

# From Eighteenth Century Proto-Restaurant to Twenty-first Century Artist's Restaurant: Sensory Experiences, Class Identities, and Dining Interiors

Mark Clintberg  
Concordia University

## Introduction

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French restaurants provided unique architectural environments that allowed for social collisions between strangers. In these novel interiors, diners were given the chance to show their class distinction and identity in two ways: through large menus from which to compose meals of good taste (in both aesthetic and gustatory terms) and through sprawling assortments of utensils and vessels with which to demonstrate dexterity and ease of use. Participation in rules of table service, table manners, and experience and knowledge of flavor combinations served as mechanisms by which visitors to restaurants could show social class through bodily performance. Restaurants remain places for identity performance to this day.

Contemporary artists create, modify, and explore restaurant interiors as sites for identity articulation. Romanian-born artist Daniel Spoerri's *Un coup de dés*, originally presented in 1968 and re-performed several times since, was a one night restaurant-based artwork that collided *haute cuisine* and working-class cookery in a large-scale banquet. Guests for the feast were split into groups and asked to perform temporarily assigned class-roles – “rich” and “poor” – according to a roll of the die. Obligated to play out these roles for the remainder of the evening, these two classes were seated opposite one another at immense, sprawling banquet tables. Tableware, decoration, and menu for each side of the table corresponded to the diner's appointed class. In 2010 a version of this banquet was held in Düsseldorf as an offsite component of the contemporary art exhibition *Eating the Universe* at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. It was a five-hour, seven-course ticketed dinner for one hundred people. Admission was €100, and guests included museum donors, trustees, and notable members of the Düsseldorf art community. For this edition of the work, “the rich” were waited on by attentive staff, who served ostentatiously garnished seafood entrées on platters, along with many other extravagantly garnished foods, and poured vintages of wine into ornate stemware; “the poor” fended for themselves, grasping at decanted vessels of wine and wooden platters of bread, bowls of lentil soup, and other simple looking fare. This restaurant artwork occasioned the performance of real and adopted class identities,

which were articulated through the consumption of foodstuffs, and interactions with vessels, utensils, and furnishings in a temporary restaurant interior.

This paper will compare historical and contemporary models of food service sites with Spoerri's artwork to highlight how restaurant interiors occasion aspirations toward and expressions of social class identity by individual participants. First, I will conduct a review of key developments in restaurant interiors and public food service in Europe with a primary focus on the eighteenth century to the present day. Next, I will discuss Spoerri's practice, which has frequently involved food, banquets and restaurants. I will call attention to the type of restaurant interior, and therefore the particular type of social relations and sensory experiences, that *Un coup de dès* presented.

When diners are present in them, restaurant interiors hold a second type of interior space within them: that of the human body itself. Therefore, a second interior site explored in this paper is the flesh of the body – the gut of the participants. One source guiding this discussion is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which holds that sense experience is delivered through the body as a series of fragments. Merleau-Ponty's theories suggest that studies of interiors must take into account body-object experiences and relations. My analysis of this artwork is constructed from my own sense-experiences of the *Un coup de dès* site and its food.

A second key source for this discussion is Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, which argues that class divisions are reinforced rather than contested by hierarchies of aesthetic taste. For Bourdieu, taste distinction is not innate, but rather a product of upbringing and education. Much like the proto-restaurant, which was embroiled in the post-Revolutionary emergence of the bourgeoisie and its efforts to perform new class identities, *Un coup de dès* asked audiences to challenge their taste distinction by adopting a class position, and performing and testing it through the sensual experience of dining.

#### Four Types of Restaurant

The nativity scene of the restaurant is often argued to have taken place in France in 1789, coinciding with the French Revolution and the formation of the bourgeois social class, who were eager to find and foster new sites for public sociability where they could make themselves visible.<sup>1</sup> Just as important to this narrative was the consequential release of a highly trained workforce of chefs from their positions of employment preparing food for aristocratic families; these chefs were then allowed to pursue their own gastronomic interests with slightly more freedom – independent of the patronage of certain families, but still dependent on the tastes of clientele.<sup>2</sup>

Accounts of the emergence of the restaurant that choose to stress these developments are elegant, and certainly serve the interests of French nationalism, but they overlook the types of food service sites that functioned both in and out of French

borders before 1789. My intention is not to galvanize the precise moment when the “modern restaurant” came into being, but instead to call attention to the other types of food service sites that were active earlier in history in order to show exactly what was – and still is – distinctive about the institution we now largely take for granted: the restaurant.

