

ARTslant

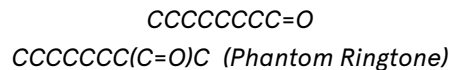
The Matter of Molecular Practice: An Interview with Sean Raspet

By Joel Kuennen

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We live at a time when an astounding amount of information is available to us at a shocking degree of immediacy. A netizen will regularly take deep-dives down wiki wormholes, eagerly grazing on masses of hyper-specific information related to a singular topic, all the while rhizomatically connected to and through a world of greater knowledge. No longer limited to a vocabulary of the phenomenological, we can pastiche together descriptions, criticisms, and comments that pull from the sciences, visual culture, advertising, etc. This mass availability of the specific makes it difficult to universalize, but philosophically and practically, we are less interested in a lexicon of the universal than a repository that is universally available.

Sean Raspet approaches materiality from a hyper-specific level: an atomic level. Titles of his works will take the form of long molecular formulas:



As such, they can be intimidatingly opaque but given a few minutes with Google, their meanings emerge non-linearly. The first formula represents Octanal, a molecule present in citrus oils. Octanal is used in the mating rituals of the crested auklet, a Siberian bird that produces the oily compound near its beak and smears it liberally about the face of its partner; Octanal is known to repel the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the dreaded carrier of Zika, Yellow Fever, and Dengue Fever; Octanal contains eight carbon atoms, sixteen hydrogen atoms, and one oxygen atom. These three elements, whose combination is the smell and taste of oranges—carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen—make up 93 percent of the human body.

In chemistry, the importance of relation becomes very apparent.

"Media are civilizational ordering devices." In John Durham Peters' book *The Marvelous Clouds*, the media philosopher advocates for a broader understanding of media to include the environment. His basic premise goes something like, "if there is data collected, it is now mediated." It's a neat premise and one that does well in light of artists like Sean Raspet who have moved to a molecular level to craft their work. The environment—the physical reality of things—can now communicate, can hold secrets, can sway and skewer opinion, and best of all, allow for the loss of the aura of religious incomprehensibility most laypeople have towards the scientific.

Take Raspet's current exhibition *War Games* at Moran Bondaroff's new space in Detroit in which the aforementioned work is installed. Says the artist: "The two main works are five-gallon tanks of water that I have had collected from two sites: one in the area that was contaminated by a chemical spill of 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol in the Elk River region of West Virginia. And the other was recently collected from an area affected by the lead contamination in Flint, Michigan." Visually, the work is simple: five-gallon drums of liquid on a concrete floor. But with Raspet, one cannot stop with the visual. The material requires investigation. "I feel that these are important material artifacts/substances from our culture and they should be preserved as such." However, the visual presentation of his work is not bereft of meaning. Raspet calls on the industrial, the laboratory, the startup for his visual lexicon. His exhibition with the Berlin gallery Société at Frieze New York last month at once appeared as dystopian marketplace, DIS photo shoot, and product placement.

soylent

Paste

0.10

Nutrition FactsServing Size (92g)
Servings Per Container 1Amount Per Serving
Calories 500
Calories from Fat 300

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 33g 51%
Saturated Fat 4g 20%
Polyunsaturated Fat 3.5g
Monounsaturated Fat 25g
Trans Fat 0g**Cholesterol** 0mg 0%**Sodium** 370mg 15%**Potassium** 880mg 25%**Total Carbohydrate** 24g 8%

Dietary Fiber 0g 0%

Soluble Fiber 0g

Sugars 18g

Protein 26g

Vitamin A 25% • Vitamin C 25%

Calcium 25% • Iron 15%

Vitamin D 25% • Vitamin E 25%

Vitamin K 25% • Thiamin 25%

Riboflavin 25% • Niacin 25%

Vitamin B6 20% • Folic Acid 25%

Vitamin B12 25% • Biotin 25%

Pantothenic Acid 25% • Phosphorus 25%

Iodine 15% • Magnesium 25%

Zinc 25% • Selenium 25%

Copper 10% • Manganese 15%

Chromium 25% • Molybdenum 25%

Chloride 20%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

	Calories: 2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g	80g
Saturated Fat	Less than 20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium	3,500 mg	3,500 mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g

