

Sustenance for Resonance

Evoking resonance in spectators through ecological food performance



Sien Vanmaele - Zeemaal.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how ecological food performance can evoke a sense of resonance in spectators. With growing global concern for the current environmental crisis, food and its production cycle are receiving increased attention, also from performance makers. Whilst food and performance have been combined throughout history, performance events in which food has an artistic relevance of its own are on the rise. Food performance, however, has not received much attention in the field of ecodramaturgy. This thesis puts ecological food performance on the map and defines it as embodied and relational, engaging multiple senses through taste, blurring actor/spectator boundaries, with food as its bioperformative centre, offering new thinking frames about ecology.

I use dramaturgical analysis and concept-based analysis, having developed a performance analysis tool around the concept of resonance as used by Hartmut Rosa. Resonance, for Rosa, is a deep sense of connection, a mode of relating to another entity or the world at large, in which subject and world meet and transform each other. Rosa distinguishes four different qualities of resonance that form the basis for the analytical tool: affect, emotion, transformation and elusiveness. This tool is applied to *Zeemaal* (2022) by Sien Vanmaele, to identify four key scenes and corresponding dramaturgical strategies in the performance that may evoke a sense of resonance in spectators.

I conclude that ecological food performance has the potential to evoke resonance not only through embodiment, the engagement of the senses and relationality, broader food performance strategies, but also through two dramaturgical strategies that are specific to ecological food performance. Using taste, and more specifically disgust, to alienate the spectator from the food creates a potential for aesthetic resonance through interaction with the performer or fellow spectators. Focalising natural (edible) elements creates a potential for resonance with nature in an aestheticised context.

Keywords: *food performance, ecology, ecodramaturgy, resonance, affect, transformation*

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Introduction

“Hors d'oeuvre”

An oval-shaped audience seating area meets a restaurant setting, with a downstairs and an upstairs platform that surrounds a performance space. Or at least, we know a performance will take place; if we did not, it would be easy to believe we were about to witness a meal preparation, or even a chemical experiment. The stage is filled with cooking gear and chemistry equipment: knives, volumetric flasks, pipettes... It looks like a kitchen laboratory. Our hands have just been washed and sprayed with sea-buckthorn oil, making them smell like a summer day at the oceanside. The space is not bright, rather lit in a faint blue. On the desk-like tables in front of us, an array of shells, most of them filled with seemingly edible but unknown foods, has been laid out for us. The expectant atmosphere is palpable as Sien Vanmaele, theatre maker and food performance artist, steps onto the oval-shaped performance space. A poetic journey takes off: of visiting, cooking with, eating, and ultimately becoming, the sea.

In this thesis, I examine food as a performance medium in ecological performance. In my case study *Zeemaal* (2022), the performance of which I have just described the opening setting, the climate crisis and ecological thinking is front and centre. The tagline of the performance is *cooking in preparation for the end of the world*: the audience is invited to follow the story about climate fear and desperation whilst cooking and eating plant based foods from the sea, that is presented as the food of the future. Food and ecology are combined in this performance that wants spectators to (re)connect with the sea from which they, ultimately, originate. This research finds itself on a triangle where three academic areas join: first, the overlap between food and performance as sensorial, choreographed, ritualistic and ephemeral; second, ecology, new materialism and human/non-human relationality; and third, anti-accelerationism (or deceleration), slow food and resonance. I explain each of these separately, before bringing them together in the analysis of *Zeemaal*.

Food and performance through the ages

Food and performance have been combined throughout history, as demonstrated by issue 4.1 of *Performance Research Journal*, on Cooking, as early as 1999.¹ Food and performance share

¹ Richard Gough, ed., *On Cooking, Performance Research* 4 no. 1 (1999), 1–156.

some significant similarities: both have a certain ephemerality, sensory attentiveness and affectiveness.² They are rituals or ritualised activities, they have a certain choreography and a sense of play.³ In her keynote essay to said issue, ‘Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium’, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that “food, and all that is associated with it, is [...] larger than life. It is [...] highly charged with meaning and affect. It is [...] performative and theatrical. An art of the concrete, food, like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory.”⁴ Artists have worked with food throughout history. From *Opera gastronomica*, Renaissance feasts for all the senses that combined music, dancing, poetry, food, painting, sculpture, costume, and set design, to Taqui Onqoy trance dancers in 16th century Peru, “who arose to satisfy the hunger of the huacas (local shrines), whose spirits had entered their bodies, because the huacas no longer received food offerings,” to *Machina Cuccagna*, edible monuments that were elaborate structures of food fountains that were displayed, paraded, serenaded and then consumed in mid-eighteenth-century Naples.⁵ Food - or the lack thereof - has played a significant role in the arts and in performances for centuries and across the world.

Sander Janssens, theatre critic for Dutch newspaper *NRC*, writes that currently, at least in the Netherlands, food as part of a performance is often used as a pleasant add-on to the event, but hardly at the centre.⁶ However, he also observes that including it as the artistic centre of the performance is still rare, but a phenomenon on the rise. In these instances, food has a particular artistic relevance of its own, it ‘performs’. I want to examine this phenomenon further by analysing what happens when food is a lead actor in a performance and what performance and food can offer each other in an ecological context.

Food in ecological art

In recent decades, with growing global attention for the environmental crisis due to global warming, the food that is on our plates and the ways of producing and distributing it is under increased scrutiny. Although it could be argued that any performance that involves food is ‘ecological’ in its own right, if only because it deals with matters of nutrition that sustain life,

² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 4, no. 1 (1999): 1-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.1999.10871639>.

³ Sonja Stummerer and Martin Hablesreiter/Honey & Bunny, “Play with your food,” in *Food. Bigger than the plate*, ed. Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan (London: V&A Publishing, 2019), 139-40.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Richard Gough, “Devouring Theatre,” *Performance Research* 22, no. 7 (2017): 10.; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Opera Gastronomica,” *Copia* 3, no. 1 (2000): 12.; Enzo Cozzi, “Hunger and the Future of Performance,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 4, no. 1 (1999): 124.

⁶ Sander Janssens, “De theatermaaltijd neemt een vlucht. Soms speelt niet een acteur, maar een maaltijd de hoofdrol,” *NRC*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/02/15/theater-met-eten-applaus-voor-het-geslachte-varken-a4157153>.

there are a number of artists who use food in performance to somehow challenge, subvert or grapple with this reality of environmental destruction. They make what I call *ecological food performance*, a type of performance that utilises food as a performance medium to engage implicitly or explicitly with ecological themes and the environmental crisis.

Artists across the artworld are working with food in an ecological context. In *Food. Bigger than the plate*, the catalogue to the 2019 exhibition of the same name in the V&A in London, Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan shed light on how artists have developed ideas for alternative food futures in recent years, in response to a global desire for a fair and sustainable food system.⁷ Artists are exploring ‘more-than-human’ collaborations with animals and microbes in a variety of ways.⁸ Most people in industrial countries have a passive consumer relationship with their food, despite eating being “an intimate part of our biological and social being.”⁹ Flood and Rosenthal Sloan believe that by bringing food debates to the realms of culture and everyday lives, artists begin to challenge this sense of alienation.¹⁰ This way of artistic meaning-making responds to the call for new paradigms that see the social and ecological impacts of our food and the “desire to see food as less of a thing and more of a relationship.”¹¹ Flood and Rosenthal Sloan succinctly summarise why food and art are a necessary pairing in times of ecological crisis:

As a subject that extends so far and in so many directions, artists [...] are discovering food as a powerful tool through which to engage critically with the systems that govern our lives. Food unfolds ways of seeing the world, but also of identifying our agency in it. We live in an era of digital networks, but by ingesting food we become materially entangled and implicated in a host of relationships. When we use food to think through the world, we can never do it entirely as outsiders looking in, and this makes food a close and affective way to work with social and ecological ideas. As Elspeth Probyn writes, ‘the question of how to live today can best be seen at gut level.’¹²

The way food *performs* in performance events that deal with these themes, can be analysed from a new materialist perspective that renegotiates human/non-human actors on stage from a Deleuzian, relational viewpoint. New materialism in relation to performance, as

⁷ Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan, “Introduction,” in *Food. Bigger than the plate*, ed. Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan (London: V&A Publishing, 2019), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

explained by Rebecca Schneider, explores “expanding ideas of what constitutes the live — the animate, the vibrant, the vital” and includes “the lives and deaths of entities formerly known as passive objects, inanimate things, inert matter — the onstage and offstage “life of props.””¹³ It states that not only human actors have a role to play on the theatre stage, but objects or (formerly) alive entities (such as vegetables or meat) do as well. It also believes “that all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation.”¹⁴ This resonates with Deleuze’s thinking on affect: it shifts the emphasis from a focus on things themselves, to how they are produced and invented in relation to other entities.¹⁵

Let me share some examples of food performances in an ecological context, work that I will define as *ecological food performance*. In *Slachtvisite* (2021) by Peergroup, the pig is the central ‘character’ and the question ‘what path did the piece of meat on your plate take?’ the starting point.¹⁶ The animal, dead on the stage but alive only yesterday, is being turned into ham and roast by real life butchers during the performance. At the start of the performance, a five-course pork meal is served, then followed by a montage of animations, songs, and videos about the products that part of the pig will end up in (chewing gum, soap...) and about the gassing of pigs in slaughterhouses.¹⁷ In addition, Mediamatic commissioned artists Gwen van der Zwan, Krisztina Czika and chef Bryce Steba to develop a five-course dinner, using eating bodily substances as a starting point, to challenge how we take eating other beings for granted but are up in arms when consuming a piece of human. Spectators had the option to donate blood (under expert guidance), wax a patch of skin, file their nails or provide their tears.¹⁸ Lastly, Flemish collective Laika, with its tagline ‘theatre of the senses’ made several productions relating food to ecology, such as *BALSAM* (2020) and my case study for this thesis, Sien Vanmaele’s *Zeemaal* (2022), that forms a trilogy with *Landmaal* (2023), as well as the forthcoming *Luchtmaal*.

¹³ Rebecca Schneider, “New Materialisms and Performance Studies,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 4 (winter 2015): 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Rebecca Coleman, “Affect,” in *Gender: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies*, ed. Renée C. Hoogland (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2016), 21.

¹⁶ Hein Janssen, “In de voorstelling *Slachtvisite* kijkt het publiek mee met slagerswerk,” *de Volkskrant*, November 18, 2021,

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/in-de-voorstelling-slachtvisite-kijkt-het-publiek-mee-met-slagerswerk~b45d2eae/>.

¹⁷ “*Slachtvisite*,” Peergroup, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.peergroup.nl/slachtvisite>.

¹⁸ “Het Eten van Mensen - Neo Futurist Dinner 8: met Gwen van der Zwan, Krisztina Czika en Bryce Steba,” Mediamatic, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.mediamatic.net/nl/page/373665/het-eten-van-mensen>.

