

## **Retelling the Dutch Golden Age through vegetables, fruits and ashes.**

An analysis of the "eat.inspiration: *meet art, science & spirituality in a changing economy: experience the dutch golden age in 5 courses*", at Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

A little over a month ago, on May the 15th, I had one of the most epistemological experiences I have ever had. This was unexpected, because I thought I was going out for dinner. I met up with my best friend in Amsterdam, and we ended up at Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats because it was the only vegan-friendly restaurant we could agree on. I had not expected to be so affected by the experience, though I was already very enthusiastic about the idea of food as a medium for artistic expression and storytelling. It ended up being a multisensory experience where art, history and food enhance and inform each other. In this essay, I will argue that De Culinaire Werkplaats not only manages to put the theory discussed in Laura U. Marks' text "Thinking Multisensory Culture" into practice,<sup>2</sup> but also constructs a new subjectivity in a historical narrative. By adding the proximal senses to a topic usually only discussed in text and oil painting, De Culinaire Werkplaats changes the medium and the message. In this essay I will therefore discuss the ethical implications and possibilities of their work. The meal exemplified how taste and smell can be used for communicating knowledge. By challenging traditional sense-hierarchy, new subjectivities are constituted in the information communicated through taste. In this way De Culinaire Werkplaats opens up new possibilities for discussing food, art and history related to ethics in our mostly visual Western culture.

I should state beforehand that I graduated as a theatre designer focussing on embroidery/costume and that I have been catering professionally for the last five years. In the text "The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema", Vivian Sobchack mentions that with regards to pleasant smells, people in Western cultures do not usually practice "fractionary

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<sup>1</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "eat.inspiration: *meet art, science & spirituality in a changing economy: experience the dutch golden age in 5 courses*," accessed June 14, 2015. <http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/menu-en-dutch-golden-age.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Laura U. Marks, "Thinking Multisensory Culture," in Paragraph, Volume 31 Number 2, 123-137 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

smelling”.<sup>3</sup> We have a hard time distinguishing specific smells and tastes and no longer use our noses to gather information, only for pleasure. As a chef, I fit into the category of people that do practice this fractionary smelling on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> I also have an interest in using food in artistic settings to communicate or enhance and inform an aesthetic experience. I have always tried to take scent into account in my performance designs, just as I try to include the story behind the food I share when I present it. So taste and smell as carriers of knowledge as well as the ideas and practices of De Culinaire Werkplaats, are not only things that interest me on an academic and personal level, but also things I have a professional connection with. I have tried not to turn this essay into a review of a meal that tasted good, but rather to award the experience the critical aesthetic vision Marks states the proximal senses deserve.<sup>5</sup> I have refrained from complicating the Western idea of five senses in this text, keeping in line with Marks’ text,<sup>6</sup> and the culture my meal was a part of.

### **Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats and eat.inspiration**

De Culinaire Werkplaats is “a unique eating initiative & experience located opposite Amsterdam’s culture park Westergasfabriek”.<sup>7</sup> They describe themselves as “a design studio for contemporary and inspirational food concepts & narratives at the cutting edge of food & art”.<sup>8</sup> Eat.inspiration is the restaurant-part of the design studio, meant for testing out new ideas, gathering inspiration and starting a conversation with the guests about food. Eat.inspiration happens two nights a week and has a new theme every two months.<sup>9</sup> The studio consists of Marjolein Wintjes and Eric Meursing, a multi-disciplinary team of designers specialising in

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<sup>3</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema,” in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, 121-143, ed. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd., 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Sobchack, 126.

<sup>5</sup> Marks, 125.

<sup>6</sup> Marks, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, “hello!” accessed June 14, 2015.  
<http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/?cat=3&lang=en>

<sup>8</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, “hello!”.

