

Sensory Politics

Panel organized by Christy Spackman and Jake Lahne

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Panel Description:

Andrew Barry (2001) has compellingly argued that in contemporary society a cloud of information surrounds material objects, often via technological intervention. As this information circulates in the world, it potentially shifts and reconfigures both the political and economic landscape. Yet despite the recent re-integration of the senses into anthropological research, inadequate attention has been paid to the way that information produced by the senses changes individual and group behavior (Sutton, 2010). This failure to consider the effects of sensorial knowledge, especially knowledge produced by the lower senses of touch, taste, and smell, has resulted in an incomplete view of the factors that shape behaviors, be they individual, political, or economic. This panel brings together scholars examining the intersection of the material, the technological, and the sensorial in order to explore the larger political concerns implicit in such relations. By examining the production of sensorial knowledge, it asks how the senses shape processes of governance. This panel investigates the existence of the senses as part of a larger toolkit of technological intervention used for regulation of the qualities of bodies and products. It asks how sensory knowledge such as the quality of a tealeaf, the smell of an out-of-place chemical, or the too-good taste of a bitter drink complicates normative narratives of scientific authority and technological objectivity. It explores the role of haptic experiences such as touch in shaping the understanding, evaluation, usage, and meaning-making around materials—be they woolen textiles exchanged as objects of luxury or tokens of identity, or be they microbes designed to remediate pollution. We demonstrate how sensory knowledge intersects with economic and political systems, arguing that the information produced through sensorial experience is a powerful motivator for citizen action or protest, and carries the potential for a radical reconfiguration of the forms and spaces of authority.

Sierra Burnett Clark, “Faulty Senses and the Regulation of Spirits”

The first attempt to produce Regan's orange-flavored bitters commercially was thwarted by federal regulators who found the product “too potable.” From a legal standpoint, bitters must be undrinkable. The producers tinkered with recipes, arriving at a sufficiently non potable product for market: Regans' Bitters #6. This historical anthropological paper investigates the practices – sensorial, discursive, political – underlying the regulation of comestibles, asking what happens to politics of categorization when corporeal experience

intersects with bureaucratic ways of knowing and governing bodies. Through an examination of alcohol laws, it argues that regulations of comestibles reaffirm the perception that human senses are frail and fallible. The case of Regans' Bitters highlights concerns about palatability and the moral problem of pleasure, revealing how taste has been cast as delusive protection against the dangers of intoxication. The controversy over definitions of whiskey in the early 1900s, in which factions debated whether neutral grain alcohol, colored and flavored to resemble aged spirits, could legally bear the name "whiskey," reveals the putative myopia of the senses. Even as scientific and sensorial analyses failed to identify differences, proponents of a restrictive definition argued that "rectified" spirits were materially deficient and dangerous, accountable for disease, violence, and social corrosion, demonstrating peculiar convergences of scientific progressivism and nostalgic nativism. In both cases, regulation is offered as a means to overcome the presumed shortcomings of the human sensorium, by shifting decision-making from the individual to the collective and the authority of governance from the body to the mechanisms of bureaucracy.

Sarah Besky, "Analog Relations, Digital Transparency: Taste, Price, and Value in the Indian Tea Auction":

Every day, in tasting rooms in Kolkata, India, brokers taste, evaluate, and price hundreds of lots of tea. Each broker smells, touches, and tastes each sample. He describes each tea's qualities and gives it a "valuation price." After tasting, he goes downstairs to the auction room, where, lot by lot, he attempts to fetch something close to the valuation price: a number that he sees as a "natural" reflection of taste. He sits before buyers who bid by "crying out" offers. Buyers and brokers know one another by name. Traditionally, interactions among these men have been collegial rather than adversarial. In 2009, the Tea Board of India, the government regulator of the tea industry, became concerned that buyers' friendly relations with brokers "hindered market competition." To reform what it saw as a holdover from the colonial era, the Tea Board introduced an online auction system. This would allow for "natural price discovery." By computerizing tea lots, Tea Board officials saw themselves replacing the "corrupt" practice of tasting with "transparent" market dynamics. Tea traders vehemently resisted the digital transition. They emphasized that their skill as tasters ensured the continued viability of one of India's signature national products. This paper highlights the conflict between two regimes of ethics and value: the analogical regime of taste and the digital regime of price. I suggest how histories and technologies of taste aid in understanding the role of brokers and other sensory intermediaries in arbitrating the meanings of value and nation.