Calories per gram: Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

INGREDIENTS: WHOLE ALGAL PROTEIN, HIGH OLEIC ALGAL OIL, SUGAR, SOYBEAN OIL, DIPOTASSIUM PHOSPHATE, SALT, TRICALCIUM PHOSPHATE, MAGNESIUM PHOSPHATE, SOY LECITHIN, CHOLINE CHLORIDE, SODIUM ASCORBATE, DL-ALPHA-TOCOPHERYL ACETATE, ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS, FERROUS GLUCONATE, RETINYL PALMITATE, OMEGA-3 ALGAL OIL, ZINC SULFATE, NIACINAMIDE, D-CALCIUM PANTOTHENATE, THIAMIN HYDROCHLORIDE, COPPER GLUCONATE, MANGANESE SULFATE, RIBOFLAVIN, PYRIDOXINE HYDROCHLORIDE, ERGOCALCIFEROL, POTASSIUM IODIDE, CHROMIUM CHLORIDE, BIOTIN, FOLIC ACID, SODIUM SELENITE, SODIUM MOLYBDATE, PHYTONADIONE, CYANOCOBALAMIN. **CONTAINS: SOY**

Manufactured for Rosa Labs
207 S Broadway Suite 600
Los Angeles, CA 90012

While not intended to replace every meal, Soylent can replace any meal.

Children, women who are pregnant, nursing, or may become pregnant should consult their doctor before consuming Soylent. Please refer to soylent.com/notes for more information.

Soylent™ is a trademark of Rosa Labs

The Frieze presentation was part of the work Raspét is now doing as a "taste creator" with tech-nutrition startup Soylent, a techno-futurist, minimalist meal replacement program much maligned for taking the jouissance out of food. Born of the "disproportionate amount of time and money [the founders] spent creating nutritionally complete meals," Soylent for many epitomizes the height of Silicon Valley excess—the latest disruptor attempting to fundamentally change "what" and "how" we eat because the "why" has already changed. As something of a neophile, I'd been curious to try Soylent and was eager to do so when I happened upon Raspét's booth. They had stocked two versions, the drink (Soylent 2.0), which tasted somewhat like the milk left over from a bowl of cereal, and a prototype nutritional paste made from algae (at right) which is currently being distributed as a sample attached to some of the catalogs of the Berlin Biennale. "Paste," as it is simply called, tasted like umami peanut butter (not bad). Salty, sweet, thick, it clung to the esophagus on the way down and, lacking masticatory effort, didn't sate my hunger. New products are sometimes hard to place.

As a jug of clear, Flint water belies the chemical contaminants therein, the beige, viscous material of Soylent reveals neither its taste nor nutritional value upon viewing. It is on the molecular level where value or meaning resides.

Joel Kuennen: Can you tell us about your work with Soylent? What is your day-to-day as a taste creator?

Sean Raspét: I work on formulations, new concepts, and research primarily. Test formulations for a flavor concept are mixed in my studio (a factory produces the flavor based on the formulation I come up with when the flavor is "scaled up" into product form). I bring these flavor prototypes into the office about twice per week, have meetings, send emails, etc.

JK: What's your goal as a taste creator? Is it a matter of hitting the five main tastes? Is there a proven ratio of salt, sweet, etc. that is used as a goal or is it a more artful process of trial and error?

SR: Flavor is roughly 80 percent aroma (which is perceived "retronasally" through the back of the throat

into the nasal passages), so most of what I do is concerned with the “flavor volatiles,” not as much the sweetness and saltiness etc. on the taste buds. It’s a bit more like perfume. But the taste on the taste buds works together with the aroma to create the overall effect.

JK: Where in the process of production is your prototype that you distributed at Frieze?

SR: It’s still a prototype. I can’t comment much more about it since it’s still in development. Generally for every product that is eventually launched in the industry there are a multitude of prototypes.

