

## ***Disturbing Objects: Making, Eating and Watching Food in Popular Culture and Performance Practice.***

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*I like baking cakes. I have been baking cakes for a long time. I try to take a cake with me wherever I go. My cakes have travelled to Lancaster, Manchester, Bracknell, Leeds, Sheffield, Surrey, Norwich, Gothenburg and Ulverston. I am going to bake you a cake and I am going to give it to you in a moment.*

### **A Journey through Food**

I love food; making it, eating it and now I also love watching it. My performance practice investigates food in contemporary culture, and this article is an attempt to journey through food, cooking objects and my practice, both contextualising and creatively documenting my engagements with cakes, kitchens and the dinner table. In this paper, my documentary elements are – as above – in italics. Cooking materials and foodstuffs play an essential role in everyday food practices and contribute to the formation of identities, relationships and socially and culturally accepted behaviour. My interest lies with the relationship between women and food. If we look at the influences of popular culture in the current climate, for instance the rise in food and lifestyle television programming and celebrity cooks (of which there are considerably more male than female), these popular food performances can be seen as indicative of contemporary attitudes governing food and female domestic practice. I am proposing that there is a space for performance practice to address the ramifications of popular cultural food performances to explore our relationship with food and its materiality in contemporary culture.

The work of performance artist Bobby Baker is crucial in understanding how feminist performance practice can re-position female identity in relation to food and the

domestic.<sup>1</sup> Developing from Baker and others working in this field,<sup>2</sup> my practice attempts both to articulate the implications of popular cultural food performances, and to disrupt the representations of food and women they enact and promote. One of the key arguments raised in this article concerns the notion of ‘domestic fantasy’ that prevails in popular cultural food performance. It is necessary for me to outline *both* my ‘real’ and subjective position inside the ‘domestic fantasy’ *and* my motivation, as a practitioner-researcher, to articulate this bind and to disrupt it. The italicised documentation in this article is a means through which I can *both* occupy and objectify the ‘domestic fantasy’ in order to make my critique.

### **The Cookbook**

The Cookbook is a source of essential cooking information and guidance. Cookbooks outline a set of rules and practices that enable the reader to produce particular foods/households/lifestyles that are representative of the domestic and culinary ethos of the cookbook/author. Mrs Beeton is a cultural icon in the UK and her well known *Book of Household Management*, first published in 1861 and produced by her husband, offered women a guide to running a Victorian household. John. L Smith suggests that her book was a reaction against new ‘venues for eating out [that] were tempting the middle-class menfolk away from their homes’ (188) and cites her statement:

Men are now so well served out of doors, - at their clubs, well-ordered taverns, and dining-houses, that in order to compete with the attractions of these places, a mistress must be thoroughly acquainted with the theory and practice of cookery, as well as be perfectly conversant with all the other arts of making and keeping a comfortable home. (Smith 188)

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<sup>1</sup> Baker’s practice is rooted in the domestic and through her use of food in performance she communicates her ‘everyday’ experiences as a wife, mother and an artist.

<sup>2</sup> Female artists such as Alicia Rios, Karen Finley and Judy Chicago engage with food and the body in their practice.

Beeton's statement aligns a cultural expectation of female domestic servitude with gaining the love and respect of a male partner in order for women to 'compete' with the 'attractions' outside the home. Her book is offered as a potential antidote to this anxiety and the cooking practices outlined act as strategies for women to achieve domestic and marital happiness.