<sup>9</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, “what’s on the menu?” accessed June 14, 2015.  
<http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/?cat=5&lang=en>

food.<sup>10</sup> This can be conceptual, or it can be more ritualistic in nature such as Wintjes' emotion.bread for mourning or celebrating.<sup>11</sup> All of these designs are as much high-end culinary experiences as they are ethically motivated; produce are sourced as sustainably as possible and this is discussed during the meal. The food is vegetarian and they gladly accommodate vegans. As for the experience of the eat.inspiration itself, the studio does away with some traditional aspects of dining in a restaurant. When you arrive, you are personally welcomed and seated. Some tables are communal, others smaller. The room is open and features industrial materials such as concrete and steel. There is a kitchen area, an island with a stove and various blenders and machines, around which the tables are placed. Because of the open space, it suddenly becomes visible how much work it takes for a meal to arrive at your table. Meursing and a colleague cook nearly non-stop for the entire evening as Wintjes talks to guests, explains, asks questions and discusses the ideology of De Culinaire Werkplaats. Eat.inspiration has a fixed menu. We get an overview of the courses and Wintjes explains the history of De Culinaire Werkplaats and the coming meal. Each course comes with an introduction and a story about the inspiration behind it. Guests are responsible for putting away their own dishes and placing them near the sink, signalling that they have finished the course. Guests are also trusted to keep their own tab and refill their own glasses. Drinks have a fixed price, the guests decide what they feel the meal is worth at the end of the evening. Wintjes and Meursing and their studio are so open and welcoming that we feel very comfortable during this breakdown of social customs.

### **Experiencing the Dutch Golden Age in 5 courses**

The preview of homemade flatbread with curly kale topping is delicious and Dutch, kicking off a meal both celebrating and challenging Dutch identity in relation to the Dutch Golden Age, which took place during most of the 17th century. The first dish, "Beemster Polder",<sup>12</sup> has a direct link to the Golden Age, combining vegetables grown in the polder with the story of its creation. The fact that a large part of this dish was grown on land dried over 400 years ago

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<sup>10</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "meet the initiators," accessed June 14, 2015. <http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/?p=11885&lang=en>

<sup>11</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "emotion.bread: my child leaves home-rings" accessed June 14, 2015. <http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/?p=11785&lang=en>

<sup>12</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "eat.inspiration".

sets up a direct connection between then and now. In this case the connection is more conceptual than mediated through taste, but this connection continues into the second and third dish to become more embedded in taste as well as concept.

The second dish, "East India Trading Company",<sup>13</sup> has a less straightforwardly positive story behind it. With the dish comes a story of the Dutch people's wish for more heavily spiced, bold-tasting food during the Golden Age. Wintjes discusses the extreme lengths people were willing to go to and the risks they were willing to take in order to obtain the coffee and spices that are featured this dish. She also discusses many wonderful produce and items brought back by the East India Trading Company. This trade was central to propelling the Netherlands into the Golden Age. When I start to wonder if I should protest that this story ignores all the awful, cruel parts of our past, Wintjes finishes by stating that the East India Trading Company was responsible for many atrocities including the slave trade. "There is nothing I can do about that now, besides mentioning it and taking a moment to acknowledge it." Just as the Beemster-vegetables connect my plate to a distant-but-highly-relevant past, "East India Trading Company" complicates a lot of ingredients I do not usually think about when tasting or using them.

Marks describes information gained through the proximal senses (smell, taste, touch) as being in the middle of deeply personal experience and codified shared cultural knowledge. By existing in this middle ground, what proximal experiences lose in commonality, they gain in depth and trust.<sup>14</sup> These experiences largely resist commodification,<sup>15</sup> increasing the depth to which it can affect the person experiencing the proximal sensory stimuli.<sup>16</sup> She also discusses another possibility of scent (and by extension taste): to connect the virtual to the actual.<sup>17</sup> "East India Trading Company" does so, referring back to the virtual historical situation and the, to the guests at De Culinaire Werkplaats, virtual atrocities committed to bring the guests these tastes in an actual present. Coffee is still surrounded by discussions of slavery and fair trade in the here and now. The dish connects this actual taste to a virtual history that continues into

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<sup>13</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "eat.inspiration".

