

Eleanor Morgan

### Eating rotten shark

I recently ate some rotten fish. Luckily I did not get food poisoning, but was attempting to experience an Icelandic delicacy. The story of the invention of the dish is vague, but could be something like this...

A sleeper shark was found washed up on a beach in Iceland. It was a huge deep-sea fish, possibly six metres long. It was almost entirely blind due to parasitic worms that had burrowed into its eyes and which let off a luminescent glow, giving the animal a particularly horrific appearance. To the people who discovered it, such a huge catch of food must have seemed a great stroke of luck. But the meat of the sleeper is highly toxic, containing cyanic acid. The first person to try eating the fish experienced a quick but excruciating death; their last minutes of life spent staggering, foaming at the mouth and convulsing. However, clearly undeterred, someone decided to bury the shark underground. After a few months they dug up the fish, to discover that it had been transformed into putridified white flesh, stinking of ammonia due to the rotting process. Fearlessly, they tasted it, and survived.

This food is called 'Hakarl' and is traditionally eaten during the winter festival of Thorrablot, and is usually swiftly followed by a shot of local liquor. It has the texture and taste of overripe cheese, but the stench of ammonia is often enough to put people off before it reaches their mouths. However, being a committed *Lonely Planet* traveller, I tasted some. Eating putrid shark was on my list of 'things to experience' (before I die).

The development of cuisine depends on these moments of accident and experiment. Someone at sometime must have risked the possibility of an unpleasant taste, sickness or, at worst, death, to discover which animals were edible and how best to prepare them. Nowadays most of us restrict ourselves to eating animals specifically bred for our consumption (this has its own risks, of course, as CJD or avian flu has proven). Only young children have some of the curiosity and fearlessness of those first food explorers, trying out bugs, spiders, mud and pretty much anything they can put into their mouths in an attempt to learn more than their eyes can tell them. In the nineteenth century an English naturalist called Frank Buckland took this idea to heart and expanded his knowledge of the observable world by eating it.

Born in 1826, Frank Buckland was the son of William Buckland, Dean of Westminster, who introduced Frank to the delights of experimental eating through banquets of ostrich, crocodile, hedgehog and mice on toast. Frank was a keen observer of nature and from a young age kept his own private menagerie. At school he was never without his hedgehog, racoon and owl. Other animals came and went. When they 'went', either from violent or natural death, they would later appear served on a plate (squirrel pie and mice in batter were particular favourites). Frank continued the family tradition of food exploration while studying at Oxford, where he complained of the "horribly bitter" taste of earwigs.<sup>1</sup>

Frank Buckland became a popular scientific author and lecturer. He was especially concerned by the disappearance of agricultural land through commercial development,

and the possible loss of domestic animals bred for consumption. He became the leader of The Society for the Acclimatization of Animals, which aimed to investigate the possibility of importing exotic animals to Britain as a new food source. Society dinners consisted of kangaroo, wild boar and the rarer dish of boiled porpoise head, which Buckland described as tasting like “broiled lamp wick”.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Buckland arranged for the London Zoo to alert him to the death of any exotic animal, so that he might be on site to dissect it and broaden this experience through eating it. He tried giraffe, which had been ready-roasted in a fire at the zoo, and once returned from a holiday furious that a leopard had been buried without his notice. He proceeded to dig the animal up from its flowerbed and cook it.

He settled in London with his wife and children but continued to live with other animals, including a bear and a couple of monkeys, who would join him each Sunday for a glass of port. At home he sampled a variety of dishes, including elephant trunk soup, rhinoceros pie and slug soup. Apparently the great grey and black slugs made the tastiest dish. In addition to this menagerie, Buckland kept a collection of curios, including the embalmed heart of Louis XIV. This had been given to him by his father, and had originally been bought from a revolutionary who had destroyed the tomb of the Sun King. One evening during a dinner party, Buckland brought the king’s heart to the table and began to eat it in front of his guests, saying: “I have eaten many strange things, but have never eaten the heart of a king before”<sup>3</sup>. It must have been relatively palatable, as according to Buckland’s records, there were only two animals that he found inedible: moles and bluebottle flies.

Buckland gathered his knowledge from a first-hand experience with animals, whether through living with them, observing them, or eating them. Once a friend remonstrated with him for attempting to eat a dead kelt (a type of fish) to which Buckland replied: “No doubt it is nasty enough, but how can I say so unless I have tried it?”<sup>4</sup> He claimed that his understanding of nature came not from books, but through this personal, sensory experience.

