

Art in America

More of Less

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Sean Raspet's involvement in meal-replacement start-ups harks back to Bauhaus ambitions to transform everyday life through art.



Sean Raspet: *Technical Milk* 2015, Soy lent and artificial flavors, in "Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau: A 21st Century Show Home," 2015, at the Swiss Institute, New York.

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, artist Sean Raspet presented two flavored prototypes of Soylent, the ruthlessly efficient meal-replacement drink, in "Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau: A 21st Century Show Home" at the Swiss Institute, New York. Conceived as a response to Le Corbusier's 1925 vision for a mechanized, industrially produced home, the exhibition brought together art and design objects that evoked a house of the near future realized through elaborate manufacturing processes—3D printing, laser cutting, and so on—that use prodigious computing power. Having explored artificial scents and flavors in his art for the previous two years, Raspet had recently begun working as a flavor engineer for Rosa Labs, the Los Angeles start-up that makes Soylent. For the exhibition, he

filled two commercial drink dispensers with *Technical Milk* and *Technical Food* (both 2015): Soylent that he had spiked with molecules common to a broad range of foodstuffs. The resulting flavors were aggressively chemical, an implacable parade of Latex, burnt plastic, damp earth, and smoke.

When the exhibition opened, there was something like an unintentional parallel program under way in Los Angeles. Rob Rhinehart, the inventor of Soylent, was powering his residence exclusively with the energy stored in a single lead-acid battery. On his personal blog, he railed against the inefficiency of the power grid and bid farewell to alternating current. He stopped using his apartment's heating and air-conditioning systems, along with almost all appliances, including the washer and dryer, television, refrigerator, and oven. Gone, too, were all his dishes and utensils; almost everything in his kitchen had been replaced with a supply of Soylent, which he drank twice a day.

Show homes presenting everyday life of the future, like the one approximated by the Swiss Institute's exhibition, almost always have stark interiors, because they advertise technology's great promise of doing more with less. But Rhinehart's lifestyle experiment bespoke an even slimmer survivalism. He was using decades-old technology to make do with far less. He looked more like Hollywood's idea of a stranded astronaut than a Jetson. A battery, some wires, a computer, and books: the barely-there energy footprint of his apartment was a reproach to the faux-emptiness of the show home that hides a maximal electricity drain. Soylent, too, was a referendum on wastefulness—an engineer's critique of the profligacy of getting fed. Rhinehart designed Soylent to be the stingiest food ever—the least expensive, the least time-consuming, the least ecologically impactful—while nevertheless providing complete nutrition. Through its various iterations over the last three years, Soylent production has been guided by what food scholar Michael Pollan derisively calls "nutritionism": the belief that science can distill all the benefits of whole foods into a relatively small set of simple synthetic compounds.

As much as Soylent is about complete nutrition, it's also about a complete respite from the customary social obligations of going to markets, cooking, and sharing meals. Many of the drink's early adopters were tech workers drawn to this misanthropic impatience with culinary rituals and unnecessary ornament, signaled by the product's milquetoast appearance: a hospital-beige fluid sealed in white containers. Like so many of the recognizable metonyms for Silicon Valley

"disruption"—a tightly drawn hood, noise-canceling headphones—Soylent's aesthetic conveys a weird mix of self-righteousness and diffidence.

WHILE PURSUING an MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles, Raspet became interested in the vocabulary of synthetic fragrances and flavors (the two are often manufactured together, because roughly 80 percent of what we perceive as taste is actually scent). He enrolled in a chemistry course at UCLA, but for the most part he learned about flavor engineering through independent study. For Raspet, taste and smell—not sight—became a logical end point for modernism's project of medium specificity. In notes on his 2014 scent *Nc1c(C(OC)=O)cccc1*, Raspet argues that if all materials are defined by their molecular structure, then taste and smell are our most finely tuned senses for apprehending their forms.¹ Sugar, salt, and ground glass are nearly identical until you put them in your mouth.

Still, he writes, synthetic flavors are used almost exclusively as a medium for producing simple likeness: pumping yellow gelatin full of isoamyl acetate, one of the main flavor compounds found in bananas, makes it taste like the fruit. Raspet argues that explicitly linking the smell or taste of molecules to their usual host substance blocks our perception of them as specific materials in their own right. A given flavor molecule can be attached to any number of different substances; thus "it would be more accurate to say that bananas smell primarily of isoamyl acetate than the other way around."

