

#06

Cream Meetings

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Food affects us in every sense - as odours tickling our noses, as explosions of taste sensations on our tongues, as colours and forms a feast for our eyes, as tactility crunchy celery, smooth chocolate, slippery oyster. Eat celery and one's sinuses boom with the loud rhythm of chewing – sometimes so loud it is hard to hear the outside world, while an oyster slides down the throat like a gentle sigh. Each different food imparts the consumer with a multitude of specific sensorial savouring. It is curious and surprising that we know very little about such multisensorial encounters that may be experienced by people engaged in the restriction of food or binge eating and purging practices such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. A recent research project and associated series of exhibitions 'Mouths and Meaning' sought to explore the embodied and multisensorial dimensions of food and eating for people affected by an eating disorder. We (an artist and an anthropologist) have had many discussions about one of the major filmed performances pieces *Untitled (The Party)* 2011, and we share these with you here.

Untitled (The Party)

Untitled (The Party) 2011 is a short film devised and performed by two UK artists (Bronwyn Platten and Sarah Coggrave) who have both been affected by the experience of an eating disorder. *The Party* is an intentional second naming, as it not only represents overindulgence of sweets, savouries and pleasurable tastes, but is also the word used euphemistically for bingeing by some people with eating disorders. The film has been shown as part of exhibitions of *Mouths and Meaning* (Chapman Gallery, The University of Salford, Manchester UK 2011 and Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, South Australia 2013).

Untitled (The Party) begins with a young girl/woman (who is one of the artists), standing at the front door of a Victorian redbrick house. A slight figure, she is clad in a short dress of pink gingham, white ankle socks, glitter encrusted shoes, with a red party balloon tied to her right wrist. She knocks on the door, it falls ajar and she enters. As viewers we remain at a distance, watching her disappearance beyond the door. Somewhat ominously, her bobbing balloon, remains outside the house, snared in the now shut door.

The camera then shifts to a bare room where a grey haired woman, in a simple long brown dress is seated at a small table writing and vocalising over and over: mum, mum, mum, mum, mum, mum, mummy, mummy... The scene changes to a decorated room with a table groaning with food accompanied by the sound of cheery children's party music. Here is the fare of a child's party - a wobbling green jelly, different bowls containing custard, potato crisps, marshmallows, liquorice allsorts, plates of mini sausages, sausage rolls, chocolate biscuits, cubes of cheese, cheesecake, fairy cakes, jam tarts, and with large bottles of brightly coloured drinks.

The pink dressed figure appears uncertain and just stares at the laden table of food. Another cut, this time the other figure, who is still seated, proceeds to carefully fill a pair of lace-up shoes with whipped cream that she spoons from a large white catering bucket labelled "WHIPPED CREAM". Following this act, she perfunctorily steps into one shoe and then the other tying the laces tight with double bows. The insertion of each foot into a shoe is accompanied by squelching as foot replaces dairy. She walks out of sight.



Figure 1: Sarah Coggrave and Bronwyn Platten, *Untitled (The Party)* 2011 (*Mouths and Meaning*, Australian Experimental Art Foundation (2013) installation view). Credits: Camera and Editing: Insa Langhorst. Stills: Huw Wahl Photo: Sam Roberts © *The Artists*

In the following scene, the older of the two women strides into the party, carrying in her arms the bucket of cream. She gestures assertively to the young figure who is still standing in front of the food. The younger woman begins to spoon cream from the bucket into the pocket of the older woman's dress. What follows between them is a wordless yet intimate and almost ritualistic exchange that involves a process of inexact mimicry that includes the piping of whipped cream around each other's head, the filling of the younger woman's pretty and capacious Wellington boots with cream, both whipped and whipping. These actions while appearing serious and calculated are also accompanied by bouts of laughter which at times spill over much like the cream itself.

From there, as the party music surrounds them, together the two women, as improvisers/ players proceed to fight with food, make sculptures, wall pictures, smear food, wear food, hide food, spill it, sprinkle it, throw it, and stamp on it. They dance and laugh and celebrate. At one point the younger woman gives to the older woman a party hat as a gift that contains an offering of selected food that she has embellished with a cocktail umbrella.

At the very end of the film, the quality of the party changes, the atmosphere appears bleached. The younger woman seats herself on the table amongst the spillage. Here she "becomes" the cake, her head is dressed by the older woman with a halo of icing and lit candles. She is decorated with "silly string". She stands up on the table arms outstretched – she smiles ambiguously. She sits back down on the table – calmly and closes her eyes. The older woman blows out the candles, clicks off a small child's cassette recorder and walks out. The younger woman follows. We are left observing the remains....



Figure 2: Sarah Coggrave and Bronwyn Platten, *Untitled (The Party)* 2011 photographic still from filmed performance. Photo: Huw Wahl © *The Artists*

The artists in *Untitled (The Party)* have turned the focus upon eating disorders from the picturing of images of thin bodies or gorging bingeing bodies to consider the less articulated pleasures (and disgust) that surround food. Eating disorders are usually framed by serious encounters, here there is a plethora of responses - laughter, mock fighting, surrender, celebration – all centred upon the metaphor and materiality of cream. Whipped and whipping the younger and older woman's relationship playfully shifts and slides. The slippery, oozing cream interlinks the two women in intimate and unpredictable ways: "We devised a way of meeting from individual perspectives to explore the relational link between us – with and through food. Our meeting point and interconnection occurs through food – specifically cream. The cream is put on each other's heads, and into our footwear and my pockets. It gets on our hands and on our feet. We are both joined through cream and additionally the cream moves out into the world beyond us". Poured into Wellington boots, pockets and on the floor, the cream is abject, and both joins and transforms the two performers.

Viewers of the performance have made note of the fact that the artists' "do everything with food *other* than to eat it". Given that the food is played out on the surface of the performers and "consumed" through entry into the orifices of clothing and footwear and applied to the skin rather than incorporated into corporeal interiors, the artist's whole body becomes engaged in the agency of communication of affect underlined by sensorial tactilities. The negotiation of abstinence, craving and fulfilment is unspoken yet implied through the orifices created by the artists from their own bodies, garments and accessories which they fill with cream and/or food. The metaphors for incorporation, longing, craving, withholding and fulfilment are thus revealed as collocations between liberation and fear; disgust and pleasure.

This performance stands out from other approaches that specularise the image of the emaciated figure or the sensationalist acts of consumption. Instead, viewers are provoked to consider the range of pleasures, delights and taboos surrounding food and mouths. It plays with the intimate engagements of oozing liquids and mashed foods that are thrown, iced, dribbled, poured and caught into metaphorical orifices of boots, shoes, pockets and party hats, bringing forth the challenge of reconciling the dialectic of pleasure and disgust that is central to anorexia and bulimia nervosa.

Acknowledgement

An expanded discussion of *Untitled (The Party)* can be found here:

[Platten, B., Warin, M., & Coggrave, S. \(2014\). Mouthing disgust and pleasure in eating disorders: the sensorial agency and gendered dimensions of consuming bodies. *The Senses and Society*, 9\(2\), 194-211](#)

Author biographies:

Bronwyn Platten is an artist-researcher whose work intersects the disciplines of arts and health with specific interests in co-creative and multisensory art, gender, phenomenology and embodiment.

Megan Warin is a social anthropologist whose research interests coalesce around the gendering of health and illness (including anorexia), sensuous scholarship, and public understanding of scientific paradigms of obesity.