



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

This is a repository copy of *The Gift of Cake: Baking together in performance*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/139330/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Lawson, J (2018) *The Gift of Cake: Baking together in performance*. *Performance Research*, 23 (6). pp. 69-73. ISSN 1352-8165

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1533764>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# The Gift of Cake: Baking together in performance

## THE EXTRAORDINARY APPEAL OF CAKE

In Western culture, cakes are special. Cakes mark the concluding or pivotal moments of a meal or celebration and are often reserved for significant occasions and rituals. Cakes appeal to our appetite for the extraordinary, may signal excess, delicacy and/or indulgence, and inspire delight in the eater. Cakes commemorate personal, cultural and symbolic achievements and rites of passage, or simply provide a sweet interruption to the <sup>[[[]]]</sup>daily routine, accompanying brief moments of relaxation. Cakes mark special occasions and facilitate human experiences and relationships, like a social glue connecting people, places and memories. Cakes function as gifts. Although <sup>[[[]]]</sup>often presented whole, they are typically cut into multiple servings intended for sharing with others, and have strong associations with acts of kindness and surprise. The cake signifies love, warmth and generosity, qualities that sit in tension with other notions attributed to cake, such as responsibility, guilt and anxiety, which can arise in response to cultural expectations of baking for others or not eating too much. The cake, then, is both humble (in its association with the homemade) and abundant (in its superfluity). This short article begins to grapple with the cake's layered meanings and functions and considers how cake can be used in performance as a gesture of generosity.

## DURATIONAL BAKING PERFORMANCES

I have been baking and investigating cakes in performance since 2009 through a series of works that invited the audience to experience the gift of cake. Through a process of exchange, the audience were invited, in some performances, to share a memory about a significant person, place, time or cake; in return, I baked their memories into unique cakes dedicated to those memories. The audience were invited to watch me work or to bake with me. The finished cakes were displayed

in the performance spaces and in the final hours of each event the cakes were shared and eaten by audience members. Responding to the memories that participants shared with me, I made cakes dedicated to lost loved ones and deceased family members, and cakes to represent precious tales of childhood, friendships, places, homes and countries; I responded to requests to make a ‘Cake of Death’, a ‘Fucked-Up Family Cake’ and an ‘I’m Sorry I Didn’t Visit You in Hospital Cake’; and made cakes designed to signify regret, pain, nostalgia, joy and love. The deeply personal memories and commissions from the audience invested the cakes, and their making, with a heightened and alternative symbolic purpose. The audience were invited to recollect, to reminisce, to commemorate, to reimagine and to share, and they moved between personal-private and cultural-communal modes of remembering. The cakes became cathartic, symbolic, cultural, communal gifts between strangers baking together (metaphorically and actually).<sup>1</sup>

The performances considered here include *Bake Me a Cake*, Compass Festival of Live Art, Leeds 2011; *Especially For You*, Gateshead International Festival of Theatre 2012; and *Baking Time*, Performance Studies international 19, Stanford University 2013.<sup>2</sup> Each performance took place over a prolonged duration: three days, two and a half days, and twelve hours, respectively. *Bake Me a Cake* and *Especially For You* were located in public spaces: an empty shop in Leeds city centre and Gateshead Old Town Hall, respectively. *Baking Time* was performed in a kitchen on the Stanford University campus. Below I examine the processes and

---

<sup>1</sup> All performance can be considered as a gift for the audience, but the notion is especially prevalent in discourse on interactive live art and one-to-one performance; see Rachel Zerihan, who describes the gifts of ‘touch’, ‘explicit responsibility’ and ‘corporeal catharsis’ offered to audiences across a range of performance examples (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Baking as a mode of performance is particularly commensurate with the principles of participation, community and generosity that the Compass Live Art Festival and Gateshead International Festival of Theatre (aptly known as GIFT) seek to engender. There is more to be considered about the relationship between cake, generosity and the nature, form and value of participatory (and sensory) live art and the artistic platforms that support its development and public reach in a festival context.

dichotomies of baking/working/giving and eating/enjoying/receiving in the performances.

