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Banquet Performance Now and Then: Commensal Experiments and Eating as *Mise en Scène*[1]

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Abstract

Allan Kaprow, in his first attempts to conceptualise Performance in the late 1950s, insisted upon characterising his happenings as "social occasions" rather than theatrical or artistic events. This was a time when art would embrace life, after many centuries of mutual separation. Indeed, this was a long cultural process, which finally led to the creation of independent art forms, as we perceive them today, like painting, theatre, music, and gastronomy, as opposed to the fused forms where all the arts would blend together on the occasion of social or religious events. By going back to the social sphere and back to the public space, art would serve again as a social instrument by including and, more importantly, by incorporating all those who, until then, had been excluded from it. Spectators would, from now on, become participants and, due to the accessibility of the event, this aesthetic experience would cease to be addressed only to experts of an exclusive taste. Within this frame, Kaprow dissociated "artlike art" from what he defined as "lifelike art" (Kaprow, 1983, 100). This kind of art embraces life, ceremony and ritual, and provides a communal experience where boundaries between artists and visitors/spectators/participants are broken.

This article examines several theatrical and performative elements of the historical banquet, from Greek antiquity up to the 19th century, and how they have been rediscovered, reused and sometimes even distorted in contemporary European banquet performances. Beginning with the work of Daniel Spoerri, in the early 1960s, I will question how sympotic practices have been incorporated in performance art from these earlier experiments. Spoerri used eating as a participatory performative element and food as a perishable form of art during his long artistic career. I will then look at more recent banquet-performances, focusing on the work of Emmanuel Giraud, who revisits historical banquets in his performance experiments,

1 This article was written during a Visiting Fellowship at the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University.

where he explores the potentials of table sociability. Likewise, the group Les Platonnes turns to the Greek *symposion* and attempts a feminist re-reading of Plato's *Banquet* in a performance titled *La Banquette* (2015).

The above-mentioned artists experiment with 'commensality', the idea of eating at the same table or *mensa* (Fischler 529), as an 'ingredient' of their performances, thus emphasising the spectators' active participation in their events. The act of inviting spectators to the table, of sharing food and drink with them, provides a different kind of communal experience: participants become table guests and thus shape the overall performance. Eating becomes an artistic act and food an organic, ephemeral work of art. An element of performance art *par excellence*, spectators' participation as both viewers and artistic agents, is also a component of the banquet from the Greek *symposion* to Grimod de La Reynière's staged feasts in the late 18th and early 19th century. A historical overview of the Banquet will thus provide examples of how theatrical and performative elements have characterised this social event in past centuries.

In particular, I will focus on the theatrical nature of the banquet, by exploring its *mise en scène*. I deliberately use the French term as opposed to 'theatre direction' or 'staging'. Recently reclaimed by Patrice Pavis (2013), the concept of the *mise en scène* encompasses the multidisciplinary nature of both theatre direction and performance creation; it refers to a form of total art in itself. In this sense, I wish to underline a conscious, artistically driven act of putting all the different (and sometimes disparate) elements of the banquet together: performance acts, the choice of foodstuffs and food design, table decorations, the topography of the sympotic space, rituals, and the banqueters' eating and performing. Every single component works in autonomy and, at the same time, in synergy with the others, thus bringing to the fore a synesthetic performativity of the sympotic event. Here, I make use of the concept of 'performativity' as it has been formulated by Richard Schechner. For Schechner, performativity refers to

> a pervasive mood or feeling – belonging not so much to the visual–aural realm (as performances do) but to the senses of smell, taste, and touch. 'I smell something funny going on' or 'that's to my taste' or 'I was touched by what happened' are ways of apprehending the performative. (*Performance Studies* 169)

'(S)cenography' (a neologism that I owe to my former professor, the late Daniel Lemahieu) is another theatrical term that will be discussed, as it captures the material aspect of the banquet. This neologism combines 'scenography' and the Latin word *cena*—the Roman banquet. It is, in sum, what Stephen di Benedetto terms 'scenography of the senses': 'a sensual engagement experienced through a body's response to and within the theatrical event' (72).

Drawing on performance theory, I will stress how commensality and the sociability of the table offer the possibility of active audience participation. These elements, together with the banqueters' performative involvement, have constituted the basic components of the banquet in history. It should, therefore, be productive to explore how these components are being rediscovered and reproduced in contemporary banquet performances.

