( ) * *this smells familiar

Sachi Nagase
this smells familiar

Sachi Nagase
B.F.A. Thesis
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis
Abstract

Fragments from quotidian sensory experience conjure memories from personal history. Vague manifestations of feelings become interpretations of memories, which are investigated through immersive installation, sculpture, and video. Imagined scenarios are constructed to expose moments of cultural disconnect and reveal states of inbetweenness, which settle within territories amongst imagination and reality, adult and childhood, and loss and comfort. Within the works, sensory experiences including smell, sound and taste develop to relay meaning and affect. Haptic, olfactory, and auditory stimulation allow active participation, while subjectivity inherent in taste and smell generate space for new meaning. Color is used to immerse, to delineate boundaries, and to emphasize a longing for childhood imagination. The works create spaces for memory, and allow for departure beyond their original territory.
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I. Notes from the kitchen

Sometimes¹ I search for recipes online in Japanese. I’ll change the language on my computer and scroll, reading fragments of words with no meaning, and pretending to understand the rest. This halfhearted scrolling is futile—a gesture that marks a desire to connect with part of my cultural identity and to hold onto the language I once spoke fluently.

I use the kitchen as a vessel to propel curiosities and provide quotidian structure. Cooking is a process for me that offers tangible comfort² but also drives investigations through making. This is where my art practice and cooking align; both are engrained in personal history and allow me to translate my experience into physical forms. My work flows beyond the kitchen to distinguish aspects of my own cultural hybridity. Residing in the urge to explore facets of cultural identity is a desire to understand feelings of otherness associated with cultural difference. The shifting status of the work in medium and in form is derived from difficulties implicit in an understanding of cultural identity³. Past rejections of my Japanese-ness⁴ propel my current desire to unravel these complexities.

I use sculpture and installation to reimagine space and return to moments⁵ of personal history. I create imagined scenarios that often incorporate sensory

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¹ I mean recently, in the past year.
² And fulfillment—my work in the kitchen includes my current work in a restaurant kitchen as well as my personal cooking endeavors.
³ I consider cultural identity as noted by Amelia Jones in Seeing Differently—“identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (233).
⁴ I was ashamed of the bento boxes my dad packed for me. I fought him during my daily lessons of Japanese, and eventually his efforts were lost on me.
⁵ These moments traverse past feelings of cultural disconnect and investigations of identity.
experience and allude to childhood. What results within the spaces I create is an
arrival somewhere between comfort and discomfort, fabrication and reality,
confusion and understanding. The work dwells in a liminal space, suggested by a
distorted reality.

Sensory components including the edible, audible, or smell\textsuperscript{6} promote a
sense of temporality within my work. These elements, devoid from time and
removed from their original memory, signify a state of in-betweenness. Thus,
(*this smells familiar\textsuperscript{7}*) presents investigations of personal history through sensory and visual experience.
The re-imagination of these past moments allows for expansion from their original
terrain.

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\textsuperscript{6} Not in a malodorous sense, but rather, stimulating the olfactory sense.
\textsuperscript{7} The title of this thesis refers to the physical space of sensory aspects including smell, sound, and
taste. The parentheses confine the visual space on the page while the absence of written language
references the inadequacy of language to fully relay sensory experience.
II. PB&J and Bento: Cultural Hybridity in the Kitchen

“The imagining, describing, and eating food becomes a means of potentially subverting the hierarches in these realms (global and domestic spaces) and of constructing nonnormative familial intimacies.”

-Deniz Cruz, Love is Not a Bowl of Quinces (Ku 355)

The food of my childhood was influenced by distinct Japanese and Western/Western European influences because of my parents’ cultural backgrounds. I navigated facets of identity through a naïve understanding of food. The space of the kitchen was an initial site for exploration of my hybrid cultural identity. The elements of cultural hybridity present in my work allude to a state of in-betweenness. “In-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (Bhabha 2). I highlight cultural mixing and states of inbetweeness in One Year of Packed Lunch, I taught Papa How to Make Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches part II (fig. 1), as I revisit a childhood memory of packed lunch through a conflation of the Japanese bento box and the iconic American pb&j.

