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## **El Bulli: Contemporary Intersections Between Food, Science, Art and Late Capitalism.**

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# El Bulli: Contemporary Intersections Between Food, Science, Art and Late Capitalism.

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## Abstract

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Ferran Adrià, head of the Catalan restaurant and now foundation elBulli, participated in the exhibition of contemporary art *Documenta 12* in 2007. My paper analyzes this event as the intersection of three elements: Adrià's work and performance as chef, the incorporation of science and technology into cuisine in what is known as Adrià's 'techno-cuisine', and the crossing between contemporary art and food. To do so, I describe some of Adrià's dishes and examine the ways in which they relate to the artistic field. Rather than addressing the polemic question of whether a chef can ever be considered an artist or not, my essay reflects on the significance of Adrià's approximation to the contemporary art world in relation to the blurring of artistic frontiers and other cultural and social fields. I approach Adrià's case as an example of what Fredric Jameson calls the 'dedifferentiation' of spaces, disciplines, and social spheres that result from the economic forces of late capitalism.

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**Keywords:** Ferran Adrià, Documenta, dedifferentiation, late capitalism.

# El Bulli: Intersecciones Contemporáneas Entre Comida, Ciencia, Arte y Capitalismo Tardío

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## Resumen

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Ferran Adrià, chef principal del restaurante catalán y ahora fundación elBulli, participó en 2007 en la exposición de arte contemporáneo *Documenta 12*. Mi trabajo analiza este evento como la intersección de tres elementos: el trabajo y performance de Adrià como cocinero, la incorporación de la ciencia y la tecnología en la cocina en lo que se conoce como la “tecno-cocina” de Adrià, y el cruce entre arte contemporáneo y comida. En mi análisis, describo algunos de los platos de Adrià así como su relación con el campo artístico. En lugar de centrarme en la cuestión polémica sobre si un chef puede considerarse un artista o no, mi ensayo reflexiona sobre el significado de la aproximación de Adrià al mundo del arte contemporáneo en relación a la disolución de fronteras artísticas y de otros campos culturales y sociales. Me acerco al caso de Adrià como un ejemplo de lo que Fredric Jameson llama la “desdiferenciación” de espacios, disciplinas y esferas sociales producida por las fuerzas económicas del capitalismo tardío.

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**Palabras claves:** Ferran Adrià, Documenta, desdiferenciación, capitalismo tardío.

**F**erran Adrià is head of the Catalan restaurant and now foundation elBulli. He is not only one of the most influential chefs, especially known for his ‘techno-cuisine’; Adrià is also the only chef who has ever been invited as another artist at Documenta, the the only chef who has ever been invited as another artist at Documenta, the contemporary art exhibition that is held in Kassel, Germany, every five years. He participated in *Documenta 12* (2007), and he converted elBulli in another venue of the artistic event.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this transformation from chef into “artist,” Adrià began to be often portrayed in the media as a new Salvador Dalí. A quick search of pictures of him on the Internet shows the drawing of a parallel between the two artists (Figures 1, 2, and 3).



*Figure 1, 2. Ferran Adrià in Cala Montjoi (Roses)*

*Figure 3. Václav Chochola, Salvador Dali with Egg, 1969*

In these pictures, Adrià is photographed ‘playing’ with an egg, exactly like Dalí in Chochola’s famous photo. The egg plays a double role: it functions as a universal symbol of cuisine and it associates Adrià directly to Dalí, as eggs are a playful and architectural recurrent element of the latter’s imagery. Moreover, the Fundació Gala i Salvador Dalí in Figueres and the Casa-Museu Salvador Dalí in Portlligat, both buildings decorated with egg-like elements, are located in the same small area as the restaurant/foundation elBulli, which is in Cala Montjoi, Roses.

Adrià's cuisine and his persona embody a contemporary intersection between food, science, art and market. In this essay, I will not address value question of whether a chef can ever be considered an artist or not. Rather, I will reflect on the significance of his approximation to the contemporary art world in relation to the blurring of artistic frontiers and other cultural and social fields. I will approach Adrià's case as an example, to borrow Fredric Jameson's terminology, of the 'dedifferentiation' of spaces, disciplines, and social spheres that result from the economic forces of late capitalism.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, I will describe some of Adrià's dishes to see the ways in which they relate to the artistic field. Finally, I will also explore the motivations that were behind the invitation to participate in Documenta.

Interactions between contemporary art and food are not new. Leaving aside earlier connections between art and food in many still-lives, we can think of contemporary representations of food such as Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans or Claes Oldenburg's hamburgers and hot dogs, and installations and performances based on food, such as Paul McCarthy's performances, Alison Knowles's giant salads, Rirkrit Tiravanija's meals in art galleries and museums, and Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant *Food* in New York (Figures 4-9). Yet, these examples consist of multisensory artistic projects that engage in food in different ways: food as commodity for mass consumption, as a experience of the abject, or as practices of relational aesthetics. Indeed, we can also



Figure 4. Claes Oldenburg, *Floor Burger (Giant Hamburger)*, 1962.

Figure 5. Alison Knowles, *Make a Salad*, 1962 (Reenactment, Tate Modern, 2008).

Figure 6. Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962.