Modernism had come to a similar conclusion, reevaluating mediums used for mimetic representation as materials that could express their own intrinsic properties instead. This led to a self-reflexively formal (and sometimes spiritualized) abstraction, the American version of which entailed two kinds of material autonomy: not only from mimetic representation but also from the world of mass culture. But Raspet's works have more in common with certain functionally oriented episodes of modernism, like Russian Productivism and Germany's Bauhaus, which tested a "truth to materials" credo *within* the mass-produced world.

In 2014 Raspet began filling plastic containers with what he calls "abstract scents"—fragrant synthetic chemicals grouped, in liquid form, according to their chemical structure rather than their smell.² His *Aldehyde Grid Variable Program* (2014), for example, is a mixture of five molecules, each with one more carbon atom than the last. The aldehyde molecules are used to flavor fruit drinks and

candies and to add fragrance to detergents. Products scented with them are marketed as having a range of notes, from oily and fruity to soapy and amber. The various resemblances of Raspet's *Aldehyde Grid Variable Program* to known smells are only side effects of the quasi-sculptural construction of its sloped molecular structure. Raspet sought to transfer the esoteric drama of twentieth-century art—the overcoming of representational content by abstract form—to a commercial vehicle that would carry it into everyday experience.

IN MAY 2014, just weeks after Raspet exhibited *Aldehyde Grid Variable Program* at New Galerie in Paris, Rosa Labs launched the sale of Soylent. Rhinehart had independently arrived at a conclusion nearly identical to Raspet's. The entrepreneur's extreme "nutritionism" had the same modernist kernel as Raspet's molecular materialism: both men believed that science and technology could reduce a substance to the material vocabulary of its functions, as a basis for new formulations.

Up until that point, Rhinehart had eschewed flavor in accordance with the drink's pure functionalism. Raspet's abstract flavors, however, were uniquely suited to Rhinehart's own principles of nutritionist abstraction. In other words, food substitution was the ideal platform for Raspet to implement his theory of molecular materialism on a mass scale.

Raspet applied for a job as a flavor engineer at Rosa Labs, and in the summer of 2015 he began to develop his first prototypes, including *Technical Food* and *Technical Milk*. Though the only public presentations of these two flavors were in the context of art exhibitions (at Monnaie de Paris in addition to the Swiss Institute), Raspet conceived his flavors simultaneously as artworks and as commercial prototypes for products to be mass produced by the company. Raspet's first Soylent flavor to reach the market through Rosa Labs was Nectar, launched in December 2016.³ Nectar has a bright, lemony taste that some say reminds them of the milk left behind in a bowl of Froot Loops. It's made from a synthetic analogue of the Nasonov pheromone, a scent used by honeybees to mark their hive entrance, as well as flowers that contain nectar. Specific to no particular source, the Nasonov pheromone is a generalization, a way of chemically marking something as nourishment. The pheromone is not mimetic, in the manner of artificial scents designed to evoke natural analogues, but deictic; the effect of the arbitrary, temporary pointer depends on its context. By applying a synthesized version of the fragrance to Soylent, Raspet repeats the honeybee's marking act, recursively flavoring Nectar with a composition that refers not to any specific material but rather to the process of engineering a flavor.

The integration of Raspet's reflexive abstraction into Rhinehart's ecology reveals a resemblance between the two. Raspet's abstraction shares its basic formal structure with the conservationist tenets of environmentalism. Both are principally concerned with the question of how to deploy a resource so that it may sustain, rather than erase, itself. Seen in this light, recursion looks like a kind of recycling. Medium specificity becomes a flavor of sustainability.

Raspet's abstraction also found a new extension within Rhinehart's ethics. The modernist paradigm of bending a material back upon itself, formerly so aloof and self-absorbed, thereby entered the world of everyday consumption. Raspet's work at Rosa Labs recalls the ideas that came out of the later Bauhaus. Bauhaus visionaries such as Hannes Meyer and László Moholy-Nagy developed a strictly functionalist approach in which they sought to unite art with technology. To some this was a cool, joyless turn that used art to justify the rationalist withering of life. In an uncanny prefiguration of Raspet's version of this problem at Rosa Labs, Walter Gropius, the school's founding director, recalled an argument between Meyer and the architect Mies van der Rohe in the late 1920s: "[Meyer's] philosophy culminates in the assertion 'life is oxygen plus sugar plus starch plus protein' to which Mies promptly retorted 'try stirring all that together—it stinks.'"⁴ But Meyer and his colleagues believed it was a moral obligation for artists to use their skills to address the urgent problems of the world through industrial collaborations. "Can I assume the privilege of art for myself," Moholy-Nagy wrote in his diary in 1919, "when every person is needed to solve the problems of basic survival? During the last hundred years art and reality had nothing in common."⁵

AT THE 2016 edition of Frieze New York, the art fair on Randall's Island, Raspet converted the booth of his Berlin gallery, Soci t , into a Rosa Labs pop-up. From the gleaming refrigerators that lined the booth, Raspet and several of his Rosa Labs coworkers, clothed in custom uniforms made by artist Nhu Duong, doled out free samples of Soylent, as well as pouched prototypes of an algae-based nutritional paste, whose flavor, Pentagon 2.4, Raspet had recently designed.

