

GALERIE

NO FOOD FOR LAZY MAN

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An Exhibition by Emeka Ogbob

Curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung und Solvej Helweg Ovesen

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– some anecdotes on food, migration and hustlersophy –

Once upon a time, the gut was considered the central cognitive organ of the body – a fact that was common knowledge in both non-Western and Western cultures alike, but that was later shunned by ›modern‹ biology and medicine. In more recent years, researchers have proven that the concept of the singular brain found in the head is as true as any fiction, as there is at least one surplus ›brain‹ found in the gut/digestive tract, i.e. the Enteric Nervous System. This locus of command situated in the belly is said to actually control most of our mental and physical state of being ranging from our appetite, feelings, moods even as far as our memories. Thus the interplay between the gut-brain and the head-brain axis (and who knows whatever other brains are associated with other bodily organs), the information flow back and forth are therefore jointly responsible for human beings' thought-, learning-, and remembrance-processes.

If that is the case, it is no wonder that most of human social activities are based on or related to food and every other thing that accommodates the digestive tract. Even the spaces where food stuffs are harvested, prepared, and served, e.g. farms, kitchens and restaurants are considered to be special sites within societies. It is this importance of food as an agent of survival, but also as source or instigator of knowledge that has led to the positioning of food at the crux of philosophies and cultural expressions, especially but not limited to non-Western cultures. From the Stoics through Enlightenment philosophers till 20th and 21st century philosophy, reflections on and of food have stretched from the ethics, politics and epistemologies of food till the aesthetics and even metaphysics of food, at different levels of intensity. Despite the difficulties of disentangling food from a cobweb of cultural, economical and ecological entanglements, a philosophy of foods is bound to encompass the aforementioned and more. In »The Philosophy of Food«¹, David M. Kaplan discusses inter alia how implicit assumptions of food with regards to health, economy and environment become explicit in the examination of the notion of what food is and what properties make something food, as well as »the difference between natural and artificial food, the identity of food over time (from raw to cooked to spoiled), the differences between foods, or the difference between food and other edible things (such as water, minerals, or drugs).«

Alone from a metaphysical point of view, Kaplan touches on at least four points that are crucial to this exhibition **NO FOOD FOR LAZY MAN** by the Nigerian born and Berlin/ Lagos-based artist Emeka Ogbob, namely food as culture, social good, spiritual and aesthetic object. From a cultural point of view, food assumes a position far beyond its nutritive function, as it is also expressive and normative. The what, how and when of foodstuffs, i.e. their being, cultivation, preparation and consumption, as well as the legal, ritualistic and symbolic frameworks surrounding foods constitute the culture of food, e.g. the Schnitzel in Germany or the Weißwurst of Bavaria, Achu of the Nguemba people, Targine of Morocco or Sushi of Japan. It is by this that tribes, cities and nations and their peoples can be identified by

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1 Kaplan, David M. »The Philosophy of Food«. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

WEDDING

GALERIE

certain foods. From a social viewpoint, food is a binding force that brings people together and enables them to live within societies. According to Kaplan, and especially from a Western point of view, »governments play a role in the distribution of food according to some conception of justice (e.g., free market, religious tradition, the Principle of Utility, the Difference Principle, and so on). Food, on this model, is something people can use, allocate, and exchange in a way that is consistent with the meanings societies give to it. Food distribution concerns the basic institutions of society and the principles of justice that regulate how this social good is allocated.«² In societies where the government cannot assure for a social system, i.e. there is no guarantee that the government will play a role in the fair distribution of food, the policy of »no food for lazy man«, i.e. »all man for himself, God for we all« is particularly effective.

This takes us to the issue of spirituality and food. In most religions, food has a metaphysical, non-material dimension, as they prescribe what is to be eaten and what avoided, and sometimes even how and when the foods should be prepared and consumed. For example some religions ban the eating of pork, while others see cows as holy animals, and some other religions incorporate, at least metaphorically, the eating of flesh and drinking of blood in their sermons, in an act of communion, community-building or communality. The social and religious aspects of food are also lived beyond the sermon, e.g. during tea-parties, or during the act of fasting or breaking the fast together. The experiential, phenomenological encounter with food renders food an aesthetic object. This holds true not only from sensory points of taste, but also from a presentational dimension. The performance of eating pounded yams and egusi soup with the fingers is an aesthetic experience.

