

Food for Thought

Using food as the locus for thinking

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ABSTRACT

Every person eats and has some kind of competence around eating. People eat for nourishment, sensual fulfilment and socialization. All 17 of the UN's sustainability goals can be linked to food, and the food system is now recognised as a major driver of climate change due to changes in land use, depletion of freshwater resources, and pollution of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Food is personally, socially, politically and ecologically potent, making it an important vector through which to reimagine and redesign everyday interactions. In recent years, my research has taken a turn towards food as the vector through which to conduct diverse enquiries. This turn builds on professional culinary experience from my life before becoming a researcher and an ongoing, passionate interest in food as an aesthetically sophisticated, sensorially rich social glue. It extends my work in embodied design and commitment to more sustainable ways of approaching designing, designing research and living. In this proposal I provide an overview of my food-related research enquiries to articulate my contribution to the OZCHI workshop: *On and Off the Table: Re-Imagining Food and Wine Interactions*.

KEYWORDS

Food, embodied design, participation, play, ideals, values, climate change, craft, DIY.

Food for Thought

It is easy to imagine that research around food is about food, but this is not necessarily the case. In this proposal I provide a brief overview of seven interrelated research projects gathered under the program: *Food for Thought*. These projects—Playing with Food, Handmaking Food Ideals, FOOD+[material practices], Designing New Ways of Eating, Making Sense of Human-Food Interaction, SHIT! and Food Climate Futures—give a sense of the richness and diversity of my interactions with food as research material; using food as a starting point from which to explore more socially, materially and ecologically nourishing material entanglements. *Food for Thought* recognises that food is ubiquitous: an 'everyday', intimate, mundane—socially, culturally and politically potent—aesthetically rich act undertaken by every living being, not only to survive but to thrive. The program leverages these attributes to stimulate new thinking, imagining, enacting and hopefully, living.

The research described here uses an applied action-reflection approach to research-through-design [5], where emphasis is on the research objective of creating design knowledge, rather than project solutions; and a Scandinavian-inspired approach to participation: collaborating with people who might eventually be served by as-yet-unimagined designs, as co-creators in the process [7].

1 Playing with Food

In collaboration with Ferran Altarriba Bertran, this research investigates the potential of play in New Cookery.[1] It began with open conversations and *interviews-as-eating-encounters* with New Cookery stakeholders including: world-renowned chef, Ferran Adrià, his colleagues and researchers at elBulli Lab and Foundation in Barcelona Spain, a maître d' at a Michelin starred restaurant, a professional gastronomist, two food enthusiasts and a young game designer with very little experience of gastronomy. Findings from the interviews led to a series of participatory experiments that determined to understand if combining participatory research through design and play theory might better situate chefs to diversify their approach to playful gastronomy. This hypothesis was explored through dinners—designed with and for experts, enthusiasts and novices, and the resulting method tested through a workshop with student chefs and game designers. The method—Participatory Research through Gastronomy Design (PRGD)—and its development are presented in [4, 11].

2 Handmaking Food Ideals

Much technology is designed to help people enact processes faster and more precisely. Yet, these advantages may come at the cost of other, perhaps less tangible, values. Handmaking Food Ideals was a workshop, held at DIS2018 in Hong Kong, to articulate values associated with handmade through a co-creative exploration in the food domain [9,12]. The objective was to explore the potential of integrating hand-made values into future food-related technologies. During the workshop we critically reflected on the notion of handmade; engaged actively with food as design material through production, plating and consumption; observed expert food-makers in action in a local noodle restaurant; and conducted collective discussions around the values that these processes and materials can embody when attended to through lenses other than efficiency. By handmaking: touching, smelling, tasting, listening, speaking and enacting choreographies with the materials at hand, we deepened the discussion of meanings associated with the notion of

handmade and were able to bring a richness to ways that we, as designers, imagine future food-related technologies [9,12].