JK: How has your previous body of work informed your current position?

SR: It’s essentially the same. I’ve been working almost entirely with liquid formulations, things that are sold and produced on a quantitative, volumetric basis. Like most commodities that circulate in the economy, and unlike the way that art circulates. What I do at Soylent for example also consists exactly of making liquid “compositions of matter.” And the formulations I make for them are no different from any formulation I have made previously, except that they circulate in a larger quantity.



Sean Raspet presenting Soylent with Société at Frieze NY, 2016.

Photographer: Robert Kulisek, Clothing: Nhu Duong, Styling: Jon Wang, Models: Michael Xufu Huang, Eliot Glass and Yulu Serao.

JK: Given your body of work often takes a parodic look at materialist structures and conventions of production, what were your motivations in beginning to work at an essentialist endeavor such as Soylent?

SR: I don’t think Soylent is “essentialist” in the philosophical sense of believing in immutable categories—quite the opposite in fact! But I’m assuming you mean that it is a product designed to provide the essential nutrients needed for health, or the basic functional aspects of food rather than focusing on the aesthetic experience. Also I wouldn’t say my work is parodic towards conventions of production either. In any case, my motivations for working with them had to do with having the formulations that I was making circulate in a larger quantity and in a larger cross-section of society. Also, the idea of making an artwork that is a commercial product and is involved with the processes of production, rather than making art that was simply “commenting on” these kinds of things without participating in them.



Sean Raspet presenting Soylent with Société at Frieze New York 2016. Photo: Robert Kulisek

JK: What do you think of the company's techno-utopian positioning? Is there a worthwhile trade-off in the increased potential for nourishment given the loss of *jouissance*? And were you brought on as a means of mitigating this criticism of the product?

SR: I think in a way the company could be seen more as realist or pragmatic than techno-utopian. I think the prevailing trend in food is a kind of retro-utopianism of things like “organic” and “all natural.” Of course these terms are generally meaningless, especially “all natural”—primarily just marketing tactics. Organic farming is often worse for the environment and utilizes more pesticides (just different types of pesticides) and requires more resources. But people still pay a premium for these products out of a nostalgic fantasy of an idea of nature before modern agriculture and industry. (That being said I think crop rotation systems are one positive contribution from organic farming, though with more efficient food sources such as algae, they may one day be unnecessary.) It is primarily from the perspective of this prevailing trend that Soylent appears techno-utopian. It’s really just rational I would say, and because it’s a more rational utilization of resources such as land, water, and energy it also reduces food’s environmental impact.

In terms of whether I was brought on to mitigate criticism of the product, definitely not! I was brought on as a flavorist. I had been working with flavors for years beforehand in my art and I’m glad they took me on given this experience, even though I didn’t have a traditional food scientist background.



Sean Raspet, *Soylent* with Société at Frieze NY, 2016

Photo: Robert Kulisek, Clothing: Nhu Duong, Styling: Jon Wang, Models: Michael Xufu Huang, Eliot Glass and Yulu Serao

JK: Much of your previous work exhibits a pension for working backwards, reformulation, starting with the bare chemical components to either create non-mimetically or recreate mimetically as is the case with your abstract gasoline. What do you see as the programmatic potential for this deconstructive/reconstructive activity?

SR: It's important to me to work at the fundamental level of a medium or process in order to understand it and have the largest array of possibilities in working with it. The fundamental level of material in general is of course the molecular level where most of the characteristics of the entities and substances we encounter every day arise (there is of course the subatomic level but the atomic/molecular level is the limit of practical interaction).

The molecular level is also the fundamental level for flavor and scent: flavors and scents are simply collections of different molecules in certain proportions that trigger an olfactory response. So in the end I see scent/flavor and the reductivist/synthetic way of working with molecules and rearranging entities as a window into the material world in which we live. But it is also a window into the range of alternate material possibilities that don't exist in the world but could be possible: for example with my projects that have dealt with synthesizing or registering molecules that previously have not existed.