I will propose four categories of food service sites. These are: quasi-restaurant, proto-restaurant, modern restaurant, and artist's restaurant. What I call quasi-restaurants, which predate modern restaurants and appear in the west as early as the Middle Ages, are cookshops, street stalls and mobile forms of food service. These sites often involve a small selection of foods, or one specialty food, for purchase by a public; clients generally must eat standing or find their own seating away from the immediate site. I differentiate the proto-restaurant, also a precedent of the modern restaurant, as a category that includes inns and taverns, where food is available for members of the public to purchase, but clients are not given the opportunity to select food from a menu, and table-space is shared with strangers. Modern restaurants, a typology defined by sociologist Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, date at least as early as 1789. These sites offer an extensive menu to guests, and give private seating for individuals and groups. Artists' restaurants blend aspects of these three other typologies, and often add further variables of the artist's own design. If we can understand the components that define how these food service sites have functioned with relation to identity, we can gain an even greater understanding of how and why artists choose to adopt and manipulate restaurants as sites for the realization of artworks that seek to disrupt identity through sensory experience.

### A Short History of the Restaurant

Restaurants are conventionally understood as interior, hospitable sites serving multiple types of food where visitors are invited to dine for both pleasure and nourishment. Restaurants aim to entertain, sustain, and satisfy their guests. Usually these sites are businesses or financial enterprises, but sometimes they function as social enterprises or philanthropic endeavors. But although these qualities are at the core of the majority of restaurants in the west today, multiple models for food service sites have existed according to region and historical moment.

#### *Quasi-Restaurant*

Street stalls, cookshops, *traiteurs*, and itinerant food service sites – which I refer to as quasi-restaurants – predate proto-restaurants and modern restaurants, and many businesses of this kind remain active today. Quasi-restaurants are sites that provide only ready-to-eat prepared foodstuffs for sale, unlike grocers and markets, which retail produce and other ingredients in a raw state, and sometimes alongside ready-to-eat goods.

In the eleventh century such ready-to-eat goods, so-called “portable foodstuffs,” were available in England and France (Trubek 2008). The English cookshop, a type of quasi-restaurant, appeared in the Middle Ages. As sociologist Stephen Mennell explains, cookshops were sites “where townspeople could send their own meat to be cooked, or where equally they could buy a hot dish ready cooked, choosing from a side selection of pies, puddings, and joints of meat” (Mennell 1985: 136). Poor housing conditions, a lack of domestic kitchen facilities, and population density figured into the foundation of the quasi-restaurant in Europe, and Trubek argues that “increasing urbanism” resulted in a spike in the production of prepared foods in France (Trubek 2008: 31). Entrance into and use of a cookshop would have been effectively be an expression of one’s financial means, but also that one did not employ a domestic cook, or potentially that one did not have access to kitchen facilities or a hearth. In other words, it would seem the ideal client of the quasi-restaurant was likely lower-middle class: not living in abject poverty, but also certainly not wealthy. In this way, we can say that the establishment of quasi-restaurants was a result of the needs of members of particular social classes, and a place where class position was made evident through participation.

The French counterpart to the cookshop, the *traiteur*, evolved on a distinct course due to the actions of regulatory guilds that influenced what foods could be produced by certain enterprises (Trubek 2008: 36). Parkhurst Ferguson explains that before the French Revolution, guilds maintained proscriptions on and rules about what establishments could serve particular foods (Parkhurst Ferguson 1998: 604). Spang summarizes that under the guild system, “the man who made stews technically could not sell mustard, and the preparer of pâtés was prohibited from selling coffee,” which would seem to effectively block the inauguration of anything resembling what we today call a publicly accessible restaurant, where multiple dishes are served under one roof (Spang 2000: 9). According to Spang, however, the controlling guild system and its tight regulation fostered transgressive attitudes among *traiteurs*: to circumvent the rules however possible, resulting in sites that sold a diverse blend of comestibles. Over time, the boundary between private service (catering) and public sale (quasi-restaurant) became more and more slender until it dissolved entirely, leading to the modern restaurant. The *traiteur* became a site for transgressions and cross-overs of guild-based identities.