3 FOOD+[material practices]

April 2018 I co-chaired the 4th Nordic-Baltic BioMedia Network Symposium in Kolding, DK. The theme was FOOD+[material practices]. The symposium brought together thirty experts in Art, Science and BioMedia from the Nordic-Baltic Region, Germany and Switzerland for three days of meetings workshops and public outreach. Workshops included: i) fabricating bioplastic, edible and hyper-compostable tableware, ii) making tools for collecting and measuring microplastics from local waterways—to materially position ourselves with the scientific evidence that microplastics permeate the human food web, and iii) culinary collaborations with chefs from Design School Kolding. The program and images from the workshop are available at [13].

4 Designing New Ways of Eating

February–June 2018, I led a design-based investigation into DIY bioplastic, edible and hyper-compostable tableware, including two public participatory events: one at the FOOD+[material practices] symposium, the other—a research lab in the wild [10]—at my university’s 50th Jubilee event. The aim of the research was to understand if currently available open source recipes appropriately resource ‘at home’ production of bioplastics. Findings have been brought together in a hand-made book and ‘material samples set’ aimed at design researchers, amateur gastronomists, DIY enthusiasts, and others curious about plastic alternatives [2, 14].

5 Making Sense of Human-Food Interaction

Human-Food Interaction (HFI) research is skyrocketing across a broad range of disciplinary interests and concerns. The dynamic and heterogeneous nature of the field presents a challenge to scholars wishing to critically engage with prior work, identify gaps and ensure impact. It also challenges the formation of community. With Altarriba Bertran and a team at UCSC, I led a Systematic Mapping Study of HFI research. We developed an online data visualisation tool to enable researchers to engage in new ways with HFI literature and to actively engage in community-making. The research forms part of an ongoing inquiry into trends, challenges and opportunities in HFI. It has been published as a work in progress [3], a full paper and proposal for a related workshop are currently under review. The aim is to develop and refine the tool and expand the questions being asked by the HFI community.

6 The SHIT! project

Shit: n. vulgar slang; faeces; an act of defecating; things or stuff. Our gut contains a hidden world over which we have very little awareness or control. *The SHIT! project* invites participants to engage collectively, introspectively and performatively with the intricate processes taking place midway between the food we consume and the ‘shit’ we produce. Both food consumption and defecation are caught up in rich cultural arrangements saturated with social norms, rituals and taboos. At the same time, our alliances with the multitudes of microbes in our gut carries on

largely unnoticed, unless we encounter digestive problems. SHIT! is a collaboration with Tau Ulv Lenskjold, involving workshops developed around a toolkit, food lab tools and food stuff. By experimenting with technologies and foods, workshop participants are prompted to engage in carefully scripted procedures of self-experimentation. Following steps modelled on scientific method, they digest food, observe the sensation of its passage through the gut and finally use this experience to reconsider their preconceptions of the interrelation between food and shit. The aim is to spur a genuine interest in our otherwise taboo-ridden social discourse on shit, and for participants to contribute to a collective exploration of the language, morphology and taxonomy with which we deal with shit in our everyday lives. Publications forthcoming.

7 Food | Climate | Futures

The grand challenge of the coming decade is to entirely redesign our relationship to natural systems. Climate change unfolds over temporal and geographic scales that are difficult for people to relate to. Rather than engage personally, most people rely on government and technologists to come up with solutions. But it is now known that restrictive policies and radical technologies do not work without human engagement and behaviour change. Eating, on the other hand, is situated in the here and now; it occurs at the scale of the body—the scale at which people operate, think and easily imagine—and can be engaged with through embodied knowing. All people have expertise with eating. All 17 of the UN’s sustainability goals can be linked to food [6], and the food system is now recognised as a major driver of climate change due to changes in land use, depletion of freshwater resources, and pollution of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems [8]. These characteristics make food a potent vehicle for uncovering radical new relationships that people themselves can build to natural systems in response to the climate crisis. This research is ongoing. Publication forthcoming.

Conclusion

The research described here engages government, industry, academia and diverse civil society actors to (a) ‘common’ issues at stake and create seductive alternative ‘imaginaries’ of personally, socially and ecologically enriching practices; and (b) collectively negotiate the necessary infrastructure to transform these imaginaries into ‘implementable nows.’ It uses food as the locus for thinking and a ‘post-disciplinary’ method for speculation and development, converging design research and science, technology and society studies (STS) to enrich how design methods are enacted and understood and deliver empirically enriched models for engaged reflection and infrastructuring.

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