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Introduction

'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us,' Marshall McLuhan once observed (Pennings, A. 2015). A series of electronic devices has evolved from mere communication tools to co-creators in the ritual of eating. This ritual is no longer limited to the physical act of tasting; mobile phones now frame and filter our interactions and separations from food. To date, my research has focused on how the mobile phone, as a collaborator in the eating ritual, affects our processes of tasting and experiencing food. The screen has changed eating from an embodied, private act to a performative, networked gesture. In my project, the juxtaposition of visual forms contrasts the illusory beauty of digitally filtered food imagery with the harsh reality of spoilt and cold food. This is a focused exploration of the issue at hand. Electronic devices have shaped our relationship with food, converting experiences into data and becoming an essential component of our consumption habits. Emilie Baltz's Lickestra project provided another avenue for investigation: using technology to influence and modulate the senses while also reimagining this modulation as a means of connection.

ENQUIRY1

When critiquing sensory alienation in the ritual of eating in the digital age, how might one forge meaningful connections with audiences and foster reflection through "inviting" and "experiential" design strategies?

Analysis

The core of the Lickestra project struck me as radical and straightforward, combining installation art, performance, and sensory design in its execution. The designers invited participants to lick an ice cream with sensors, which triggered different basslines and tones with each lick. The ingredient choice was particularly appropriate—ice cream naturally evokes the desire to lick. It

encourages people to "play with" food instead of just "consume" it. This prompted me to think about using humour to counter the often solemn atmosphere surrounding technology and screens. In stark contrast to Lickestra, the imagery and text I used in my project leaned towards "serious parody" or "detached revelation". My aim was not to entertain audiences with parodic data, but to elicit reflection on their own ritualistic behaviours. However, I believe Lickestra's approach resonates with audiences because of its inviting tone. This levity does not diminish the gravity of the situation; rather, it lowers the barrier to entry, allowing for greater participation. It serves as a "experiential" critique, or playful subversion. After all, nobody wants to be "told" to reflect. While seriousness is powerful, it can also create distance.

From a narrative perspective, Lickestra's performance resembles a linear, progressive sequence—Involving preparation, direction, execution, and conclusion—and is inherently non-reproducible. In contrast, my juxtaposed images capture "frozen" moments. I began contemplating how to make this narrative process more complete, as I couldn't allow the data conflicts between the pre- and post-filter food images to remain unresolved. Beyond the conventional approach of dividing it into multiple parts, is there a more potent narrative that could evoke a similar emotional arc in the audience – curiosity, experimentation, collaboration, surprise, and achievement? This leans towards a design that amplifies sensory experience.



Baltz, E. (2014) Lickestra.

In fact, we both see eating as a ritual. She criticises the individualisation of dining and the growing numbness of the senses, whereas I criticise its alienation from digital media tools. Yet, fundamentally, her work appears to fully embrace the coexistence of the sensory and physical, with technology serving as a tool to amplify this experience. However, I see electronic devices as an intrusive, intervening force that disrupts the relationship between person and food, distorting certain "fantasies" about sustenance. Here are some of the differences. Naturally, Baltz's work provides me with a fresh perspective: a call to rethink design as a participatory, sensual, and critically pleasurable

experience.

Moving forward with my work

In my context, electronic devices are: controlling, mediating, distancing, symbolic, and obscuring.

When placed within my research context, Lickestra serves as an ideal-type counterpoint, revealing technology's role in improving sensory experience. However, this precisely exemplifies the more universal contradiction at the heart of my research: electronic devices are primarily treated as sensory "intermediaries" or "substitutes" rather than amplifiers.

Both Lickestra's and my work are based on observations of behavioural patterns. Lickestra uses sound to amplify these systems, whether literal or metaphorical, and make them externally manifest. In contrast, I am more interested in how these same systems influence and shape our five senses. This gives me a new perspective: could I turn "digital interference" into a perceptible experience? Maybe turn "like counts" into a repetitive, jarring noise, or "screen editing time" into an unsettling texture? Baltz transformed ritual into a meticulously planned framework. This makes me wonder: could I go beyond simply criticising this alienated ritual and actively design a "counter-ritual" to resist or repair the phenomenon?