The bento box fits 180 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—the number of sandwiches I would have eaten in a typical school year. The confrontational smell

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8 These nonnormative familial intimacies in my life took the form of my stay-at-home father growing up.
9 My reliance on Japanese and American/European backgrounds have complicated my efforts to “fit in” at different points in my life—these attempts to “fit in” are moments which inform my work.
10 Hybridity in the terms of the process of cultural mixing, and according to Bhabha, “translating and transvaluating cultural difference” (qtd. Kalra 252).
11 I brought a bento lunch on the first day of kindergarten, immediately regretting my decision when my classmates pointed with disgusted looks on their faces. I asked my father to pack me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the remainder of my adolescent school career.
of processed bread references the deeply uncomfortable memory in which this piece comes from. Anthropologist Christine R. Yano writes, “Food is a powerful, semiotic device that draws people together and also keeps some apart, etching in lines of inclusion and exclusion” (qtd. Su 31). I use food as a cultural signifier to reflect on my experiences regarding feelings of Otherness. Apart from food, sound exists as an immersive element to reference language and disjointed learning. The sound piece includes my father’s voice, reciting in Japanese how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. A small laugh at then end of my father’s sentences subtly suggests the absurdity of speaking this recipe in Japanese. My voice interrupts his after one delivery of instructions, and I repeat exactly what he says in more broken Japanese. Our voices intertwine in a crescendo of noise to a level where distinguishing individual voices becomes impossible. The sound piece finishes with my voice alone, while my father’s last chuckle fades away. His laugh points to the naiveté of childhood, and the innocence of confronting identity at a young age.

*fig 1: One Year of Packed Lunch: I taught Papa How to Make Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches part II, (2015)*
III. Craving Immersive Experience: Taste and Affect in Art

“When emotions are described by flavors, though, are these simply metaphorical conventions? Or does the emotional condition of bitterness, for instance, release the same gastric response as the ingestion of bitter flavors?”


The augmentation of affect theory and affect studies as related to art critique is relatively new. The impact, however, of art works that rely on affective strategies have changed how art is perceived within the contemporary context. The recent exhibition Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art at the Whitney Museum of American Art (fig. 2) bared a public desire for art in the gallery to extend beyond a painting on a wall. The exhibition, noted by the museum as the “most technologically complex project at the Whitney to date” boasted incorporation of “color, touch, music, spectacle, light and darkness to confound expectations flattening space through animation and abstraction, or heightening the illusion of three dimensions” (Whitney). The immersive, sensory spaces within the exhibition created affect that led to the popularity of this exhibition.

Affect is bodily, and in constant flux. It cannot be conceived of by language and is completely held within the sensory. Affect theorist Brian Massumi defines affect as a “visceral, raw, prefeeling... is the manifestation of the body’s internalization of an intensity” (Massumi 28). Affect is characterized as separate

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12 I was lucky enough to view Dreamlands and completely fell for the immersive qualities of the exhibition.
13 The exhibition was directly referencing cinematic tradition but heavily relied on sculpture and installation-based works.
from feeling and emotion because of its unconscious and non-linguistic nature. Installation and video works often carry affective potential because of the immersive natures of the media. We are drawn to immersive environments like those in the *Dreamlands* exhibition because of indescribable sensations, akin to awe, potentially derived from these spaces.

![fig. 2: Hito Steyerl, Factory of the Sun (2015) in Dreamlands](image)

Sensory components in art through smell, sound, or taste extend an affective experience. Anika Yi (fig. 3) is noted for making a “new kind of conceptual art” (Gregory). Her work often involves food products, smells, as well as chemical and scientific processes. She has used food and natural materials such as tempura-dried flowers, live snails, and monosodium glutamate. Yi wishes to cultivate a “full-body experience” in which participants leave her work “perplexed or awe-struck” (Gregory). The affective qualities of Yi’s work narrate the stories she tells within them, and guide a visceral experience.
Affect theorist Jill Bennett defines affect in terms of the “rationality holding together sensory perception, thus the process of experiencing art” (qtd. Henry). The confrontational elements of the sensory within art works strengthen their affective potential and invites participation. Auditory, olfactory, and haptic senses extend beyond visual elements of the work that manifest in a physical, sensorial understanding.