Slow food and resonance

Next to performance-based and new materialist approaches to food and performance, a third field of influence for these pieces is the slow food movement. This movement, a descendant of the countercultural and anti-consumerist movements of the 1960s and 70s, focuses on sustainable food production and criticises acceleration in the food chain.¹⁹ In *Resonance - a sociology of our relationship to the world*, sociologist Hartmut Rosa defines acceleration as “an irrevocable *tendency toward escalation* rooted in the fact that the social formation of modernity cannot stabilize itself except dynamically.”²⁰ In other words, modern capitalist society has to constantly expand, grow and innovate to reproduce itself structurally and culturally: it “must always be dynamically accelerating.”²¹ The dysfunction that this systemic tendency toward escalation creates, can be seen in the environmental crisis in which the relation between the human and non-human is disturbed.²² In fact, acceleration leads to us destroying the world we try to control: “the destruction of our natural environment is the opposite of what we dreamt of, and in turn, nature becomes a threat to us.”²³

The food supply chain illustrates the disturbing effects of ever-increasing acceleration. The slow food movement argues that acceleration destroys our natural environment and has left us alienated from it.²⁴ As ecological food performance concerns itself with precisely these themes of environmental destruction and alienation, it is logical to make a link with Rosa’s ‘antidote’ to acceleration. This antidote is a feeling of aliveness that Rosa calls ‘resonance’: “a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other.”²⁵ The subject, in this case, is the spectator or attendee of an ecological food performance, and the world is represented by the food in/and this performance setting. I expand on resonance in the theoretical framework below.

¹⁹ Luca Simonetti, “The ideology of Slow Food,” *Journal of European Studies* 42, no. 2 (May 2012): 168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244112436908>.

²⁰ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Polity Press, 2018), 24.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 24-25.

²³ Hartmut Rosa, “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa.” interview by Bjørn Schiermer, E-Special: Four Generations of Critical Theory in *Acta Sociologica*, Sage Journals, 2016, 3. https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration_and_Resonance.pdf.

²⁴ “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa.” 3. Luca Simonetti, “The ideology of Slow Food,” *Journal of European Studies* 42, no. 2 (May 2012): 168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244112436908>.

²⁵ Susan Satterfield, “The Resonance of Resonance: Critical Theory as a Sociology of World-Relations?,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33 (March 2019): 309.

Case study: Zeemaal

The phenomenon at hand here are performances with an ecological agenda that use food as a performance actor. I use the first performance of a trilogy by Flemish artist Sien Vanmaele, *Zeemaal*, as a case study. In *Zeemaal*, Vanmaele presents a character in a theatrical setting, who was full of zest for life, but now suffers from climate anxiety. The protagonist alleviates her fear by engaging very concretely with food, especially seaweeds and algae, as she has always felt close to the sea and feels a need to 'return' to it.²⁶ Starting with the sea, the place from which all life – including her own – springs, the spectator is taken on a sensory journey along beaches and cliffs in which they look, listen, smell, feel, taste, as well as cut, mash and mix.²⁷ The second performance in the trilogy, *Landmaal* (2023), is a theatrical ritual in which Vanmaele battles food waste and invites spectators to her 'altar of outcast food'. In this high mass of bacteria and ferments, she works with yesterday's bread, blistered vegetables, dented fruit and micro-organisms.²⁸ *Luchtmaal*, the third performance, is forthcoming.

This trilogy, and much of the eco-theatre made in the Dutch-language sector, is made with a clear objective: making its audience realise that we have to change how we eat (or how we live in general) to save the planet. Vanmaele has stated specifically that she wants spectators to alter their behaviour after seeing this performance.²⁹ But, if the work is made with that clear message in mind, it may well be a lecture or another event and may miss the mark artistically.³⁰ Or, as theatre critic Evelyne Coussens describes it in *Theaterkrant*, by being overtly political in its messaging and objective it risks losing art's unique aspect of using the imagination to explore new potentialities.³¹ So what is unique about performance and food in bringing this ecological message about? What are the dramaturgical strategies employed in combining the affective aspects of food and performance to bring about an ecological message, and what is their artistic value in making resonance come to be?

²⁶ Tuur Devens, "Gezamenlijk verwonderen om dit bijzondere 'laatste' avondmaal," *Theaterkrant*, December 30, 2023, <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/landmaal/laika-sien-vanmaele/>.

²⁷ "Projecten," Sien Vanmaele, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.sienvanmaele.be/projecten>.

²⁸ "Landmaal," Laika, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.laika.be/NL/landmaal>.

²⁹ Evelyne Coussens, "Klimaatangst verwerkt tot onschuldig kookprogramma," *Theaterkrant*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/zeemaal/sien-vanmaele-laika/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Research question

To be able to coherently answer these initial questions above, I have developed the following research question:

How can ecological food performance evoke a sense of resonance in spectators?

To answer this question, I will use the following subquestions:

1. How can the academic debates on food performance and performance and ecology inform each other to define ecological food performance?
2. How can we use Hartmut Rosa's understanding of resonance as a lens to analyse the dramaturgical strategies in ecological food performance?
3. How do the dramaturgical strategies in Sien Vanmaele's *Zeemaal* create a potential for resonance to occur?

Theoretical framework and methodology

To answer my research question, I will use two main methods: concept-based analysis and dramaturgical analysis. My first chapter sets out to define ecological food performance, by bringing together the academic debate on food performance and literature on performance and ecology. I first identify three main characteristics of food performance, after which I incorporate new materialist ideas on food as a performance medium.

In the second chapter, I introduce the concept of resonance as used by sociologist Hartmut Rosa, and develop it as a performance analysis tool. Resonance, for Rosa, is the answer to modern society's mode of dynamic stabilisation: modern (Western) society needs to accelerate to maintain its status quo.³² This way of thinking is also used by performance studies scholars analysing ecocritical artistic work. Carl Lavery writes, for example, that "in a capitalist and global culture addicted to the accelerationist 'high' that carbon consumption, smart machines and fibre optics invariably supply, it comes as no surprise to find artists and critics asking new questions about what art can do."³³ Rosa distinguishes four different qualities of resonance: affect, emotion, transformation and elusiveness. My second chapter uses these separate qualities as the basis for the analytical tool.

³² Hartmut Rosa, "Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa." interview by Bjørn Schiermer, E-Special: Four Generations of Critical Theory in Acta Sociologica, Sage Journals, 2016, 3. https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration_and_Resonance.pdf.

³³ Carl Lavery, "Theatre and time ecology: deceleration in *Stifters Dinge* and *L'Effet de Serge*," in *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*, ed. Carl Lavery (Routledge, 2021), 76.

The third chapter puts the concept of resonance to the test of analysing performance. What dramaturgical strategies can be employed to create the conditions in which resonance might occur through ecological food performance? I analyse Sien Vanmaele's *Zeemaal* employing concept-based analysis combined with dramaturgical analysis. Dramaturgical analysis, a method developed by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx in "Dramaturgical analysis. A relational approach", is based on a dramaturgical triad composed of three elements: composition, spectator, and context.³⁴ Composition refers to the strategies used to structure a performance, including creation principles, preparatory research, plot structures, movement patterns, and theatrical means like acting styles, costumes, and lighting. Spectator analysis focuses on how spectators are addressed during a performance, exploring modes of spectatorial address and the active participation of spectators in meaning-making processes. An analysis of the context, then, considers the social and artistic contexts in which a work is embedded, including cultural, economic, and political influences, as well as the artistic biotope of the maker. Dramaturgical analysis emphasises the interconnectedness of these three elements: a performance event always involves all three aspects and requires a relational approach of composition, spectatorship, and context.³⁵ I use these methods to analyse four key scenes in *Zeemaal* with a potential for evoking resonance. The conclusion answers the research question for as much as the scope of the research allows and offers avenues for further research.

³⁴ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: A relational approach," *Forum+* 28, no. 3, (October 2021): 4-16, <https://www.forum-online.be/en/issues/herfst-2021/dramaturgical-analysis-a-relational-approach>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 1 - Defining ecological food performance

“Amuse-bouche”

How can the academic debates on food performance and performance and ecology inform each other to define ecological food performance?

A room full of expectant spectators. The tables around them are prepared for dinner, with table cloths, glasses and candles, although plates and cutlery are missing. The group sits in a circle in front of the tables. We close our eyes. Silence. A communal breath or two. Then, we are invited to stick out our hand. It is filled with something round, warm, soft. A moment later, something drips over it. Then, little sprinkles, like mini hailstones. Without opening our eyes, we are poetically guided to smell, lick, and take a bite of what turns out to be a potato, sprinkled with olive oil and seasalt. A shiver down my spine releases the anxiety I felt about tasting something that I could not see first, and replaces it with a sense of aliveness and arousal. And this was only the appetiser of this sensory six course meal, the opening session of *Het Jaar van Verlangen* (The Year of Desire), a series of theatrical sessions around yearning and longing in 2023, by Dutch theatre maker Marte Boneschansker. For this theatrical meal she collaborated with scenographer Katrijn Westland and food designer Tessa Straver. My relationship with desire is forever changed.



Marte Boneschansker, Jaar van Verlangen, 2023. Photo: Jeroen Bessems

I sketch this example here because this dinner contains several key elements of contemporary *food performance*: embodiment, taste and relationality. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss these elements to establish the characteristics of food performance, using this event, that does not have explicit ecological components, as a guidance. Interestingly, the mentioned categories are all relevant in ecological performance as well, but somehow the literature on food performance misses a more explicit ecological interpretation and vice versa. By first unpacking these ‘general’ food performance characteristics, I can afterwards use those same categories to uncover the analogies between food performance and ecological performance and unveil how they inform each other in recent ecodramaturgical work involving food. To establish what characterises the phenomenon of *ecological food performance*, I use the second section of this chapter to draw from new materialism and ecodramaturgical literature and apply that to the established food performance categories, to arrive at an actionable definition of ecological food performance.

I. *How food performs*

1.1 *Embodiment*

To begin with the most obvious and literal food performance element: being a spectator in a food performance event involves eating. It is an embodied experience; the consumption of food is an explicit *artistic* element of food performance as I understand it here. In order to experience the *Jaar van Verlangen* performance, you had to close your eyes, feel the warm blob of unknown edible substance in your hand and *dare to have a taste*.

There are many ways to involve food in performance, not all of which involve an embodied experience for the spectator; makers may use food as a scenographic element without inviting the spectator to have a taste, for example.³⁶ Let me motivate why *embodied* food performance is the phenomenon at hand here. The historical fused food art forms Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to, mentioned in the introduction, played to all the senses and always involved the spectator eating (part of) a meal. Later on, these multisensorial fused forms were turned into separate events: dramatic theatre plays and dinners. Based on the reemerging of these events in contemporary performance, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls for a renewed understanding of theatre in relation to the *senses*, widening the scope of embodiment in

³⁶ Emma Govan and Dan Rebellato, “Foodscapes! The Pleasures and Dangers of Culinary Theatre,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 4, no. 1 (1999): 31-41.

performance to include taste and smell.³⁷ By adding an ecological perspective to food performance, I am responding to her call with a contribution to this.

