt means of capturing different mappings of ritual and digestion at these events – a term that also inspired the symposium underpinning this pamphlet: *Digesting Ritual: Food, Waste and the Body*, which was held at the GSA, University of Surrey, on 6 July 2018. It also captures something of Amanda Couch’s food-based performances, particularly a piece presented as part of this symposium called *Our Palace of Intestines* (2018). It involved a gigantic pie being raised from a specially-prepared underground earth oven and processed to a performance studio, where its outer

layers were pulled apart to reveal a labyrinthine sausage reminiscent of intestines, bits of which were torn and consumed by the symposium's delegates under her tutorage. Amanda will flesh out the intricacies of the ritual later on in this pamphlet. In these opening remarks, I will be unearthing a few notable practices that her ritual evokes, and what they can tell us about the significances of digesting ritual historically and in the contemporary moment.





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BIOGEOCHEMICAL
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SCORING FOOD
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EXCHANGE AND
TRANSFORMATION
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Feasts in the late-medieval period in Europe were typically tied to religious festivities, although the nobility would also take the opportunity of staging feasts to celebrate weddings and other special events. Some of the better-known examples were the banquets of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, who sought to impress guests by drawing on the theatrical possibilities of food's presentation. Most interesting of all was his penchant for novelty pies. At a feast held in Bruges on 8 January 1430, to celebrate the recent marriage of the duke to Isabella of Portugal, 'a huge pie, containing a live sheep dyed blue with gilded horns' was presented to guests as the *pièce de résistance* of a meal that also featured 'wild beasts, riding on roast pigs'.

The best known of the duke's feasts was 'The Feast of the Pheasant', held in Lille on 17 February 1454, which was intended to muster support for a crusade against the Turks. The feast included a pastry containing flautists and a live lion which guarded a nude with hippocras (sweetened and spiced wine) emanating from her right breast. Finally, at a feast

attended by Philip the Good, but held by the Duke of Savoy to celebrate the marriage of the latter's son in 1434, 'an immense pie was brought in and opened in front of the high table, and a man dressed as an eagle, with a most realistic eagle's head and beak, emerged from its interior flapping its wings, releasing a flock of white doves which flew about and settled on the tables'.¹

These part-culinary, part-theatrical, novelties were called *entremets*. *Entremets* were a culinary or entertainment 'interlude' featured between courses, known in England at the time as a *soteltey* or *sotiltie*. Popular *entremets* in the Medieval period, aside from novelty pies, included milk that was fried, curdled, drained and pressed to look like meat that could be carved and the "cockentrice," or "cokagrys," which added a fanciful creature to the ranks of nature. The forepart of a large capon (cock) was sewn to the hind-quarters of a suckling pig (grys) after stuffing with a farce; the newborn beast was then parboiled, roasted,

¹ Richard Vaughan, *Philip the Good: The Apogee of Burgundy*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1970), 56-57, 143-45.

and “gilded” with an egg glaze’.² As these examples illustrate, food, theatre and theatricality merged in the late-Medieval *entremets*, playfully unsettling the appearance of food and the codification of gustatory ritual.

While inedible dishes were included in Medieval feasts, Barbara Santich notes what she calls a ‘transformation’ in the *entremets* of the sixteenth century, separating out the culinary and theatrical elements: ‘The *entremets* as spectacle became almost purely theatrical’, which meant that the cooks could ‘devote all their skills to the culinary art, the visual display’. This transformation coincided with advances in the craft of cooking, such as the clarification of jellies using egg whites and the elaboration of a skill base for the manipulation of sugar, opening up new opportunities for visual consumption.³

Hence, the significances of a banquet’s spectacular and ritualistic dimensions started to develop over the period identified by Santich; performance was not just surplus to satiation, but the point and purpose of a culinary ritual. These evolved interludes were increasingly representative of the chef’s craftsmanship in excess of his aptitude for creating amusement and frivolity, as well as the host’s ability to present cuisine as a luxury, symbolic of the host’s wealth, power and refinement. The ritualistic qualities of banquets were useful as they provided hosts – particularly aristocratic hosts and monarchs – with a framework for codifying power.



² Phyllis Pray Bober, *Art, Culture, and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 261.

³ Barbara Santich, ‘Metamorphoses of the Banquet’, in Anthony Coronos, Graham Pont and Barbara Santich (eds) *Food in Festivity: Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy*, (Sydney: Symposium of Australian Gastronomy, 1990), 110.