While Kaplan touches on many other concepts of food, it is worthwhile putting a small spotlight just on 2 more concepts, namely food epistemology and food politics. The former deals with the knowledge, justification, experimentality and consumption of food. Based on our knowledge and belief systems we consider foodstuffs good or bad, appealing or unappealing in taste, odour, consistence or sight. »In addition to typical epistemological questions concerning the reasons and conditions that warrant beliefs, food epistemology is also about risk and trust, practical reason, and the effects of physiology and psychology on perception.«³ As for the latter, food is political. The choice of what, where, when and how to eat has consequences. Based on the principles of demand and supply, the consequences affect the food chain as in production, distribution and consumption. This in due course affects the political and economic realities at a national and international levels in relation to food security, global trade and otherwise.

It is also for the aforementioned reasons that food has found its place so deep-rooted in many African cultures and philosophies. For example, as Chinua Achebe famously stated in *Things Fall Apart*, »proverbs are the palm oils with which words are eaten.«⁴ This Igbo saying depicts the importance of using proverbs dexterously in that social context, but also far beyond. Palm oil is the core element of most of the Igbo dishes, thus the metaphor. The usage of proverbs reveals maturity, depth and intelligence of the user, thus proverbs are themselves a container of philosophies. There are uncountable lores, proverbs, idioms and sayings on, of, about food that capture the politics, economy, social aspects and philosophies of everyday life.

It is from these »palm oils with which words are eaten« that this exhibition project takes its cue. In most West African countries, especially in the Pidgin speaking countries, one can find stickers in taxis, on trucks, in restaurants and offices carrying the saying »No Food For

2 Ibid 1

3 Ibid 1

4 Achebe, Chinua. »Things Fall Apart«. London 1958.

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Lazy Man«. This saying is epitomatic of societies in which one must stand on his/her feet and hustle in order to make life going.

This slogan could thus stand as a key philosophy for every hustler, i.e. for every Sauveteur, as the late musician Lapiro de Mbanga a.k.a Ndinga-man would have termed it. To understand why the saying ›No Food For Lazy Man« or their cousin-sayings like ›le credit est mort hier soir⁵, better soup na money cook am⁶, ›good soup na money kill am« or ›goat di chop na place weh dem tie am« are so important in hustlersophy, it is worth understanding who the hustler or the Sauveteur is in this context. Maybe one the most concrete revelations on the essence and being of the Sauveteur would be from the musical piece »mimba we« by the radically critical man of the people Lapiro de Mbanga:

»Sauvetage na boulot weh e no get composition de personelle
Sauvetage na boulot weh e no get retraite anticipé
for we own boulot for sauvetage dem no di ask man diplome ana 5 ans d'experience
for sauvetage il n'a pas de concours«
(...)
»we di beg da so... we taximan, we sauveteur dem, we people for chuck head. Remeh no deh,
repeh no deh... lef we we helep we own sikin... oh mimba we oh«

In a nutshell, this musical piece which opens with the line »You wan dammeh you mimba we, you wan souleh you mimba we,« i.e. think of us (hustlers/sauveteurs), when you are eating and drinking⁷, Lapiro de Mbanga defines the job of a hustler/sauveteur as one that doesn't have a premature retirement benefit, neither does it require 5 years of experience nor an examination or test to become hustler. The piece embodies the precarity of this group within societies, whose philosophy of ›No Food For Lazy Man« is at the crux of this exhibition project.

