

# The Political Potential of Fermentation

**Sophie J Williamson discusses the turn towards art-food practices, particularly fermentation, and how these can be politicised to counter societal decay.**

On a drizzly Sunday, driving from Arbroath to Huntly in Aberdeenshire, the landscape changed from urban seafront to lush rolling hills and tree-lined A-roads. Time takes on a different rhythm in these parts and it is hard to not feel the histories of the land seeping through the air. Despite my damp raincoat and muddy shoes, I was in for a treat.

*The Gathering Table* was a series of meals prepared by Scottish-Iraqi artist and chef Kawther Luay. Inviting collaboration with more-than-human actors – working among flora, fauna and microbial communities – Luay divided her project into three distinct ‘acts’ over several weeks, in which narratives of the land were woven through both its present and past ecologies, Scottish folklore, local agricultural knowledge, archival research and her own mixed-heritages and cultural influences. To reflect this specificity, each of the meals took place in a different location close to the respective places the ingredients were sourced from. In the first act, *Milk*, sheltering from the rain under a tented canopy in a picturesque agro-forestry small-holding under Tap O’Noth Hill, Luay and her collaborator, artist and writer Fionn Duffy (who made the churning vessels from locally foraged wild clays), read excerpts from 19th-century local newspaper clippings, archival accounts, poetry and their own writings. Mounds of *shankleesh* and *kashk* (Middle Eastern strained cheese, known also as ‘Dream Cheese’) hung dripping from gently-swinging cotton sacks, which we each later shaped into balls by hand, covering them in crushed dried seaweed from the local coast. In the following act, *Grain*, the cultivation of barley was traced through its carving of the Aberdeenshire landscape and processes of fermentation as it traveled through trade routes. The final act, *Clay*, took place on the banks of the River Bogie, drawing together cheese, yoghurt and fermented and sourdough cultures which were cooked directly on burning embers, the bisque-fired vessels glowing with heat.

For Luay, as with other artists working with it, food is inextricably linked to hospitality. From Gordon Matta-Clark, Carol Gooden and Tina Girouard’s artist-run restaurant in the 1970s to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *pad thai* in 1990 and Rasheed Araeen’s recent *Shamiyaana*, there has been a steady stream of artists committed to working with food and the potentialities of hosting events with it. Delfina Foundation has been running its Politics of Food programme since 2014, and they now span five seasons and a multitude of artist contributors. Yet the ethos of hospitality, sharing and care is often out of kilter with the political structures that form our daily realities. As I write this, the *Bibby Stockholm*, the UK’s new asylum-seekers containment barge, is moored at the Isle of Portland; a floating steel (and apparently disease-ridden) reminder of our inhospitable attitudes, global territorial divisions and inequality of access to resources.

In recent years, there has been a marked turn towards artists not only working in food but more specifically to forms of preservation and fermentation. More broadly it had been adopted in trendy food circles (Noma in Copenhagen, arguably the world’s most influential restaurant, has had a specialist fermentation lab since 2014) and, as the empty shelves in supermarkets during the first wave of Covid-19 testified, many of us were drawn to making our own sourdough loaves, kimchis and kombuchas during lockdown, a sign perhaps of a desire to invest labour into the foods we eat, into the tactility of making them and the slow wait of molecular transformations – devotions of time normally refused to us by the daily grind of late capitalism’s hourly demands and its disconnect with local and global ecologies. Simultaneously, this has aligned with the enthusiastic embrace of cultural discourse around the microbial communities that we are both part of and host to. As Ed Yong elegantly describes in his book *I Contain Multitudes*: ‘Every one of us is a zoo in our own right – a colony enclosed within a single body. A multi-species collective. An entire world.’ The sourdough starter my father gave to me is different to the ‘mother jar’ he still has in his fridge; mine has collected into its being



Mirna Bamieh/Palestine Hosting Society, *The tongue tracing the hand tracing the earth*, 2021, performance, Hayy Jameel, Jeddah



Kawther Luay, *The Gathering Table, Act 1 – Milk*, 2023, performance

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my specific environment (my Margate kitchen with its sea air and overgrown snail-ridden garden), while his continues to accumulate north London suburbia. Populations of domestic fridge-based cultures that soared during the pandemic's lockdowns suggest a desire to get up-close to and to collaborate with the unseen communities that surround us: when the global situation outside is terrifyingly uncertain, we return to more primal, grounding roots.