The philosophies communicated through the Mrs Beeton persona are reflective of the dominant patriarchal attitudes of the time,<sup>3</sup> and contrast with the contemporary attitudes adopted by cookery writer and celebrity television cook Nigella Lawson. In her cookbook *Feast* (2006), Nigella<sup>4</sup> advocates self satisfaction and independence: 'when it comes to eating, I am all for solitary pleasures. [...] At its most basic, perhaps, is the quiet satisfaction of knowing one is fending for oneself, the instrument of one's own survival' (341). For Joanne Hollows, Nigella 'attempts to negotiate the demands of both pleasing the self and pleasing and caring for others, addressing the anxieties associated with cooking that frequently arise from a fear of being judged as "improperly" feminine' (186). The assumed female responsibilities of 'feeding the family'<sup>5</sup> have come to determine that which is supposedly inherently 'womanly' and 'feminine.' Failure to comply with the expected duties of the 'wife' and the 'mother' can lead to a judgment of the female as failing in her role of 'woman' and so becoming 'improperly feminine.' Ashley et al. also discuss the 'anxiety and guilt' that women experience fearing judgement, 'for their failure to live up to the idealized images of family life' (131).

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<sup>3</sup> Note the precarious authorship of the *Book of Household Management*; Mrs Beeton's recipes were compiled through processes of editing and selecting from other sources (Hughes 206) and the book was produced and then reproduced in varying forms and editions by her husband (Hughes 383).

<sup>4</sup> More so than her full name, the word *Nigella* alone, is representative of her media persona based on a version of her identity. In using her first name, I distinguish her media persona as the concern of this article. The same will later apply to Delia Smith.

<sup>5</sup> This term is used by Marjorie DeVault in her book, *Feeding the Family* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

Bobby Baker has brought recognition to women's 'everyday' domestic responsibilities through her practice. In *Kitchen Show* (1991) Baker confesses her anxiety about wanting to please other people in her kitchen and demonstrates her various 'acts' of defiance. She releases her anger and frustration by throwing a pear against her kitchen cupboard; the 'disruption of that metaphor of women's fruitfulness' (Pollock 181). In contemporary culture, Nigella Lawson has also 'disrupted' notions of female care and responsibility in the kitchen by embracing self-satisfaction and indulgence. Although the different gendered attitudes and approaches to female domestic practice from Mrs Beeton and Nigella are not surprising, it points up a history in which cookbooks not only disseminate cooking methods and ideologies underpinning female domestic practice, but also offer readers a strategy to emulate and construct a particular lifestyle. My interest here is to unpick how these 'lifestyles' that are available to women in contemporary culture are produced/performed and question what is implicated for women and their relationship with food and the domestic.

### **The Object of my Desire**

In contemporary culture, food personalities have considerable influence. In an article in the *Observer*, David Smith describes the success of the two television cooks, Delia Smith and Nigella Lawson:

The term 'Delia effect' entered the Collins English Dictionary in 2001. The phenomenon was evident when she was seen using cranberries on TV and, a day later, sales rose by 200 per cent [...]. Since then the 'Delia effect' has been shorthand for a celebrity endorsement that prompts a shopper stampede. Sales of goose fat rocketed when the product was championed by Lawson as the essential Christmas cooking ingredient.

Food personalities and their cooking practices are admired, followed and become convention. Raymond Williams' 'dominant/residual/emergent' model of cultural processes can inform how they have established new codes of practice (121-127). From the late seventies and onwards, Delia Smith was the 'dominant' female food figure in the British media and her persona was defined by her methodical and didactic approach to cookery, such as her three part cookery book and television series, *How to Cook* (1998). The title of Nigella's cookbook *How to Eat*, released in the same year, indicated her fun and indulgent cooking ethos. In contrast to Delia's image of 'perfection,' Nigella makes a virtue out of her flaws and in her television programmes she abandons the 'traditional' and 'proper' methods of cooking and adopts an 'anything goes' attitude. Nigella's persona is founded on her fallibility as a cook; she is messy and she describes herself as 'lazy', 'greedy' and 'clumsy' in her television series *Nigella Bites* (2000). This self-confessed incompetence re-appropriates those assumed negative traits and they become qualities that are enjoyed and even admired in Nigella. This shift in the female role operates in accordance with Williams' 'emergent' cultural process in which 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created' (123). Nigella promotes fantasies of domestic pleasure and perfection on her *own* terms and she has renegotiated what it means to be a public woman disseminating cooking practices and altered the 'dominant' relationship between women and food.