I consider how exchange invited modes of collective, interconnected and multifarious participation, which unsettled the cultural function of cakes as gendered, asymmetrical gifts, and enhanced the potential of cakes and baking to develop articulations of generosity between participants.

#### THE INVISIBLE 'WORK' OF BAKING AND GIFTING

Baking seems fundamental and traditional, an integral part of producing and maintaining key aspects of social life: family, time and place. UK TV cook Nigella Lawson describes feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction from baking a cake:

it's easy to make a cake, but this doesn't convey<sup>[1]</sup> the depth of achievement you feel on making one. There's something about seeing such elemental change, that flour, butter, eggs, sugar could become this – and more, that you've brought it about – that's so satisfying. Such simple pleasures are not to be underestimated. (Lawson 2003: 3)

Nigella expresses both wonder at the magic of cakes and a commitment to the beauty of their simplicity.<sup>3</sup> Cake is constructed as wholesome but with the potential to beget deep pleasure; baking, it is implied, is an innate skill. These sentiments make baking seem easy, and echo a long-standing gendered view of feminine culinary work; the effort of making a cake is so simple, so natural, that it is rendered invisible.

Cakes are strongly associated with women's work and experiences; the appeal and promise of the homemade cake is tied to the feminine through the cake's role in childhood and the construction of motherhood. Nicola Humble describes the

---

<sup>3</sup> The name Nigella alone is synonymous with Nigella Lawson's media persona, therefore I use her first name in my writing to distinguish her media persona as the concern of my research.

cultural construction of the cake as a gift from the mother; the cake is ‘a sentimental object, imagined first and foremost as embodying an act of love, an offering of time and skill, sweetness<sup>[SEP]</sup>and pleasure by the mother to her family’ (Humble 2010: 68). Deborah Lupton has also considered how food operates as symbolic gift within the family context, ‘a potent sign of love and duty ... most often prepared by a woman in the role of wife and mother’ (1998: 47). Citing Nick Fox, Lupton notes that unlike the commodity gift, the symbolic gift relationship does not hinge on ‘reciprocity or even acknowledgment’ (1998: 48). The work of gifting<sup>[SEP]</sup>in this context, then, is constructed as invisible and inevitable, yet this sits in tension with the knowledge that ‘the more preparation involved the greater the symbolic value of food as gift’ (Lupton 1998: 48). The birthday cake is a prime example of the visible/invisible paradox in woman’s physical and emotional labour. My baking performances problematized the gendered, linear, unidirectional contract of the cake-as-gift construct, and investigated how cakes might function as a form of cultural generosity, by marking and celebrating multifarious human experiences, and attending to the process of ‘baking together’.

I performed and rendered visible the work of baking as gift. I constructed a chaotic and busy environment, displaying ingredients, equipment and bodies at work. I shared my exhaustion and anxieties about completing the task with audience members who watched as I worked late into the night. They witnessed moments<sup>[SEP]</sup>of difficulty and failure and lived alongside my struggle to complete the task and bring the cakes into being. I embodied the symbolic gift exchange contract while enacting its disruption; the cakes were intended for aesthetic pleasure, operating outside of their conventional rituals, and requiring no customary conditions of their recipients. In this way, the work aimed to echo and foreground the usual responsibility of the baker/giver and the invisible/visible paradox of effort involved.

Australian artist and scholar Catherine E. Bell has articulated the labour-intensive

practice<sup>[SEP]</sup>of baking in her performance *Making a Baby* (2003–6). Bell baked a novelty ‘baby-cake’ once<sup>[SEP]</sup>a month to coincide with her menstrual period, and invited women identifying with motherhood in different ways to share in the ritualized eating of the cake. As Bell describes:

The monthly, nine-hour cake baking and icing process demands commitment, care, patience and devotion – attributes that I consider essential to the rearing of children. While decorating the cake,<sup>[SEP]</sup>I feel guilty for cursing the baby in progress, for the attention and energy it demands. I start to question my aptitude for this maternal role. (2011)

Bell further acknowledges her sense of responsibility (as the artist) to find a recipient to eat her baby-cakes, thus completing the symbolic contract and confirming her ‘maternal’ success. Bell describes her guilt and shame at the number of cakes ‘proliferating’ in her bedroom and refrigerator without a designated recipient (2011).