*Figure 7.* Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Pad Thai*, 1991-96

*Figure 8.* Robert Frank, Still from *FOOD* (short movie on Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Goodden's conceptual restaurant founded in 1972 in New York City).

*Figure 9.* Paul McCarthy, *Bossy Burger*, 1991. Performance, video, and installation at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles.

mention a work much closer to Adrià: Catalan artist Antoni Miralda and his Centre Internacional de la Cultura del Menjar (International Center for the Food Culture), an online project devoted to the investigation of gastronomy, science, technology, and art.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Adrià, however, we have a cook with no direct relation to the art world who was invited to a highly influential artistic event. It is worth remembering that developments in cuisine have a utilitarian component. As Italian artist [Maurizio Cattelan](#) pointed out in an interview with Adrià in the art magazine *FlashArt* in 2009: “I must start from the principle that vanguard cuisine comes from the need to feed. And this is the big difference in relation to the other artistic fields.”<sup>4</sup> And yet, what contribution does Adrià make to the contemporary art scene? What theoretical, conceptual and ideological frames connect his work to the sphere of the aesthetic? In fact, can we still think of the aesthetic as a separate field? These are some of the questions that I will attempt to address in this essay.

### **Who is Ferran Adrià?**

Ferran Adrià (Santa Eulàlia, Barcelona, 1962), head of the restaurant *elBulli*<sup>5</sup>, was considered the best chef in the world from 2006 to 2009

by the prestigious list *The San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants*.<sup>6</sup> Yet, he was downgraded to number two in 2010, when restaurant Noma in Copenhagen reached the top position. In 2011, elBulli closed its doors to reinvent itself and they plan to reopen again in 2014 in the form of an interdisciplinary foundation devoted to leading scientific investigation and food culture.

elBulli was a restaurant located in the North-East of Catalonia, in an area close to the border with France. For many years, elBulli, or El Bulli, was a restaurant owned by a German couple and accommodated North-European visitors during the tourist boom of 1960s. In 1984, at age twenty-two, Adrià joined the kitchen staff of elBulli as a line cook. Eighteen months later, he became the head chef. In 1990, Adrià and Juli Soler, who had already been the restaurant's manager for many years, became co-owners.

During the first three years, Adrià was very influenced by the French *nouvelle cuisine*. But after this period, he began to invent and cook his own recipes and his cuisine became associated with molecular gastronomy, even if he prefers to describe his cuisine as 'deconstructivist' and 'technoemotional'.<sup>7</sup> As he points out, "[m]y goal is to provide unexpected contrasts of flavor, temperature and texture. Nothing is what it seems. The idea is to provoke, surprise and delight the diner. [...] The ideal customer doesn't come to elBulli to eat but to have an experience."<sup>8</sup>

Catalan cuisine is in principle not an easy ground for molecular or scientific experimentation. Catalan cooking is based on fresh food such as fish from the Mediterranean; meats from the interior, especially pork; and seasonal vegetables, with special emphasis on corn, garlic, and olive oil. Its basic premise is to maintain the essential tastes without over-processing them.

During the 80s and early 90s, Catalan cuisine was highly influenced by French *nouvelle cuisine*, but in the late 90s many restaurants began to further experiment with new forms of cooking, even if these were still based on the essential foods of traditional cuisine. It is worth mentioning that most of the considered best restaurants in Spain have emerged in Barcelona and the northern part of Catalonia, where we find seven restaurants with two or three Michelin stars.<sup>9</sup> This is indicative of

Catalonia's high creativity in the field of cuisine and also its success in developing a cultural and gastronomic tourist industry.

Following this trend, Adrià's beginning as a leading chef and co-owner of elBulli around the mid-1980s were clearly influenced by *nouvelle cuisine*. The dishes from this period are characterized by the use of local ingredients which were considered 'poor' or 'peasant food', but which were cooked and presented in a highly sophisticated form. Yet, traditional local styles of preparing food were also applied to expensive food like seafood. Traditional and local cuisine "informed elBulli's early explorations of the traditional food of Catalunya, of the rest of Spain, of Italy and finally of the whole Mediterranean."<sup>10</sup>

Currently, Adrià's dishes are inspired by fusion cuisine and are highly influenced by Japanese cuisine. From the Nippon Island, he has borrowed not only many ingredients but especially *kaiseki* cuisine, "a style of formal dining with many courses that are finely balanced in taste, texture, cooking technique and presentation. In fact, the Japanese emphasis on the spirituality, ritual and sequence of eating, which values the experience of the whole meal and the flow of courses over individual dishes, had a deeper influence on the food of elBulli than the use of Japanese ingredients."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the search for new techniques of cooking, new concepts, and new ingredients is the most important act of creativity. Fusion cuisine has fully immersed Adrià's world in globalization. In this sense, Adrià's dishes have little to do with his beginnings at elBulli's kitchen, when the essential ingredients were local. Now the most 'local' ingredients and references are connected to the rest of Spain, mainly with Castilla and Andalucía. Therefore, Adrià's vision of the 'global' is reflected in the fusion of two instances: the different worldcuisines and the Spanish cuisine rather than the Catalan one. For instance, he uses Andalucian olive oil, ham, and olives; and he mimics Andalucian style when he deepfries fish (with a very sophisticated technique). On the other hand, dishes such as the one called 'earthy', made of several tiny bites of earthy-like dishes, were inspired by Japanese landscapes (Figure 10). Not surprisingly, Adrià was named international 'brand ambassador' for Spain by the country's Ministry of Tourism, in an attempt to make high cuisine another attractive asset for Spain.<sup>12</sup>