Sound and taste are muddled within a candy machine in Try Me (Gashapon) (fig. 4). The machine holds sweet, savory, bitter, and sour handmade candies as related to flavors of Japanese cuisine from my childhood. I create hypersensitivity in the mouth while using sound to dull tastes unfamiliar to Western tongues. The sound coming from the candy machine through

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14 Active participation rather than passive viewing.
headphones is the sound of candy being tumbled inside my mouth. What at first sounds bodily and grotesque becomes a rhythmic clacking of candy against tongue and teeth. A bodily self-awareness initiates contemplation of flavor.

Try Me aligns sensory perception with aspects of cultural experience. Theorist Ben Highmore’s investigations identify that cultural experience is a “densely woven entanglement [of] perception and management of attention, the senses, the sensorial, and the human sensorium” (Gregg 132). Taste creates an allure because of the universal nature of sensory experience. Inherent in taste, however, is a subjective experience. Each interaction invites a different subjective participation.
IV. Can I Try a Bite of That?: Intersections of Interaction and “Body Art”

“In the affect of art there is a coupling, joining, rhizomatic ‘becoming’ between the artmachine (object) and the subjectmachine (viewer).”

-Jeremy Lemahieu, *On Affect Theory and Art Criticism*

In effort to facilitate aspects of this “rhizomatic becoming” as described by Lemahieu, I cross the line from spectatorship to participation, in which the body of the participator is necessary to activate the work.

Upon first encounter, *No MSG Added* (fig. 5) accosts viewers with the pungent smell of shaved fish. The pillows on the ground and headphones on the table indicate that four individuals are invited to engage in an experience of both aural and olfactory senses. Participators sit on bonito-scented pillows and watch the dancing fish flakes atop the low, Japanese-style table as they become inured to the strong smell. Through meditative and repetitive sounds, five ambiguous “courses” of sound (water, scraping, crackling, fire, and silence) reference the production processes for this crucial ingredient to Japanese cuisine. Within an introspective “meal,” a collective consumption of sound and smell alludes to a complex process that extends beyond nourishment or pleasure. The aesthetics of the work remain simple and clean. Stained wood and neutral tones, give priority to the sensory aspects of the work to stimulate an interactive experience.
“Resonant and evocative, food’s link to bodily appetites and sensory experiences invite considerations of the immediate needs and desires driving human behavior” (Ku 134). Food’s direct relationship to the body, as well as my activities in the kitchen that exist as extensions of my practice, propel an interest in performance.

Amelia Jones writes about “body art” in relationship to the formation of identity and an understanding of the self. I investigate performance by using the action of the body as a means to cultivate an exchange; to ‘replot the relation between perceiver and object, between self and other’ (Jones 14). Incorporation of my physical body within performance work explores feelings of Otherness as related to cultural identity. One Year of Packed Lunch I taught Papa How to Make Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches part I (fig. 6) explores the same childhood memory of packed lunch through performance. The sound piece is lengthened to
20 minutes to allow me to make 180 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in front of an audience.

Performance isolates time in a way that distills the initial memory to a bodily interaction within boundaries. Guattari writes of performative works as having “the advantage of drawing out the full implications of this extraction of intensive, a-temporal, a-spatial, a-signifying dimensions from the semiotic net of quotidianity,” while also rendering them constructed and artificial (90). The performance of One Year of Packed Lunch rejects aspects of the memory, through isolation within a liminal temporality, and to some effect relays a cyclical nightmare of never-ending sandwich making. Within the performance, a “different metabolism of past-future where eternity will coexist with the present moment” occurs (Guattari 90).

fig. 6 Sachi Nagase, One Year of Packed Lunch: I taught Papa how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches part I (2016)
V. Chop, Slice, Record: Narrative and Communication Loss in Video

“In order to feel not so alone in the world, we blur the lines of our subjective memories, and we say to one another, ‘I know exactly what you mean’.”

-Monique Truong, Bitter in the Mouth (15)

Narrative qualities within my work are inherent because of the memories from which the work is derived. How do you assemble truth from memory? To what extent are the narratives from our memories fabricated constructions within our minds? The medium of video enriches these blurs between fabrication and reality, and temporal fluidity and stasis within the structure of narrative memory.