Amy Lasater-Wille, "Standardizing Sazon: Individual Tastes and the Emergence of Culinary Expert Cultures in Lima, Peru":

During the past two decades, Peru has experienced a “gastronomy boom,” a dramatic rise in publicity and revenue related to its restaurant industry. Today Peruvian chefs are national celebrities, even viable presidential candidates; their entrepreneurial and culinary efforts are portrayed both as engines of economic growth and as sources of national pride. Key to this pride is the widespread opinion that all Peruvians have excellent but individual senses of taste (*sazón*). In this view, Peruvian food is good because it represents a multicultural nation, and it is progressive because any Peruvian (of any socioeconomic stratum) can monetize his or her taste by opening a restaurant. Even while celebrating diversity, however, chefs and members of Peru's gastronomy society often argue that Peruvian cuisine will not be truly successful until it has been properly standardized. In this paper, based on sixteen months of ethnographic research in Lima, I explore the political ramifications of this tension between the desire for standardization and pride in individual expertise by examining the practices of two separate groups of Lima residents, a small group of pisco tasters and a class of post-secondary culinary students. Analyzing their use of language in naming flavors and in linking tastes to past individual experiences and imagined international norms, I show that these groups are part of a larger movement that aims to codify “Peruvianness” while maintaining a sense that any individual could draw on this new, standard Peruvian flavor to make money in the global marketplace.

Fiona P. McDonald, “Sensing Our Material World: The Aesthetic Transformations of Woollen Blankets in Contemporary Art, Craft, and Indigenous Cultural Property”:

Our material world is made up of the “gathering of materials in movement” (Ingold 2013: 439). A woollen blanket is one such material enmeshed in a global web of action and significations (Gell 1998) where its movement and circulation has often been dependent upon its aesthetic transformation into something different. At a basic level, it is something that most of us across various cultures might have had an experience with in either an imagined, sensory, or an embodied way. To the touch, its basic material properties are that it is at times soft, itchy, scratchy, thick, dense, woven, pliable, and heavy. In the context of this panel, these sorts of actions of touching woollen blankets has seen them be imagined and reimagined by various people beyond their intended quotidian function as apparatus of survival. It is these creative transformative and intentional actions by makers such as Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and craftspeople that capture the movement of blankets across time and place and that reflect the mediated sensory engagements in relation to the haptic experiences our material world. Taking up the panel question: When is sensory experience “only” subjective and personal, when is it objective and shared, and who decides and benefits?, this paper will present several examples of the celebration and limitations of sensory engagements with materials mediated by artists as they move through various contexts that map out how sensory experiences with materials are used to political and social ends.

Peter Oviatt, “Crafting Waste and the Politics of Mycelium”:

For DIY myco-remediators, propagating fungi is a political act. These remediators propagate the vegetative state of fungi, called mycelium. After the mycelium matures, remediators skillfully introduce the organism to polluted land or material wastes. If successful, the mycelium converts plastics, petroleum, and other wastes into benign materials. Through the case study of a DIY myco-remediator network in the Pacific Northwest, drawing on participant-observation, interviews, and analysis of remediation manuals, I argue that mycelium is a (practical) tool and (political) lever by which amateurs are able to reconfigure materials and spaces once cordoned off by professionals. Remediators act by applying scientific knowledge (of fungal taxonomy, ecology, and biochemistry) to their own sensorial experiences. In this manner, remediators “craft” waste. I define craft as manual, sensorial experiments that are based on scientific knowledge. Remediators train their senses to identify nuances of smell, texture, and patterns in the mycelial structure. Through multi-sensory interactions, the unseen becomes seen; both intuition and precise measurements are crucial to this work. I also analyze the value and purpose of “doing-it-yourself” or “ourselves.” What drives DIY remediators to take matter(s) into their own hands? What benefits do they see in low-tech/low-cost methods of remediation? Remediators strive to communicate highly experiential (often tacit) knowledge. They hold workshops and write manuals to guide sensorial training. By using mycelium to craft waste, remediators build and reify values such as environmental activism and an awareness of unseen natural agencies.

Christy Spackman, “A Disruptive Odor: Smelly Water and the Re-Alignment of Expert and Lay Knowledge”:

On January 9 2014, West Virginians abruptly lost access to their municipal water supply due to a spill of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol (MCHM). During the ensuing weeks as regulators, scientists and governmental agencies debated the safety of the water supply, one important factor emerged: MCHM smelled like licorice. Even after MCHM levels dropped below the safety threshold, consumers continued to complain of a licorice-like smell in their homes, schools, and work-places, forcing a reexamination of the effectiveness of current modes of detection used by regulatory bodies. Despite the role of the senses in scientific controversies like the West Virginia water spill, little research has examined how sense-able molecules intersect with narratives of scientific authority and expertise. Drawing from media reports, interviews with government officials, consumers, and scientists, this paper investigates how sense-able molecules disrupt the generation of information around scientific controversies. I argue that the sense-able nature of certain molecules forces a reconciliation between the knowledge generated by scientific technologies and by the human sensorium; in doing so, these molecules complicate and remake dichotomies of expertise and authority about health and safety, requiring scientific experts to form novel research alliances with non-expert consumers. Consideration of the sensory politics of molecules, by bringing together the technological and the sensorial, opens new ways for understanding and imagining relationships between humans, molecules, and technologies of detection.

Discussant: Amy Trubek

<http://aaa.confex.com/aaa/2014/webprogram/Session12294.html>