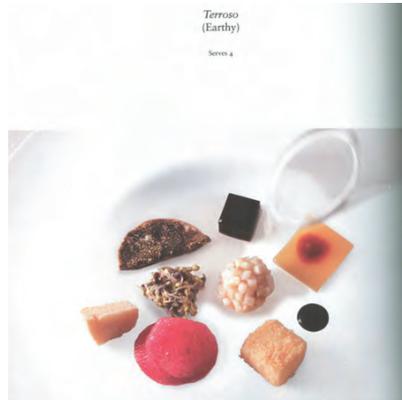


Figure 10. "Earthy".

Perhaps we can also read Adrià's cuisine in political terms and observe that his ideological position would correspond to the construction of the image of a Spain with regional variations rather than the image of a differentiated Catalonia. This relates to one of the fiercest controversies in which he was involved. One of his fervent competitors was Santi Santamaria, former chef of the three-star Michelin restaurant El Racó de Can Fabes, who publicly criticized Adrià's cuisine.<sup>13</sup> Santamaria's restaurant presented the opposite type of cuisine: it was based on high quality local ingredients, which were cooked with traditional techniques so that the food was little processed. Gastronomist Colman Andrews directly connects Santamaria's cuisine with his Catalan pride. He says that "Santamaria today is proudly, politically Catalan, and is a vocal articulate defender of regional traditions, culinary and otherwise, and of the natural environment of rural Catalonia."<sup>14</sup> Andrews describes Santamaria as "a sturdy medium-sized bear of a man with a generous smile, a balding pate and the shadow of a beard and mutton chop whiskers sometimes framing his rounded face."<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, Andrews' presumably gracious description of Santamaria can be viewed as an ideological and determinist analogy between certain physical and behavioral features, and localist and

stubborn Catalan nationalism. Thus, it is implicit in Andrew's statement that Adrià embodies the opposite values: Adrià is invited to participate in *Documenta* at least in part because he represents a multicultural and global frame, which is conveniently connected to the tourist picture of Spain.<sup>16</sup> In short, while Santamaria's sort of 'political' cuisine is seen as 'traditionalist', Adrià can be regarded as an 'innovative' chef and global artist.

### **Molecular Cuisine or Techno-emotional Food<sup>17</sup>**

Adrià was the first Catalan chef to explore the new possibilities of 'techno-cuisine'. Molecular gastronomy is today a highly influential force in contemporary haute cuisine.<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, all cooking processes are molecular, since cooking changes the molecular structure of food, especially with the application of heat. Applied to contemporary *haute cuisine*, however, it refers to the reduction of recipes to global formulas, in which ingredients from the same physicochemical family can be interchanged to invent new recipes.

Nicholas Kurti, a Hungarian physicist and professor at Oxford, and Hervé This, a French physical chemist who works at the Institute National de la Recherche Agronomique, invented Molecular and Physical Gastronomy in 1992. Molecular Gastronomy is, in short, the study of the physical and chemical processes that occur while cooking. As This points out,

Nicholas Kurti and I sought to promote the notion of molecular gastronomy [...] Chemistry and physics, judiciously applied, can tell us how to preserve the tenderness of meats, how to master the chemical reactions that give the crust of roasted meat its wonderful flavor [...]. Time honored maxims, proverbs, old-wives' tales, folk believes, and culinary rules are millstones round our necks that weight us down when they are false and wings that carry us aloft when they are true. Hence the importance of molecular gastronomy, whose primary objective is first to make an inventory of such rules and then to select those that have withstood careful analysis. Culinary art has everything to gain by separating the wheat from the chaff of empirical observations."<sup>19</sup>

More specifically, as de Solier points out, “Kurti and This suggest that dishes are neither solid nor liquids, but ‘complex disperse systems’, and have developed their own scientific language called ‘CDS formalism’, which aims to provide a global description of the physical microstructure of a dish by translating its recipe into a scientific formula.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the ‘Chantilly cream’ is translated into a global formula by:



That is, an oil (in this case milk) dispersed (divided) in water, plus gas (or whipping), leads to a whipped cream. This translation of recipes into formulas is called ‘modeling dishes’.<sup>21</sup> With modeling dishes, one skilled chef can interchange elements from the same family of foods, or also called the ‘physicochemical system.’ For instance, one can substitute liquid milk for a solid cheese to make a cheese Chantilly. In Kurti and This, this method is called ‘generalization’.<sup>22</sup>

Adrià’s molecular cuisine is famous for the invention of the so-called spherifications, foams and airs, as well as liquid nitrogen cooking. Every year the restaurant would close during a six-month period and a team of about twelve chefs devoted themselves to investigating at elBulli Taller (literally, workshop), which opened in 2000 and was located in Barcelona.<sup>23</sup> The creations developed at the Taller brought science into the kitchen by using chemicals and laboratory instruments to produce ‘strange’ food. Before 2003, elBulli team discovered most of their pseudo-scientific creations by chance and by trial and error, but in 2003 two chemists were hired as permanent staff of the new Science department in the Taller. Andrews ironically describes elBulli Taller as a place where

he [Adrià] and his team prepare food on flameless induction hobs and, worse, sometimes with cold, in tubs of liquid nitrogen; they use machines that don’t look familiar and implements that don’t seem to belong in the chef’s tool kit, such as electric screwdrivers and oversized syringes. The Taller, in particular, is rumored to be some kind of high-tech laboratory, full of science-fiction paraphernalia.<sup>24</sup>

Andrews’ narrative is especially interesting to situate the work of Adrià and the Taller in a terrain in between science and sorcery. On the

one hand, Andrews emphasizes the scientific side of Adrià's work and presents it as something serious, contrasted, and rigorous (Figure 11).