The call also alludes to the development of performance studies as a separate artistic and academic field, as Erica Fisher-Lichte writes about in *The transformative power of performance*. The dramatic theatre concerns itself predominantly with two senses: seeing and hearing. A spectator can take a relatively 'passive' position of sitting, watching and listening, without having to engage their body in any more active form. Performance, however, may turn spectators into participants or 'actors' and through that, opens up a range of sensorial possibilities.³⁸

Fisher-Lichte mentions Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas*, in which the artist ate an entire jar of honey, drank excessive amounts of wine and subjected herself to torture until the spectators became actors by getting up from their seats, taking care of her and thereby ending the performance.³⁹ Although in this case, spectators were not the ones consuming the food and wine, they might have *felt* the extreme discomfort in their own bodies through Abramovic's, to the point that they decided to intervene. Another example she draws from is Hermann Nitsch's performative actions in which spectators were turned into actors and their bodies "were sprayed with blood, faeces, dishwater, and other fluids and were invited to slop about in the gore, disembowel the lamb, eat meat, and drink wine."⁴⁰ From these performance art events, the food performance practice developed further into the performance examples mentioned in the introduction, that are all embodied experiences through the invitation to eat along with the event. Food performance nowadays blurs actor/spectator boundaries and demands embodied spectator participation through eating, engaging a plurality of senses rather than merely seeing and listening. As such, consuming food as a spectator has become an integral part of the artistic experience.

1.2 Taste

Consuming food means engaging the senses; *tasting* is key to food performance. Taste is a complex sense, as unlike other senses, it relies completely, as Jenny Lawson writes, on a "confluence" of the senses.⁴¹ It operates in multiple modalities as a sensory experience, not only through the mouth and the nose, but also through the eye, ear and skin. Taste thus has unique sensory modalities, says Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.⁴² The brief *Jaar van Verlangen* example

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance - A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2008), 21.

³⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁴¹ Jenny Lawson, "Transformative Taste-Encounters," *Performance Research* 22, no. 7 (2017): 49.

⁴² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses," 2,3.

illustrates this important aspect of taste: the fact that we also taste with our eyes, and thus use multiple senses when tasting in general. This opens up a range of sensorial possibilities for food performance makers.

Writing on taste and the separation – or what she calls, “dissociation” – of the senses, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett shows this can also be used deliberately in performance.⁴³ She states that while “we eat to satisfy hunger and nourish our bodies, some of the most radical effects occur precisely when food is dissociated from eating and eating from nourishment.”⁴⁴ When the potato was placed in my hand as a singular *object* that I was to touch, smell and lick without setting eyes on it, rather than in between five other of its kind on a plate with a bit of gravy and broccoli, I was in a way alienated from it, and through that, the potato became something new. Boneschansker, Westland and Straver made use of the fact that our eyes “let us ‘taste’ food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell.”⁴⁵ They realised that even “a feast for the eyes only will engage the other senses imaginatively, for to see is not only to taste, but also to eat.”⁴⁶ Thus, by *removing* one of the senses that we use for tasting, the potato, the salt and the oil performed their newness, producing the above described associations with comfort, hailstones and bodily fluids.

Taste, however, is not only a sense: it is also an aesthetic faculty. To illustrate how this duality plays out in food performance, I use Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s distinction of three junctures on which food and performance “conceptually converge”.⁴⁷ First, she claims, “*to perform is to do*,” to perform the acts that come with producing, distributing, making and serving food, much like those needed to stage a performance.⁴⁸ Secondly, she points out that “*to perform is to behave*,” dealing with food is a matter of customs, etiquette and ritual that govern how we eat together.⁴⁹ Finally, “*to perform is to show*,” eating together invites people to show their appreciation, evaluation or perhaps dissatisfaction, which moves food events towards the theatrical and the spectacular.⁵⁰ It is in this *showing*, of appreciation, disgust or discernment, that the sensory experience of taste and taste as an aesthetic faculty conceptually converge.⁵¹ When I, however subtly, showed my appreciation of this potato that had an exquisite taste because of the performative way in which it was presented to me, it was both because of its

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁵¹ Ibid.

flavour (taste as a sensory experience) and its pleasurable presentation in a performance setting (taste as an aesthetic faculty).

Richard Gough writes – with regards to taste in the sense of the aesthetic faculty – that the concept of aesthetics emerged from “*aisthēsis* (meaning full, total, sense-perception).”⁵² In the original sense of the word, knowledge was received through all the senses. As the origin of the word becomes forgotten – Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that, during the Enlightenment, aesthetics came to mean a philosophy of beauty in relation to sensory experience – “sense perception (especially taste and smell, gustatory and olfactory) become separate from reason and logic (logos).”⁵³ In other words, originally, having an aesthetic experience meant having all your senses engaged, in a multisensory perception. Then, during European enlightenment, aesthetic experience demanded a separation of the senses, as an emphasis on reason and the written word developed. This mirrors the development of dramatic theatre with passive spectators who only engage two senses: seeing and listening. Contemporary food performance uses taste as both a sense and an aesthetic faculty to attempt to return to, or reinvent, a more multisensory aesthetic experience.

1.3 *Relationality*

The multisensory modalities of taste and the convergence of taste as a sensory experience and taste as an aesthetic faculty imply a relationality between the different senses and between food and the performative experience. Lawson also observes that the decipherability of taste is “always already relational.”⁵⁴

The *Jaar van Verlangen* event was a taste encounter with a transformative capacity. The potato and the poetic instructions given by the performers as to how to engage with it served as a vehicle for me to transform my own relationship with desire and yearning. I am someone with a lot of desire, longing and yearning that takes place in my head. The physicality of consuming food, in an aesthetically pleasing way, in a performance setting, with ample inventive subtle alienating ways of presenting the food, whilst being asked to simultaneously share these desires out loud with another, unfamiliar spectator, allowed me to feel these desires in my body, to shape them into substance, in a way. Engaging in the performance produced a relationality between my desire and the food, a relation between myself and another spectator, and ultimately, a relation between my desire and my body.

⁵² Gough, “Devouring Theatre,” 15.

⁵³ Ibid.; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 2.

⁵⁴ Jenny Lawson, “Transformative Taste-Encounters,” *Performance Research* 22, no. 7 (2017): 49.

In his exploration of taste and smell in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* that Lawson draws from in her article, philosopher Michael Serres describes taste as “a kiss that our mouth gives itself through the intermediary of tasty foods. Suddenly it recognizes itself, becomes conscious of itself, exists for itself.”⁵⁵ By tasting the potato and other foods later on, my body recognised desires that previously lived only in my mind. The food served only as the vehicle for that recognition. Serres claims that cooked food’s relational nature “invents coalescences” and leads to culture and knowledge, as fusions of one body into another (animals and plants becoming part of a human, for example) take place at all times, in every kitchen and at every dinner table.⁵⁶ However, in daily life in high-paced, late-stage capitalism, many humans no longer recognise the coalescences or relations that take shape between the different bodies in the kitchen and at the dinner table. They merely consume food as nourishment, without paying particular attention to its taste. By tasting actively rather than mere consuming, as food performance invites spectators to do, our dormant *taste* is, according to Serres, awakened. In this way, it allows for a potentiality of relational transformation through the tasted object, as I experienced at *Jaar van Verlangen*.⁵⁷ Becoming aware of the relationality (between the food and your body, between the different senses used for tasting, between yourself and the other humans with whom you are seated at the table, between the food and the other performative elements, etcetera) is thus a pivotal aspect of food performance.

II. *Putting the ‘eco’ in ecological food performance*

Having established these three key characteristics of food performance, the *ecological* in ecological food performance now deserves attention. How can food performance be situated within the conceptual field of performance and ecology, and what role can ecology play in food performance? To answer this question, I first define ecology in relation to the climate crisis and briefly sketch some relevant literature on performance and ecology, to then establish how the categories of embodiment (with taste as a sensory modality implied in this concept) and relationality are also relevant in ecological work.

⁵⁵ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 224.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

2.1 Defining ecology

It is key to, first and foremost, define ecology, for which I draw from Lisa Woynarski's recent work *Ecodramaturgies - Theatre, Performance and Climate Change*.⁵⁸ Woynarski writes that the term does not refer to the "biological scientific study of organisms in the environment but the way in which we as human beings relate to each other, our environment, and the more-than-human world."⁵⁹ She cites Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart who state that ecology "describes the interconnected relationships of the living world, 'the study of animals and plants, our habitat and environment, as well as the analysis of the interrelationships between us all.'"⁶⁰ Although ecology can thus not be equated with 'the climate,' in the reality of environmental destruction we live in it is nonsensical to discuss ecology without relating to the climate crisis. In their 2010 work *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton calls our current global ecological circumstances due to unprecedented global warming a catastrophe and a crisis.⁶¹ In their 2013 work *Hyperobjects : Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, they go one step further and call it "the ecological trauma of our age, the very thing that defines the Anthropocene as such," for which "an appropriate level of shock and anxiety" is desperately needed.⁶² Climate change may be just an aspect of ecology, says Woynarski, but "it is the grand narrative of our current ecological context."⁶³ The climate crisis is ecological because "it requires an urgent and radical reconsideration of the relationship between humans and the earth, how we live and how we shape, and are shaped by, the more-than-human world."⁶⁴ Importantly, Woynarski adds, this requires a consideration of the relationships between humans as well, examining "how climate change intensifies inequalities and injustices, falling along familiar patterns of vulnerability and marginalisation: race, gender, class, disability, social mobility, political capital and colonisation."⁶⁵

2.2 Embodiment in ecological performance

So what can performance do? Carl Lavery asks the same question in the 2018 edited volume *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*. His approach is radically different from a lot of work in Theatre and Performance Studies that advocates "for a direct intervention into

⁵⁸ Lisa Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies Theatre, Performance and Climate Change* (Reading: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies*, 2.

⁶² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 8-9.

⁶³ Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies*, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

ecological and environmental matters and/or makes largely positive – perhaps even hyperbolic – claims for theatre’s capacity to bring about behaviour change.”⁶⁶ Instead, he says, we should reflect on how theatre works as a medium, as according to Elinor Fuchs and Bonnie Marranca “theatre’s ecological contribution is not found in any explicit ecocritical message it may purport to communicate, but rather resides in the more oblique possibilities inherent in the theatrical medium itself.”⁶⁷ One such possibility may be found in what performance *does*, in how “its dramaturgical distribution of organic and inorganic bodies in actual time and space creates sensations and experiences in the here and now,” and in its “immanent capacity for affecting bodies, individually and collectively.”⁶⁸

A clear analogy with regards to embodiment can be drawn with food performance already: it arranges or distributes bodies – human and food, both organic perhaps, but the food is no longer alive – in actual time and space, in a way that has the potential to create affect in the here and now. I elaborate on affect in chapter 2; for now it suffices to state that theatre and (food) performance offer “new frames of thinking, feeling and viewing, or tell/show us something about our current ecological situation.”⁶⁹ They have the ability to invite ecological thinking in ways that are unique to other mediums, because of the liveness, immediacy and embodiment of the theatrical medium, and its capacity to affect bodies – those of the spectator, performer and non-human bodies (such as food) alike.