Decay and decomposition have long threaded through art history: think of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted between 1490 and 1510, or Michelangelo Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*, c1590, and, more recently, the life-cycles of the swarming flies in Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years*, 1990. This lineage sits distinctly separate from the more common history of *memento mori*: decay is not a putrefaction into nothingness or a finite end, but a process of becoming. Writing on the degradation of political structures, Iranian philosopher and writer Reza Negarestani suggests that, through decay, 'the solid entity is taken over neither by integrated life nor death, but by irresolution'. In a lecture at Goldsmiths in 2006, Negarestani described it as an architecture with no differentiation between physical, living and non-living entities and conceptual socio-political formations, arguing that all structures are always in a process of undoing, decaying into something else and only momentarily perceived to be whole 'in unimaginably twisted ways'. Later developing this in his now seminal 2011 book *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, Negarestani examines the politics of decay as an 'undercover softness' that evades consolidation by those in positions of power.



Kent Chan, *Warm Fronts*, 2021-, performance

He places decay in opposition to perhaps more romantic approaches of planetary ecological entanglement that have been embraced by contemporary art discourse in recent years by, for instance, Lynn Margulis, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, where composting and decomposition are seen as processes of return within holistic cycles of nature: deconstruction, disappearance, deliverance and rebirth. Instead, Negarestani argues that decay acts in order to indefinitely postpone death and absolute disappearance. In decay, 'the being survives by blurring into other beings, without losing all its ontological registers'; it doesn't wipe out or terminate but, on the contrary, it keeps alive. He is writing specifically from the context of the political structures of the Middle East, where political and societal 'rot', as he describes it (or 'anti-creationist creativity or perversion'), creates an intangible substratum to society: 'by degenerating all aspects of formation, decay ungrounds the very ground upon which power is conducted, distributed and established'. The decay therefore becomes an autonomous building process. The turn towards art-food practices working with fermentation can be likened to these descriptions of decay as a political device, sharing much of the processes of deconstruction and degeneration. Like decay, fermentation is similarly a process of survival inherent in all organic life, extracting energy from the molecules that it breaks down. Yet fermentation also introduces a resolutely different trajectory into the processes of decay: to ferment is to excite, to create effervescence and vivacity. As we roll our *shankleesh* balls in our hands, Luay explains, 'cultured, curdled and fermented characters collide at different points in their existence, transformed through time, technique and the elements'. Through the transformation of ingredients, fermentation creates and holds space for new cultures to form: human, microbial, bacterial and fungal. Fermentation is a process of agitating agency.

Fermentation as a storytelling strategy is also at the heart of Palestinian artist and chef Mirna Bamieh's practice, as exemplified by her live art project *Palestine Hosting Society*, 2018-. Exploring the politics of disappearance and the way memories are produced, her staged dinners and interventions draw on farming practices and intergenerational legacies in order to rescue displaced Palestinian culinary recipes and traditions from the brink of extinction. A nation of farmers, occupation by Israel and the expulsion of its people has severed the Palestinian population - in the enclaves and the wider diaspora - from their historic connection to the land, eroding the knowledge of Palestinian cuisine. Furthermore, the restriction of movement between regions in Palestine means that localised recipes are now severed from one another: 'Food', Bamieh says, 'has the power of movement that most of us as Palestinians don't have.' More potent than simply dining, this act of producing Palestinian foods becomes an act of reclaiming self-sovereignty. Laid out in the abandoned shops of the Old Al Jubail Vegetable