Our works both explore ritual and repetition. However, previous feedback indicated that the numerous sets of repetitive images I created were not entirely "essential". I now understand this point of view, because in works such as Baltz's, the repetition of the act of licking creates an experience that is both performative and cumulative. My goal, however, was to highlight a "argument". Once the viewer understands my logic, the subsequent sets simply reinforce the previous viewpoint rather than providing new experiences. I should incorporate multiple concepts I want to express rather than simply "stacking" examples. After all, excessive repetition reduces impact. Obviously, if I were to shift the subsequent development to a sociological study or archival-style work, multiple sets would be justified. The difficulty lies in creating new meaning (the argument). As a result, repetition loses its emphasis and becomes "surveying" and "categorising". This, too, offers an intriguing direction.

ENQUIRY2

In East Asia's digital-age dining rituals, as food's "use value" gives way to its "symbolic value," what

authentic sensory and social connections have we sacrificed? As graphic communication designers, how can we use visual practice to highlight this shift in value and cost?

Extension

Although my observations are primarily from bustling, technologically saturated environments such as cities, I am aware that the relationship between dietary habits and technology varies significantly across cultures and regions. Rural areas may have more traditional food cultures that actively resist technology. As a result, I have deliberately limited my scope to the urban context profoundly shaped by digital capitalism and internet culture, focussing my in-depth investigation on this specific phenomenon. Naturally, I find this phenomenon to be quite common in East Asian cultural contexts. As a result, the digital incursion into East Asian urban environments will serve as a base for my future experiments.

In *The Consumer Society*, philosopher Jean Baudrillard posits that an item's "use value" is increasingly supplanted by its "symbolic value" (Baudrillard 1998). This appears to underscore precisely my point: the taste and nutritional value of food recede into secondary importance, while garnering social media attention becomes the primary objective—a direct manifestation of this symbolisation. Yet some argue such theories are somewhat extreme, contending that symbolic value is not the sole motivator of consumption (Kyle 2020). As a result, I do not see digital interference solely as a negative factor, but rather as a specific cultural condition that allows new relationships, forms of control, and emotional expressions to emerge over time. I consider myself to be taking a more neutral stance on this issue, acknowledging both the sense of detachment and the pleasure gained from the ritual of consumption mediated by technology.

In East Asia's digital-age dining rituals, as food's "use value" gives way to its "symbolic value," we lose the "sense of togetherness" that is deeply embedded in Eastern Asian relationships. At traditional Chinese communal round tables, seating arrangement, cutlery placement, chopstick lifting and lowering, and food sharing all combine to form a complete social ritual. However, the intervention of digital devices systematically undermines all of this. Screens cut off nonverbal glances and pauses, and the "pot aroma" and "freshness" of food

appear to vanish as well. Some ramen shops in Japan have embraced the "loneliness economy" by introducing cubicle-style designs for solo diners. While providing privacy and allowing people to eat alone without shame, critics argue that it fails to address fundamental issues such as community well-being and interpersonal relationships (OECD 2025). While providing sanctuary, these spaces also encapsulate the individual, transforming "loneliness" from a one-time occurrence to an institutionalised, default experience. When the ritual of eating moves from communal tables to cubicles, we lose the opportunity to build and sustain community through food. This model reflects the logic of social media and electronic devices, which connect people online while increasing offline alienation. Both replace direct connection with symbolic, mediated gratification.

Billie Muraben gave me an intriguing example: TV dinners. These were pre-packaged, frozen, single-serving meals popular in the West during the 1950s and 1960s, intended for easy heating and consumption, usually while watching TV. Their invention appeared to transform family dining habits, moving meals from the dining table to the sofa. This case provided a historical foundation for my research. In comparison to Emilie Baltz's Lickestra, the introduction of TV dinners sets a stark precedent: it was designed not to improve the dining experience, but rather to prioritise "entertainment" and "efficiency"—conditionally sacrificing the social dimension of meals. This made me realise that one of the issues I want to address in my research is the critique of technology's logic, which detaches people from authentic experiences and forces them to submit to an external system. I believe I can no longer analyse it in isolation, but rather show how this experience perpetuates, opposes, or transforms.



Click Americana (2025)

Summary

Emilie Baltz's Lickestra represents a design style that combines critique and performance, intimacy and interface. It opens up new possibilities for my research. What I'm now talking about is our pursuit of social capital and symbolic value in the digital realm at the expense of the sensory attributes and immediate gustatory pleasures of food in real life. Finally, it prompts me to consider a more fundamental question: When our daily rituals are choreographed by interfaces and algorithms, what natural, primal connections are fading away? What symbolic elements are emerging? Design may involve less critique and reflection and more diagnosis, remediation, and revelation.

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