Fig. 1. 'Daniel Spoerri (standing on the left) during Le déjeuner sous l'herbe, 1983'. Photographer: David Boeno. 12 February 2018.

Short History of the Banquet

Historically, gastronomy and the consumption of food and drink have intertwined with discourse, performance, and art in the context of public and private shared meals.[2] These kinds of social events emphasised entertainment, sociability, conversing, spectacle and the pleasure of the senses. Throughout history, such meals were referred to by different names. The widely used term 'banquet' was in use from the Renaissance onwards and encompassed various meanings, depending on the historical epoch in which it was being used. Deriving from the French word 'banc' and the Italian 'banquetto'—a diminutive of 'banco'—'it implies the use of "bench" or "board" as a surface upon which to display, or from which to serve food' (Meads 8). It is interesting to note that this surface served as a kind of stage, thus setting off the activation of the theatrical mechanism of play and display.

In ancient Greece, variety shows developed alongside tragedy and comedy during the *symposion*, a component of the Greek banquet, which consisted of two parts: the meal proper, δεῖπνον (*deipnon*), where people ate, and the συμπόσιον (*symposion*), which means 'drink together', where people drank (Stourna 19). A third component sometimes concluded the banquet: it was called the κῶμος (*komos)*. This was an orgiastic Bacchic revel of the symposiasts. These components were seen as separate, each being a ritual with a sacred quality. In the dining room, the ανδρῶν (*andrōn*, which literally means 'the space reserved for men'), the banqueters would lie on couches shared by two men. During the *symposia*, performances were held in the centre of the space. These performances were not only confined to professional performers. The symposiasts would indulge themselves in impromptu amateur performances, like reciting poetry and playing music.

While the Greek *symposion* held spiritual and religious

2 Since antiquity there has been a distinction between public and private banqueting. For example, in ancient Greece, the *Syssition* was a public banquet (Schmitt Pantel), whereas the *symposion* was private (Murray).

significance, the Romans were more engaged in the pleasures of extravagance and ostentation. In Rome the feast was called *convivium* or *cena*[3] and contained a spectacular dimension. Dinner did not involve any theatrical act, but there was music and dance. Yet, the Roman feast was of a theatrical nature in the sense that it deliberately made use of the idea of astonishment. In other words, the whole table ceremony was dramatised and special dishes were invented to accompany this dramatisation. Here are two notable examples: the host served unknown meat (such as stork and bear paws) or presented symbolic dishes. For instance, 'Trojan pork', consisted of a pig's head adorned with a Phrygian cap, thus evoking the Trojan horse filled with warriors, since the pork's head was stuffed with birds.[4] A successful *cena* consisted of the pleasure of sharing and culinary pleasure. To achieve this goal, everything had to be well regulated: satisfaction was to be neither excessive, leading to disgust, nor insufficient, thus annoying the diners. For this reason, the ceremony associated with the *cena* was a complex and delicate art: its failure could mean a rupture in the social standing of the host (see Dupont 59-85).

In medieval times, feasting included performative acts which operated as an interactive action between banqueters and performers. These acts were a very precise and calculated way of conveying messages of political and economic superiority, and of social cohesion. Occasionally they functioned as a celebration of the launch of a political programme. The *Banquet du Faisan* (*The Feast of the Pheasant*), which took place in Lille in 1454, fulfilled the latter function. Most of the elements of that banquet—including the choice of ingredients, recipes, food design, and the performances of the *entremets* – were designed to promote a crusade planned by the banquet's host, Duke Philip the Good, against the Ottomans, who

3 Both Roman words are linked to sharing and conviviality, the latter, according to one interpretation, referring to the Greek word κοινόν (*koinon*) which means 'common'.

4 Horace's S*atires* and Petronius' *Satyricon* both contain information on the proceedings of the *cena*. The particular examples of the dishes stated here derive from the above literary texts – a fact that leads us to believe that they are fictional and not commonly consumed in the *cena*.

had taken Constantinople the year before. A number of performances that took place within that banquet relate explicitly to the crusade's aim. One notable performing act included an enormous pie which contained twenty-eight musicians performing a musical composition (from the inside of the pie). At the end of the performance every banqueter would take an oath to participate in the crusade. This banquet provides an example of how food, performance and politics become a unified artistic event (see Normore).