However, I would argue that Nigella's success as a female figure is a result of the 'residual' culture on which her 'domestic goddess' persona is founded. Williams' term 'residual' has been defined by Laurie Cohen as 'an expression of tradition [...which] has

been brought forward from the past, is reconstituted and remains active in the present' (193). For Hollows, Nigella's 'domestic goddess' ethos is founded on 'nostalgia for an imagined "golden age"' (188) which was criticised by the British press 'as indicative of a prefeminist 1950s' (90). This nostalgia can evidence a 'residual' culture that Nigella has ironically re-fashioned to produce a female identity that has elements of both the postfeminist and the domestic housewife.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Cake Stand**

*I always place my cakes onto a cake stand. I have collected a few over the years but my favourite has to be Nigella's simple but elegant cream cake stand. I find that cake stands elevate cakes into perfect creations of domestic wonder and give them the importance that they deserve.*



Fig.1. Nigella's Cake Stand

Hollows suggests that Nigella 'offers a point of identification in fantasy' (194), and this 'fantasy' and lifestyle is made available through the cooking materials and objects that represent her image. Nigella's own brand of kitchenware entitled *Living* is available in department stores across the UK. The 2006 product brochure states that her All Purpose Cooking Pot 'turns any kitchen into the heart of the home' and her Pestle and Mortar 'looks beautiful on a kitchen surface and is a joy to use' (Lawson, *Living Kitchen* 1-5). These beautiful objects along with her cookbooks, her food, her style of dress, can all be

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<sup>6</sup> I am using the term postfeminism here in its historical sense in accordance with Hollows' perspective that 'Nigella's conception of cookery is historically *post* – 1970's feminism' (181). See also Charlotte Brunsdon who situates Nigella within a category of domestic television personalities that negotiate the 'structure of being and not being a feminist' (45).

accessed and reproduced and make tangible the ‘domestic goddess’ fantasy. I too have participated in this fantasy through my fascination with Nigella (sometimes delighting in her food and her products). For Hollows, ‘the domestic goddess is presented as an imagined and unfixed position’: integral to the Nigella persona is the acknowledgement ‘that it *is* a fantasy’ (190). Hollows here refers to Len Ang’s positive claim that ‘fantasy offers the opportunity to experience feminine identities “without having to experience their actual consequences”’ (190). This is certainly true if the engagement with a figure like Nigella is a distant one; and one that only *entertains* the notion of her reality. Yet I have engaged with Nigella in my own kitchen; her cookbooks line my top shelf and her kitchenware decorates my surfaces, becoming part of my aesthetic and ‘performance’ of daily life. However, I admit that when I bake one of Nigella’s cakes I do not feel *okay* if it sinks in the middle, even if I can display it on her beautiful cake stand. By becoming part of cultural convention, the self-conscious gap between Nigella’s ‘domestic fantasy’ and ‘domestic reality’ becomes smaller. Perhaps what I am describing is not so much a concern with failing to be ‘properly feminine,’ but the ‘reality’ of dealing with the consequences of a failed ‘domestic fantasy.’

### **I wish I had a Kitchen**

*Have you ever dreamed of having your perfect kitchen? Have you stared longingly at those beautiful kitchen brochures and imagined yourself inside those miniature kitchen worlds? Do you know what it takes to exist in ‘Elemental Walnut and Zinc’ or to go dancing in ‘Savannah Shaker?’ I don’t have my own kitchen and I certainly don’t have my ‘dream kitchen’, but I can show you how to create your perfect kitchen – even when you don’t have one.*

*1pm-2pm: Elemental Walnut and Zinc*<sup>7</sup>



Fig.2. *I Wish I had a Kitchen*, Re-creating the kitchens.

*'Two elements of earth combine to create an irresistible environment; vegetable and mineral' (Plain & Simple Kitchens 24).*

**Required**

*Tahini paste*

*Walnut oil*

*Nuts & seeds*

*Zinc supplement tablets.*

*3pm-4pm: The Cottage Cream Country Kitchen*<sup>8</sup>



Fig.3. *I Wish I had a kitchen*, Cottage Cream Country.