While Bell baked cakes alone, prompted by<sup>[SEP]</sup>her own bodily rhythms, for sharing with invited women in her artistic community, in my projects the work of baking and gifting was a public, visible event that became a communal effort and mode of participation. In *Bake Me a Cake* and *Especially For You*, I worked with a group of volunteer helpers from the communities of Leeds and Gateshead. In *Baking Time* the performance was structured as a series of one-to-one encounters in which individual audience members were invited to ‘take time out’ from their daily lives to bake with me. In all performances, audience members were invited to join in and help with baking tasks; some stayed for the duration of baking one cake, others returned one or two times to witness the growing collection of cakes. Mass cake-baking became a communal project and the audience members’ desire to participate in the task overtook other culturally inscribed motivations to engage with cake (e.g. taste, social ritual), which invested them in the work of the project and nurtured local cultures of generosity.

A willingness to participate and share responsibility for completing demanding

tasks is a common audience response in durational performance and notably involves acts of generosity.<sup>4</sup> UK artist Selina Thompson's audience collaborated to construct a dress out of cake around her body in her durational performance *Pat It and Prick It and Mark It with 'B'* (2013). Thompson has described the 'hair brained schemes' that emerged from invested and dedicated audience members (2013). My audience members were also demonstrably generous with their time and impacted on the process and outcome in ways that amplified my effort as the artist; I was made cups of tea; one man undertook an emergency trip to the shop for ingredients in Gateshead; and an expectant mother volunteered to stay after the cakes had been eaten to help me clean the kitchen at Stanford. I remain grateful for these acts of kindness from strangers and the shared commitment to the task. The work of baking together in these examples engendered a 'generosity of spirit' and an investment in the community generated.

#### THE JOYS OF REMEMBERING, RECEIVING AND EATING CAKE

Through the signifying potential of cakes and the process of baking together, the performances evoked a multiplicity of complex emotional experiences. The baking performances echoed established symbolic uses of cake in commemorative practices including festive meals, celebrations and religious ceremonies; many of the memories shared by participants directly involved cultural cakes made for birthdays or weddings for example. Participants also prompted me to commemorate local experiences and domestic rituals in such cakes as 'Daddy's Failed Attempt' and 'Half a Cake', baked for a six-month-old child. Cakes also remembered experiences not typically celebrated, such as divorce, and 'failed' cakes recalled feelings of guilt. Produced in response to these personal and often unsettling narratives, some of the finished cakes appeared as unappetizing and

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, Hoffman describes audience members spontaneously dancing with Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters of Lone Twin in their 2011 durational performance *Ghost Dance* as a 'collective feat of mutual support' (2012: 50).

were unusually coloured or shaped, and resonated with Compass Festival Director Annie Lloyd's observation that the cake is 'full of ambiguity and generosity' (2011).

I have a visceral memory of the unadulterated delight I experienced as a child at the sight of cakes; my mother would use the idiom 'tickled pink' to describe their effect on me. I recognized a similar effect in audiences who returned to see – and eat – the finished cakes. There is something that happens when people are presented with vast quantities of (free) cake. To articulate what I witnessed in these moments, I turn to Humble's observation about the 'transformative powers<sup>[SEP]</sup> of cakes' as represented in literature, existing<sup>[SEP]</sup> in the realm of the fantastic, in a 'category of inebriating, mind – as well as body – altering substances' (2010: 101). My cakes produced a collective frenzy or a cultural 'inebriation' that united audience members who – tickled pink – gathered outside the shop as part of the Compass Festival, eagerly waiting for their promised gift of cake. The cakes became a means of participation through exchange. The performances transformed the individual cakes/memories/dedications into a collective (rather than asymmetrical), endeavour, and highlighted the 'event-ness' of these cakes as liminal objects produced by a web of spontaneous, multi-directional exchange between multiple, unknown givers and receivers.

