

Off to the Circus!

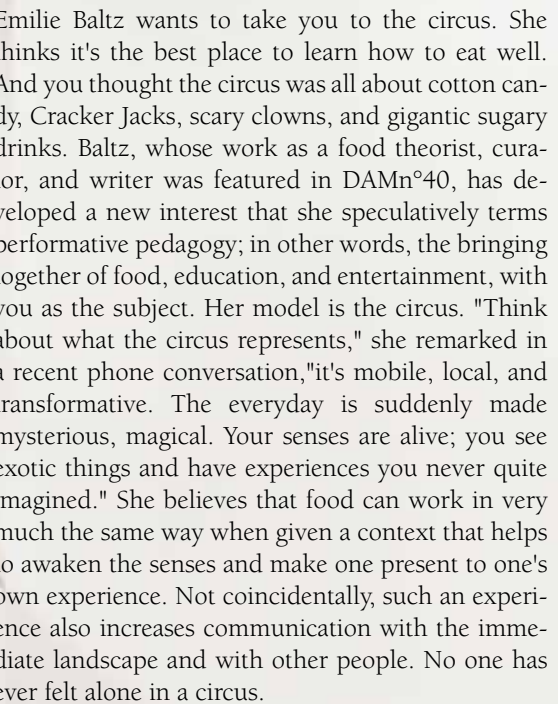
Food as performance by Emilie Baltz

Wanting ordinary everyday things to be made mysterious, magical even, Emilie Baltz is keen for people's senses to come alive. And she wishes to achieve this by exposing you to exotic things that bring experiences you never imagined. By giving food a context that helps to awaken the senses – much like in a circus – she aims to defy the notion that what you see and taste is not the same as what you get. By staging public projects, Baltz offers us a sense of play and the associated opportunity to gain knowledge, pleasure, community, and nourishment in the process.

LYLE REXER



Emilie Baltz wants to take you to the circus. She thinks it's the best place to learn how to eat well. And you thought the circus was all about cotton candy, Cracker Jacks, scary clowns, and gigantic sugary drinks. Baltz, whose work as a food theorist, curator, and writer was featured in DAMN°40, has developed a new interest that she speculatively terms performative pedagogy; in other words, the bringing together of food, education, and entertainment, with you as the subject. Her model is the circus. "Think about what the circus represents," she remarked in a recent phone conversation, "it's mobile, local, and transformative. The everyday is suddenly made mysterious, magical. Your senses are alive; you see exotic things and have experiences you never quite imagined." She believes that food can work in very much the same way when given a context that helps to awaken the senses and make one present to one's own experience. Not coincidentally, such an experience also increases communication with the immediate landscape and with other people. No one has ever felt alone in a circus.



Baltz has always been interested in the dense cultural and psychological context in which the biological fact of eating is nested. Decades ago, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss made it clear that for human beings there is no such thing as a natural food. Everything we eat and the act of eating itself are caught in a web of meaning making, of ritual and myth that help us understand who and what we are. But recently Baltz has become frustrated with 'haute gastronomy', as she calls it. She is disturbed that the rise of food elitism, of food as a class aspiration and a luxury commodity, has actually separated people not only from each other but also from food itself. It cannot be appreciated for the true richness of its associations. "We aren't developing our own palates and defining our own tastes", she says. Citing as an example a recent symposium she attended in which internationally distinguished chefs provided state-of-the-art cuisine but without any reference to local sourcing or age-old traditions of food preparation – a missed opportunity to connect palates to places and people that for Baltz is what a good meal should



do. A meal shouldn't exist in a vacuum. In her view, this is part of the larger problem of food consumption's gradual divorce from its production and from its own rituals. The improved technology of food packaging and preservation, the rise of the suburbs, the compartmentalisation of daily life, and, more recently, the disembodiment promoted by virtual experience, have all conspired to transform the word eat from a verb to a noun, and create food deserts in the midst of fertility.

LICKETY SPLIT

So, the answer is to take up juggling, lion-taming or trapeze artistry? No, Baltz has in mind a different kind of circus. Her first act was to stage Lickestra in a former bodega in Manhattan. For this she constructed four white plinths with ice cream holders, and invited participants to squeeze inside each one up to their shoulders. With the help of smart-object

designer Carla Diana and musician Arone Dyer of Buke and Gase, the ice cream was connected via an electric circuit to tone-producing technology. The act of licking completed the circuit and produced a different sound for each cone. Participants quickly learned how to improvise by changing the rhythm and intensity of their licking. The performance was over when the ice cream was finished. As Baltz put it, "From improvisation to orchestration, the eater became the performer, as the primitive act of licking reached beyond flavour perception to become an instrument for play."

Baltz had already entered the synesthetic realm when she collaborated with Dutch artist Bart Hess to design a cocktail for Play Bar at the Museum of Sex in Manhattan the previous year. Patrons consumed the 'drink' by licking it off of a black, ribbed plate. The alcohol may have gone to their heads but not before it passed through several other sensory chan-





nels. "When we are young", added Baltz, "we pass so many things through our mouths, and taste is associated with so many sensations. In fact, all the senses influence perception." Then, last April, at Manhattan's Hotel Particulier, Baltz organised a sit-down dinner in which the food was served directly on the table (and into the guests' hands), and they ate it without the benefit of utensils. The result was not only a significant upgrade to the idea of finger-food but a visual record was also left on the tablecloth itself, which looked much like an action painting from the time of Jackson Pollock.

Baltz's aim is not a diversionary sleight-of-hand, like a rabbit pulled from a hat, but rather an awakening to the notion that what you see – and taste – is not exactly what you get. You actually get a lot more in terms of knowledge, pleasure, community, and nourishment if you are willing to give-into a sense of play. "The body is our own technology, which each one of us can learn to develop", she added. "We can practise it every day." And we don't need a net or a whip and a chair. <