*Figure 11.* “Still Life” created by elBulli Taller.

But, on the other hand, he emphasizes mystery and offers to the reader a sense of magic, secrecy, and geniality. The balancing between the two poles is perhaps the strongest aspect of Adrià and his creations. Yet, Adrià's success is also due to his willingness to make his recipes public. Sharing his recipes, which are published in books and on the Internet, is a way of proving that, behind the mysterious forms and the cryptic science, his creations are feasible, enjoyable, and healthy.<sup>25</sup>

One of Adrià's most famous inventions are the so-called spherifications (Figure 12), which are the product of dissolving calcium carbonate in an edible liquid of some kind, such as melon, pea, or carrot juice, while feeding droplets of this mixture into a solution of calcium

alginate. Then, a chemical reaction solidifies the epidermic layer of the drop, keeping the interior totally liquid. A refinement of this procedure came with the use of liquid nitrogen to freeze the eatable liquid solution mixed with calcium carbonate into molds before bathing them in the alginate solution. With this process, the food could take many other shapes, not only spherical (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Spherification Process.

Figure 13. Cooking with Liquid Nitrogen.

No scientific creation by Adrià has been as successful and imitated as the foams and airs (Figure 14). The idea came to Adrià in 1991 when he paid attention to the residual foam left by freshly squeezed fruit juice.<sup>26</sup> Foams are no more than mousses lightened with air instead of cream. To achieve this, Adrià and his team tried several ways of injecting air into food. Finally, they could do it with the help of an Austrianmade siphon with nitrous oxide capsules as propellants used in Austrian coffeehouses.<sup>27</sup>

The first air was produced in elBulli Taller in 2003 “by emulsifying a foam, [previously liquefied with a Turmix],<sup>28</sup> injecting the maximum amount of air and consequently a foam that, due to its volatility, we call ‘air’.”<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 14. "Carrot Air".*

In short, the main role of science in Adrià's cuisine marks a difference in relation to the rest of highly renowned chefs. Scientific experiments held every year at elBulli Taller by chemists and the application of sophisticated technologies to the creation of 'new' dishes, elevated elBulli and its chef to a level above the simple act, or art, of cooking. As de Solier points out, "the science of molecular gastronomy transforms culinary knowledge and practice from the realm of the layperson into an abstract system of scientific expertise."<sup>30</sup> The notion of 'abstract system' is a key aspect to understand the role of Adrià as an 'artist' who participated in *Documenta 12*.

### **elBulli's Participation in Documenta 12**

elBulli was invited to participate in Documenta 12 in 2007. elBulli became *Documenta's* Pavilion G during the 100 days of the art event (Figure 15). Therefore, the 50 clients dining at elBulli each night during this period were not considered guests, but visitors of the *Documenta*. Moreover, the director of the *Documenta*, Roger M. Buergel, randomly chose every day two visitors at the *Documenta* and invited them to have

diner at elBulli.<sup>31</sup> They were invited to fly from Kassel to Catalonia, have dinner at elBulli, spend the night in a hotel, and come back the next day. Adrià served each evening to his 50 diners a 35-course dinner specially prepared on the occasion of *Documenta*.



**During the one hundred days that documenta 12 lasted, there was a large banner at the entrance to the elBulli restaurant identifying it as one of the pavilions of the exhibition.**

*Figure 15.* Documenta's Pavilion G, 2007.

According to Buergel, “almost single-handedly, Ferran managed to transform the way in which we perceive food. This was the key to his participation in *Documenta 12*. Of course, the transformation of human perception is an old modernist game. In 2007, one might suppose or even wish the game to be over. But it is not.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, to Buergel, the artistic aspect in Adrià's creations is the perceptual trick. Almost all of Adrià's dishes are not what they appear to be, or they are even nothing recognizable, responding to what Adrià calls ‘techno-emotional-cuisine’. For instance, dishes conventionally served hot are turned into

ice creams, caviars are made of spherified fruit juices, pasta is made with thin endless cheese noodles, and cold drinks are served hot. One could argue that Adrià's dishes are based on a sort of anti-synesthetic game.