In Golden Heritage Living (2015) (fig. 7) Chinese American artist Zhiwan Cheung explores his relationship to his grandmother by creating a two-channel video. On the right, his grandmother describes her life while moving about her home. On the left side, the artist is pictured wearing his grandmother’s clothes and attempting to follow her language. His attempts collapse into a lip-sync chase, relaying cultural loss through generations.

Maggie Lee contends with aspects of her Asian American identity in her film Mommy (fig. 8). She collages found and filmed footage to relay an autobiographical story surrounding her mother’s death. Both Lee and Cheung contend with their personal histories in an investigation of their national and/or cultural identities. The medium of video allows for a complete narrative fabrication that resembles reality, whether or not their prospective stories contain truth.
I use video in *Miso Soup* to depict cultural loss and reference a memory which never existed. I attempt to record myself making miso soup, but represent this cultural loss by using the camera to impair my cooking. Because I’m filming with one hand and cooking with the other, my movements are jerky, relating to the unevenness of memory when trying to recall aspects of my Japanese heritage.

For twenty years, Chun Lun was not allowed to leave Guangzhou.

*fig. 7* Zhiwan Cheung, *Golden Heritage Living* (2015)

*fig. 8* Maggie Lee, *Mommy* (2015)
Video can activate a wild imagination because it seems to create a new reality. Artist Mak Ying Tung (fig. 10) uses found objects and food in odd juxtapositions to elicit humor and curiosity, while also playing to a darker side of human sensitivity. In *Disarming* (2013) she films her herself picking the spines off of a cactus with tweezers. Each time a thorn is plucked, white puss escapes from the hole in which the spine once sat. The harsh action of plucking creates a scenario difficult to watch. Video allows us to associate the human body with the body of a cactus, and the disfigurement of the cactus creates a feeling similar to that of popping a pimple—gross, difficult to watch, yet satisfying.

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15 This also speaks to why the medium of video has the potential to create affect.
Searching for something between Orange and Tangerine (fig. 12) combines literature and video that depicts my hands sewing through a clementine\(^\text{16}\). The self-mutilating gesture elicits sensorial qualities as the fruit is stabbed with a needle and eventually torn apart. My voice within the audio narration is warped to sound childlike and almost animatronic. I read a passage about memory and taste from *Bitter in the Mouth*, a coming-of-age story about an adopted Vietnamese protagonist with synesthesia who associates words with flavor. The text references the individual nature of taste, and our desire to relate to one another despite this subjectivity. The close-up footage deforms the fruit and my hands and creates a marriage between the distortions of video and sound. The skewing acknowledges the idea present in the text—of searching for a lost connection.

Video reveals and simultaneously alters. Its affective potential lies in our ability to read reality into the medium. In video, an alternate reality is created

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\(^{16}\) My use of the clementine is in reference to its hybridity (a clementine is a mixture between a mandarin orange and a sweet orange).
where time and narrative are malleable. The possibility of transforming our perceptions is ripe.

*fig. 11* Sachi Nagase, *Searching Between Tangerine and Orange* (2017)
VI. This smells familiar (play with me?): Color as Play and Boundary

“I try to make the installations more and more minimal and architectural. You enter into the installation and then start watching the film, and hopefully at some point, you become aware of the space that you’re watching the film in and your own body in it.”

-Mika Rottenberg

Artists Mika Rottenberg (fig. 12) and Baxter Koziol situate their installation and video work within physically crafted spaces that contextualize their work, and frame its content. Boundaries are created that mark the physical and conceptual existence of the work.

In TENT (fig. 13), Koziol creates an enclosed space out of fabric and wood obsessively stitched together in large squares of pale yellow and brown. Within the “tent” is a collection of fruits and toys, a television, and Koziol himself. Everything within the tent is clad in its own stitched fabric flesh. Appearing like a hideout or cocoon, the piece references childhood and memory as Koziol endures a durational performance as a “prop” within the space itself.