During the Renaissance, the banquet became a 'total' festive event: all the elements (music, dance, and food) came together to produce a coherent spectacle with a single theme. An example of such lavish and extravagant banquets is the so-called 'sugar banquet' given by the Venetian state in 1574 to honour the future King of France, Henry III: all the elements—napkins, cutlery, and tableware—were made of sugar. The strong visual theme (one might say 'scenographic') of this banquet was accompanied by efforts to activate the other senses (touch, smell, and taste). Thus, all the senses worked together in order to transform a mere visual appreciation into a total, synesthetic experience.

The plethora of food and spectacle—the main characteristic of the banquet in the 15th century—gave way to refinement and rarity in the 16th century. During the 17th century, the banquet reached its zenith as an art form; remarkable examples are the ones given by Louis XIV in Versailles, one of them being an event called 'Les plaisirs de l'île enchantée'. This was a three-day feast, which included several theatrical and operatic performances and was preceded or followed by a majestic meal. Towards the end of the 17th century, during the so-called *repas en ambigu*, the dining room turned into a kind of gastronomic theatre: a 'dramatic' combination of sweet and savoury foods were displayed in a room, but not necessarily consumed. The meal became a feast for the eyes, since visual pleasure was now seen to be more important (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Making Sense', 73-74).

Between the late 18th and early 19th century, the French

gastronome and theatre critic Grimod de La Reynière created some of the most memorable examples of staged banquets. In his first legendary mock-funerary banquet which took place in February 1783, Grimod employed a dramatic situation, and explored food and eating as spectacle (see Shrem). Funeral invitations were sent out to the twenty-two table guests and another three hundred spectators were invited to watch the banquet from above, in a voyeuristic kind of participation, which greatly shocked some of the guests:

> On arrival, guests were disarmed and stripped of their decorations before being led into a darkened room, examined by an advocate, and then allowed into a black-draped dining room lit by 365 candles with a catafalque as centrepiece and a balustrade for invited observers around the periphery. Grimod introduced two of the known courses, of pork and foods cooked with oil (Levi 101).

Grimod's lavish, eccentric and highly spectacular meals marked the end of a long period of theatricalised banquets. From the 20th century onwards, the banquet has been characterised more by the social nature of conviviality than by the artistic, eccentric and ludic elements of the historical banquet.[5] It is interesting to consider why the banquet gradually lost its magnificence and celebratory and gastronomic excess and gave way to less distinctive forms, like the banquets given by heads of state or the presidential inauguration banquets, among others.[6]

According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett the banquet was replaced by new forms of festivity and sociability after the French Revolution ('Making Sense' 75). This was due to the emergence of the restaurants in the 19th century, opened by the chefs who used to work in aristocratic households and had been left unemployed after

5 See, for example, the French Belle époque banquets, as they are presented by Roger Shattuck in his book *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (1968).

6 For examples of modern Banquets and their similarities and differences with historical court banquets, see Freedman 99-108.

the upheaval of the Revolution. The restaurant came to be considered as the new 'temple' of sociability, and provided a new, more intimate kind of space. As a result, the focus of the diner became the plate and its contents, rather than the visual pleasure and spectacular paraphernalia of the traditional banquet. Joshua Abrams underlines this shift of focus from the visual/scenographic to the gustatory and draws a parallel between contemporaneous evolutions in both cuisine and the theatre:

> While such a shift may seem at first glance the inverse of the historical shifts in theatrical scenography, it might be usefully considered to run parallel to the development in emphasis from the stock settings of eighteenth-century theatres through the early-nineteenth-century 'archaeological' theatrical design (under Josef Schreyvogel and Charles Kean, for instance) to the ultimate 'realism' of the box set and naturalistic settings, which sought to allow focus to remain on the plot and theatrical content of the play itself. (Abrams 7-8)