Another very important part of this exhibition project is the relationship between food and migration, and eventually hustling. It goes without saying that there is a sophisticated and multidimensional relationship between food and migration, which goes beyond the migration causality principles, i.e. which goes beyond lack of food or food related practices as causes of migration. It is actually quite interesting to see how food and drinks play an important role in maintaining cultural and social ties within certain migrant groups. For example a visit to the restaurant ›Nigeria Haus« in the Oranienstr., Berlin is not only to quench thirst and hunger, but also to maintain kin and strengthen ties to fellow African migrants that come to hang out in the restaurant. The atmosphere in such spaces is spiced by home stories and jokes, newspapers with current news from back home flying around, a ca 24h TV broadcast of news and Nollywood films, and most of all the blasting of music hits that awaken and keep home memories alive. That is in effect the fate of every diaspora, as these almost ritual moments of ›breaking bread and drinking wine« together construct and solidify religious, cultural or other group identities. In this light, sometimes food too serves as a ›bridge« between the ›host« group and the migrant communities, as through food and the knowledge gotten through the gut brain, channels of understanding and mutual respect could be built.⁸ Although the integration of curry into the menus in England or better said

5 Which means that »credit died last night« therefore whoever is asking to eat or buy on credit is not welcome

6 Which means the quality of a good is closely tied to the price of that good. The higher the price the better the quality

7 Here ›eating and drinking« also stands for governmental profits of all kinds

8 The french anthropologist Levi-Strauss was one of the first Europeans to explore the role of food and the senses in regards to bridging binary systems or cultural differences. Speaking about the anthropology of the senses, he writes in The Raw and the Cooked, »They [the senses] are operators, which make it possible to convey the isomorphic character of all binary systems of contrasts

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the fact that curry has become the British national dish doesn't necessarily make the British more tolerant or open towards Indian or Pakistani migrants in the UK.

However this art project does explore the potent communality of shared flavours such as in beer drinking. For the exhibition Ogboh launches a new locally brewed beer based on a taste survey of African migrants living in Berlin. **Original Suffer Head Beer.** What is interesting is that the beer project also comments on certain African ›gustemologies‹, a term coined by American anthropologist David Sutton, meaning ways of connecting food, memory, world view (cosmology), emotions and the senses.⁹

Another point of interest within this project is how migration trajectories influence foods, menus and relations to foodstuffs. This can be perceived at least in 3 levels, namely the interconnection and exchange between various migrant groups within a new and foreign context, appropriations of foodstuffs between the 'host' and migrant populations and the construction of hybrid foods due to an unavailability of desired ingredients that lead to the rising of new cultural, economic, political and social configurations. These continuities and exchanges within migrant foodways might explain the survival of typical Yoruba foods and food philosophies carried during the middle passage to the new world, and still found in Afro-Brazilian menus today, as much as how cola came into Coca-Cola. Migrant foodways thus construct, leave behind and reveal identity traits and markers – even though sometimes syncretic in nature.

In one of our many conversations in preparation of this exhibition **NO FOOD FOR LAZY MAN** Emeka Ogboh said »many Africans have a kind of mango story«. With this he alluded to another very important aspect of food as seen from a nutrition, historical, phenomenological and sensual point of view. Indeed an African in an Indian restaurant sipping on a glass of mango lassi might easily find him-/herself catapulted into a specific moment in his/her past some 20-30 years ago. And it might likely be in the rainy season, when he/she and friends found their way up a mango tree and suckled on the nip of a succulent mango. This journey into the past is facilitated by the taste, the smell and sight of that mango lassi.

It is within these frameworks that Emeka Ogboh's solo exhibition will explore migration from Africa to Europe with food metaphors. Using popular signs, symbols, quotes, anecdotes and other associations found in Restaurants across Africa and Europe he will get granular on food flows within migrant contexts, food philosophies and cultures within migrant populations and especially with regards to how these migrants most of the time have to hustle to make ends meet.

connected with the senses, and therefore to express, as a totality, a set of equivalences connecting life and death, vegetable foods and cannibalism, putrefaction and imputrescibility, softness and hardness, silence and noise« (Levi-Strauss, 1983 [1964], p. 153).

⁹ David E. Sutton, »Food and the Senses«, Annual Review of Anthropology, Indiana University, 2010, PDF downloaded from www.annualreviews.org p. 215

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