But, is this experimentation with form sufficient to explain the inclusion of Adrià into the art world? While this was one of the main alleged reasons to present him as an artist, his participation could also respond to a series of marketing needs which were related in turn to the anxieties of European cultural elites that were eager to keep the modernist impulse alive and discover 'new', 'groundbreaking' forms of artistic engagement while professing class status through their culinary experiences. As Manuel Borja-Villel<sup>33</sup> points out, "Ferran's participation [in Documenta] was an example of the narcissism and self-satisfaction inherent in the mounting of the show", which "speaks to a certain dilettantish extravagance on the part of the curator, who, in my way of seeing, considers this political venue as something merely festive and communal."<sup>34</sup>

Yet, rather than condemning Adrià or the curator, some characteristics of his cuisine can be analyzed as catalyzers of cultural crossing not only between art and food but also between modernism and postmodernism. That is, Adrià's creations can be translated into examples of both modernist and poststructuralist or deconstructivist theories, as his production navigates in between the two.

### **Is elBulli Modernist?**

Adrià's maximum is defined with the sentence 'creativity means not copying', which he acquired after attending a talk by chef Jacques Maximin in Nice in 1987.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Adrià's culinary principle is based on rupture and originality, which are central ideas within modernism and are intrinsically linked to the notions of authorship and creative genius.

The modernist project is also manifested in the universalist aim of molecular cuisine to establish common truths, which will provide the foundations for the evolution of gastronomy.<sup>36</sup> Kurti and This's venture engages with the work of Brillant-Savarin, who was the first to connect

food and science in early nineteenth-century France. We owe to these men the invention of molecular gastronomy.<sup>37</sup> The translation of recipes into formulas by molecular cuisine and its consequent method of ‘generalization’ (invented by Kurti and This) is also used by Adrià and his team to develop a system of symbols (Figure 16). Thus, as de Solier affirms, “molecular gastronomy is no postmodern science.”<sup>38</sup>

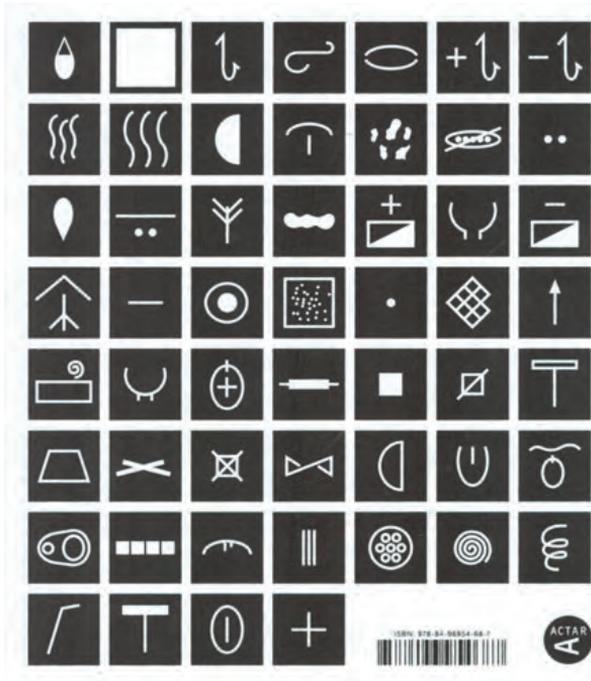


Figure 16. elBulli's Symbols.

On the other hand, the aspect and textures of some of Adrià's dishes suspiciously resemble abstract expressionist paintings, especially the image of the dish published in *Documenta 12* catalog (Figure 17). Or, in one particular dish he pays direct homage to European Informalism (Figure 18). According to anthropologist Gary Alan Fine, creativity is

fundamental to the chef's status, since cooking is a form of aesthetic production and a sensory experience, and not a mere technique.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Fine's approach to high cuisine, especially Adrià's, is very similar to Buergel's artistic view of Adrià's 'old' perceptual tricks and games.



*Figure 17.* elBulli's Image for Documenta's Catalog, 2007.

*Figure 18.* elBulli's Homage to Antoni Tàpies.

### **Is elBulli Postmodernist and Deconstructivist?**

Adrià argues that, beyond perceptual games and surprises, his cuisine is a language for the dialogue between the chef and the diner. Through this dialogue, Adrià expects to 'deconstruct' traditional culinary meanings. Adrià suggests that "deconstruction in kitchen consists of using (and respecting) already known harmonies, transforming the texture of ingredients, as well as their shape and temperature."<sup>40</sup> Deconstruction is the task of questioning the concepts that are self-evident and that structure our knowledge to open up other possibilities of approaching the world.<sup>41</sup> As philosophical thinking it aims to go beyond the sensorial, and it is unclear whether food and cuisine can ever depart from this sensorial realm.

However, as Parasecoli (2001) fervently defends, the idea of deconstruction helps us understand Adrià's world. According to Parasecoli,

the concepts Adrià translates and materializes into food are, by his own admission, amazingly close to those developed within the literary and philosophical movement generally known as deconstruction: the same provocative use of estrangement, intended to make the most familiar structures, classifications, and conceptual systems totally unfamiliar; the same intense effort to subvert any absolute set of assumptions, to relentlessly fray the signifying differences in the canonized and mythicized culinary discourse.<sup>42</sup>

Still, while deconstruction avoids authority and uniqueness in favor of simulation and pastiche, Adrià's 'deconstructivist' approach to cuisine emphasizes originality, authorship, and uniqueness. Following Parasecoli again, "the common point between cooking style and the deconstruction method would be the play with textures, shapes, and temperatures of ingredients in order to enhance the 'spirit' of a dish, to display all of its connections to memory and to other recipes."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, going back to Buergel's justification on why Adrià was invited at *Documenta*, one realizes that what Adrià and Parasecoli call deconstruction, Buergel calls it perceptual games. In the end, it remains unclear whether deconstructing cuisine means creating something new or dismantling the inherited knowledge that structures our food and our cuisine.