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17 He claims that these materials were, “the palest fabrics I had.”
fig. 12 Mika Rottenberg, *Cheese* (2008)
*installation view, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art*

fig. 13 Baxter Koziol, *TENT(exterio)*r (2016)
I use color to construct boundaries and define limits of space. Color references childhood play rather than a specific memory of place. Seafoam green\textsuperscript{18} submerges \textit{Breakfast for Two} (fig. 14) and marks where the imagined scenario begins and ends. There is a sense that the memory is finite, the imagined scene can only exist within the confines of green.

\textit{Breakfast for Two} invites participators to step into an imagined breakfast where video is sustenance and communication is impossible. The claymation presented on both screens separates the participators and depicts a surreal scene of a “breakfast for two” without human presence. The plates slide on the floor to the table on their own, and the eggs roll to the stove and crack in the pan by themselves. The proximity of the screen to the edge of the table within the installation blocks the view of the person sitting across the table, and the sound of idiosyncratic kitchen noises make a conversation impossible. Presented on recipe cards within the installation and in a frame in the video is a photograph of my sister and me as children. The photo-representational reference past juxtaposed with the absence of human presence contribute to feelings of memory and loss.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{18} This color reminds me of my neighbor’s kitchen in my childhood neighborhood but, I will reveal, does not have any personal connection to my childhood home.
\end{footnotesize}
In *This smells familiar (play with me?)*\(^9\) (fig. 15) yellow\(^{20}\) defines where a memory begins and ends. A yellow bunk bed exists as an enclosure, a haven, an intimate dark playroom for two. Within the bunk bed are two projections. One shows two people\(^{21}\) playing and performing child-like interactions\(^{22}\) while in the second projection, two clay characters have a fragmented conversation referencing memory, attraction, and comfort. The interactive piece invites two participants to sit within the bunk bed “theater,” as ambiguous lines are drawn between concepts of loneliness and security. What began as a flicker of the feeling of sharing a bunk bed with my sister twists into a narrative about companionship, referencing those relationships we create when we “grow up.”

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\(^9\) This title references an imaginary conversation, the absence of smell but the presence of a familiar feeling--a longing?

\(^{20}\) Yellow is the color of sunshine. My mother almost named me Summer. Yellow represents sickness or jealousy. Yellow is a derogatory term used to describe someone of Asian descent.

\(^{21}\) My age (~21)

\(^{22}\) From braiding hair to hand-clapping games
fig. 15 Sachi Nagase, *This smells familiar (play with me?)* (2017)

fig. 16 Sachi Nagase, *This smells familiar (play with me?)* (2017)
*interior view*
VII. This smells familiar (a departure)

“It starts from that feeling that doesn’t quite manifest. Then it becomes a search for what manifests this thing that can never quite be manifested. I want to create this structure to fence these abstract sensations in, to give them shape and materiality.”

-Mika Rottenberg

I use moments of personal memory as points of departure. In _Sun-kissed_ (Aroma Beach) I consider the decaying properties of UV rays in living objects such as sun-bleached bamboo stalks and a sprouted potato. I create a bizarre beach scene using these elements and subtle-smelling spray cheese and powdered gelatin. I cover my arms and legs with spray cheese “sunscreen” and push my toes in and out of mounds of powdered gelatin “sand” with a projected video. A sense of touch arises from the work, spawned from initial material inspiration, which extends beyond reality to graze the surreal.

*fig. 17* Sachi Nagase, _Sun-kissed (Aroma Beach)_ (2017)
Sensory perception drives the work while material investigations and childish desires spark imagination from traces of memory. **Maggie Nelson** ruminates on memory in *Bluets*:

“For the fact is that neuroscientists who study memory remain unclear on the question of whether each time we remember something we are accessing a stable “memory fragment”—often called a “trace” or an “engram”—or whether each time we remember something we are literally creating a new “trace” to house the thought. And since no one has yet been able to discern the *material* of these traces, nor to locate them in the brain, how one thinks of them remains mostly a matter of metaphor: they could be “scribbles,” “holograms” or “imprints”; they could live in “spiral”, “rooms”, or “storage units.” (81)

There is freedom within metaphor. These traces are drawings. They are projections. They are containers. The rest is left up to imagination.
Bibliography


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