<sup>14</sup> Marks, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Marks, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Marks, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Marks 134.

the actual now, though the situation it connects to in the now is largely virtual to the guest because it happens far away from their dinner table. De Culinaire Werkplaats actualises both a historical and a current virtual situation through taste and storytelling. By complicating the history of the food we are served, Wintjes and Meursing use the ethical possibilities of food as a proximal medium that actualises the virtual to its fullest extent.

The third dish, "The Syndics", is inspired by Rembrandt's painting *The Syndics of the Clothmaker's Guild* (1622).<sup>18</sup> The dish's connection to the Golden Age is less direct, but had a bigger impact on me. Rembrandt's painting is a commissioned piece depicting the five appointed officials responsible for checking the quality in colour and weight of the broadcloth imported to the Netherlands against samples. Also depicted is a sixth man, a servant of the guild.<sup>19</sup> The dish consists of leek used in five different ways: mousse, salad, croquette, wonton and ashes. Wintjes has a fascination for fibres, both in food and textiles,<sup>20</sup> which shone a new light on this painting as an inspiration. To me, the connection between food-fibres and textiles and the quality control depicted in the painting was provocative. The experience of eating the dish opened up a completely new experience of the painting, deeply informed by personal knowledge. It was transformative. The friend I was with likes to joke that I am a philistine for preferring YouTube videos to the height of Dutch culture, since he studied art history with a focus on the Dutch 17th century masters such as Rembrandt. I usually have trouble relating to paintings, finding it easier with sculptures I am allowed to touch or works I understand the technique of, such as embroidery or sewing.

Something in the dish, combined with the discussion of broadcloth samples, evoked in me a tactile experience that would not have taken place without the dish telling (part of) the story. The discussion about nuances in quality that need to be felt and experienced in a tactile way is something I know both from working with fabrics and from working with food, just as Wintjes does with fibres. The different shades of leek made the situation in the picture and the nuances of fabrics tested by the syndics intimately felt. Taking the time to connect the story

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<sup>18</sup> Museum Het Rembrandthuis, "The Syndics," accessed June 14, 2015.  
<http://www.rembrandthuis.nl/en/rembrandt/belangrijkste-werken/de-staalmeesters>

<sup>19</sup> Rijksmuseum, "The Wardens of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild, Known as 'The Syndics', Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, 1662", accessed June 14, 2015.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.5217>

<sup>20</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "some other type of fiber art," accessed June 14, 2015.  
<http://www.deculinairewerkplaats.nl/?p=5349&lang=en>

and painting to the food, and specifically one element in that food to one textile material, as well as five different ways of preparing it to five individuals responsible for quality control of said material, invoked something more personal than the first two dishes. This points to the kind of affective experiences Marks describes. She uses two examples in the form of scented oils to illustrate the argument her text rests on:<sup>21</sup> that scent and therefore all proximal senses including taste and touch can transmit knowledge,<sup>22</sup> and deserve the same aesthetic consideration as the more distancing senses of vision and sound.<sup>23</sup> She highlights the ethical possibility of personal affect created by proximal sense experiences, stating that "it is incommunicable per se, and that is its virtue".<sup>24</sup> Affect is the participation in the virtual, and though it can be expressed as emotion, it resist being interpreted completely. Affect is the free force underlying emotion and action.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of "East India Trading Company", the link between virtual and actual was quite clear and not something I would classify as affect. With "The Syndics," the experience was much less communally agreed on and rational, but it impacted me more deeply. This better fits with Marks' description of the ethical possibility for personal affect related to smell and taste.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to relate this now, in text, in the same way that Marks needs scent to rest her argument on. It is connected with my preference for experiencing art through touch thanks to the daily habit of communicating with my non-verbal but tactile sister. The dish is something I felt in my fingers. The cloth that the syndics in the painting are responsible for, evokes personal memories of sewing and cutting and buying different fabrics. Yet those are feelings I cannot fully explain to you now on the page. But then that is precisely Marks' point, illustrated by the two scents. There is information in the leek and in the different contrasts and nuances between the more earthy ashes and the very bright springy salad, which taught me something I could not have understood through words or Rembrandt's painting alone. The

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<sup>21</sup> Marks, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Marks, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Marks, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Marks, 135.