### ***Food for Thought, Thought for Food or the Endogamy of Class Elite***

Adrià's participation in *Documenta 12* led to the publication in 2010 of the book *Food for Thought, Thought for Food*, edited by Vicent Todolí and Richard Hamilton (Figure 19).<sup>44</sup> The aim of this book was to justify Adrià's fragile position as a contemporary artist who nevertheless remains within the sphere of high cuisine. The main argument of the contributors to the book was to present Adrià as and despite his own reluctance to being labeled one, and to portray the menu of his restaurant as a collective and participative work of art.



*Figure 19. Promotional Pictures for Food for Thought, Thought for Food. Adrià and Todolí.*

For instance, Richard Hamilton's text argues that inviting Adrià to participate in *Documenta 12* was a completely appropriate decision. Hamilton compares Adrià's work with several 'postmodern artists [who] have approached the subject of food obliquely', such as Marcel Broothaers, Claes Oldenburg, Alison Knowles, Dieter Roth, and Daniel Spoerri.<sup>45</sup> Adrian Searle's article, in turn, is a journal-style report of his one-day experience at elBulli Taller in Barcelona. Searle describes the process of conception and production of the dishes, and constantly compares it to the process of artistic creation.

The book offers a wide understanding of how Adrià's formal participation in *Documenta* materialized, and it contains detailed illustrations of the thirty-five creative dishes that composed the menu (Figure 20). And yet, the argument of the whole book and the passionate explanations of the editors and contributors do not quite succeed in convincing skeptical readers, and one does not find a strong theoretical base to justify the presentation of high cuisine as art. We still have to answer the question: where does the impulse to define Adrià's cuisine as art come from?

At the same time, commodities have also incorporated cultural value.

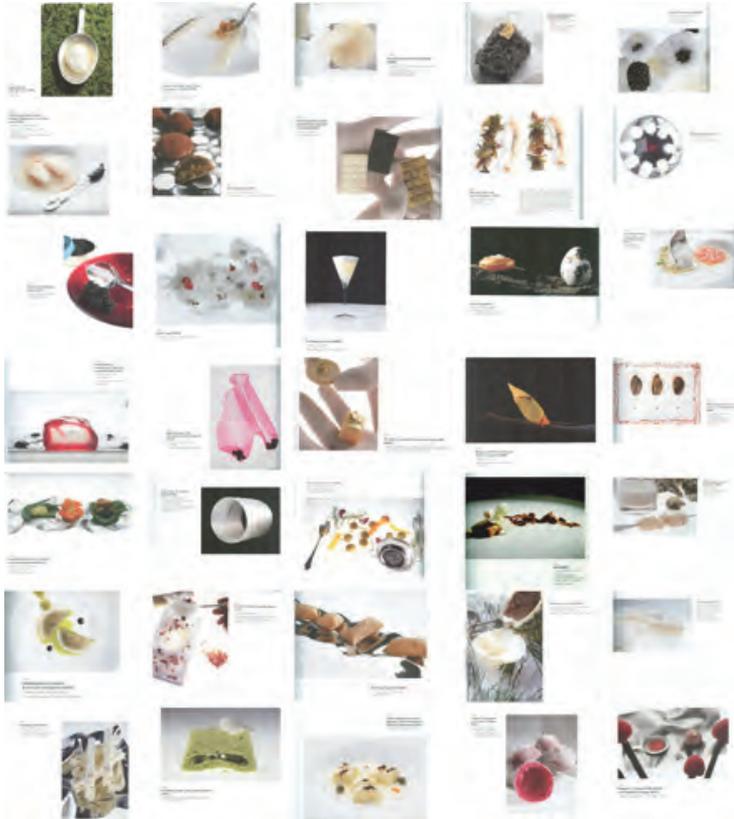


Figure 20. Documenta's Menu.

### **elBulli as an Example of Postmodern 'Dedifferentiation'**

The case of elBulli is maybe another, rather extreme example of the general blurring between the market and cultural production, or what Jameson has termed the 'dedifferentiation' of social spaces in late capitalism. In our contemporary times, the difference between culture and the market has disappeared, as everything has been transformed into capital, from art to food to all type of personal and social experiences.

In a post-Fordist economy in which the desires of the customer determine the design of production, marketing has become a crucial aspect of the commodity. Commodities differentiate themselves through the work of marketing, which involves all type of cultural and immaterial knowledges that can help create special qualities for commodities.