The emergence of the historical avant-garde in the early 20th century was a response to the restrictions on creativity that were felt to exist in the arts whilst realism and naturalism were dominant paradigms. The avant-garde also provided new fertile ground for the return of the theatricalised banquet, which would now become mainly an artistic event, rather than a social one. Food would provide the ideal medium for provocation, dramatic effervescence, and spectacle. For example, the Cubists turned to the art of gastronomy as early as the 1910s, when Guillaume Apollinaire invented the term *gastro-astronomisme* and spoke about the first culinary experiments of Cubist cuisine (see Berghaus 8-9). *Gastro-astronomisme* demands, according to Cecilia Novero, 'a "dramatic" look at cooking and eating' and 'presupposes that food be—intentionally—used as drama so as to consciously have an impact on the viewer/diner's emotional and sensual perception of the world' (9). While Cubist cuisine provided an original and provocative dimension to both cuisine and the arts,

the Italian Futurist movement is where art, food, and performance were more thoroughly blended together and acquired a consciously evoked social, political, artistic, and aesthetic dimension. The Futurist banquets reached their apogee in the early 1930s (Berghaus 3-17). Marinetti separated food from nutrition in his (and Fillía's) *Cucina Futurista* (1932). The Futurists believed that food, liberated from the constraints of providing nutrition, could become an artistic medium. Thus, the process of preparing food and consuming it acquired a theatrical and performative aspect, since food applied to all the senses. Both the Futurist banquets and Futurist cuisine were provocative and controversial, a reaction against Italian bourgeois cultural and culinary tradition.

A few decades later, in the United States, Allan Kaprow found food and drink to be ideal materials to experiment with in his happenings. In 1964 he created *Eat* in the Bronx, within which he offered wine, apples, bananas, toasts with jam, and potatoes in a semi-Eucharistic ritual. In his first attempts to conceptualise performance in the late 1950s, Kaprow had already insisted upon characterising his happenings as 'social occasions' rather than theatrical or artistic events. This was a time when art would embrace society and life (including everyday life), after many centuries of separation, from Kant and Schiller's ideas about artistic autonomy to the gap between art and life in late 19th century aestheticism. By going back to the social sphere and to public space, art would serve again as a social instrument by including and, more importantly, by incorporating all those who, until then, had been excluded from it. Spectators would from now on become participants and, due to the accessibility of the event,[7] this aesthetic experience would cease to be addressed only to experts with specifically cultivated, exclusive tastes. Within this frame, Kaprow dissociated 'artlike art' from what he defined as 'lifelike art' (100). The latter embraces life, ceremony, and ritual, and

7 Happenings and performances may happen in public spaces—a street, a garage or a church: spaces with easy and free access that are more welcoming than those specifically reserved for artistic events.

it provides a communal experience where boundaries between artists and visitors/spectators/participants are broken. The banquet provided the elements that could create a new type of commensality, which could reinforce the new yearnings of live, visual and performance art. According to Nadia Seremetakis:

> [C]ommensality can be defined as the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feeling. … Here each sense witnesses and records the commensal history of the others. In this type of exchange, history, knowledge, feeling and the senses become embedded in the material culture and its components: specific artefacts, places and performances (37).

Seremetakis stresses the idea of exchange between past and present, memory and the present emotion, identity and alterity as ingredients of the shared table. This sense of commensality can also be found in both the historical banquet and in current banquet-performances. Through the use of food and its sharing between performers and banqueters/spectators, a new sense of communion is created, one that is enhanced by the intimate, direct communication that the banquet has diachronically offered, as opposed to the frontal communication in conventional theatre and the museum/art gallery. Seremetakis highlights the materiality of food among other artefacts. This new-found interest was also underlined by Kaprow, back in 1958. When writing about Jackson Pollock's legacy, Kaprow stated that:

> Pollock … left us at a point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. … Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. (Kaprow 7-9)

Here, food, together with other quotidian, banal objects, becomes the ideal artistic medium that both represents and symbolises the use of everyday life as source of inspiration and final artistic destination.

The Banquet Revival in the Performance Art of Daniel Spoerri, Emmanuel Giraud, and Les Platonnes

The revival of the banquet as artistic event brings out the spectacular quality of the actions and images related to food. The *mise en scène* highlights the elements of surprise, deception, and dramatization, and these banquets revolve around a theme or story and develop through time. The (s)cenographic arrangement of the contemporary banquet performances studied here call for an association between the table and the stage and the table as stage. Similarly, the topography of the 'sympotic' type of space, as formulated by David Wiles,[8] plays a significant part in the artistic concept. The spaces where banquet performances take place may reflect both the idea of inclusiveness and the idea of exclusiveness, as testified by the use of both indoor and outdoor spaces that are either accessible to all, or reserved for a limited number of participants. Banquet performances may take place in museums, galleries, restaurants, gardens, highways or in private spaces. Likewise, the table becomes a new type of stage, where food and drink are displayed before being consumed, and a space that unites all the spectators/banqueters surrounding it, almost like a small-scale gastronomic theatre in-the-round. At the same time, food design is particularly emphasised, since recipes may be conceived especially for the event. Hence, the choice of ingredients, the taste, and image become dramatic and symbolic.