<sup>7</sup> See *Plain & Simple Kitchens* brochure (24).

<sup>8</sup> See *The book of kitchens* brochure (20).



*Think yellow, think bright, think farmhouse, think English, think home baking.*

***Required***  
*Lemons*  
*Flour*  
*Hearty Lamb Stew*  
*Traditional clotted Cream*



Fig.4. *I Wish I had a Kitchen, Smothering my face with my kitchen ‘fantasy.’*

*I felt nauseous from the food smells. The balsamic vinegar made my eyes water, the lemon and salt stung my face, and the tahini paste and stilton cheese felt thick and uncomfortable on my skin.*



Fig.5. *I Wish I had a Kitchen, Posing inside my ‘Vintage Kitchen.’*

*After five long hours my kitchens were created. You can picture me inside my kitchen fantasy wearing my best ‘domestic goddess’ smile.*

### **Fantasy Objects**

Beginning with my fantasy of having my ‘dream kitchen,’ *I Wish I had a Kitchen* (2007) investigated how I could isolate and embody the components of my ‘kitchen fantasy’ and disturb popular cultural representations of the kitchen space. I attempted to disrupt my delight in the beautiful kitchen objects that represent domestic fantasies of ‘joy’ and ‘balance and serenity’ (Plain & Simple Kitchens). I appeared as a soiled female, representing my discomfort inside the ‘dream kitchens,’ and used the objects to create mess and chaos which is often left out of media representation. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, states that, ‘[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (4). For Nick Mansfield, abjection ‘unleashes [...] the internal ambiguity and uncertainty that logical systems try to deny or disguise;’ he describes ‘our individual shame and disgust at the flows that accompany bodily life’ (85). If spaces such as the kitchen house the materials of ‘bodily life’ then we can recognise how those materials have become subject to ‘borders, positions, rules’ that work in accordance with the ‘system and order’ that defines socially and culturally prescribed patterns of behaviour and exists in opposition to the abject.

In my performance, I released the food and objects that make up the ‘dream kitchen’ from their neat, contained and beautifully packaged forms. As a point of comparison, in her *Kitchen Show* (1991) Baker performs her exaggerated delight in the appearance of food, such as the joy she expresses in a new tub of margarine with its ‘satisfying nipple’ peak in the centre. Baker’s confessional tone also implies the apprehension of regret, having to spoil the neatly packaged product through the process

of consumption. Helen Iball observes Baker's 'preoccupation with food packaging' throughout her performance work, stating that 'it is almost as if she cannot wait to consume [the food] but paradoxically, the packaging also sustains the "moment before" consumption' (75). For me, the popular kitchen designs and objects also exist in that 'moment before;' they function to *suggest* a space and time that *could* be, which is part of their perpetuating appeal. The 'dream kitchen' is an impossible place that is destroyed through the (bodily) process of realising it.

With this in mind, I wanted to explore how I could engage physically with my 'kitchen fantasy' through my practice. I put myself inside the kitchens that I had recreated and covered my body in the substances that are presented so appealingly in popular kitchen representations. This enabled me to embody my 'kitchen fantasies' and the 'desirable' foods and objects in their altered (imperfect) state. As well as the moments of discomfort, exhaustion and frustration that I felt during the performance, I also found pleasure in the immersive experience. In destroying my fantasy I got as close as I could to the 'dream kitchen.' The tension between 'domestic reality' (physical) and 'domestic fantasy' (metaphysical) that I have begun to outline here is echoed in the complex relationship between the body, food and practices of consumption, which will be discussed below.