### Proto-Restaurant

Functioning alongside quasi-restaurants were proto-restaurants such as inns and taverns that fed clients who were away from the domestic sphere. Clients of such places were usually travelers, people running errands away from their homes, or folks wanting to be seen in society.

Inns had coexisted with cookshops for several centuries, but in terms of food service, inns would cater specifically to their own lodging guests. Unlike diners in modern restaurants, guests at inns did not have a selection of foods offered to them,

but instead had to be content to sustain themselves with whatever the innkeeper set before them (Spang 2000: 136). “At the time,” Trubek describes, “if you were a traveler and dining at an inn, you would be seated with others at a large table - a style known as *table d'hôte*. The traditional menu had simply informed the customer of the dishes to be served and the cost of the meal” (2008: 36). Early inns did not allow the diner to select their own meal, and did not allow guests to select tablemates. Eventually the *table d'hôte* did allow guests to make a selection from a small menu of different dishes, evolving into today's continuation of this customary service style, where guests select from a reduced menu of perhaps three main dishes and two or three options for each other course at a predetermined price.

Taverns, today usually thought of as places mainly for drink and not for dining (with the exception of the related English pub), in the eighteenth century were “noted eating-places and centres of social life” (Mennell 1985: 137). Sociability and commensality mark the tavern as distinct from the inn, which by its very nature would be largely populated by relative strangers; taverns served as social loci for people who were for the most part familiar with one another, and who lived in the same community.

European inns and taverns existed concurrently with another proto-restaurant: a curious food site that served only soup, after which the “restaurant” of today is named. The French term “*restaurant*” was used as early as the fifteenth century to refer not to an architectural site, but a “semi-medicinal preparation” designed to revive the ailing (Spang 2000: 1). It was not for the sake of social eating that clients ostensibly visited these purveyors, but for the purpose of imbibing a remedy designed to tax the client's body as little as possible while still providing apparent nutritional value. “*Restaurant*” draws from the French *restauratif*, meaning to restore, and the food served at these sites was itself called *restaurant* since it was intended to restore the strength of clients. Those who maintain restaurants were and still are called *restaurateurs* in reference to these early soup-serving sites (Drouard 2007: 269). *Restaurateurs* were part chef, and part pharmacist. Such restaurants were designed specifically for artists and intellectuals, and offered a unique feature: small private tables rather than large shared banquet tables, and flexible hours of service (Shore 2007: 304). These clients of delicate aesthetic taste, it would seem, also required delicate tasting food because of their real or feigned fragile health, and required a site that could respond to erratic schedules dictated by their impulsive appetites.

### Modern Restaurant

Parkhurst Ferguson develops the term “modern restaurant” to refer to food service sites in France at the end of the eighteenth century that continued two strategies of the soup-serving restaurant, and offered diners flexible food service according to the client's own schedule, but enlarged their menus to include solid foods. The very large menus at these sites were not an entirely new idea in food service,

however. Imperial China's Song dynasty (1127-1279), for example, saw an explosion of public dining sites - some of which served hundreds in one seating - offering meals to people of diverse classes and occupations (Waley-Cohen 2007: 111).

Out of step with the narrative tying the French Revolution to the "invention" of the restaurant, the emergence of modern restaurants did not immediately result in food sites of equality, fraternity, and liberty. First of all, kitchens in restaurants were notoriously gendered and homosocial spaces, and according to Trubek, in Europe women were never employed as chefs in the nineteenth century or before (Trubek 2000 :40). Second, women were also not always welcomed as clients in early restaurants (Colquhoun 2007: 287). Finally, modern restaurants were class-segregated sites catering to individuals who no longer wished to patronize inns and taverns since these latter sites were apparently known for cheaper food and therefore a mixed demographic of clients, including the lower classes (Spang 2000: 72). Higher prices at modern restaurants set up a class-filter, effectively barring entry for the lower classes, and creating cordoned-off interior spaces for clients of relatively homogenous class-identity. Also, unlike inns and taverns – where a kind of sociability was expected between guests who were potentially strangers to one another and seated around immense tables – modern restaurants offered islands of controlled and contrived social isolation in a sea of public life. The bourgeoisie, it seems, was the ideal client-group for the modern restaurant since they had disposable wealth and were eager to be conspicuously present in the growing public sphere of France, while also enjoying a degree of privacy.