The paradox is that the more commodities must differentiate themselves in our consumerist and postmodern society, the more dedifferentiated the spheres of society become. As **Jameson** points out, postmodernity, in which ‘the end of art’<sup>46</sup> takes place, “is marked by a dedifferentiation of fields, such that economics has come to overlap with culture: that everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented.”<sup>47</sup> For **Jameson**, the emergence of the so-called *happenings* during the 1960s, whose very deployment was also political because of their critique of the relation between high culture and state power, was the first attempt to abolish the boundaries between art and life.<sup>48</sup> ‘The end of art’ was strictly linked to the end of the sublime and the end of the *auteur*, and it went hand by hand with the appearance of Theory (mainly structuralism and post-structuralism). However, a parallel phenomenon was the emergence of what **Jameson** calls the ‘Beautiful’, which conformed the other face of postmodernism, at the other side of Theory. The Beautiful relates to the decorative, and it is a source of “pleasure and gratification”.<sup>49</sup> Thus, both Theory and the Beautiful are part and parcel of ‘the end of art’. Following **Jameson** again,

we must add a significant qualification to this identification to postmodernism with Kant’s and Burke’s conception of the Beautiful: this has to do with education, the public sphere, and the cybernetic or informational age; and it requires us to underscore a remarkable historic development in our own time, namely the immense expansion of culture and commodification into all these fields—politics and economics, for example- from which it was so rightly differentiated in the daily life of the modern period.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, this ‘acculturation’ of daily life and the corresponding ‘commodification’ of culture can explain the relationship between two

separate phenomena such as elBulli and Documenta. This double process of ‘commodification’ of culture and ‘acculturation’ of daily life can be particularly observed in Adrià’s foams and airs (see figure 15). As de Solier points out, “elBulli’s molecular gastronomy dematerializes the substance of food [especially in foams and airs], making literal Marx’s metaphor of modernity: ‘All that is solid melts (or in this case, is siphoned) into air’.”<sup>51</sup> But Adrià’s foams and airs can be read not only as a metaphor for modernity, but also, and more specifically, as a metaphor of our current stage of modernity, namely postmodernity. This stage, as Jameson has shown, is that of finance capitalism. The airs and foams are a perfect portrait of the transformation from material production (the so-called ‘Fordist’ model) into immaterial finance capital (or also called ‘post-Fordist’ model). Adrià’s molecular gastronomy is another example of the general dematerialization of production under finance capitalism. Like the immaterial components of marketing and the dedifferentiation between art and decoration, cuisine turns into another free-floating signifier with no “proper” sphere or “authentic” tradition.

### Concluding Remarks

The performative experience of dining at elBulli (performative because some of the dishes were finished at the guests’ table, and sometimes special guests could eat in the magnificent kitchen while it was in full action), the aesthetic achievement of Adrià’s dishes, the will to confuse and transform human perception, and the centrality of science in his creations, the ‘dedifferentiation’ of social fields, along with an intense process of marketing, are some of the guidelines to interpret Adrià’s invitation to *Documenta 12*.

However, we must still ask the question of Adrià’s contribution to the contemporary art scene. Given that his dishes do not seem to assume any artistic practice or discourse beyond the perceptual games provided by his highly sophisticated creations, we must question whether his food experiences connect in any strong way with the artistic tradition of “before” the end of art. In other words, even if finance capitalism has blurred all differences and categories, the lack of reference to a previous

conception of art turns him into a simple celebration of the current state of things. Adrià's food, even if it is aesthetically complex and visually attractive, does not pursue the creation of a vision or a comment on the world beyond the sensorial experience of food. In the end, his art and food are simply sustained by the global 'airy' economy and one cannot help wonder what would happen to his creations if some day this airy economy finally collapsed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, El Bulli modified its spelling and became elBulli. This change aimed to modernize the restaurant's logo by imitating the spelling of trendy technologies such as iPhone, iBook, or iPod. This not only indicated a marketing strategy but also reflected the restaurant's effort to connect to new technologies. For more information, see Andrews Colman (2010). *Reinventing Food. Ferran Adrià: The Man Who Changed the Way We Eat*. London: Phaidon. Since this paper mainly focuses on the period of 2007, when Adrià was invited at Documenta, I will use the most recent name elBulli.

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, Fredric (1998). *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso, (73).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.foodculturemuseum.com/> [last accessed April 28, 2013].

<sup>4</sup> Cattelan, Maurizio (2009). "Ferran Adrià" *Flash Art* 267, 39.

<sup>5</sup> In its restaurant form, elBulli was composed of Ferran Adrià (elBulli's main chef and co-owner), Albert Adrià (Ferran's brother and elBulli dessert's chef), Juli Soler (coowner and PR), Oriol Castro (Creative Team alongside with Adrià brothers), Pere Castells and Íngrid Farré (scientific department).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theworlds50best.com/> [last accessed April 28, 2013].

<sup>7</sup> Technoemotional cuisine is based on scientific experimentation and the invention of perceptual games. Even if this type of cuisine is defined as "deconstruction," its application in cuisine is very far from the philosophical context in which it emerged.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, Colman (2010). *Reinventing Food. Ferran Adrià: The Man Who Changed the Way We Eat*. London: Phaidon, (201).

<sup>9</sup> This guide awards one to three stars to a small number of restaurants of outstanding quality. Two restaurants have three stars: Sant Pau (Sant Pol de Mar) and El Celler de Can Roca (Girona), and five Catalan restaurants have two stars: Les Cols (Olot), Miramar (Llançà), Can Fabes (Sant Celoni), Lasarte, Àbac, Enoteca and Moments (Barcelona). This is a high percentage in relation to the rest of the world (except for some regions of France). Source: [http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guia\\_Michelin#Les\\_estrelles\\_Michelin](http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guia_Michelin#Les_estrelles_Michelin) [last consulted March 4, 2013].