<sup>25</sup> Marks, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Marks, 135.

tastes imparted on me a proximal knowledge that did not become so hedonistic as to push my aesthetic appreciation and the epistemological aspect of the meal to the background.

The last two dishes, "The 1st Bubble" and "The Golden Bend",<sup>27</sup> were, as De Culinaire Werkplaats puts it, 'sweetish' courses.<sup>28</sup> "The 1st Bubble" was inspired by the financial crash of the tulip market during the Golden Age. This added yet another sensory element to an intellectual story: food used as a metaphor, making the experience understood by translating it into the medium of food. The tulip bulb was symbolised by a sweet-sour pickled onion surrounded by dried prunes and chocolate. Real tulip bulbs, Meursing told us, are inedible. The combination of onion with chocolate and dried fruits was both pleasant and unusual. This was topped with chocolate foam, hiding the other items in a tiny sea of brown bubbles that quickly dissipated. The foam was fittingly disappointing. Having discussed market crashes and the popping of a financial bubble, it was interesting to then dip my spoon into something that disappeared almost as soon as I touched it. It did not so much melt in the mouth as it disappeared the moment one tried to taste it. Combining the history of a financial crash with the physical experience of clashing flavours and eating something that is visually there but not in substance or taste, brought home a point about the concept of a financial bubble. I had never given the metaphor much thought, stopping at the thought of a bubble's fragility and ability to pop, but more accurately a bubble seems to be there only to vanish when it is too closely examined. This dish embodied the metaphor, adding a layer that had been missing for all the previous times I had heard the metaphor used. "The Golden Bend" was a reflection of the opulence in a particular neighbourhood in Amsterdam during the Golden Age, connected to some noteworthy facts about food culture during that period. People lived on *oliebollen* (fritters/beignets) and it was thought the height of sophistication to combine sweet and savoury food. The dish combined sweet fig-fritters with salty olive-pearls. The connection between a virtual past and an actual now was perhaps most apparent in this dish, because it so clearly referred back to an earlier food-culture with different customs. Getting a glimpse into the specificity of historical customs and being aware that they were the height of fashion during their time, made me aware of the equally specific and peculiar nature of our own

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<sup>27</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "eat.inspiration".

<sup>28</sup> Studio De Culinaire Werkplaats, "what's on the menu?".

customs. Consuming fried batter in an age when clean drinking water and calories were not as easy to come by as they are now makes complete sense, though it is completely irrational in our current Dutch food landscape of overabundance and excellent plumbing. Deeming salt-sweet combinations refined or weird is less rational and exemplifies how our own customs are as just as irrational and specific as customs from other places and times. This really hit home as I tried to broaden my mind into rhyming the taste of onion with chocolate and olive with fig.

### **Situated Knowledges and subjectivity**

If food can be seen as a medium that transmits knowledge, we can then ask to what extent this knowledge is situated. Donna Haraway, in "Situated Knowledges",<sup>29</sup> argues for partial knowledge.<sup>30</sup> She argues for embedded objectivity, which means that the producer of the knowledge is accountable for the knowledge they create.<sup>31</sup> Since all knowledge is partial and subjective, it is forbidden to claim universal objectivity that allows the producer of the knowledge to hide behind a veil of all-seeing, coming-from-nowhere objectivity, the "god-trick".<sup>32</sup> She defines objectivity therefore as partial, subjective, embodied knowledge that can be accounted for; knowledge that is situated.<sup>33</sup> In the case of De Culinaire Werkplaats, this starts with the ingredients. The produce used to tell the story are sourced from known origins whenever this is possible. This is most obvious in the case of "De Beemster Polder", because the ingredients were harvested from that actual polder, with the history of the piece of land being discussed as the dish is served. Wintjes and Meursing take great care to position themselves in the stories, using certain historical events and customs to inspire a much bigger conversation. The stories they tell are partial and subjective, and Wintjes and Meursing are open for questions and discussions. They are accountable for the story as much as one can be in the case of historical narratives. The guests' experiences of the meal is by definition situated

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<sup>29</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14 No. 3, (1988): 575-599.