Yet, casting some doubt on this conclusion, in 1852 the English gastronome Abraham Hayward, quoted by Mennell, describes an *anxious* bourgeois social class who dined in restaurants with the hopes of enjoying their wealth *out of view* of other classes. This new class, Hayward writes, "the new patriotic millionaires, who had enriched themselves by the plunder of the church and nobility, were fearful, in those troubled times, of letting the full extent of their opulence be known; and thus, instead of setting up an establishment, preferred gratifying their Epicurean inclinations at an eating house" (Mennell 1985:139-140). Hayward's account describes restaurants as if they were cloisters of *gourmandise*, supplying secretive meals of sensorial excess, rather than as theatrical stages providing opulence in public view. It is likely that both currents - the nervous and self-conscious in camera dinner, and the brazen spectacular feast of decadence - commanded the imaginations of bourgeois restaurant patrons at the time.

Mennell draws on the research of Jean-Paul Aron to demonstrate that eventually different types of restaurants catering to different classes and budgets - not just the bourgeoisie - were opened across Paris (1985: 140). With time modern restaurants became the territory not only of the bourgeoisie, but of divergent classes; gargottes and guingettes are two examples of less formal restaurants for non-bourgeois clients, Trubek writes, known for affordable food, dancing, and entertainment (2000: 38-39). Clearly the "modern course" that Parkhurst Ferguson has in mind for the restaurant was built upon the increasing political and economic power of an emerging bourgeois social

class – but also by the influence of restaurants designed and patronized by other classes. In any case, modern restaurants were and still are sites that are usually segregated according to social class by virtue of the price of food on offer.

### Spoerri's Food

Restaurants provided – and continue to provide - the opportunity for diners to “perform taste” and social class. Restaurants are social, gastronomical, and theatrical ventures, and artists capitalize on these attributes when they establish their own food service sites. Spoerri's dinner toyed with the tradition of modern restaurants, since *Un coup de des* offered an arena for each participant to stage their savvy and “true” social class according to their response to the food delivered to them while acting out their temporary, “adopted” social class.

Spoerri has a long-standing interest in working with food as an artist's material. He is perhaps best known for his *tableaux-pièges*, also called *Fallenbilder*, snare pictures, or trap paintings, which are sculptural wall mounted assemblages that preserve the arrangements of vessels, utensils and detritus left after meals. The title of this series of works refers to the capturing of the moment just after a meal has finished, and these artworks explicitly engage with the genre of still life.

In addition to banquet-artworks, this artist has also established his own functional, long-term restaurant. In 1967, Spoerri converted a small bar tabac a five minute walk down the street from the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, at #19 Burgplatz, into *Restaurant Spoerri*. It was a personal project, evidently: he wallpapered the space with his correspondence. The restaurant served delicious meals to its clientele (it was known for its excellent steaks), but menus would vary according to the designs of temporarily appointed chefs, including Joseph Beuys. Often, the resulting food would be experimental in nature: *escalopes de python*, ant omelet, and schnitzel of elephant trunk for instance (Buschmann 2009: 235). Visitors could dine at a table and have the remains of their meal fixed in place, turned into a vertically oriented picture plane, and transformed into a snare picture. These tabletop still lifes were then made available for sale.<sup>3</sup>

Spoerri refers to himself as a “collaborator of chance,” (Novero 2010: 152) a designation that suits the method used to create his *tableaux-pièges*, since during a meal as diners pass around foodstuffs and vessels chance dictates the final placement of each of these elements. The title of Spoerri's banquet, *Un coup de dés*, also relates to chance. It refers to an 1897 poem written by the French Symbolist, Stéphane Mallarmé: “*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.*” Mallarmé's title translates to “a roll of the dice will never abolish chance,” and Spoerri's banquet serves as an illustration of this poem's spirit. Novero writes of his practice, “by trapping the banal, halting the everyday, and especially putting on view the work of consumption in the chance-

instants of tables, objects, and food, Spoerri thought he would thus whet the audience's desire for movement and life" (Novero 2010: 152).