2.3 Relationality and the more-than-human

Let us turn more in detail to a dramaturgical theme present in a large body of ecological performance that shows the analogies with relationality: the non-human or the more-than-human. A foundational work with regards to this is Jane Bennet’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.⁷⁰ In the work, she theorises the political agency of natural phenomena and things, such as weather, food and electricity, examining how non-human elements influence social relations and politics. This thought lies at the basis of new materialism, which, as Rebecca Schneider explains, believes “all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation.”⁷¹ Schneider also states that new materialist thought acknowledges that “matter engages with matter as well as with (or without) humans, who are also matter” and that it sees matter as both agential and discursive, with a

⁶⁶ Carl Lavery, “Introduction: performance and ecology - what can theatre do?,” in *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*, ed. Carl Lavery (Routledge, 2021), 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷¹ Rebecca Schneider, “New Materialisms and Performance Studies,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 4 (winter 2015): 7.

capacity for meaning-making outside linguistic boundaries, something it shares with performance studies.⁷² Food, as a non-human entity, is thus able to produce meaning in relation to the matter it engages with, much like Serres' argument. Bennet understands food as "an interconnected series of parts" in a constantly mutating system of human and nonhuman activities, where the interconnectedness between them is key.⁷³ Wyonarski also bases herself on Bennet's thought, citing how inanimate (or dead) things, such as food, have "thing-power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."⁷⁴ Wyonarski argues that ecodramaturgy is about recognising how more-than-human matter performs, going beyond the general understanding of performativity as a solely human affair. To counter this anthropocentrism she coins the term bioperformativity, which entails "the biological/material and the performative effects of things" and can be used to critique and interpret "the way the human and more-than-human are categorised and constituted in performance, acknowledging more-than-human performances through drawing attention to embodied ecological relationships, emotions, ideologies and political effects."⁷⁵ In ecodramaturgy, following this new materialist thought, food can thus be understood as biperformative, influencing the matter (including humans) that it relates to and interacts with, and vice versa.

Combining the various qualities of food as sketched in this chapter, ecological food performance can be defined as an embodied and relational type of performance, in which taste is a crucial aspect. It blurs actor/spectator boundaries, engaging multiple senses through the relational sensorial modalities of taste, by inviting active spectator participation. The food in ecological food performance is biperformative; it is able to produce meaning in relation to the matter or entity (such as the spectator) it engages with. Rather than aiming to directly change behaviour, ecological food performance offers new frames of thinking, feeling and viewing about our current ecological situation and food cycle, in a way unique to other mediums because of its liveness and the affective arrangement of organic and inorganic bodies in time and space. It critiques and extends thinking about ecological interconnected relationships, in response to the need for a radical reconsideration of the relationship between humans and the earth, how we live, how we eat and how we shape, and are shaped by, the more-than-human world.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 97.

⁷⁴ Wyonarski, *Ecodramaturgies*, 71.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

Chapter 2 - Resonance as a dramaturgical lens

“Entrée”

How can we use Hartmut Rosa’s understanding of resonance as a lens to analyse the dramaturgical strategies in ecological food performance?

Resonance is the momentary appearance, the flash of a connection to a source of strong evaluations in a predominantly silent and often repulsive world. Hence moments of intense resonant experience (a sunset, captivating music, being in love, etc.) are always also filled with moments of intense longing. They contain the promise of a different way of relating to the world – we might even say that in a certain sense, they offer a promise of salvation. They convey a sense of being deeply connected with something.⁷⁶

Ecological food performance makers must grapple with the addiction to accelerating that Rosa and also Lavery observe. What can art do in a society that keeps accelerating to maintain its very stability? By exploring the role of resonance in ecological food performance I hope to show how theatre actively relates to this pressing concern of our time.

I have established that acceleration – in the food cycle, in the use of fossil fuels and natural resources, in technology, in society as a whole – leads to, among other things, environmental destruction. On a human level, it leads to a state of alienation – from the way the food on your plate is grown and modified, from nature, from the physical, embodied world, from other humans. Alienation, according to Rosa, is a “specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection.”⁷⁷ Rosa states that resonance is the antidote to acceleration and the antithesis to alienation and makes clear that resonance is about relating to the world and all that constitutes it, in an engaged and connected way.

To define what it means to resonate with another human, the food on your plate, or, in the context of this thesis, an ecological food performance and its artistic qualities and/or ecological messaging, instead of being alienated from it, it is helpful to turn to the etymology of the word. *Re-sonare*, in Latin, means resound. Rosa uses the example of two tuning forks, in which the vibration of one body prompts the other to vibrate in return, at its own frequency. This response is not mechanical but the two vibrating bodies speak to each other in their own

⁷⁶ Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 278.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

voice. What is more, they can enlarge each other's effect, becoming more than the sum of parts.⁷⁸ From this simple, visual example, the meaning of resonance can be deduced: something or someone begins the vibration of one of the tuning forks, by which two bodies, in their own voice, affect one another and transform each other. This first vibration can come from the 'world', something outside of your own body that sets the vibration in motion, but a human can also start the vibration. The ability to do this depends on 'perceived self-efficacy': one's ability to act and enter into social relationships, which is dependent on one's ability to be confident in themselves and to influence their environment in a controlled manner.⁷⁹ Perceived self-efficacy determines the extent to which human beings have the "ability and desire to generate resonance" rather than only experience it – artists who are able to present an ecological food performance, for example, have sufficient perceived self-efficacy to be the initiator of potentially resonant experiences.⁸⁰ Importantly, based on this affecting and being affected, resonance is thus strictly a relational concept, not an emotional state, and it describes a mode of *being-in-the-world* – the mode the citation at the start of this section puts into words.⁸¹

Rosa distinguishes four different qualities of resonance: affect, emotion, transformation and elusiveness. This chapter explains these qualities and uses them to create a framework through which ecological food performance can be analysed.

The motivation to use this particular concept as the foundation for this analytical tool does not stem merely from thematic links between acceleration and ecological destruction and the way food performance makers respond to those observations with ecodramaturgical work. It also stems from the way Rosa believes humans can experience resonance. He distinguishes three axes or dimensions of resonance: one that connects us to other humans, one that connects us to material things such as objects in the mode of work or education, and a lastly one that "gives us a sense of how we are connected to the world, or nature, or life, or some such ultimate reality as a whole."⁸² This last dimension is experienced "through the practices and conceptions of religion, nature, art or history."⁸³ Rosa argues specifically that art is a way to *experience* resonance and the ecological awareness that it brings about. By bringing this sociological concept and conviction to performance studies, I make visible *how* art, and specifically ecological food performance, may bring about resonance, and what dramaturgical strategies may contribute to that.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 252-253.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 244.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 254-257.

⁸² "Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa," 4.

⁸³ Ibid.

I. *Affect: embodiment and relationality*

The first quality or building block of resonance, and analytical category, is affect. By briefly returning to the example in the first chapter, I can identify multiple affects that were produced during the dinner at *Het Jaar van Verlangen*: fear, nervousness, anxiety, excitement, arousal... When resonance comes to be, writes Rosa, a “subject is affected, i.e. touched and moved, by some segment of world.”⁸⁴ The subject, in this case, is the spectator, or attendee, of this theatrical dinner, and the world is represented by the food in/and this performance setting. Affects are physical sensations, “heat or cold, pleasurable or unsettling shivers, surges of feeling,” that flow through the subject.⁸⁵

For this analytical framework, I understand affect to be a related but distinctly separate category from emotion. Following Brian Massumi's thought on affect, Rosa also separates the two. He explains this separation by stating that when a subject is *affected*, it responds to that affection with an outwardly directed *emotional* movement, such as giggling or crying.⁸⁶ Massumi, in his seminal work “The Autonomy of Affect”, claims that emotion is a sociolinguistic qualification, a *putting into words* of an already felt state, whereas affect is that state itself, registered first by the body.⁸⁷ He explains this as the “missing half-second”, activity that occurs in the body or brain, before it is made conscious.⁸⁸ When the potato landed in my hand at the dinner, there was a brief moment in which I did not feel or express a specific ‘emotion’ toward it or because of it, but there was already a registration of it being warm and soft and its tactility in general: “the skin is faster than the word.”⁸⁹

As such, two characteristics of affect are key to analysing ecological food performance. First, affect is a physical category, registered in embodied subjects. Second, it is also always relational, as there is always a subject that is affected by something or someone, and that it affects in return. This first characteristic, embodiment, presents us with some clear avenues for analysis. How does the performance activate the unique sensory modalities of taste? How are the senses stimulated, separated, deceived perhaps? Do the non-food elements of the performance coalesce or dissonate with the preparing and/or eating? How might the performance evoke an embodied awareness with regards to ecology through engaging with a

⁸⁴ Ibid., 250.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 251.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 250, 251.

⁸⁷ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 86.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 86.

physical food object? These questions help to establish the affective potential of the performance with regards to (spectatorial) embodiment.

The relational characteristic of affect may demand some more context. In brief overview of affect studies, Rebecca Coleman reports on the debate on affect and the body. There is no scholarly agreement on whether affects are (biologically) innate to the body or rather or constituted through affected bodies. In this thesis, I choose to follow Coleman's writing on the Deleuzian strand that believes bodies themselves are constituted through affective relations, because Rosa's resonance is strictly a relational concept and I also build on Serres' thought on taste that invites coalescences.⁹⁰ This means, according to Coleman, that analysing affect in this way requires "shifting the emphasis of inquiry away from a focus on things themselves toward how things are produced and invented through their relations with other things. Bodies and the world are thus in affective relations and coproduce each other."⁹¹ Based on this, she wonders how this relational approach might confuse the boundaries of a body, between the "inside" and the "outside" of it. If bodies – any body, including more-than-human bodies – are created through their relations with their environment, there are no clear demarcations between the inside and outside of bodies.

Analysing ecological food performance in this context is a bit more complex, but it helps to recall the bioperformativity of the food and how it influences the subject (the spectator) it interacts with. This leads to questions like: How does the relation between food and spectator take shape in the performance? Which patterns of collaboration and or cocreation are addressed and performed? Does the performance attempt to affect the digestion, by using pleasant smells, sounds or language or by creating abject affects of disgust, or of fear, ultimately obstructing the digestive process? By formulating views with regards to these questions and the ones on embodiment, we can get a sense of the affective capacity of the performance as well as the specific affects that could be produced in the performance, that might contribute to evoking resonance.

II. Emotion: aesthetic resonance

Emotion, as a concept, can refer to a broad spectrum of sensations, not in the least in Rosa's work. Rosa generally positions emotion in relation to affect mostly in the spirit of Massumi's positioning of the two concepts, but claims Massumi is mistaken when he states that an

⁹⁰ Coleman, "Affect," 21.