Mirna Bamieh, *Sour Things*, 2023, installation view, Sharjah Biennial

Market, Bamieh's installation *Sour Things*, 2022, for the Sharjah Biennale drew attention to the different moments of the fermentation processes, such as waiting times and changing weather, while in the *matbakh* (kitchen) new products continued to be made throughout the exhibition. Additionally comprising drawings, ceramics, text and video, *Sour Things* centred fermentation as a method for 'sharpening our propensity for listening, learning, caring and becoming more attuned'. Navigating the fine line between decay and preservation, Bamieh's determination to pass on recipes at risk of becoming lost becomes a powerful act of resistance. Each fermented food evokes notions of death, rebirth, fear, relationships, community and ecosystems that work with time to create transformation; fermentation becomes a metaphor for 'zooming into the microworlds of encapsulated multitudes to reconsider life, cities, people, relationships and occurrences'. It is in the bubbling of Bamieh's fermentations that Negarestani's thesis comes to the fore, one in which ideas of survival and perseverance link diasporic population to their lands through food.

The writer and food activist Sandor Ellix Katz astutely observes in his book *The Art of Fermentation* that resistance can occasionally be 'dramatic and public, but most of the decisions we are faced with are mundane and private. What to eat is a choice that we make several times a day, if we are lucky.' The crux of Luay and Bamieh's practices is an interest in harking back to a more sustainable way of eating and benefiting from the land. Fermentation and preservation of food is a tradition deployed across the globe out of necessity when faced with scarcity; a necessity that is still vital and must be registered as part of the solution to returning to more ecological, low-carbon-footprint local diets. As Katz argues, these cumulative choices we make about food have profound implications: we can choose the role of consumer led by the mass markets, or we can 'merge appetite with activism and choose to involve ourselves in food as co-creators'.

Luay, Bamieh and others working at the intersection of art and fermentation offer opportunities to resist not only cultural hegemony but also the subsequent culture of mass-marketing and commodification, working holistically with the environment; they look to the past in order to preserve the future.

Beyond food practices, the ethos and the desires held within fermentation seeps into other forms. Candice Lin's *Seeping, Rotting, Resting, Weeping*, 2021, for example, incorporates fermentation processes to create the indigo dyes for the fabric of her tented hosting structure. Lin's multisensory environment encourages erotic tactility and communality between bodies, fabrics and objects. While on the one hand this represented post-pandemic longings to meld our bodies with other bodies, the work also reflects the processes of fermentation through a more critical lens, one in which an organism encapsulates another (which brings to mind anthropologist Michael Taussig's definition of 'the space of death' as one that binds 'the culture of the conqueror' to 'that of the conquered'). For Lin, forming the dyes by hand was also a way of recognising a 'space of death' inside the organic process of indigo dye, which relies on feeding the bacteria that hasten the decay of organic matter – such as urine, broth or old fruit – and, by extension, the death toll of workers in the indigo plantations in British-ruled India. Fermentation-as-enveloper carries through into the cultural contact points of colonial legacies and trade routes that intermingle in Lin's objects; for example, a hand-printed Japanese *katazome* design incorporates Portuguese and Dutch trade logos, or the Nigerian adire patterns that are peppered with the Union Jack or motifs of the British crown. When indigo is fermented, it is sometimes referred to as a live being: 'a child, that needs to be put to bed' or 'rest under the bedcovers'. Lin's work considers how we are enmeshed through fermentation – culturally, historically, environmentally and cross-species – through both erotic and caring acts and extractive or violent interaction.