Because of this interest in daily life, Spoerri's work has been considered exemplary of *Nouveau Réalisme*, an art movement centered in France in the 1960s. French critic Pierre Restany, who effectively founded the movement in the early 1960s, characterized *Nouveau Réalisme's* as being focused on plainly displaying the stuff of daily life. Art historian Jill Carrick further explains that Spoerri, in contrast to Restany, did not want to simply celebrate the quotidian commodities that surrounded him, but also to problematize them. For Spoerri, as Carrick writes, *Nouveau Réalisme* was "a folding of narratives of memory, blindness, and opacity through the so-called 'matter-of-fact'" (Carrick 2010: 5). By presenting edible commodities in a dining scenario, Spoerri wanted to question the arrangements of daily life that we often take for granted – particularly with regard to class as it is enacted in food service sites like restaurants. One reason that Spoerri wanted his audience to be attuned to chance outcomes is because he was interested in how our particular social class positions are the product of chance rather than innate, essential identity.

Haus Maria Theresia, where the dinner was hosted in 2010, is a restored former convent. One hundred guests were first registered at a reception table in the foyer of the space, and given a unique identifying sequential number and a glass of Gosset champagne. Trays of canapés were circulated by wait-staff while participants mingled. After the artist appeared and, in a booming baritone, announced that diners would be split into two groups according to assigned numbers and the roll of the dice, guests then crowded through the doorway, shuffled into the sanctuary, and began their role-play in earnest. Three sprawling banquet tables filled the space, and each table was split laterally according to two distinct decorative schemes. One side of every table had a bare wood surface outfitted with wooden trays, paper napkins, table wine by the carafe, and candles haphazardly jammed into empty wine bottles – for the "rich." The opposite side of the table featured fine china, baroque candelabras, cloth napkins, and fine vintages of wine served by attendants – for the "poor." A small, temporarily installed kitchen with fridges, service area, storage containers, and cooking equipment was in full view of diners at the front of the sanctuary, allowing guests to witness the staff furiously assembling the food. Custom printed menus – each of which were signed as an artist's edition – also decorated the tables. These menus served to create anticipation for the "luxurious" or "impoverished" foods each diner expected to receive. Over the course of several hours, the "rich" were served an assortment of traditional French foods associated with the middle and upper classes, such as *Médaille de Lotte de l'Atlantique avec des artichauts et Dialogue de poivrons et paprikas et Pommes rissolées* (medallion of monkfish with artichokes and dialogue of peppers, paprika and browned apples). The poor were served foods of the German working class, including *Linsen Eintopf mit erdfruchten & gebrackenen Kartoffelschalen* (black lentil soup with deep fried potato skins). During this artwork, the smells of both "rich" and "poor" cuisine blended in the air, and all participants could access the full menu through sight,



but access to these cuisines through taste and touch was restricted according to the performed class of each participant.

The format of Spoerri's banquet directly referred to the history of food service sites in Europe, and borrowed conventions from taverns, inns and modern restaurants. *Un coup de dés*, like the inn and the tavern, brought people together to be convivial – some participants were strangers but many already knew one another from Düsseldorf. Also, like the inn, *Un coup de dés* served a fixed menu, a *table d'hôte*, to its clients. But unlike the class mixing promoted by early inns, *Un coup de dés* caused conviviality for participants who were in reality of similar class to one another – which is to say they were financially privileged. Spoerri's banquet was a moralistic piece of theatre that blended various typologies of restaurants to introduce imaginary class difference through role-play, but the project ultimately revealed that all present at the meal were in a greatly privileged position; no one who was actually poor was admitted.

#### A Phenomenological Account of *Un coup de dés*

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy encourages us to reflect on how experience is delivered to consciousness through the apparatus of the body. He calls the body the "darkness needed in the theatre in order to show up the performance" (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 115). This architectural metaphor takes the body as an interior space that stages narratives - that is to say, experiences. From Merleau-Ponty's point of view, the "thickness of the body" is what enables the subject to have contact with the world (167). In other words, the perception of a literal architectural interior is one that is shaped by the physical, bodily interior of the visitor. The particular arrangement and conditions of the bodily theatre impacts the performance that takes place - meaning that experience is shaped by bodily subjectivity and identity.