⁹¹ Ibid.

emotional state such as sadness can be experienced affectively as pleasant.⁹² Instead, Rosa writes that “what is experienced as pleasant is not sadness itself, but rather the resonant impact it provokes.”⁹³ To make emotion a relevant and manageable tool for this analysis, I focus specifically on negative emotions that can still bring about pleasure, only in the aesthetic context of the artwork or performance. In this way, a specific type of resonance may occur, that Rosa calls *aesthetic resonance*. Because affect has both emotional, physical and cognitive components, scholars like Massumi, and Rosa himself, make a distinction between affect and emotion. It is important to note that some scholars disagree with this separation. Sarah Ahmed, for example, argues that “to frame emotion as “sociolinguistic fixing,”” as Massumi does by stating that emotion is, in essence, affect put into words, “is to overlook the ways in which both emotions and affects are mobile phenomena.”⁹⁴ I believe that separating the two is necessary and choose to do so, to understand how ‘negative’ affects in performance might still contribute to making resonance come to be.

Rosa, interestingly, claims that the “radical decoupling of resonance and emotion is specific to aesthetic experiences.”⁹⁵ When he writes about experiencing all three axes of resonance (connecting to other humans, connecting to material things and connecting to the world at large) through art, he states that “what we experience as beauty is the expression of the possibility of a resonant relationship to the world, a possible mode of being-in-the-world in which subject and world respond to each other.”⁹⁶ We can experience a sad story or a dance performance fuelled by rage as remarkably beautiful. This “double emotional structure of pleasurable pain or painful pleasure,” in which the emotional response to a ‘negative’ affect is one of pleasure, produces a “resonance of alienation.”⁹⁷ The potential emotional response of ‘pleasurable’ tears can only really be experienced in an “aesthetic relationship to the world.”⁹⁸ Through the sad, angry, scary or abject experience of the artwork, a spectator experiences alienation, which is likely their dominant mode of relating to the world, whilst simultaneously experiencing resonance through its beauty, “which overcomes this alienation [...] allowing the possibility of resonant relationship to the world to shine through.”⁹⁹ This is not to say that for Rosa, emotion as an analytical category only concerns negative emotions. I merely see this

⁹² Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 257.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Coleman, “Affect,” 17.

⁹⁵ Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 257.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 433.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 437.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

resonance of alienation, or *aesthetic resonance*, as the most relevant mode when it comes to analysing food performance.

So how may ecological food performance create conditions for a resonance of alienation to come to be? With embodiment and taste being such important components of ecological food performance, it makes sense to analyse dramaturgical strategies that might provoke affects of disgust, yet aim to create a positive (or at least intrigued or touched) emotional response. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva discusses the human response to the threatening and repulsive, a response with abjection and disgust.¹⁰⁰ She argues that when spectators have an abject experience of an artwork or performance, this evokes a psychological response that breaks down the boundaries between the self and the other. With regards to food, an array of possible abject and disgusting experiences arise. Kristeva mentions decay and bodily fluids, among other things, which have been explored in the examples mentioned in the introduction:¹⁰¹ *Het Eten van Mensen*, part of the series of Neo Futurist Dinners at Mediamatic, asked each participant to donate some blood, a piece of nail or tears that would then be incorporated into the dinner to problematize eating animals, and Sien Vanmaele's *Landmaal* uses fermentation techniques to make decayed food edible again.

A food performance requires the spectator to engage with the food presented, however repulsive it may look, feel or taste. If you choose not to engage, you cannot experience the performance. But as food – and its looks and tastes – is so connected to our health, our survival, our physicality, this presents the maker with an opportunity to appeal to the spectator in a different way. If everything is tasty and soft, you have a pretty thin palette as a performance maker. If you make the spectator cross a certain threshold (of repulsion, for example) to eat, then the performance might appeal to the audience in a different, more resonant way. When analysing the potential for resonance in an ecological food performance, it can thus be helpful to enquire what compositional elements might produce affects of disgust. Is there food presented that, for example, looks deceptively good but tastes awful? Does the performance use unknown foods, or ask spectators to prepare or treat the food in a potentially repulsive manner? How is the performance structured to then attempt for the produced repulsed affects to still evoke a positive emotional response, and have the potential to contribute to a state of (aesthetic) resonance?

¹⁰⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An essay on abjection*, (Columbia University Press: 1980).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

III. Transformation: alienation as a necessary category

*[Resonance is] a flash of hope for adaptive transformation and response in a silent world.*¹⁰²

The third quality of resonance that Rosa identifies, is transformation. When a subject is being touched and affected by another subject – be it another person, an artwork, a place in nature – and reacts and responds to it, they may be transformed as a result of that affection, and the other side is transformed as well, like in the example of the two vibrating tuning forks that keep influencing each others’ tunes. Both subjects come out as a different person or entity.¹⁰³

Transformation is thus both a process and an outcome of resonance. Experiences of resonance “always involve a moment of being overwhelmed, of losing control, of being unexpectedly and unpredictably touched and transformed by another.”¹⁰⁴ They are not moments of immediate confirmation, but rather moments in which “one’s relationship to the world becomes more fluid, with the result that self and world both emerge from the encounter changed.”¹⁰⁵ This means that resonant relationships express the successful *adaptive* transformation of the world, not of some human appropriation of the world to ‘artificially’ make resonant relationships come to be.¹⁰⁶

In fact, we can only establish a responsive relationship “to a counterpart that we cannot completely appropriate or adaptively transform, that ultimately remains foreign and inaccessible to us as a whole.”¹⁰⁷ This is because in order for an entity to respond to another entity *in its own voice*, a necessity for resonance, this voice conceptually needs to be different, other, alien, than the voice of the entity it enters the resonant relationship with. If the voices are not truly different from each other, resonance cannot occur, only consonance. Resonance is “necessarily constituted by its “other,” [...] that which is foreign or alienated.”¹⁰⁸ Importantly, there is thus no way in which one can live in an exclusively harmoniously resonant environment: resonance is a momentary flash in a predominantly alienated world, precisely because this adaptive transformation can only take place with segments of the world that have not previously been appropriated.¹⁰⁹ This is why intense experiences of resonance are also moments of intense longing; they “contain the promise of a different way of relating to the world,” they “convey a

¹⁰² Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 282.

¹⁰³ “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa,” 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 279.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

sense of being deeply connected with something,” that you are usually alienated from.¹¹⁰ Resonant experiences can exist precisely because they “do not abolish the intervening moments of foreignness and inaccessibility.”¹¹¹

So what can this more fluid relationship to the world look like in ecological food performance? In “A Study in Dissonance: Performing Alternative Food Systems,” Natalie Doonan describes Amanda Marya White’s artwork *Botanical Animal*. In this work, White develops a closed-loop system for growing her own tomatoes: she grew plants from the seeds of the cherry tomatoes she first purchased in the supermarket, then ate, and deposited in her waste (her faeces). She then harvested the seeds from her waste, planted them and grew them into fruiting plants. She now continues the cycle by eating and growing further generations of the tomatoes.¹¹² By physically interacting with a food whose production cycle she was previously alienated from (having bought the tomatoes in the supermarket), she transformed the tomatoes – quite literally, through consuming, disposing and growing them out again – who in turn affected her by unveiling how much they are a part of her and how much they depend on each others’ bodies for survival. Ultimately this affection led to a transformation of the relationship between the artist and the tomatoes: from alienation and indifference, they became connected with each other in a resonant manner. What is more, says Doonan, the relationship between the two also became more fluid, as it became more unclear where White’s body ended and the tomatoes’ bodies began.¹¹³

The artwork “triggered a gut reaction in those who participated or heard about the event” – affective responses of disgust, for example.¹¹⁴ In the article, Doonan argues that these responses “make evident the agentic capacity of food.”¹¹⁵ Most people prefer an abstract distance from how our food is produced, rather than source it from our own faeces. This, says Doonan, “highlights the role of affect in expanding self-capacities, though, since alienation from the products we consume can be achieved only through distance and abstraction—through disconnection.”¹¹⁶ The artwork makes clear how a degree of alienation is necessary, in order to transform the relationship with food, in this instance, to a more resonant connectivity.

Rosa does not go as far as to describe precisely what he believes are specific characteristics of resonant transformation for him. Transformation, as part of the analytical tool

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 278.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Nathalie Doonan, “A Study in Dissonance: Performing Alternative Food Systems,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 157, (winter 2014): 39.

¹¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

in this thesis, can thus be understood in a broad sense: it may refer to a sense or awareness of change, a different viewpoint perhaps, a different sensitivity or a changed understanding of something. A change in a relationship with another entity. As such, we might analyse ecological food performance based on its capacity to transform. What does the performance do to elicit a potential transformation, in relation to the maker, the food and the spectator? How does the performance stage change? What are the elements of alienation that are implicitly present, and are necessary for potential transformation? What are performative elements that constitute this, how is it different from, for example, simply eating in a restaurant?

IV. *Elusiveness: a fundamental aspect of art's appeal*

No matter how hard we try, we can never make sure or guarantee that we will get into a mode of resonance with someone or something: you might buy the most expensive tickets for your favourite piece of music, and yet you might still feel untouched by the performance. And what's more, this elusiveness also means that it is impossible to predict or control what the result of an experience of resonance will be, what the process of transformation will result in.¹¹⁷

The last quality of resonance might be the most complicated to use as an analytical category. Resonance, Rosa states, is always characterised by an element of elusiveness: all the previously described categories might be plentifully in place, but one can never *be sure* resonance will occur. This is because of the necessity of alienation. Alienation, in all potentially resonant experiences, is not a loss of resonance. “Resonance is not consonance, it requires the active presence of something that is beyond my grasp, elusive, and in this sense remains alien. [...] only something that is and remains utterly *different* can actually speak to us in its own voice.”¹¹⁸ It is impossible to create a world with encompassing resonance, because it would no longer be possible to ‘hear the voice of the other’, who you are alienated from. Like the tuning forks that are not connected to each other in any mechanical way, and thus separated, *alienated* entities, resonance requires an entity that is truly different from you in order to establish a resonant connection.

Interestingly, Rosa writes, theatres, museums and other artistic spaces are, in a way, always looking to create the conditions in which spectators might enter into a mode of resonance

¹¹⁷ “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa,” 3.

¹¹⁸ “Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa,” 4.

with the artwork. Artistic spaces in fact “represent paradigmatic, cultic spaces for ritualized experiences of resonance in modern society.”¹¹⁹ Spectators enter a performance space looking for, and sometimes finding, “moments in which their understanding of themselves and the world is shaken and made fluid, in which they are touched, gripped, and moved.”¹²⁰ However, because by taking the time out of their busy, accelerated lives to specifically look for a resonant experience in art, it is possible that they “confuse being sentimentally affected or sensually overwhelmed for resonance, or even simulate resonance perhaps without even being aware of it.”¹²¹ Sentimental affection occurs if a subject ends up only reacting to themselves, to their own emotions, without being existentially addressed and responding to another entity they are alienated from. When this happens, “a desperate, collectively reinforced desire to be emotionally affected” remains, creating “an *echo chamber* that occludes the absence of fluidity and adaptive transformation.”¹²² That quest for an experience in which you are transformed by the artistic encounter, and the awareness that such experiences are not guaranteed and cannot be forced or manufactured, “that they are not only inaccessible, but also rare and unlikely, may well be a fundamental aspect of art’s appeal.”¹²³

Elusiveness, as such, is not so much an analytical category, but rather a tool to critically evaluate the conditions for resonance as a whole. One possible avenue when using elusiveness in this manner, is to review the presence of elements that spectators are alienated from, and the interaction they are invited to have with those elements. If they are present, how are spectators invited into this interaction, and what possibilities are there to respond to these elements, to avoid responding merely to one's own emotions? Another question might be: how does the performance aim to fulfil the promise of a resonant experience, to avoid becoming an echo chamber of unfulfilled desire for emotional affection?