Singaporean artist Kent Chan also described ideas of fermentation in his work *Warm Fronts*, 2021-. Initiated during the Covid-19 lockdown, the work is a series of transmissions made from across the tropics that tap into electronic music's long-held associations as a 'futurist statement'. Working with musicians from numerous remote regions of the tropics – Guillermo from Brazil, Makossiri from Kenya, Kaleekarma from India and Gabber Modus Operandi from Indonesia – Chan broadcast the rhythms and the shared sensory climatic energy of the region, the prickling heat on moist skin, connected bodies in distant locations. The Tropics cover almost 40% of the Earth's surface area, and it is projected that by 2050 more than half of the world's population will live in the region. Apart from Singapore and Australia, all 106 countries with tropical zones within their borders are classed as developing economies. As a result of global warming, tropical conditions are expanding into an ever-wider band circling the planet. Chan suggests that – having lived with precarity for centuries under the conditions of colonial extraction and its legacies – those living in tropical regions can offer an expansion of our geoclimatic imagination. Chan speculates that as the tropics continue their expansion, climate demarcation might dissipate and lead to a shift in which a collapse of delineations between geopolitical regions will allow us to focus on commonalities. The musicians of *Warm Fronts* create what Chan calls a 'solar and sonic alliance', one in which kinship is formed through the fermentation of shared histories and colonial ghosts present in the humid heat, allowing new possibilities to bubble to the surface.

As one final example, a few weeks ago, while sipping a malt-based fermented liquid at a favourite London pub, Indian artist Sujatro Ghosh described his exhibition last year in Berlin, 'Prosaic Elegy For Hungry Streets', in which 'sensation, violence, scarcity and abundance are summoned into a delicate recipe'. During the Bengal famine of 1943 it is estimated that more than three million people perished due to starvation, disease and displacement in the wake of disastrous weather, wartime disruption of food distribution and the abject failure of the British colonial administration. Basing his work on the still-present legacy of this catastrophic history – considered to be one of the most devastating human-made events of the 20th century – and having held extensive interviews with survivors of the famine, Ghosh proposes that the idea of starvation positions food not just as a form of nourishment but also as a site of memory, longing and a sense of injustice. In one of the exhibition's installations, *The Museum of Desire*, mason jars filled with preserved and fermented foods are offered up as 'a clock that keeps cured, spiced and marinated time'. These suspended and carefully transformed foodstuffs (recipes donated by the fam-

ine's survivors) aren't just strategies to plan for an unknown and unknowable future, they are filled with dreams and desires that seep into one another, nurturing new alliances and forms from the precarious present. While history, both metaphorically and physically, becomes an edible sustenance, each jar evokes a different moment: the specific context and family history of its maker. Channelled through 'the time of waiting and succour', they become proposals, dreams and desires for the future. Negarestani would argue that it is in these spaces of the Bengali Famine, Palestinian Occupation, pandemic lockdown or global climate catastrophe that the processes of decay separate themselves from the 'transgressive war machines of termination, annihilation, tragedy and violence'. He argues that power requires a ground in order to turn into a formative power (power of law, the state, religion etc), therefore 'decay incapacitates the ground by which power is instrumentalised'.

The differing approaches to fermentation by the artists explored here do not seek a position that operates outside societal structures and time. While they refuse the tools of instrumentalised power, they find ways to circumnavigate them, make them visible and sustainable, both allegorically and practically. Writing in the context of the Occupy movement, Judith Butler astutely declared that, 'for politics to take place, the body must appear'. Now, in the context of global ecological urgencies and the societal breakdowns that continue to ensue, this can – and must – be redeployed. The 'body' need not be a singular human, though, but instead can take the form of unveiling and making visible the communities (human and non-human), infrastructures and biomes that we depend on. Butler's declaration to bare a visceral, tangible reality in plain sight can be seen in these artists' strategies of fermentation as they expose the micro-relations that surround us.

Furthermore, fermentations do not follow exact recipes but instead necessitate that we put the anthropocentric to one side in order to collaborate with the often unseen structures that surround us, that they are part of us and have formed us: microbial communities, historical legacies and otherwise. Fermentation practices are imbued with care and attention to the minuscule shifts and changes of their particular context, in which new allegiances, collaborations and continuously morphing structures can be found. To ferment is to bring intent to the table, metaphorically and actually. Humanity is desperate for transformation, Sandor Ellix Katz tells us. 'Our way of life is proving to be unsustainable,' he says. 'We need to reimagine how we live our lives. Now more than ever, we need the bubbling transformative power of fermentation.'

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