Daniel Spoerri, member of the group Nouveaux Réalistes and inventor of Eat-art, apart from using food in his work, has, since the 1960s, organised numerous banquets, the so-called 'dinner-

8 Wiles (2003) argues that the evolution of the Banquet's spatial arrangement through the ages shows the different requirements related to each historic epoch, as regards the place occupied by politics, table talking and discourse, social relationships, the performing arts and, of course, the art of gastronomy.

actions'. One of them that I will briefly present is *Déjeuner sous l'herbe* (*Luncheon under the grass),*[9] whose title is a reverse reading to Manet's famous painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). In the outdoor area of a château, Spoerri set a long table for a hundred guests, while a forty meter-long trench was being dug. In the middle of this feast, Spoerri ordered the diners to bury the tables with the food leftovers inside the trench. In 2010 and 2016, in a type of archaeological excavation, the banquet's leftovers were revealed once again, in a gesture to remind

Fig. 2. 'The tables are installed inside the trench. Daniel Spoerri, in the foreground, is directing the operations'. Daniel Spoerri, *Le déjeuner sous l'herbe*, 1983. Photographer: David Boeno. 12 February 2018.

spectators of the ephemeral nature of both food and performance. Eating, an act mostly associated with survival and the continuation of life gave way to burial—the last act of performing death. Decades

9 This dinner took place near Versailles in 1983, see http://www.dejeunersousl-herbe.org/

later, a symbolic resurrection of the meal would take place. The banquet's decaying (s)cenography would acquire the characteristics of an archaeological find, a relic of a performance that lasted a lot longer than usual. Indeed, this performance might be thought of as having continued under the ground for decades after the meal was over. Spoerri thus played with the notion of time, which can be both devouring and disgorging.

Fig. 3. 'The excavations of part of the banquet in 2016.' Daniel Spoerri, *Le déjeuner sous l'herbe*, 1983/2016. Photographer: Anne Fourès. 12 February 2018.

The French artist Emmanuel Giraud creates food performances, in which he acts both as chef and master of ceremonies. In an effort to revive the memory of famous banquets of the past, he resuscitates these banquets while altering them in gustatory and in symbolic terms. According to Allen Weiss, 'Emmanuel Giraud's performances are places where solipsism, narcissism, and the fantasies of a greedy person join commensality, seduction, and the mythology

of a well-chosen group of table guests' (11, my own translation from the French).

Fig. 4. Emmanuel Giraud, *Devenir gris*, 2009. Photographers: © Luc Jennepin / Emmanuel Giraud. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2009[10] Giraud performs *Devenir gris (Becoming grey)*, in a gallery in Montpellier. This was a deformation of Grimod de la Reynière's funerarary banquet, mentioned above. Giraud's sympotic space is bare and contains the most characteristic props in Grimod's original (s)cenography: black candles, a coffin and a catafalque. Likewise, the gastronomic creations that echo Grimod's menu[11] are cooked on the basis of ingredients in black—an unusual colour for food and one that caused mistrust among the evening's banqueters:

10 In that same year, Giraud returned to a historical form of the banquet and created his own version of a Roman *cena*, *Le Festin de Trimalchion*, at the Villa Medici in Rome.

11 A fictional account of this menu can be found in Huysmans' novel *A Rebours (Against Nature)* (1884).

black egg, raddles of rare rabbit in cocoa juice, and Guinea fowl in tombstone, among other morbid delicacies. This dark, highly aestheticised scenography of vision and taste is dramatically eloquent: the banquet's menu and recipes, just like the props[12], tell a story of mystery and death and approach this topic with black humour.

Fig. 5. Emmanuel Giraud, *Devenir gris*, 2009. Photographers: © Luc Jennepin / Emmanuel Giraud. Courtesy of the artist.