By analysing an ecological food performance based on these four elements – affect, emotion, transformation and elusiveness – we can get a sense of the performance’ capacity to evoke a state of resonance. After all, “what we experience as beauty is the expression of the possibility of a resonant relationship to the world, a possible mode of being-in-the-world in which subject and world respond to each other.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 430.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 430-1.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 431.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Rosa, *Resonance - A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, 433.

Chapter 3 - The potential for resonance in *Zeemaal*

“Main course”

How do the dramaturgical strategies in Sien Vanmaele’s Zeemaal create a potential for resonance to occur?

In *Zeemaal* (2022), Flemish sensory theatre maker Sien Vanmaele takes her audience on a poetic journey revolving around the ocean. Through a narrated story, spectators move with the character Sien along beaches and cliffs, salty farmers and seaweed harvesters, as she explains how she attempts to filter all the non-environmentally friendly items and habits out of her life in the city. Simultaneously, whilst watching the performance, we prepare and eat plant-based food that comes from the sea. All this to try, as shared by the Sien as being the premise of the performance, to ultimately ‘become’ the sea. As Vanmaele plays a fictionalised version of herself in this work, in this chapter I shall refer to Vanmaele as the theatre maker by her last name, and to the fictionalised character by using ‘Sien’.

In this monologue, only supported by a chef behind the scenes and two ‘sea mates’ who occasionally help distribute food to the spectator cooks, Sien searches for solutions to curb her planetary anxiety and fear of ecological destruction. To briefly recount *Zeemaal*’s fictionalised story: Sien has always felt deeply connected to the sea, but moved far away from it to live the life of a city dweller. As her anxiety, fuelled by the alienation of the food she eats and the smells, buildings and car fumes that surround her, grows and grows, she one day realises that life originated in the ocean and humans thus also come from the sea. To curb her climate anxiety, which has become extreme by now, she takes the sea as the logical starting point for her quest for a sustainable and liveable future. Her doctor recommends her to heal her anxiety by engaging in an activity she enjoys: cooking. From there, she discovers a potential food future in the richness of the sea, and seaweed specifically.

To sketch the scenography at the start of the event: in front of each spectator lies a collection of plant-based foods from the sea. A plate with what looks to be dried seaweed, a razor clam filled with an ash-like substance, a shell with a puree of some sort with three different types of sea leaves sticking out of it. The plate is surrounded by five shells in different sizes, one filled with an ice-cream-scoop-shaped yellow blob with a creamy substance, another with green thin slices of vegetable, one empty and two closed off on top of each other. To share for the ‘table’ (three people) is mineral water and a pink liquid. And then there is the small, glass dish filled with water and several types of weed. It is clear from the beginning: *Zeemaal* will ask spectators

to step out of their food comfort zone. Black powder, raw seaweeds and shells as cutlery may well be a daunting prospect for most.



The plate upon entering the spectator seating area.

On the performance space, then, there are several cabinets left and right, with plants, pipettes, bottles and flasks in all shapes and sizes, some empty, some filled with green or blue substances. In the middle, a large installation, midway between a kitchen countertop and a lab desk. In between, a lot of space for Sien to walk around and interact with the spectators. Occasionally she uses a little stool for example, to peek over the upper level and inspect the preparation processes of the spectator-cooks on the upper row. This illustrates how this performance requires the spectator to participate in the cooking and eating, as the performer keeps an eye on each spectator's engagement. If you choose to not cook or eat, you 'risk' being called out by the performer.



The performance stage with the kitchen counter top meets lab desk.

Directly addressing the spectators, who are surrounding her in an oval (or waterdrop?) shaped two-layered ‘galley,’ Vanmaele invites her audience on a sensory journey. At set moments, spectators are requested to eat first relatively familiar, prepared food, that becomes more and more unfamiliar as the performance progresses. *Zeemaal* is an ecological food performance *par excellence*: spectators cook and eat as an integral experience of the performance, the food we eat and prepare creates meaning, and although the performance directly addresses climate destruction thematically, it also has more subtle undertones that may offer new frames of thinking about our ecological relationships. As such, *Zeemaal* is an ideal case-study to explore how the four qualities of resonance operate in this performance.

Zeemaal contains many specific moments of collective cooking, interwoven with the more or less chronological story. During it, spectators are instructed to make sea-ravioli, prepare sea-tea, seaweed-butter and taste weeds straight from the water. Sometimes, we eat directly, other times we are instructed to leave our prepared dish on the plate, to eat later, when our complete ‘sea meal’ is served at the end of the performance.

What strategies in *Zeemaal* contribute to a potential for evoking resonance? In this chapter I use dramaturgical analysis, a method previously explained in the introduction,

together with the qualities of resonance as a theoretical lens to formulate an answer to this question. I have selected four key potentially resonant moments that I describe and subsequently analyse through the lenses of affect, emotion and transformation. Elusiveness, as established in chapter 2, is a more overarching quality that I address at the end of the analysis. The analysis is organised through the chronology of the performance.

I. Welcome: cleansing ritual

The performance commences with a cleansing ritual, even before the spectators are seated. Spectators stand in line before entering the galley, and every spectator is invited to have their hands rinsed with warm water by the spectator in front of them. Afterwards, they rinse the hands of the person behind them. The ritual is finished by Sien spraying some sea-buckthorn oil on the hands of her spectators, starting their experience off with a pleasant scent and oily rubbing together of the hands. We may not yet be eating, but we are preparing our bodies for the act of preparing and consuming food.

This first spectator/spectator and spectator/performer interaction immediately shows a great **affective** potential. On an individual level, it is already a distinctly embodied experience, both through the sensation of the warm water and subsequent oil on the skin, and the need to rub the hands together to prevent it from spilling and to allow the oil to evenly spread. Although we are not yet actually eating, the senses are activated already: the oil has a strong, pleasurable scent which may produce relaxing, positive affects. What is more, this experience is set up in a relational way; you are dependent on the spectator in front of you to rinse your hands and are responsible to rinse those of who comes after you. There is hardly any need for vocal explanation, as soon as the ritual is started, the spectators in the queue understand what is expected of them through the example of those before them. This ritual can only take place through these dependent relationships, which allows for an immediate connection between fellow audience members, in an embodied, rather than vocal or cognitive, way.

As this first experience is designed as a pleasurable one, the category of **emotion** is less relevant to discuss in this instance. **Transformation**, however, may already occur in these first few minutes. Here, it is most likely to come to be on the level of human to human connection. You may share an intimate (resonant) moment with an unknown (alien) spectator who rinses your hands with care, arising from (transforming through) that brief encounter as someone who, touched (affected) by such care from a stranger, wishes to pass that on to the person whose hands you are about to rinse. As I continue to show in this analysis, *Zeemaal's* transformative

and **resonant** potential does not lie in its relatively thin plot about climate fear, but rather in the embodied experience, the connection with other spectators, and the sea.

II. *An encounter with the sea*

*The chemical composition of seawater resembles that of human blood. And cerebrospinal fluid, tears, sweat and the amniotic fluid we swim in as foetuses.*¹²⁵

After the cleansing ritual and the first surprising and expectant encounter with the food and shells on the plate, *Zeemaal* commences. Sien explains how her relationship with the sea began: she sketches an evening with friends on the beach, long ago. She ran into the sea naked, and was intensely touched by the magical experience of her body existing in the ocean surrounded by fluorescent algae – one might say she experienced resonance with the ocean that night. This is how she truly encountered the sea. The premise of the performance, clearly stated in the opening monologue, is that through cooking and eating from the sea, we realise our interconnectedness and ‘become the sea a bit’.¹²⁶ In spite of this initial announcement, it takes a while until the spectators start to interact with what is on the plate in front of them. Despite the shells, leaves and weeds in close proximity to each, the gaze is turned quite traditionally to the performer in the performance space through lighting and monologue and the fact that the specific foods are not referred to in the performance text until a bit later.

The second key opportunity for resonance to occur then, is, perhaps not coincidentally, the first moment that the spectatorial gaze is actively turned towards the food, right after this narration. As happens throughout the performance, this is done through clear verbal and visual instructions. To emphasise from the get go that we humans come from the sea, Vanmaele announces we are going to drink ‘primal water’ as a way of toasting to our evening together. She picks up a bottle with pink liquid and invites the spectators to pour some of it into an empty shell. She describes the specific pyramid-shaped shell we are meant to use in detail, and wonders if we can imagine that one day, it was inhabited by a sea snail. The primal water looks like lemonade, or perhaps a deep-coloured rosé. Taking the shot of primal water is the first communal act of performer and spectator: “Pour the primal water into the shell. Santé!”¹²⁷ We pour, we drink, and we taste an all-encompassingly salty, *nasty* liquid.

¹²⁵ Sien Vanmaele, *Zeemaal* (Amsterdam: De Nieuwe Toneelbibliotheek, 2023), 13.

¹²⁶ Vanmaele, *Zeemaal*, 9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

With regards to **affect**, several elements are at play here. Firstly, spectators are asked to drink this liquid from a shell. Although we are not specifically invited to first touch the shell and interact with its shape per se, the sensory experience of picking up and drinking out of a shell is uncommon, potentially evoking affects of uneasiness and discomfort. Perhaps unfortunately, this act is not presented specifically as something out of the ordinary we should take note of, and thus glanced over without much intended impact. It is the drinking of the liquid itself that takes centre stage. Vanmaele directly plays with taste and the deceit of the senses here. Pink is a colour with positive, sweet taste associations. This is how we taste with our eyes – spectators are presumed to automatically assume a pleasurable taste, only to be met with a salty, nasty flavour. This salty shock produces an abject response and affects of disgust and strong repulsion.

These are intense affects that can paradoxically lead to pleasurable **emotions**. As the drinking of the primal water is composed as a toast, the spectators take their salty shot at the same time, which means the repulsion also arises simultaneously for everyone. This leads to a shared experience of disgust, likely prompting small interactions with spectators beside you to confirm with one another that this drink has, in fact, an unexpectedly rather unpleasant taste. Because of this shared experience, there is a clear window for **aesthetic resonance** to come to be: shared sorrow is half the sorrow, and this may lead to pleasurable emotions and a deeper connection to the spectators around you.

Only after drinking it, Vanmaele emphasises that the chemical composition of the fluid we just toasted with is akin to our bodily fluids, such as blood, cerebrospinal fluid, tears, sweat and amniotic fluid. This addition is where **transformation** becomes a relevant factor; we realise cognitively and physically that the liquid to which we just responded to in such an abject way, is actually akin to the liquids that are a part of us. The close connection between these various fluids may evoke a sense of **resonance** and a potential for a deeper interconnectedness with bodies (human, oceanic or otherwise) around us, and a more embodied awareness with regards to ecology.

