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# Non-Taster: A Photo Essay About a Loss of Taste and Breakfast

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## **Abstract**

*Non-taster* is a photo essay exploring the elusive connections between the change of taste and the immigrant experience based on my story of losing taste at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. The world, which used to be dirty, viscous, and alive has rapidly become hygienic, distanced, and virtual. I documented the packaging and food sauce for breakfast via a series of scanned images and photographs during the second and third lockdown in London. The photos of spicy sauce and food packaging reveal the desire to reconnect with the senses. Alongside apathy, nostalgia, and homesickness, *Non-taster* laments the changes of the senses and desires in the post-pandemic period.



Photograph 1: 'Non-taster' in colour

Photo description: A photograph made of nine boxes arranged in three rows, the photos are in colour and represent:

1. *'CBD Oil'*: a small green bottle of cannabidiol oil;
2. *'A Pair of Liquid'*: a bag of vinegar and chilly oil often contained in an instant noodle bag;
3. *'Tabasco'*: a green and a red Tabasco spicy sauce;
4. *'Liquid Fun Chilly'*: a small bag with chilly oil often contained in an instant noodle bag;
5. *'This pattern is for Reference Only'*: a cut-off packaging of instant snail soup with rice noodles in the chilly oil with a variety of colourful vegetable toppings and a statement at the bottom of the bowl saying "This pattern is for reference only";
6. *'Nong Shim Dried Pleasure'*: two silver bags of chilly & salt powder and dried vegetables that come with the Korean Nong Shim instant noodles;
7. *'Sriracha'*: a big bottle of red chilly sauce with the branding of a white-coloured chicken and white letters, and a bright green cap;
8. *'Liquid Fun Vinegar'*: a small bag with dark coloured vinegar often contained in an instant noodle bag;
9. *'Non-fried'*: a cut-off packaging of instant rice vermicelli in the chilly oil with fresh bird's eye chillies (red and green) with coriander, a smiling face sits on the left side of the bowl and a pair of chopsticks on the right picking up the noodles.



Photograph 2: 'Non-taster' black & white

Photo description: The same picture of 'Non-taster' but in black and white.

*Non-taster* is a series of scanned images and photographs of hot sauce and food packaging for instant noodles that I suddenly started craving for breakfast after losing my taste in 2020. The singular images include various packaging designs for instant noodles, vinegar, chili oil, and powder that come along in a bag. I scanned the unopened food sauce and noodle bowl images cut from the bags. In addition, I photographed the chili sauce I used to spice up the noodles when I could not taste their flavour.

Instead of documenting my actual breakfast, I am more interested in the contrast between the plainness of the dry instant noodles, and a fried noodle block with toppings. The kitsch images on the packaging are usually marked as “this pattern is for reference only” (documented in one photo). The expectation of a bowl of a satisfying and flavourful meal is still there, even though everyone knows what is really inside an instant noodle bag bought in a nearby corner shop. This became more apparent than ever when I lost my taste. On one hand, I craved comfort food during the lockdown, while on the other, due to the significant decline in my taste, I was not fully aware of what I ate. Indeed, the visual differences between the scanned images and the actual meal are drastic, but they tasted pretty much the same. Therefore, I compare the taste of now and then with black and white versus colour to signify a loss of taste as my personal experience.

After collecting the singular images, I chose nine pictures that appeared frequently: instant snail rice noodles, Nong Shin Ramyn and rice vermicelli with toppings; Tabasco Pepper Sauce, and Sriracha Hot Chilli Sauce. A bottle of CBD oil, which helped relieve my anxiety greatly, was also added to the breakfast routine. Each item is presented separately on a white background and framed by divided rectangles like in a virtual window display. They look plastic, cold, and displaced. The juxtaposition of photos plays on a tension between the idiosyncrasy of everyday comfort food and the formal rigidity of the images themselves, reflecting those experienced amidst the unease of social distancing and isolation. The

photos were taken and scanned in the shared living room with my smartphone and a printer.