We can use Merleau-Ponty's approach to understand how identity was brought to light through intersections of bodily and architectural interiors during Spoerri's event. As he later revealed during interview, Spoerri's trick was to fool the rich and poor role players by using the finest ingredients in the peasant fare and ingredients of lower quality in the aristocratically styled entrees. This banquet plays with the *sensory perception* of foodstuffs as influenced by décor evocative of class, where entrées that visually signal poverty, and are surrounded by humble vessels, turn out to have a richer taste once they enter the bodily interior. At *Un coup de dés*, lavishly ornamented entrées were prepared using humble ingredients, and modest-looking dishes were prepared using extravagant ingredients. Because of this specially modeled architectural interior, the "rich" participants expected lavish foods, and the "poor" expected simple foods. Through the "thickness of the body," which allowed the collision of clashing visual aesthetics and actual flavor, the class positions people had agreed to play out for the evening became increasingly unclear. Confusion and even frustration resulted for some people present, causing a few vocal outbursts at the tables as the evening progressed since, although most took the situation in good humor, some rich

participants seemed to feel cheated out of a taste experience they felt they were entitled to because of their ascribed class position and their *actual* class position, which had given them the cultural cachet and financial solvency to attend.

The food of *Un coup de dés* accessed historical, and stereotypical, attitudes about what these regional cuisines signify, and their exchange value. For the event's chef, German food was seen as the ideal form for characterizing poverty, while French food was apparently ideal for representing luxury. These exchange values in turn promoted forms of behavior from participants, some of whom felt they were not getting their money's-worth.

These material components of the artwork serve as signals to the diners, many of who were relative strangers to one another, and gave them cues about how to relate socially to one another. For example, during the dinner members of the "rich" class repeatedly took carafes of wine from the poor side of the table, causing one "poor" woman to shout "Do not take *our wine!*" The event might have remained simply playful, but the coveting of objects arranged on the table prompted a very real form of antagonism. The foods on display at each table sparked desire and jealousy in some diner's minds. With the *Un coup de dés*, dramatic differences in food service led to discord because the event sowed discontent between actors temporarily performing class roles. Spoerri's diners experienced a controlled and artificial form of class difference. This distinction was not entirely maintained in practice, however; many guests swapped food from opposite sides of the table, and with a bit of enterprising banter I was able to persuade one "rich" woman to give me her dessert. This scenario, which sparked such covetousness at the dining table, involved a unique type of commodity that I refer to as the edible commodity, which has a special relationship with interior sites of food display.

### Gastronomy and Edible Commodities

A frenzied interest in cuisine and the emerging field of gastronomy arose in France in the late-eighteenth century, coinciding with developments in aesthetic theory spurred by writers like Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant. We could say that in this period food became further aestheticized by the field of gastronomy. Restaurants of this period, working in concert with theories of gastronomy began to display food in ways entirely different from the methods used by their predecessors, putting comestibles center-stage by making food service in restaurant interiors visible from the exterior through street facing windows, for instance. Although food certainly existed as a commodity before this time, this particular method of display initiated food commodities into a new phase of function and effect. This is a particular type of displayed food that I will term an *edible commodity*.

The edible commodity is a form of commodity in that it is put on display for the diner (and passersby) to enjoy through sight (and through smell) before enjoying it

through eating – although some who witness the edible commodity never have the opportunity to eat it. The architecture of many modern restaurants is carefully designed to allow passers-by to visually encounter foods from street level, and because of this these sites have a great deal in common with shop windows where commodities are displayed as theorized by French author Charles Baudelaire. Paul Wood notes that while Karl Marx investigated the economic conditions behind the commodity, Baudelaire “tried to grasp the experience of it” (Wood 1996: 391). Wood explains that from Baudelaire’s point of view, commodity objects “took on characters of their own: as when a group of luxury objects arranged in a shop window along one of Haussmann’s new boulevards murmur among themselves and mock the inability of a poor passerby to purchase them.” Those who view restaurants through the window-glass are similarly enticed to ingest – or dream of ingesting – the edible commodities put on display on tables before diners, while also feeling mocked by the edible commodities that are just out of reach. Edible commodities nurture appetite and covetousness through display, and this response is nurtured through the thickness of the body as theorized by Merleau-Ponty.