By bringing the Rosa Labs products to the fair, Raspet emphatically contrasted Rhinehart's environmentalist outlook with the consumption habits of the art world. Echoing Moholy-Nagy, Raspet wrote in his notes for the booth that "if the activities of art were redefined to primarily focus on the problems of food, medicine, and transportation systems in an aesthetic capacity their products could be experienced continuously while at the same time their resource footprint would be considerably diminished."⁶ For now, however, Raspet sees art largely as a waste of resources, not

only because most of its objects are singly made with ecologically intensive materials—petroleum-based products, metal, wood, and so on—but also because artists expend large amounts of unrecoverable energy on these efforts. He goes on to say that his Rosa Labs booth showcased an art redefined to work, less wastefully, inside the bounds of industry, and that it recycled artists' "metabolic" investment by providing energy rather than just exhibiting the traces of its expenditure. In the context of the fair, this meant that Raspet's booth was the only one directed at art workers—not just their patrons—as consumers. The pop-up was a Rhinehart-esque experiment in the austere rationalization of the art world's ecosystem, trimming waste from creation and distribution while also looping the two.

But does a drink that reduces the economic and social friction of artists' lives just normalize their precarity? Do we really need *more* flexibility? At the least we can say this much: by inserting the Rosa Labs promotional machine into art's paradigmatic space of consumption, Raspet reversed the historical direction of this kind of solutionism. The Bauhaus and its various heirs—the Artist Placement Group in London, the Art + Technology program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—all assumed that artists could improve industry, bending it to good works through their aesthetic sensitivity. Raspet, by contrast, imagines an ethically sensitive industry bringing a prodigal art world to heel.

SEVERAL MONTHS after Frieze, Raspet left Rosa Labs to start his own synthetic nutrition company with writer and researcher Lucy Chinen. Working under the brand non/food, Raspet and Chinen began to design artificially flavored, algae-based food products; their first, a synthetic chocolate analogue called non/coco, launches this spring.⁷ It hasn't yet proved scalable, but algae inspires an alchemical lust in the sustainability community because it can thrive with almost no nutrients and little water while vacuuming up carbon dioxide through photosynthesis. Given that various strains of algae are simultaneously being developed as alternative food sources and biofuels, this seems less like futurism than like a weird atavism where our baroque world of consumption devolves back into a single dimension—one source of fuel for both bodies and machines. Raspet and Chinen have chosen to launch the company with a synthetic version of chocolate, whose virtually universal appeal makes it a flavor applicable to nearly anything (Crest sells chocolate-flavored toothpaste; a company called Philosophy makes chocolate-scented bath products). The breadth of its use parallels that of algae. In its appeal to generic aesthetic and ecologic applications, non/coco, like Nectar and the Frieze

booth, signals a move beyond the molecular materialism of Raspet's previous projects into another mode of nonobjective reflexivity governed by a material's arbitrary uses.⁸

At the same time, this movement deeper and deeper into ethically minded consumption suggests a postscript to the narrative of the late twentieth-century relationship between art and industry. Capitalism absorbed the forms and ambitions of the artist's creative life into flexible post-Fordist labor, while art borrowed the tools of capitalism to professionalize its actors and vastly expand its market. Raspet's work indicates how profoundly this mutual influence has affected the social imagination of its subjects. The founder class of Silicon Valley believes that it has taken up the mantle of the avant-garde under the blithe optimism of "disruption." Meanwhile, artists have increasingly adopted a deep cynicism about changing the world, resigning themselves to the narrow economic pragmatism of a financialized world that views their work as an asset class.

The contemporary art world and Silicon Valley may be most compatible in their flaws. Both fields overindulge white men, exalt novelty and youth for their own sake, and thrill to the speculation of investors. This chimera of privilege and acceleration could arguably be the dystopian future of art and technology. But Raspet, in the trajectory of his own practice, suggests a more hopeful alternative. It's hard to say which version is more likely to succeed, but Raspet's is formally much more interesting. By embracing Silicon Valley's faith in ethical consumption (and profit), Raspet envisions a way for artists to recuperate their utopian idealism through—not in spite of—the commodification of their work.

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