Although I only started documenting during the last two months of 2020, I noticed myself craving very spicy breakfasts since the beginning of the year. Waking up one day, I found I had lost my sense of taste. The symptom did not go away for two months. I remember pouring excessive amounts of Sriracha Super-Hot Chilli Sauce on a bowl of Shin Ramen but not being able to distinguish the flavour. My flatmate stared at my breakfast and commented: “It smells like tear gas!” When comfort food no longer felt comforting, I became more confused than ever. It was February 2020. Covid-19 started spreading in China while nobody outside Asia would believe uncommon words such as 'lockdown', 'quarantine', and 'social-distancing' would later become the most used words of the year. Three months later, scientists announced that sudden decline of taste is one of the main symptoms of Covid-19. Still, I do not know what caused my taste buds to strike. Was it flu or a sign of underlining health problems? Or was I just among the millions of unrecorded Covid-19 cases in the UK?

The taste deterioration happened gradually, even if I had failed to notice it during the past five years of moving from one place to another, whilst coping with juggling full-time study, several part-time jobs, and behavioural disorders. This is an all-too-common scenario for immigrant students. Ironically, my first paid job was as a food critic writing for inflight magazines. For a long time, I took my taste buds for granted and believed they would remain functional – if not overly sensitive – and never shrink. The online resources existent on taste decline made me realise that rapid ageing, apathy, and other mental illnesses may be the contributing factors. I wondered if apathy lead to taste diminishing in my case. It seems my body refused to maintain the functionality of these tiny sensitive pieces of flesh named taste buds in order to 'power through' life, to feel less, engage less, and survive better. Unconsciously, I started documenting my breakfast, and some of the selected images became

this photo essay. Through the interlaced experiences of migration and food, I want to create an intimate piece for people forced into change by the Pandemic: food critics who lose their taste buds, dreamers who cannot remember their dreams, writers who cannot write, travellers staying at home.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, concepts such as 'nomad', 'intimacy', and 'desire' were central to my live art practice. In the first year of my PhD and my first year in the UK, I developed a durational work titled *Living Out of a Suitcase*, commissioned for the *Women of the World Festival* (2018). I dressed up in a modified suitcase and opened the suitcase for audience members' inspection. In the following year, I toured a short solo piece *Double Exploration* (2019), in which I imagined myself to be a broken sex machine making loud noises. *Sit and Wait and Be Sweet* (2019) is my most recent live performance. It is about becoming a chewing machine that makes a trap and is trapped simultaneously. Instead of discarding indigestible bubble gum residue, my collaborator and I use fingers, lips, tongues, and saliva to create viscous lines and webs on each other's body. Experimenting with recycling sticky gum waste and making art from the garbage we produce, the two female bodies together intend to make live, mutable abject art that cannot be consumed or digested. Likewise, bubble gum colour T-shirts, pink lighting, the synaesthesia and catalyst of the sickly-sweet smell from strawberry-flavoured gum, and the 'wet' background chewing noise played essential roles in that work.

Then it comes to the post-Pandemic period. Not only live performances were cancelled, but the new Health and Safety regulations, already implemented strictly in performing arts venues, will significantly change live performances that, like *Sit and Wait and Be Sweet*, comprise bodily fluids, touch, and close contact with the audience. For me, the loss of taste is more than one of the most identified Covid-19 symptoms. It relates to the mass trauma that many people experience from cultural displacement and the Pandemic. Therefore, it implies a broader sense of

apathy or embodied withdrawal. As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2006) argues, “trauma expresses itself viscerally, through bodily symptoms, re-enactments, and repeats” (p. 1675). Moreover, trauma does not cease when the traumatic event ends. Leading trauma theorist Cathy Caruth (1996) theorises trauma as ‘the double wound’, ‘an injury inflicted on a body’ according to the Greek *trauma*, or ‘wound and ‘returns’ in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. If trauma is not addressed consciously, it will always return in unexpected ways. Psychiatrist and trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk (2014) also emphasises that ‘flashbacks’ can be even worse than the horrendous traumatic event itself, which has a beginning, middle, and an end. In many cases, traumatic experiences are difficult to put into words. Activities such as non-verbal performance practice and photographs, however, can address individual and social trauma. At the same time, the traumatic can become “a productive means of thinking about performance and as a potentially potent creative force”, as Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan (2011, p. 1) highlight in the *Performance Research's* special issue *On Trauma*.

In short, *Non-taster* can therefore be read either as a series of breakfast images or as a durational performance that deals with those flashbacks after I regained my taste, albeit partially. What matters for me is noticing the small changes, like my breakfast routine, and document them. It is a baby step towards acknowledging the self being shaped by the pandemic and finding new ways to continue my practice in these difficult times.

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