As a brief sidenote, directly after this transformative toast, Vanmaele uses the same saline solution to engage yet another sense: that of smell. To emphasise associations with the sea at the beginning of the performance, Vanmaele pours seaweed infused salty water over hot lava stones that are part of the kitchen station on stage. She uses a large bundle of dried weed to spread out the salty steam that erupts from the lava stones across the stage, making the entire space smell like the sea. The physical sensation of the smell, in combination with the melancholy of the monologue and the just experienced aesthetic resonance might produce affects of longing for the sea, nostalgia, fear or otherwise, depending on one's associations with the sea.

III. *Moving inland: climate fear*

*I breathe exhaust fumes. I eat out of plastic. My only connection to the sea are Aldi's fish fingers.*¹²⁸

Already early on in the poetry of the performance, Vanmaele deserts the idyllic nostalgia. Sien sketches, in quite literal wordings, the alienation of the sea she experienced when she moved inland, into the big city. The choice to make this sense of alienation, both of the natural environment, and also linked directly to food (i.e. eating out of plastic, eating Aldi's fish fingers), a distinct dramaturgical element, is relevant in this research for two reasons. Firstly, it situates this work firmly in the ecodramaturgical context, in which alienation from our natural environment is a key theme. Secondly, it clearly shows the human desire to experience resonance in an alienated world, exists in the fibres of the performance itself.

Unlike that first shot of primal water, the first time we eat during *Zeemaal* is a relatively smooth experience. On our plate we find two shells filled with a cheese made of nuts, white beans, nutritional yeast and wakame. The sea mates hand out sea oak crisps for us to eat it with. This seems to serve the purpose of the amuse-bouche: something to ease the spectator into the eating of unfamiliar foods from the sea, and to work up their appetite for it.

Immediately after the amuse-bouche – many spectators are still crunching away the sea oak crisps – Sien moves her narration back to the sea. The third key moment with resonant potential occurs when she introduces briny plants that have 'learned to live' in salty circumstances. In a rhythmic sequence, Sien lists plants that tolerate salt – “And when I say tolerate, I mean that they do not like salt. In fact, I think it hurts them.”¹²⁹ She speaks staccato and the sequence is underscored by monotonous sound, giving the names of the plants an almost mystic quality. Afterwards, she explains the various survival tactics of these plants: saving the salt excess in their lowest leaves until they decay, for example, or forming a protective ball of air around their flowers. Spectators are then asked to turn their gaze to the briny plants on the plate in front of them. They are instructed to inspect them in detail, finding out the survival tactic of these particular plants. “The middle plant is iceplant. Take a good look at it. Can you see the salt crystals? That's the excess salt she's crying out. Feel it. Taste it.”¹³⁰

By focalising the spectator's gaze towards the details of this middle plant, the iceplant, Vanmaele makes the examination and subsequent tasting of the plant an experience loaded with

¹²⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 21.

affect. The performer both explains the ecological reason for the characteristics of the plant and also slightly anthropomorphises it by comparing its salt survival tactic to crying. As if Vanmaele wants to bring across that the plant you are holding in your hand right now seems to survive against all odds, which is visible in its very composition. This framing in the performance text, combined with the tactility of the plant held in their hands, is likely to awaken an affect of sympathy within the spectator, not to mention awe and admiration for the plant's ability to survive.

As this instance does not concern negative affects, I will not discuss **emotion** as a separate category here, but this scene does have a strong **transformative** capacity. The anthropomorphising of the iceplant and our interaction with it can have naturally have a range of meanings or effects depending on the spectator, but let me draw from my personal experience in this instance: in myself as a spectator I noticed a profound shift. Crucially, iceplant is aesthetically very pleasing: it survives through forming salt crystals on the outside of its leaves that look like perfect glass drops and radiate beauty. By looking at, feeling and tasting this single, beautiful branch of iceplant, isolated in an aestheticised context, it seemed to suddenly possess a liveness of its own that I would have never seen had I witnessed it in its natural habitat, among many of its kind. Much like the potato in my hand at *Jaar van Verlangen* (except the potato was not exceptionally beautiful), through the alienation of this plant in an artificial performance setting, I felt like I understood it, appreciated it or, in fact, **resonated** with it, in a way I never would have otherwise.

IV. *Cooking as a rescue*

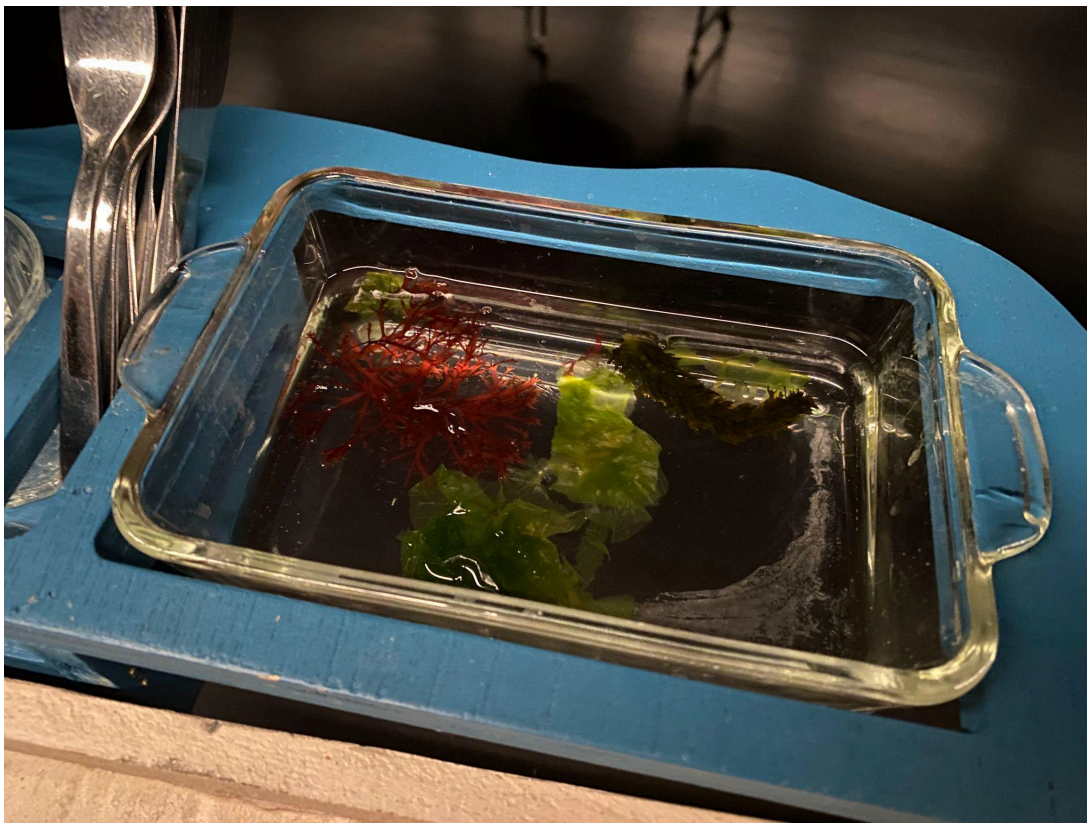
We are going to identify fresh seaweeds. In the glass dish in front of you are three types of seaweed. We work in threes. One person takes an empty scallop shell and the tweezers. Remove the weeds from the dish with the tweezers and place them in the shell. The fluorescent green seaweed that looks like a lettuce leaf is sea lettuce. The other green seaweed that looks like antlers is green sea fingers. The brown seaweed is brown algae. Taste it, if you dare.¹³¹

The three last words in the quote above are the ones in which *Zeemaal* refers most directly to 'the elephant in the room' with regards to consuming seaweed: the fact that for many people,

¹³¹ Ibid., 36.

seaweed is an unfamiliar food that might evoke affects of disgust. As the performance progresses, and character Sien descends more and more into a state of anxiety, the foods spectators consume become more experimental. This is a central dramaturgical element in the latter half of the performance, and one that provides several windows for aesthetic resonance, in which the emotional response to a ‘negative’ affect may become one of pleasure. I highlight two specific scenes before analysing them together.

After having tasted the sea cheese with seaweed crisps that were prepared beforehand and tasted relatively familiar, and making sea ravioli with some unfamiliar, but at least cooked, ingredients and eating them off a plate, *Zeemaal* takes the seaweed tasting one step further. In the glass dish in front of the spectators, in a puddle of water, lie several ‘raw’ weeds that look like they have just been harvested. Spectators are invited to have a taste of all three weeds, using the tweezers provided.



Fresh seaweeds.

The next scene is the one that most overtly plays with the plural sensory modalities of taste and the senses. As she describes how she spent some time on the Scottish island Mull, Sien invites the spectator to imagine the landscape – or, she corrects herself, seascape – through a

small ceremony. Spectators are asked to carefully take off the lid of a glass bottle, revealing the sugar kelp inside it. We then are invited to share the sugar kelp amongst the three people who share the galley area and put the weeds into the great scallop shell, stabilising it with smaller shells if needed. Following that, we pour warm water over the weeds and are asked to let the sea tea brew. Sien poetically describes the seascape that the spectators are asked to imagine, and then invites us to taste the sea tea. Immediately afterwards, she commands us to take the pieces of sugar kelp and put them over our eyes. She does the same herself. The poetic seascape description continues, more poignant somehow, now that we cannot see the stage, performer and food in front of us anymore. After a while, we are asked to remove the weeds from our eyes, revealing Sien in a bathing suit on top of the galley.

Due to the unfamiliarity of the weeds, and the second salty (and this time even warm) drink, **affects** of repulsion are likely to be created. The weeds covering your eyes may also evoke affects of uneasiness or anxiety: will I be asked to eat something that I cannot see first? In fact, Vanmaele could have taken this even further: by removing one of the senses through which we perceive taste, in the setting of a performance in which we are asked to taste or eat something at any moment, there is a real potential that the spectators may be commanded to consume something they have not set eyes on, producing affects of uncertainty and fear. Had the performance followed through and fulfilled this potential, the alienation that would have occurred would have been a clear dramaturgical strategy to produce a potential for what Rosa calls a resonance of alienation. It is the only moment in the performance in which the senses are momentarily purposefully separated.

Regardless, these produced affects of repulsion and anxiety are not formally acknowledged in the composition of the performance. Vanmaele has chosen to present the unfamiliar foods and weeds matter-of-factly, stating clearly when spectators are expected to prepare or eat, and, except the small hint in the quote above (“Taste it, if you dare”), leaving no room for doubt or explicit mentions of the unfamiliarity and potential abject experiences and affects of disgust. To be able to experience the full performance, which takes place on all the different embodied and sensory levels already described, spectators are politely requested to taste and eat all that is presented to them.