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A
'REVOLTING'
PIE, FOR
'REVOLTING'
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'REVOLTING'
TIMES
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Louis XIV's *grands divertissements* took the theatrical dimensions of gastronomy a step further, incorporating theatrical presentations, poetry, music, games, and sumptuous cuisine as elements of a celebration not just of a particular event, such as a wedding, but of a monarch's character and power. A particularly striking example was held in 1664, when Louis hosted a week-long fête in Versailles (though initially planned to be three days). One evening over the course of the fête, thirty four costumed musicians arrived before the emergence of the Four Seasons, as Graham Pont records, 'bearing plates of delicious food (it is Molière's troupe, making an *entrée* – in both senses of the word!)'. After many dancers, animals, musicians, pages and

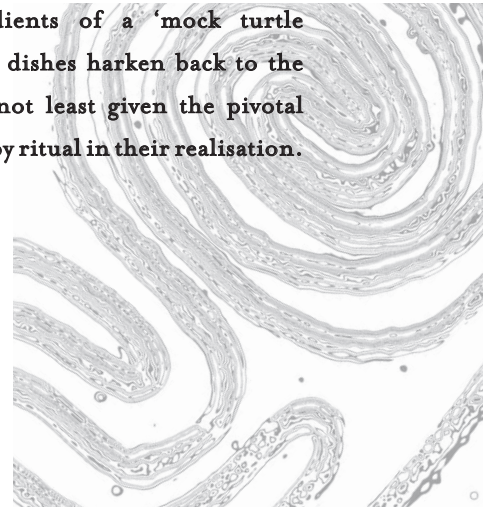
servitors, the latter carrying food on their heads, made their entrance, a great table appeared with musicians at its apex. The diners were seated, attended by characters including 'Abundance, Joy, Seemliness (Propreté), and Good Cheer', before tucking in on 'the sumptuous collation'. These characters were played by members of Louis' household, 'evidently performing a theatrical version of their official duties to the accompaniment of specially composed music'.⁴ The representative function of Louis XIV's servants was consequently thematised, folding the act of attending into a highly stylised ritual.

⁴ Graham Pont, 'In search of the *opera gastronomica*', in Corones, Pont and Santich, *Food in Festivity*, 120-21.

Medieval and Baroque forms of digesting ritual have inspired some of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century's most prestigious chefs. For instance, 'technoemotional cuisine' or 'molecular gastronomy' enquires into and experiments with the chemical composition and transformation of foodstuffs, and was led by Ferran Adrià at elBulli in Catalonia, now closed, Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck in the village of Bray in England, René Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen, and the Roca brothers of El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain. Ritual continues to play a significant role in the gastronomy of each of these chefs, and recalls the innovative integration of ritual and digestion in each of the historical examples surveyed above.

Take, for instance, two of the Fat Duck's better-known dishes. For a dish called 'The Sound of the Sea', diners are invited to place a conch next to their ear while eating, so that they can hear the sounds of waves crashing against a beach, courtesy of a concealed MP3 player, while they eat edible sand, seaweed and seafood.

For 'Mad Hatter's Tea Party (c. 1892)', inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, diners are offered a pocket watch made from beef and mushroom stock and wrapped in edible gold leaf. The watch is dropped into a transparent glass teapot, making a consommé, which is then poured into a bowl beneath containing the core ingredients of a 'mock turtle soup'. Both dishes harken back to the entremets, not least given the pivotal role played by ritual in their realisation.



Another example is *el somni*, which was a collaboration between the Roca brothers, film maker Franc Aleu, and over forty other collaborators including singers, sculptors, a Bonsai Master, poets, painters, visual and film designers, special effects artists, a stage designer and the internationally-acclaimed performance company La Fura dels Baus. The piece is described as ‘An opera in a dozen courses and a banquet in a dozen acts. An overall multi-disciplinarian, analogue, digital, real, dreamy, cybernetic and culinary work. Opera, electronica, poetry, 3D, performing arts, singing, reflexion, painting, films, music and cookery’.⁵