### **Cake**

*Sometimes it seems a shame to eat a cake and destroy it when it looks so beautiful. At my grandparents' 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration they had two cakes with photographs transposed onto each; one taken on their wedding day and one of them now, much older of course. The cakes were cut into little portions and by coincidence I was given my grandmother's face. I could not bring myself to bite into the cake and destroy the image of my grandmother. While no one was looking I wrapped the cake in my napkin and placed it in my handbag. This cake is kept inside a wooden box in my bedroom.*

Emma Govan and Dan Rebellato use Kristeva in their article 'Foodscapes' to explore cultural problems with food consumption stating that '[a]bjection appears when food [...] threatens to disrupt the integrity of the body, when the boundary between self and other, between what you are and what you eat, is unsettled' (33). Perhaps the possibility of consuming my grandmother's cake became problematic because the boundaries between the cake, my grandmother, and me were disturbed; for Kristeva the human corpse is the 'utmost of abjection' (5) and perhaps through symbolising my grandmother's death the cake too became abject. Govan and Rebellato ask the question,

Are our most disgusted reactions not reactions to finding *our own bodies* in the food we eat? The mucosity of uncooked egg-white; the hairy skin on a peach [...] all these foods recall the body. In response to this impossible doubling, our bodies double over, the food repeats on us, the abjection and slippage of the boundaries of the body have their direct counterpart in the retching, heaving and gagging of the body in crisis. (33)

I am 'in crisis' over my grandmother's cake; maybe it would have been right to eat this cake, to ingest the body that I am already a part of, but perhaps I am disturbed to find my 'own body' in the cake and I am not able to do so.

### **The Dinner Table**

The dinner table is the place, historically, in western culture, where we first experience the complex set of rules and practices that govern the act of eating. The dinner table is prescribed with many rules that contain and control bodily functions and a physical contact with food. Stephen Mennel states that, 'notions of propriety and good taste developed around eating practices and table manners as part of the "civilising" of European society' and that at the dinner table 'good manners' involved a controlling and restraining of the body (qtd in Lupton 20). The physical codes of conduct such as, 'not to

“speak when you have your mouth full, not to eat noisily and to keep ‘all uncooked joints’ (i.e. elbows) off the table are all subtle ways of teaching children to manage their bodies’ (Bell and Valentine 64). This socialising and ritualising of the dinner table becomes a ‘performance’ that arguably detracts from the act of consumption and opposes Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘grotesque body,’ which ‘is frequently associated with food. It is a devouring body, a body in the process of over-indulging, eating, drinking, vomiting and defecating’ (Ashley *et al.* 43). However, the practices in place at the dinner table function to deny the ‘grotesque.’ Ashley *et al.* citing Burch Donald, reference the longstanding rituals employed at the dinner table. The extensive list of cutlery and crockery that has been required can evidence ‘increasingly mediated and complex forms of contact between the body and items of food’ (54) and these objects further disassociate the body from the act of consumption.

Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as, ‘a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed’ (317). Baker’s work explores this notion of an open, fluid and incomplete body which can disturb conventional practices of food and the body. In *Table Occasions* (2000) Baker plays out the anxieties, social inscriptions and cultural practices of the dinner table onto her own body. Balancing precariously in her heels on top of the table, Baker’s body is stretched and pulled into awkward positions and the dinner table becomes a site of potential hazard. Bearing the weight of her soiled table cloth at the end of the show, Baker appears vulnerable, exposed and ridiculous. By rendering her own body grotesque, Baker foregrounds the female labour, responsibility and anxiety connected with the dinner table space.

## Dinner with Jenny

*I would like to introduce you to George, my special dinner table for one on wheels...*



Fig.6. *Dinner with Jenny*, George.

*A photograph (taken from above) of my dinner table set beautifully for dinner is transposed onto the surface. I gesture to the image of the table objects such as the knife and fork, as if they are actually there. A large mirror is suspended above the dinner table positioned at an angle, so that it reflects the table image to the audience.*



Fig.7. *Dinner with Jenny*, photograph of the table set for dinner which was transposed onto the table surface.