The link between looking and eating is not a novel one, but it seems to be a one-way system. We consume things with our eyes (metaphorically), but we don’t look at things with our mouths. Buckland tried to do this, and although he was respected for some of his observational discoveries, he was generally considered a bit of an eccentric (at best). His knowledge of which slug was the most edible satisfied his boundless curiosity, but was otherwise useless. His food explorations may still have their moment of glory if natural disaster strikes and we are left alone with slugs and bluebottle flies (only eat the grey and black ones, and don’t touch the flies)

Eating is an experience. We take an object and put it in our mouths, where we can no longer see it. We taste it (a sense that has very few descriptive words) and have the physical sensation of our insides receiving an outside. The pleasure of having those gaps filled. ‘Experience’ is a much-used (and abused) word, but one of its recurrent definitions has been the description of a moment when the clear distinction between subject and object (or ‘other’) is blurred, leaving both altered in some way.<sup>5</sup> Eating would seem to lend itself to experience, as it is dependent on a mixing of subject and object.

To return to my putrid shark. Eating this is described in my Icelandic guidebook as ‘an experience’. I want to experience new things, as this means that I am living my life to the full. So, I dutifully go to the fishmonger, who tells me that the stench of ammonia comes from fishermen pissing on the dead carcass (this is not true, but adds more to the excitement for tourists) He watches me as I eat it, smiling, waiting to see whether I spit or swallow. I swallow. It’s not that bad. That’s it. I walk away to look at the whale meat.

Experience is on sale, another commodity of which we’ll never have enough. In this case it is the failure to fulfil our short lives that is at stake. Let the panic begin: ‘101 Things to do before you die!’ (“*an essential companion for anyone who wants to enjoy life as it races by.*”) ‘99 Things to do before you die!’ (If you have less time) and, slightly pessimistically, ‘10 Things to do before you die!’. Travel features large in these lists. We will waste our lives unless we get on a plane and go somewhere foreign, where we can look at stuff and eat things. But can this truly be described as experience? Experience cannot be fully possessed by the individual. It is something that we pass through, but which we do not own. That is why these trips usually do not live up to our expectations. In his extensive discussion on the history of experience, Martin Jay writes, “...because experiences involve encounters with otherness and open onto a future that is not fully contained in the past or present, they defy the very attempt to reduce them to moments of fulfilled intensity in the marketplace of sensations.”<sup>6</sup>

What about art? Can it avoid this ‘commodification of experience’? I don’t mean simply the commodification of the art, but the commodification of the *experience* of art. The Helen Pitt Gallery is hosting its own wedding, complete with food and guests. Such a performance harks back to that optimistic time when artists believed that the market system could be sidestepped by breaking down the barriers between the art object and the audience. The art would be temporal, unable to be co-opted into a market system, and the audience would no longer be passive receivers, but active players. The art event aims to be an experience - a fleeting moment with unexpected outcomes. In this sense the experience *is* the art. However, such events cannot entirely sidestep the market system, as subversion itself is a central feature demanded of new (and marketable) art. In addition, this marriage performance is for sale - for \$20 you can be a guest at Helen Pitt's wedding (with all proceeds going to the bride). How can the performance at the Helen Pitt retain a sense of experience, an ‘encounter with otherness’ without it becoming another ticked box on the list of ‘things to do’?

Frank Buckland offers a possible answer. His experiments consisted of observing with his eyes, but experiencing with his mouth. The etymology of ‘experience’ comes from the same word as ‘experiment’ – with the suggestion of the unknown, of doubt and even of danger. This link suggests that uncertainty is part of experience - of passing through something, or of something passing through you. Performances, even at their most wild, have a level of certainty, a containment. Experience does not have that security.

I suggest that we repeat the experiments of Buckland. However, it cannot be an exact reenactment; we have to make our own discoveries, there has to be a risk. I propose that a shark is buried under the gallery floor (there is, of course, a nice one preserved in an art collection somewhere that we could borrow) On the night of the event this shark

is dug up. The room fills with the stench of ammonia, we can't see anything because our eyes are streaming with the fumes. It may, or may not, be ready to eat. Too long in the ground and it's inedible, too short and it's poisonous. We tuck in. Some people might be sick, some people might even die, but those that survive will have a fantastic sense of having been through an experience.

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<sup>1</sup> G.H.O. Burgess, *The Eccentric Ark; the Curious world of Frank Buckland* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968) 11

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>4</sup> John Upton, *Three Great Naturalists* (London: Sunday School Union, 1910) 104

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (University of California Press, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 407