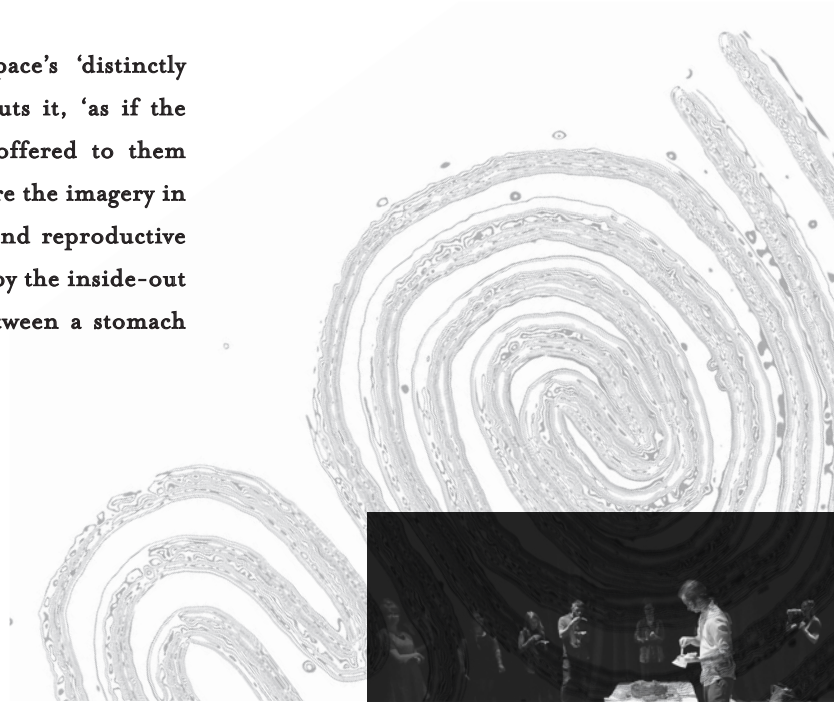
The ‘central act’ was an invite-only dinner, a GastrÒpera, which took place in 2013 in Arts Santa Monica, Las Ramblas, Barcelona. With strong echoes of the early-Renaissance *opera gastronomica*, or ‘musical banquet’, music, spoken word, a card game, smell and gastronomy were all incorporated into the dinner, alongside sight as panoramic, themed

projections immersed diners, including projections onto a shared round table and onto individual plates. The GastrÒpera was followed by a book, a film and two exhibitions: one in Arts Santa Monica in May-June 2013 and another in Sala Ciutat between April and July 2013.

Molecular gastronomists, then, such as Blumenthal and the Roca brothers, are encouraging diners to engage and interact with the world by sensory means that exceed gustation. Food, music and other sounds, touch, and so on, each play a role in the formation of a ‘total’ and highly ritualised experience of a food event. In this, they also recall something of Allan Kaprow’s *Eat* held at an abandoned set of beer caves in the Bronx, New York, in January 1964. Once inside, audiences were invited to nibble at apples hanging from strings, and to consume fried and raw bananas, salted potatoes, wine, and jam sandwiches in what Kaprow described as ‘a semi-eucharistic ritual’. However, what is most striking about this happening, and what sets it apart from the pristine environments

⁵ El Somni, ‘(CCR) + (A). X = “el somni”’, 2013, <http://www.elsomni.cat/en/>, (accessed 4 Jan. 2019).

of molecular gastronomy, is the space's 'distinctly organic sensibility', as Sally Banes puts it, 'as if the participants themselves eat what is offered to them inside the "body" of the cave' [... H]ere the imagery in the cave is an amalgam of digestive and reproductive functions – made even more extreme by the inside-out corporeal quality [...] somewhere between a stomach and a womb'.⁶



⁶ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 195.



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Medieval and Renaissance *entremets*, Louis XIV's *grands divertissements*, molecular gastronomy, food-based happenings, and Amanda's *Our Palace of Intestines* – as we shall see – all marry together digestion and ritual. Food serves purposes other than satiation and different forms of performance help to facilitate these purposes through the codification of ritual, establishing, or re-ordering, the symbolic capabilities of food and its presentation. Of particular concern today though is the deep enmeshment of digesting rituals in ecologies that far exceed the performance of wealth and privilege, or the refinement of taste. Digesting rituals have always been bound up with cultural and political capital, but what is becoming increasingly clear is the impact of these rituals not just on producing or sustaining significant inequalities, but on the natural environment. The ruins of digesting rituals – natural waste and a ritual's carbon footprint – leave detritus in networks of production and consumption that spill beyond a ritual's limen. Hence, in producing and consuming these rituals, it is

incumbent on us to consider the close imbrication of food, waste and diverse kinds of body (mineral, animal, vegetal) – or what Amanda describes in terms of 'thresholds' between bodies, land, and food – and what is not so easily consumed and converted into new materials in an ecosystem that is not just ours, but the habitat of that we seek to digest.



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OUR ENJOYMENT IS
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