Another recent example of the distorted reproduction of a historical banquet comes from the French women's group Les Platonnes. A feminist reworking of Plato's *Banquet*,[13] this 'phallophagic' *symposion* aims at going against 'the very masculine philosophical concept on love, in which women have been trapped since antiquity' ('*La Banquette* des Platonnes'). Hence, the names of the Platonic *Banquet*'s participants are changed into female ones.[14] Socrates becomes SocratA, Alcibiades becomes AlcibiadA and Phaedrus becomes PhaedrA. The character of PhaedrA is also the banquet's centrepiece: her head is placed in the middle of the table,

12 For example, the banqueters' were frightfully curious when first seeing the coffin: would it contain the food they were going to consume?
13 The title itself —*La Banquette*—refers to this feminist appropriation.
14 This work openly alludes to Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner party* (1979) where seventy important women of the past are symbolically invited in a triangular table.

and her philosophical discourse is 'ingested' by the other female symposiasts. Precarious food (rotten fruit, candies, and marshmallows) and wine are offered only to female spectators. Male spectators cannot enjoy this oral experience, since their mouths are stuffed with sanitary towels. As Nariné Karslyan, who is part of Les Platonnes, told me, the aim was to achieve a state where the men can, for once, remain silent and listen to the philosophical discourses pronounced.[15] The participants in this banquet performance thus communicate a clear political message against the diachronic male supremacy, during which women's mouths were shut for centuries. Women were not allowed to express their own version of important philosophical issues. Similarly, they could not easily indulge themselves with the sensual pleasures (love, wine, and food) that had been normally reserved for men.[16]

Fig. 6. *La Banquette des Platonnes*, 2016. Photographer: Hubert Karaly.

15 Personal communication, 8 February 2018.

16 Indeed, in the Greek symposia, women were not allowed to attend, with the exception of professionals, like the *hetaerae* and female performers.

Banquets, Art, and Society Today

Our highly self-conscious society calls for a more intentional implication from both performers and spectators, who not only do or even re-do, but are self-conscious about it (Carlson ix). Performance is interactive, inclusive, physical and direct, and for this reason, food's material aspect, its relationship to the mouth and body, as well as its importance to the community make of it a powerful medium for creating a collective conscience between artists and participants. Food is also a visually and dramatically eloquent scenographic element, which can also be perceived by all the senses, in a synesthetic way.

In banquet performances, apart from the use of food as a perishable, ephemeral and consumable prop, the arrangement of the table, which prevails in the sympotic space, introduces a new kind of (s)cenography, a *locus* where artists and participants become part of the same performative experience through the notion of commensality. Furthermore, the table creates an embodied experience of the material elements of performance, sociability, and physical intimacy between performers and participants through the shared feeling of conviviality. All these ingredients are 'kneaded' by the performance's *mise en scène*, the art of staging and orchestrating the disparate elements coming from the theatre, everyday life, and cultural performance.

During the 1960s and 1970s performance artists consciously turned to the search of a more communal experience in their events through the activation of both commensality and conviviality. Turning to the aesthetics of the historical and the avant-garde banquet, these two notions could be resuscitated in performative practices with well-defined aesthetic, social and political resonances. As regards the evolution and flourishment of banquet performances after the turn of the century and up until the present day, it is essential to point out that the ground for this proliferation was already laid a decade earlier. In his essay 'Relational Aesthetics', Nicolas Bourriaud defined a renewed need for conviviality, which was experienced by the artistic creation in the 1990s: 'there has been an upsurge of convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective and participatory, exploring

the varied potential in the relationship to the other' (61).

This conviviality was different from the one that was sought by the historical avant-garde, whose artistically tumultuous context emphasised the provocation of the public and of art itself. As a result, during the historical avant-garde, the table had turned into a battlefield, thus provoking a rupture in conviviality. Conviviality was also different during the 1960s and 1970s—a time when the need to define art was still evident. Within this frame, the table became a space where artists and viewers/spectators/participants would meet in search of a shared social and political identity.