However, the pacing and audience positioning of the performance do leave room to experience the potential repulsion and share this with fellow spectators, which might in turn make it a positive experience on an **emotional** level. Unlike the usual restaurant setting with tables for two, each table ‘area’ here is set up for three people, seated closely together, sometimes executing preparation activities together. Each time a new element is tasted,

Vanmaele leaves spectators time to experience the physical reaction to it, sometimes informally interacting with spectators, asking how they like it. In the performance I witnessed, for example, both spectators with whom I shared my ‘table’ expressed genuine fear to taste these weeds that were presented to us in the glass dish. This fear, however, was not necessarily unpleasant: **aesthetic resonance** may this time be found through ‘overcoming’ your repulsion, because you know you can only experience the full performance if you taste all that is offered to you. Even if that means having a taste, only to spit it out again, as I witnessed one spectator doing.

Unlike the primal water scene, which may have been **transformative** because it likely took you by surprise, this time it is through actively overcoming the fear and having a taste anyway, together with those around you, that a transformation may come about. During these scenes, and in fact throughout the performance, the embodied experience of interhuman and more-than-human connection is a central element, through all the food and sharing experiences described above. Rather than the plot, it is Vermaele’s pieces of text that relate to the preparation, tasting and eating of these alien weeds and foods that works to establish the realisation of interconnectedness. “The chemical composition of seawater resembles that of human blood.”¹³² “As much as we have become a land animal, we come from the sea.”¹³³ “The slimy dragon's tongue licks my toes, a melon jellyfish swims across my back as if to say it's all going to be fine, the sticky tongue nourishes my skin.”¹³⁴ and finally: “We toast our seameal. Smell, taste, eat. And become the sea.”¹³⁵ It is through carefully instructing the spectators to execute isolated acts of preparation and tasting, communally, by turning their attention to the food in front of them and explaining where it comes from and how it is interconnected with humans (an attentive way of eating that has become unfamiliar and thus alien to most), that the transformative potential of the performance unfolds. Although Vanmaele has demarcated certain parts of the performance as rituals or ceremonies, such as the seascape ceremony, each preparatory or tasting act in *Zeemaal* can be seen as ritualistic, allowing spectators space to **resonate** with the other humans around them and, most importantly, with the food in front of them and with the ocean itself.

¹³² Vanmaele, *Zeemaal*, 13.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

V. *Elusiveness in Zeemaal*

As I explained in chapter 2, resonance can not be ‘conjured’, there is always an element of elusiveness at play. However, *Zeemaal* makes use of ample dramaturgical strategies and elements that create a potential or a window for resonance to occur. As Rosa writes, it is in artistic spaces that resonance is actively sought after, leading to both more open and receptive spectators, and to artists who seek to provide resonant experiences. The elusiveness of resonance is related to the necessary condition of alienation. In *Zeemaal*, plenty of elements provide a sense of alienation on some level. When reviewing the food dramaturgy throughout the performance, the food becomes more and more unfamiliar and less ‘prepared’ for human consumption, increasingly alienating the spectator from what is on their plate. On the level of individual scenes, with the primal water the expectation of a sweet lemonade does not match the salty taste of the liquid, alienating the senses. In addition, by taking an (edible) plant out of its natural environment and presenting it in an aestheticised context, without other plants of its kind, we are able to look at the plant in a new, alienated way. Working with these alienated elements, as well as engaging the senses and playing with affect, give food performance makers the strategies to create opportunities for resonance. Elusiveness remains a given, a necessary quality of resonance, but especially during ecological food performance, with both food and spectator activation through performance at play, conditions to aid the occurrence of resonance can certainly be created.

Conclusion

“Dessert”

In these pages, I have aimed to put ecological food performance on the map within the field of ecodramaturgy. In addition, I have demonstrated how resonance is a relevant analytical dramaturgical lens within ecological work and in ecological food performance specifically, and what is more, what dramaturgical strategies can create the conditions for it. Resonance is useful when analysing ecological work because of its direct links to acceleration and ecological destruction, and even more so for ecological food performance because of the sensorial and affective aspects of that work.

I have shown how ecological food performance can evoke a sense of resonance in spectators. By defining ecological food performance through bringing together the academic debates on food performance and ecodramaturgy, developing an analytical tool based on Rosa's concept of resonance and using that as an analytical lens for the ecological food performance *Zeemaal* by Sien Vanmaele, it can be concluded that ecological food performance has the potential to evoke resonance through 'general' food performance strategies such as embodiment, the engagement of the senses and relationality. More importantly, this research has uncovered two dramaturgical strategies that are specific to ecological food performance: using taste, and more specifically disgust, as a strategy to alienate the spectator from the food and through that create a potential for **aesthetic resonance**, for which interaction (performer/spectator and/or spectator/spectator) is a condition, and focalising natural (edible) elements to create a potential for **resonance with nature in an aestheticised context**.

From the first toast with the deceiving pink salty liquid, to the raw seaweeds: disgust is an important affect that contributes to a potential for aesthetic resonance in more than one instance of *Zeemaal*. In the analytical tool I developed around resonance, I devoted special attention to strategies that have the potential to evoke aesthetic resonance, in which 'negative' affects may produce pleasurable emotions. In *Zeemaal*, the negative affects are found predominantly through the unfamiliarity and sometimes deceiving look of the food itself. By starting with the deceiving pink primal water, building it up to tasting 'prepared' unfamiliar food on the plate, to tasting weeds straight from the sea, the repulsed sensations build up. Only when shared with the performer or other spectators, positioned intimately close, this experience evokes a potential for resonance on the interhuman level, and aesthetic resonance with the performance and its ecological themes itself.

Perhaps the most interesting element with regards to ecodramaturgy is the sequence with the briny plants, specifically the iceplant. This scene combines a potential for resonance with art and with a potential for resonance with nature. Vanmaele creates the conditions for a resonance with nature in an aestheticised context to come to be. Whilst Rosa writes that one can for example experience resonance through engaging with art *or* strolling through nature, this research has shown that by placing a natural element in an aestheticised context, engaging with art (more specifically with ecological food performance) can in fact *lead* to resonating with nature. It becomes a dramaturgical strategy: by placing an entity from the natural world in an aesthetic performance setting, one might resonate with it, but only because one's gaze was turned to it in the aesthetic context of the performance. In this way, this research has built on and deepened Rosa's work and demonstrated how art can make different forms of resonance come to be. Moreover, in light of ecological issues at large, creating an opportunity to actively reconnect with nature in an artificial and/or alienating environment is very meaningful. Such a resonant experience has great transformative potential, for example to reestablish the connection with the sea that Vanmaele hopes to achieve for her spectators. Ecological food performance is a fitting artform to do so, because it always already actively incorporates natural elements (in the form of food) which provides makers with more strategies to create those conditions for resonance.

Working with resonance in a dramaturgical context also has its limitations. A concept that is so relational, rooted in affect and emotion and focused on the individual experience of the spectator, is likely to make for a relatively one-sided focus on spectatorship in an analysis, and perhaps even on the subjective experience of the researcher. Compositional elements and the spectatorial address take centre stage, creating the risk that the world at large and the situatedness of both the work and the spectator are left under-analysed. A way to avoid this in future research is to use resonance as the key concept in a contextual analysis (a method that analyses relations between artworks and the wider world, using one central concept), making sure there is at least one other performance, with its own, different situatedness to use as a comparison or sounding board.

This way, it is possible to, in further research, use resonance precisely to make an even more prominent connection to the world at large, creating a chance for a more intersectional understanding of the concept. Resonance, as I have used it in this project, is presented by Rosa as the antidote to an acceleration that originates in a Western context. This is a result not only of Rosa's writing but also of my choices as a researcher, as it is the acceleration and subsequent ecological destruction that I have wanted to address by coining and analysing ecological food

performance. Regardless, the concept does not immediately imply a focus on intersectionality, which is a missed opportunity and something I would want to uncover in a future project.

Ecological food performance, by extension, can be politically engaged on a broader spectrum than *Zeemaal* is. *Zeemaal*'s performance text presumes a lot about its spectators' context and situatedness: the character Sien (with whom spectators are meant to identify) lives in the city, consumes a lot of plastic, is able to travel to find out more about seaweed and has enough money to buy vegetarian burgers and premium brand meal boxes. The only place for self-reflection on this privileged position is midway through the performance, in a spiralling monologue when the climate fear really takes hold of her. About her partner: "He shouts that I should get out of my green bubble, that I may be working to meet climate targets, but that most people are happy just to make it to the end of the month."¹³⁶ This insight is not taken any further. In addition, Vanmaele as a maker can afford to work with the expensive medium that is food performance. Importantly, as a researcher, I live in similar privileged conditions, and I imagine most of my fellow spectators do as well, given the price of the ticket for the event. The activist environmentalist message woven through the performance text is mainly 'identifiable' for spectators in a similarly privileged, European and largely white context.

It is helpful to turn to Wyoński once more: she adds *intersectional ecologies* as a lens to her ecodramaturgical thinking: "a way of interpreting ecodramaturgical practices, foregrounding marginalised perspectives and acknowledging the multiple social and political forces that shape climate change and related ecological crises."¹³⁷ A future research project might thus take *intersectional* ecological food performance as a starting point, using resonance to compare or contextualise Vanmaele's work with, for example, the food performance by culinary artist Maureen de Jong at *Het Jaar van Schaduw* (2024) – the more intersectional successor to the sensory dinner (the one with the potato) at *Het Jaar van Verlangen* a year prior. This event started off with Kiriko Mechanicus' film *A Tomato Tragedy*, which shows the migrant workers that pick Europeans' canned tomatoes, who have come to southern Italy to realise their dream of a better life in Europe, but never get beyond the tomato fields.¹³⁸ The documentary shows how they fight against a Europe where others reap the sweet rewards of their disillusion. At *Het Jaar van Schaduw*, a confronting tomato-centric dinner followed. Such a contextual analysis could shed light on the complexity of the ecological crisis and its interwovenness with other issues of inequality, challenging to uncover how Rosa might be read through an intersectional, climate justice lens. This might show that in the *Jaar van Schaduw* performance, rather different, much

¹³⁶ Vanmaele, *Zeemaal*, 25.

¹³⁷ Wyoński, *Ecodramaturgies*, 6.

¹³⁸ Kiriko Mechanicus, *A Tomato Tragedy*, KRO-NCRV, 2023.

more confrontational strategies of alienation are employed. Whereas in *Zeemaal*, the act of overcoming one's fear of tasting seaweed – to put it bluntly – and sharing that victory with fellow spectators, may lead to positive emotions and subsequent transformation and aesthetic resonance, this confrontational strategy may only alienate spectators further. To create a window for spectators to resonate with the migrant workers, for example, would likely require a different strategy. Perhaps the tomatoes themselves can be instruments for 'transporting' resonance: the strategy for resonance with nature in an aestheticised context that this research uncovered may be developed further to support an intersectional understanding of the concept.

Despite this large opportunity to deepen the research on resonance through intersectional ecological food performance, one thing has been made clear already. Ecological food performance may evoke resonance in spectators in a plurality of ways, establishing a genuine sense of interconnectedness with the human and non-human entities around us. It is a medium ideally suited to give us that much yearned for flash of hope for salvation in a silent, broken world.

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