Citing Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Edward Casey states that

Commemorating calls upon us not as separate beings but as already intertwined; it calls on us in our strictly social being ... creat[ing] new forms of sociality, new modes of interconnection: between past and present, self and other, one group and another ... one art form and another ... bring[ing] about 'a mystical community of essence between beings.' ... Commemorating ... constructs the space, and continues the time, in which the commendably inter-human will be perduringly appreciated. (Casey 2000: 250–1)

In his work on primitive mentality, Lévy-Bruhl uses the term 'mystical essence' to refer to the intangible human experience of connecting with beings/things, such as



ancestors, the dead, mythical identities and food, which become part of our lived reality and identity through participation.<sup>5</sup> As Casey summarizes, ‘Thanks to participation, things can be simultaneously themselves and *not* themselves, here and also there, past as well as present’ (2000: 248). This is useful for identifying the potential of commemorative exchange in my performances through the cakes and their effect on audiences. The cakes, as ritual objects, facilitated participation across time, space and bodies (past and present, fictional and real) and resulted in a shared identity between audience members, the cakes and their associated memories and histories. In this way, cakes are powerful, effective and affective objects in performance that can intervene in a community of strangers and map new avenues of exchange, sociality and commensality.

I observed the cakes’ ability to move (physically and emotionally) a community through the integration of commemoration and generous participation in a performance context, evidenced most acutely in the willingness of participants to embrace and invest in the creative, symbolic and commemorative potential of cake. The communal eating of the artwork acted as a celebration of the possibility of cakes and a testament to the special place they hold in our collective consciousness. People returned not only eager to consume for the sheer pleasures of taste, but also eager<sup>[SEP]</sup> to participate in the ritualistic and communal feasting on numerous cakes, to witness the cakes performing and commemorating the memories of participants and to be part of the unique community nurtured through each event.

The cakes were both excessive and generous<sup>[SEP]</sup> in their abundance and accessibility, subverting<sup>[SEP]</sup> a limiting feminine domestic tradition of gifting and the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Stanley J. Tambiah, who expounds Lévy- Bruhl’s proposal that the two central states of the human mind include mystical experience and rational-logical mentality. Mystical experience includes ‘contact with a reality other than the reality given by the actual or everyday circumstances’ (1990: 91), which can usefully speak to the multiple ‘realities’ of the performance experience.

commonplace function of cake as commodity spectacle. Instead, the cakes were located in an aesthetic space that nurtured<sup>[SEP]</sup> a community of participants implicated in interconnected processes of baking, giving, eating, receiving and sharing cake together. The cakes were located in a web of exchange that moved beyond symbolic and actual gifting: participants included the individuals who shared the memories, who may or may not have returned to receive them, the symbolic ghosts of the people/things honoured by those memories, and other strangers who became audiences to the finished cakes' performances of their unique (beautiful, painful and poignant) histories and meanings, which generated new responses (delight, disgust, awe, amusement, bewilderment). To return to Casey: after the cakes were eaten and the gift-symbol was destroyed, the 'essence' of the community that 'perdured' was exchange itself, the feeling of generosity, the profoundly 'inter-human'.

## REFERENCES

Bell, Catherine E. (2011) 'Cooking up crimes and maternal misdemeanours: From food ritual to transgressive performances' in *Double Dialogues* 15, Winter: *The Hunger Artist: Food and The Arts*.

Casey, Edward S. (2000) *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd edn, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Humble, Nicola (2010) *Cake A Global History*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Hoffman, Beth (2012) 'The time of live art', in Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (eds) *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lawson, Nigella (2003) *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, London: Chatto & Windus.

Lloyd, Annie (2011) *Bake me a Cake*, Compass Festival, <http://compassliveart.org.uk/festival/events/bake-me-a-cake>, accessed 12February 2018.

Lupton, Deborah (1998) *Food the Body and the Self*, London: Sage Publications.

Tambiah, Stanley, J. (1990) *Magic, Science and Religion and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson (2013), Selina *Pat It Prick It and Mark It with 'B' Promotional Video*, Spill Festival of Performance, <http://selinathompson.co.uk/work/pat-prick-mark-b/>, accessed 12 February 2018.

Zerihan, Rachel (2009) *Study Room Guide on One To One Performance*, London: Live Art Development Agency.