In the 1990s, the issue, Bourriaud argued, was 'to experience art's capacities of resistance within the overall social arena' (31). Indeed, conviviality had become a consumable product in the 1990s—a period of apolitical art and social solitude. The need for the formation of communal experiences in the arts, just like the ones that had been created back in the 1960s, gave way to a need for reactions against a society, which seemed to have become an anonymous, all devouring arena. Conviviality could be 'bought' when entering the museum, the gallery or the theatre and then thrown away at the exit. This was probably one of the reasons that banquet performances and eating in the theatre particularly flourished in the following years. However, as opposed to the 1960s, society during the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to have become more politically apathetic, and art served as a consumable product of experiencing temporary sociality and indulgence. Food and the shared table were employed as political symbols in an apolitical society, in theatre productions like Eva Diamantstein's *Nachtmahl* (*Meal*), in Germany[17] and Michael Marmarinos' *O Ethnikos Hymnos* (*National Anthem*) in Greece.[18]

Today, direct and physical commensality, as well as the

17 Spielart Theatre Festival, Munich, 2001. In this production, during a shared meal between actors and spectators, the table becomes a stage. The play explores questions of national identity in Germany, drawing from the period of the Nazi era.

18 Theseion Theatre, Athens, 2001. Here, again, spectators and actors sit at the same table and eat and drink together. The devised play is concerned with Greece's search for a new national identity, during a period of rapid and constant change, from the civil war period (1946-1949) up until the turn of the century.

materiality of food, still provide fruitful inspiration in both theatre and performance art. This can be testified in the work of artists like Spatula&Barcode[19] in the United States, who place the performance of hospitality at the centre of their artistic endeavours, or the immersive dining theatre produced by Gingerline[20] in the UK. Sharing a meal between dancers and spectators is also a basic component in the choreographic piece *Beytna* by Omar Rajeh and his group Maqamat Dance Theatre,[21] based in Beirut, which was presented in Paris in March 2018. The organic quality of food and the physicality of the dancers' bodies—an interesting and unorthodox combination since eating is traditionally dissociated from dancing—add a commensal fluidity to the performative banquet.

In contrast to the physical banquet performances of the contemporary moment, the advent of new technologies creates a new, digital form of conviviality. For example, the Brazillian-French research group Corpos Informáticos establishes new kinds of conviviality between digitalised banqueters. In their work *Hungry@ Corpos,*[22] invited guests or random chat network users who happen to be online share a virtual online banquet. Here, a fragmented kind of long-distance communion is produced.

This interesting kind of 'glocal' virtual conviviality plays with the notions of presence and absence: bodies, the images of food and its consumption are, at the same time, present (through the screen) and absent (since they are not physically in the same place). In this fractured reality, the sharing of a common meal, the taste of food and drink, the sense of smell or the gaze between the banqueters are being lost. This 'muting' or even 'mutation' of the senses caused by the digitalised banquet, leads to the loss of *mise en scène* and (s)cenography's traditional capacities to create a total, whole, shared,

19 http://spatulaandbarcode.wordpress.com/
20 www.gingerline.co.uk/
21 https://www.maqamat.org/
22 These experiments with telepresence had started as early as 1997.
For images of the online banquet Hungry@Corpos, visit: https://anthology.rhizome.org/telepresence

commensal experience. Online participants bring their own micro-(s)cenographies of the table and food items to the shared screen. They also shape the overall *mise en scène*, since their participation might have an effect on the evolution of the virtual banquet's unfolding. For instance, in one of *Hungry@Corpos* online banquets, one virtual banqueter began licking a chutney-covered carrot. At that point, the webcast was terminated, probably due to the fact that the chat network's moderator considered the content to be offensive.[23] In this case, the moderator became an anonymous "big brother" kind of *symposiarch*[24] and played the part of the person who sets the rules of the banquet, just like in ancient Greek *symposia*.

Banquet performances still provide what Marcel Mauss calls 'total social facts' as he posits that feasts concurrently embody and show all aspects of society: juridical, aesthetic, political, religious, moral, among many others (100). As a result, the table becomes a stage, where different and complex such phenomena are knit together through the banqueters' active participation, synesthetic (s)cenography and a commensal *mise en scène*. To conclude, the theatrical and performative elements of sympotic practices continue to evolve in curious and unexpected ways as society, culture, the arts, and technology continue to intersect, collide, converse and merge. Performance makers maintain a vital interest in the banquet and its historical evolutions and continue to offer new perspectives.

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23 https://anthology.rhizome.org/telepresence

24 The presiding officer of the *symposion*.

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