<sup>30</sup> Haraway, 589.

<sup>31</sup> Haraway, 588.

<sup>32</sup> Haraway, 581-582.

<sup>33</sup> Haraway, 582-583.

because it is partial, subjective and also (literally) embodied. Through the act of eating the guests take tastes and therefore, according to Marks, knowledges into their bodies.<sup>34</sup>

Haraway discusses in her text how new modes of subjectivity can open up new stories challenging traditional disembodied objectivity.<sup>35</sup> She elaborates on the possibility of discovering new subjectivities with concepts otherwise thought of as objects, such as seeing the earth as an acting subject capable of mischief.<sup>36</sup> I would argue that *De Culinaire Werkplaats* takes this kind of non-traditional subjectivity into account by enacting vegetarianism and respecting veganism. It is a small first step, taking the subjectivity of animals and the health of the earth seriously, but they also award a new subjectivity, in taste and story, to topics that would otherwise remain unexplored, especially during a meal. Cloth as a subject with different moods. Leek with five distinct personalities. Onions and chocolate as subjects capable of clashing and getting along at the same time. Coffee and spices as tastes so tempting they were a driving force behind human atrocities, something Marks also touches upon,<sup>37</sup> whose victims are easily ignored if not for the fact that Wintjes deliberately allows time and space to discuss and actualise people in the virtual reality of the story and the dish. Dutchness in the Golden Age not as something distant to be proud of or to despise, but as a specific historical identity equally subjective, complicated, problematic and contradictory as our own culturally specific 'us'. Just as the medium and the deconstruction of sensory hierarchy in this meal allow for revisiting dominant narratives, so it offers new unexpected subjectivities in the food and through those proximal knowledge which could not have been conveyed in any other way.

## **Conclusion**

Marks also discusses the commercialisation of the proximal senses for consumption. Smell becoming "time for yourself", a thing that can be bottled and sold to busy middle class women.<sup>38</sup> *De Culinaire Werkplaats* resists this kind of commodification, not in the least because

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<sup>34</sup> Marks, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Haraway 594.

<sup>36</sup> Haraway, 593.

<sup>37</sup> Marks, 128.

<sup>38</sup> Marks, 130-132.

they do not adhere to regular dining 'rules'. By removing pricing from the equation, they undermine the commodification of the food and labour. It is up to the visitor to decide on the actual worth of the food and experiences, and the work that has gone into creating them, you receive throughout the evening, thereby subverting the custom of frictionless, waited, expensive fine dining. By creating a setting that could best be described as a very welcoming streamlined living room with open kitchen, De Culinaire Werkplaats actively resist the hedonistic commercial use of the proximal senses, focusing instead on a more epistemological approach of combining storytelling with letting the food itself speak. In the stories Wintjes and Meursing tell, they not only challenge the hierarchy of the senses, but also engage with dominant and forgotten narratives in Dutch history. The experience resists simplicity. They do not challenge dominant narratives by proclaiming to have a better story, but they do complicate seemingly innocuous experiences such as the taste of coffee or cinnamon and by demonstrating the rich complexity of a painting I would have otherwise thought very little of. On the whole I would describe the experience as meaningful rather than delicious, though it was both and the two informed each other. In the blending together of stories and food, with the food informing the stories and vice versa, De Culinaire Werkplaats manages to meticulously orchestrate a multisensory experience that constitutes knowledge in a way that storytelling alone could never have.

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