Although Baudelaire discusses commodities put on display in architectural interiors and viewed from exterior spaces, Spoerri’s project brings attention to bodily interiors in the context of a restaurant interior. Each guest, once seated, had a view of their own portion of food and the table setting associated with their temporary social class, and that of a counterpart from the “opposite” class. This restaurant interior, with its theatrically divided tables, was intentionally designed to frustrate its participants. Like Baudelaire’s wanderer of boulevards who craves commodities that are out of reach, Spoerri’s diners, myself included, experienced longing for a set of edible commodities they were not permitted to access. Spoerri’s project used the arrangement of décor to mock its participants for desiring what chance has withheld from them: an experience of edible commodities offered to the “other class.” *Un coup de dés* denied its participants access to the edible commodities put on display just across the table from them; each person had to either be content with the edible commodities that fortune provided, or negotiate access to the other foods they desired.

### Distinction and Social Class

Several writers have proposed essential links between wealth and taste distinction. Kant blithely discounted the appetites of the lower classes by writing, “Hunger is the best sauce; and people with a healthy appetite relish everything, so long as it is something they can eat” (2007: 42). French gourmet Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, too, was convinced that a correlation could be observed between the sensitivity of one’s gustatory palate and one’s income. He designed empirical tests to “prove” this theory (2006: 134-136). He writes that these “tests are relative, and should be proportioned to the various classes of society” (135). A serious gourmand earning 5,000 francs a year, Brillat-Savarin argues, should be able to appreciate the glories of “a breast of veal baked in its own juice,” whereas one earning 15,000 francs annually would be

better suited to eat a “filet de boeuf pique, and baked in its own juice, with pickles.” Different social groups, he defends, are “worthy of having treasures” of varying sophistication (134). Brillat-Savarin’s opinion finds a parallel – though facetious – argument in the structure of Spoerri’s dinner. But within the context of its temporary class drama *Un coup de des* secretly turns perceived links between wealth and class distinction on their head.

Pierre Bourdieu’s study of the aesthetic preferences of French social classes after the Second World War, *Distinction*, is based on detailed primary research, where participants of different vocations and educational backgrounds were asked to state and describe their aesthetic taste preferences for music, photography, and so on. From these surveys, Bourdieu concludes that we can “map out a universe of class bodies” (Bourdieu 2005: 76). This adds the variable to social class to Merleau-Ponty’s equation of bodily experience. The “theatre” of the body is not a neutral one, but one informed by many aspects of identity, including class position and upbringing.

Bourdieu argues that class divisions are reinforced by hierarchies of aesthetic taste, and that these divisions are jeopardized by any “animal attachment to the sensible” brought to light through “the object which “insists on being enjoyed”” (489). He continues,

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.) and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. (1)

This philosophy of aesthetic taste suggests that something *essential*, even natural, distinguishes the poor from the rich - other than simple chance. According to the logic implied by this hierarchy of taste, which Bourdieu critiques as a construction, one might extrapolate that those who have good taste find themselves in positions of financial security as a kind of reward for their ability to distinguish the lowly from the elevated.

Moments when people can display their aesthetic taste also offer a chance to show personal class-rank, Bourdieu points out. He writes, “Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept” (57). He notably argues that aesthetic tastes in food are very durable markers of early childhood education and environment, and therefore are the most obvious markers of a person’s class background (79). By extension, restaurants are profound sites for the enactment of personal dramas of social class through exclamations and demonstrations of preferences for certain foods, certain modes of

décor, and certain forms of architecture. Spoerri's feast offered a similar performance opportunity for participants to show their class in a restaurant interior.

## Conclusion

Countering the usual circumstances of aesthetic judgment that Bourdieu investigates through his study, Spoerri's banquet tried to demonstrate to its participants that their class position did not give them inherent skills in predicting aesthetic *and* gustatory value in concert when faced with edible artworks in designed architectural interiors. *Un coup de dés* showed how frameworks of aesthetic assumptions are easily toppled, relative to class position, and revealed that aesthetic judgment is a trained behavior, and one very easily misled by parlor tricks such as décor, and the plating and aesthetic composition of food. The "theatre" of the body is quite liable to be fooled, resulting in misled performances of social class through expressions of food preferences.