<sup>10</sup> Adrià, Albert; Adrià Ferran; Soler, Juli (2008). *A Day at elBulli. An Insight into the Ideas, Methods and Creativity of Ferran Adrià*. New York: Phaidon Press Ltd, (136).

<sup>11</sup> Adrià, Albert; Adrià Ferran; Soler, Juli, (136).

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, Colman. (293).

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 22.

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, Colman. (277).

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, Colman. (277).

<sup>16</sup> The Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona (Costa Brava Girona Pyrenees Tourist Agency) partially funded Adrià's participation in Documenta.

<sup>17</sup> The term 'techno-emotional' was first coined by journalist Pau Arenós in the Spanish periodical *El Periódico*. Source: Andrews, Colman. (219).

<sup>18</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (2010). Liquid Nitrogen Pistachios: Molecular Gastronomy, *elBulli* and Foodies. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 2, 155-170 (156)

<sup>19</sup> This, Hervé (2006). *Molecular gastronomy: exploring the science of flavor*. New York: Columbia University Press, (11-12). For more information, see Crow, James Mitchell; Campos-Seijo, Bibiana (2009). Interviews: Hervé This and Ferran Adrià Talk Chemistry and Cooking. *Chemistry World* 6, 10, 40; Friel Blanck, Jaime (2008). *Molecular Gastronomy: Overview of a Controversial Food Science Discipline*. *Journal of Agricultural and Food Information*, 8, 3, 77-85; and Raisfeld, Robin; Rob Patronite (2006). *Ferran Adrià, Molecular Gastronomist*. New York, 39, 38, 83.

<sup>20</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (158).

<sup>21</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (158).

<sup>22</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (158).

<sup>23</sup> During each six-month period, more than 5000 experiments were conducted at *elBulli* Taller. Around 100 were selected to eventually become part of the next menu. (Andrews, 203).

<sup>24</sup> Andrews, Colman (201).

<sup>25</sup> During the last three years, an intense controversy emerged on whether Adrià's recipes could be harmful for people's health. Late chef Santi Santamaria, owner of *El Racó* de Can Fabes, accused Adrià of 'poisoning' his customers. But the two restaurants, both with three Michelin stars at that moment, have always been competitors and Santamaria, who died in February of 2011, had always been on the losing side. For more information, see Chapter 14 in Andrews, Colman; and Santamaria, Santi (2009). *La cocina al desnudo [The Kitchen Stripped Bare]*. Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, SA. <sup>26</sup> Andrews, Colman. (234).

<sup>27</sup> In particular, the 'Isi Siphon' was the one used at *elBulli*. It is a sort of pressurized container in which foams can be created by aerating a liquid under pressure. Source: Adrià, Ferran; Adrià, Albert; Soler, Juli (525).

<sup>28</sup> Electric blender. The name comes from the Spanish brand that popularized the appliance.

<sup>29</sup> Ferran Adrià quoted in Andrews (237).

<sup>30</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (156).

<sup>31</sup> The chief curator was Roger Buergele and the exhibition's head commissioner was Ruth Noack (also Buergele's wife).

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, Richard; Todolí, Vicent (2009). *Food for thought, thought for food*. Barcelona: ACTAR, 77. For more information, see also Pitman, Joanna (2009). *Lovely mousse, but is it art? A profile of the great chef Ferran Adrià*. *The spectator* (July 11),16.

<sup>33</sup> In 2007, Borja-Villel was the chief curator at the *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona* (MACBA) and is currently the director of the *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía* in Madrid (MNCARS).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Andrews, Colman (270).

<sup>35</sup> Adrià, Ferran; Adrià, Albert; Soler, Juli (40).

<sup>36</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (157).

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 37.

<sup>38</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (158).

<sup>39</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (160).

<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in de Solier, Isabelle (163).

<sup>41</sup> See, Culler, Jonathan D (1982). *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Parasecoli, Fabio (2001). Deconstructing Soup: Ferran Adrià's Culinary Challenges *Gastronomica* 1, 1, 60-73 (63).

<sup>43</sup> Parasecoli, Fabio (67).

<sup>44</sup> Book's editors are Vicent Todolí (the Tate Modern's former Director) and Richard Hamilton (Renowned British Artist). Book's contributors are Roger Buergel (director of Documenta 12), Ruth Noack (exhibition's head commissioner and also Buergel's wife), Marta Arzak (Director of Interpretation at Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum and also daughter of Basque leading chef Juan Mari Arzak, first Spanish chef who achieved three Michelin Stars), Josep Maria Pinto (elBulli cataloguer), and Adriane Searle (The Guardian's art critic). However, the idea of the book was Adrià's. He wanted to evoke Brillant-Savarin's nineteenth-century book on gastronomic philosophy, and conceive the book as the new 'physiology of taste'. Source: Andrews, Colman (272).

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, Richard; Todolí, Vicent (54).

<sup>46</sup> See, Danto, Arthur C. (1997). *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, Fredric (73).

<sup>48</sup> See, Kaprow, Allan (2003 [1996]). *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press.

<sup>49</sup> Jameson, Fredric (86).

<sup>50</sup> Jameson, Fredric (86).

<sup>51</sup> de Solier, Isabelle (164).

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