(from left to right)

- 1) CCCCCC(CO) CCCCCCCCCO CC/C=C\CC/C=C/CO C1=CC=C(C=C1)CCO CC1=CCC(CC1)C(C)(C)O CC(=CCC/C(=C/CO)/C)C CC(=CCCC(=CCCC(C)(C=O)C)C(C8+ alcohol variations), 2015. 3-octanol, 1-decanol, trans-2, cis-6-nonadien-1-ol, phenylethyl alcohol, alpha-terpineol, nerolidol, geraniol 2) Human Vanillin Receptor Target Mixture, 2015. vanillin, ethyl vanillin, vanillin acetate, vanillyl butyl ether, vanillylacetone, N-vanillylnonanamide. 3) C1=CC=C(C=C1)C=O C1=CC=C(C=C1)CC=O C1=CC=C(C=C1)CCC=O (benzyl(C++)aldehyde) 2015. benzaldehyde, phenylacetaldehyde, hydrocinnamaldehyde.
- 4) CC1=NC=CN=C1 CC1=NC=CN=C1C CC1=CN=C(C(=N1)C)C CC1=C(N=C(C(=N1)C)C)C (methyl pyrazine addition ramp) 2015. 2-methylpyrazine, 2,3-dimethylpyrazine, 2,3,5-trimethylpyrazine, 2,3,5,6-tetramethylpyrazine 5) CC(C)COC=O CC(C)COC(=O)C CC(C)CCOC=O CC(C)CCOC(=O)C CC(C)(=O)OC CC(C)CC(=O)OC CCOC(=O)C(C)C CCOC(=O)CC(C)C (iso-ester reversal) 2015. isobutyl formate, isobutyl acetate, isoamyl formate, isoamyl acetate, methyl isobutyrate, methyl isovalerate, ethyl isobutyrate, ethyl isovalerate.

JK: Your projects involving Soylent and chemical reformulation offer a critique of the synthetic mindset as is described in Nc1c(C(OC)=O)ccc1 and the abstraction of value as mentioned in Forms and Formulation. Firstly, can you describe your notion of the synthetic mindset? Secondly, do you consider

this practice a critique of a computational/synthetic relationship to our own bodies and alienation from our environment or as an embrace of a future where non-essential labor is eliminated so that we may direct our efforts to higher intellectual and cultural pursuits?

SR: The texts you mention are not a critique of the synthetic mindset but simply an acknowledgment and further elaboration of it (which speaks to your second question). What I call the “synthetic mindset” is a cultural shift in our relationship to the material world that has become especially noticeable in the past 10 to 15 years. Matter and material entities are seen as increasingly malleable—a kind of revisable materiality. It’s kind of like the idea of an “undo” button or a Photoshop filter or color slider that we increasingly imagine could be applied to the objects of our everyday experience.

There are the obvious ways in which there is a shifting relationship to previously fixed cultural categories, such as a changing relationship to the idea of nature related to GMOs (one of the bogeymen of the present which I think is actually a very positive development overall in terms of being able to achieve an environmentally efficient and more sustainable agriculture system). But what I am talking about is not so much these obvious examples but more the everyday smaller instances where our relationship to the world has shifted and become more fluid, often in terms of how we imagine it rather than how we may actually interact with it.

In general I think this is a positive development: it opens up a new area of play and eventually even perhaps a kind of freedom. Or it at least is something to build upon. But it is of course crucial to remain aware that as much as we may imagine the material world to be malleable, there are fixed limitations of energy and resources. Nothing is “virtual”; everything is material. So we have to think economically and be aware of the resources required to make material transformation (or “virtual” representation) and push for those resources to be distributed equally and sustainably.

And yes, to the extent that this situation may point to a distant future where work is either eliminated through automation or becomes a different mode of activity—even a voluntary activity—more akin to play, we have to ensure that this elimination or reduction of work happens equally for all people. It seems a very long way off from the perspective of the present, but it’s a conversation I think we should be having now.