The four types of food service sites I have introduced differently profile socially constructed connections between class, aesthetic taste and bodily experience. Spoerri's artist's restaurant questioned the apparently legitimate idea that wealthy people have tools of aesthetic distinction completely at odds with those at the service of those with less privileged backgrounds. Over the course of Spoerri's meal, visitors were encouraged to feel that they *deserved* what they are being served because of their assigned class position, and then had that entitlement stripped away.

Public dining furnishes a mode for individuals to parade their detailed knowledge on food, and to express their ability to detect subtle flavours and aromas, therefore putting their sensorium on display. These expressions of taste distinction, which are intended to display personal social class, are made possible through the body of the diner. In the case of Spoerri's feast, usual aesthetic codes of food and décor were scrambled in order to cause diners to rethink their assumptions about how class is performed in restaurant interiors.

~ This research for this paper was completed with financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Concordia University, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and the residency program of Fogo Island Arts. The author would like to thank his thesis advisor at Concordia University, Dr. Johanne Sloan, and his host supervisor at Oxford University, St. Peter's College, Dr. Hanneke Grootenboer.

## Notes

1. Some academics claim that before the 1789 Revolution restaurants were illegal in France. Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 3. Shore, however, argues that bona fide restaurants appear a little earlier - around the 1760s. Elliott Shore, 'Dining Out: The Development of the Restaurant', in Paul Freedman (ed.), *Food: The History of Taste* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 301-302. Other sources that claim France "invented" the restaurant include Amy B. Trubek's *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession* (Philadelphia, 2000) and *French Food: on the Table, on the Page, and in French Culture* (London; New York, 2001) edited by Lawrence R. Schehr and Allen S. Weiss.
2. Before the nineteenth century the relationship between chef and aristocrat was one of patronage; the wealthy would sponsor the services of a chef in the same way they might a talented visual artist. Trubek explains that, "it was only in the closed world of the aristocracy that a *chef de cuisine* could practice his craft up until the 1800s, but it was also in this protected environment [...] that *haute cuisine* that we know it today was developed and refined" (Trubek 2000:31).
3. n.a. "Eat Art Galerie."  
[http://www.danielspoerri.org/web\\_daniel/englisch\\_ds/werk\\_einzel/18\\_eatartgalerie.htm](http://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/englisch_ds/werk_einzel/18_eatartgalerie.htm). Site accessed February 9, 2013.

## References

"Eat Art Galerie."

[http://www.danielspoerri.org/web\\_daniel/englisch\\_ds/werk\\_einzel/18\\_eatartgalerie.htm](http://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/englisch_ds/werk_einzel/18_eatartgalerie.htm). Site accessed February 9, 2013.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2005. "Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity," in Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., *The Taste Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.

Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. 2006 (1825). *The Physiology of Taste: or, Transcendental Gastronomy*, Fayette Robinson, trans. Charleston: BiblioBazaar.

Buschmann, Renate. 2009. "Evocations of Pleasure and Disgust: Daniel Spoerri and the Establishment of Eat Art," in Elodie Evers, ed. *Eating the Universe: Vom Essen in der Kunst*. Düsseldorf, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

Carrick, Jill. 2010. "Introduction: Topographies of Chance and Return," in *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde*. Surrey; London; Burlington: Ashgate.

Colquhoun, Kate. 2007. *Taste: The Story of Britain Through its Cooking*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Drouard, Alain. 2007. "Chefs, Gourmets and Gourmands: French Cuisine in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries," in Paul Freedman, ed. *Food: The History of Taste*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 2007 (1790). *Critique of Judgment*, James Creed Meredith, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mennell, Stephen. 1985. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2007. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.

Novero, Cecilia. 2010. *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Parkhurst Ferguson, Patricia. 1998. "A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France," *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (3): 597-641.

Schehr, Lawrence and Allen S. Weiss, eds. 2001. *French Food: on the Table, on the Page, and in French Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.

Shore, Elliott. 2007. "Dining Out: The Development of the Restaurant," in Paul Freedman, ed. *Food: The History of Taste*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Spang, Rebecca. 2000. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Trubek, Amy B. 2000. *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Waley-Cohen, Joanna. 2007. "The Quest for Perfect Balance: Taste and Gastronomy in Imperial China," in Paul Freedman, ed. *Food: The History of Taste*. Berkeley; Los Angeles.

Wood, Paul. 1996. "Commodity," in Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.