*Set the table by learning how to place knife, fork, wine glass, napkin and candlestick.*

**Guest List**

*Mrs Beeton (underneath)*

*Fanny Cradock (standing to my left hand side)*

*Nigella Lawson (on top)*

*As hostess I am responsible for the presentation, the decoration, the cooking, the serving, the drinking, the eating, the table turning, the conversation, the entertainment, the gossip, the drunken spillages, the clearing away, and the after dinner speeches. Hosting dinner is like a kind of solo dance....*



Figs 8 - 10. *Dinner with Jenny*, Engaging with the dinner table.

**Disturbing Objects**

*Dinner with Jenny* attempted to disturb the normative rituals of the dinner table. The missing objects were gradually placed onto the table (filling in the photograph) and I struggled to control and move it around the performance space; the dinner table became an unstable, ‘fraught space’, to use Rebecca Schneider’s term (53).

In *The Book of Household Management*, Mrs Beeton disparages women who fail to keep the household in order and identifies the half an hour before the evening meal as the most difficult time:

The Half-hour before dinner has always been considered as the great ordeal through which the mistress, in giving a dinner-party, will either pass with flying colours, or lose many of her laurels. The anxiety to receive her guests, her hope that all will be present in due time, her trust in the skill of her cook, and the attention of the other domestics – all tend to make those few minutes a trying time. (11)

This can evidence a history of a ‘fraught’ relationship between women and domestic materials; everyday foods, cooking and dining objects can signify the responsibility and expectation inherent in assumed domestic practices and cause anxiety. The construction of Delia Smith as exemplary image in contemporary culture can act to exclude those who do not live up to her standards. Delia was named ‘the nation’s official domestic science teacher’ (Ashely *et.al* 175) and a spokesperson from the BBC stated that her television series *How to Cook* was intended to help people who ‘didn’t learn from their mothers’ (Ashely *et.al.* 174). This rationale for deployment of the Delia image is indicative of a cultural dissatisfaction with the female role and the use of media performance as a strategy to reassert conventional, female, domestic responsibilities.

In *Dinner with Jenny*, Mrs Beeton, Fanny Cradock,<sup>9</sup> and Nigella Lawson were the imaginary cooking idols seated at different places around my table, watching over my dinner. I used these imaginary figures to restrict the way I negotiated my body and the table space. I embodied their cooking and dining actions and re-presented them as extreme and obsessive patterns of behaviour in abstract repetitive sequences. These engagements were designed to problematize the ideal representations of the female food personalities, champions of the ‘domestic fantasy,’ and unsettle their eating and dining conventions.

### **Gift Objects**

*In the final moment of giving a cake I always make sure that I make an entrance. This attracts attention and gives my cakes their own special moment of glory. Nigella has stated that ‘one of the reasons cake baking is so satisfying is that the effort required is so much less than the gratitude conferred’ (Domestic Goddess vii) and this is why I like*

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<sup>9</sup> Appearing in 1955 Fanny Cradock was one of the earliest television chefs in the UK renowned for her extravagant appearance and her elaborate food.



*people to clap, cheer and take time to admire the cake and congratulate me for my efforts.*

The gift of food can be as disturbing as it can be pleasurable and it is not always appropriate to offer food. Govan and Rebellato acknowledge a cultural concern with knowing the origin and identity of the person giving food (36), which is perhaps reflected in the phenomenon of the food *personality*. In 2007 I attended Nigella's book signing event in Manchester. A woman in the queue told me that she had intended to bake Nigella some cookies, but decided against it because her brother had warned that it was not book-signing etiquette to bring food, as Nigella would not be able to accept it. For all her construction as a woman amongst equals, Nigella is also constructed as a celebrity. As such, she is not available for real acts of domestic reciprocity. Accepting food from an unknown source would risk *cultural* contamination. I hope to have suggested in the foregoing that my own practice is itself a kind of cultural contamination. It is designed to mess with – to disturb by inserting itself in – the constructions of women in relation to food in mass culture. It is itself a sort of gift.

*I hope you will accept your cake - don't worry - they say that the first bite is with the eye...*



Fig.11. *Giving Cake*, Royal Holloway College, University of London, June 2008.

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