

Tofu, Steak, and a Smoke Alarm: The Food Network's Chopped & the Sonic Art of Cooking

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Place And Space, Sound, Sound Art



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On Sunday evening, Susan discovered the tofu had gone bad. Unfortunately, the entrée for the evening was to be tofu with sweet chili sauce. We connect on Skype at 3:30pm, as Susan is cutting up vegetables. Usually, she has classical music on while she cooks; it helps her concentrate. She's cut up so many vegetables in her life, that she finds music sweetens the repetitive activity. However, today I hear only the rewarding sound of her knife bisecting baby bok choy.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/chopping.mp3>

Susan and I don't talk about this sound, but it is certainly familiar. She says she cuts up the pieces small, as Mimi likes the chunks of bell pepper to be as little as possible.

My ethnographic work on cooking is birthed from a very personal place: Susan is my Aunt and Mimi my mother. They live together in Kingston, Massachusetts, where Susan's cooking nourishes Mimi through her ongoing chemo and radiation treatments. Using Skype, I watched and asked questions remotely from Raleigh, North Carolina on three consecutive evenings during their dinner preparation in order to more deeply understand cooking as an art. From the first moment of preparation each night, Susan and I talked about the meal, the cooking techniques, and her feelings about cooking and eating—and I noted that sound emerged as central to her culinary process.

Opening my ethnographic practice up to sonic analysis enables new definitions of both chef and kitchen as lively, complex sites, constantly negotiating with each other. Taking the role of sound into account in the practice of cooking allows me to construct new interpretations of cooking artistry that considers everyday negotiations and embodied limitations not as “threats” to the cooking art, but, instead, as elements that enrich its artistry.

My sonic analysis specifically chafes against dominant formations of “cooking as art” in the contemporary moment, exemplified by reality television programs such as [The Food Network's Chopped](#), which constructs a static configuration of space with the cook as subject and the meal as art object. On *Chopped*, four chefs are given thirty minutes and four ingredients. Using these items, they must make a dish to be judged by a panel of food experts. These items are often strange or incongruous: on one episode, they had to make an appetizer out of frosted wheat cereal, baby red romaine lettuce, black garlic, and quahog clams. The success of a dish is measured by the chef's ability to balance the necessary experimentation with an implied universal of good taste, texture balance, and pleasuring preparation. In other words, *Chopped* collapses art-making and capital into the “art object-meal,” reproducing a tired definition of “high art” that necessitates access to wealth and privilege, because the creation of “art” requires expensive foodstuffs, sophisticated kitchen technologies, and a highly controlled visual and sonic environment.



https://youtu.be/Zy9_sXAk_uM

In my Aunt Susan's kitchen, there are a number of sonic and spatial negotiations that preclude her cooking from the singular criteria of artistry perpetuated by *Chopped*. Specifically, my Aunt Susan's cooking does not meet *Chopped*'s standards because it requires negotiations related to her personal mobility and my mother's health. My Aunt uses a wheelchair to get around her house, and, as a result, some kitchen appliances are harder to reach. My mother's chemo and radiation treatments mean that she has both complicated limitations to her diet and fluid culinary desires.

In seeking to understand the fluid challenges of Susan's cooking, I designed my virtual sensory ethnography by combining two methods, defined respectively by Sarah Pink and Jenna Burrell. In *Sensory Ethnography*, Pink proposes that the ethnographer is immersed in smells, tastes, sights, and sound during the ethnographic process. Things that might seem mundane such as the sound of onions being chopped, for example, can actually reveal a complex set of relations about the cook and their process. The cook might be listening to the chopping as a rhythm in her process, like background music: the pleasing sound as it hits the cutting board. But if the onion isn't fresh, the sound is less crisp, less crunch, the sounds changes to speak of a different type of knowledge, and she must act differently in response. In "The Field Site as a Network," Burrell proposes an understanding of the ethnographic field site as a network rather than a singular object. The field site, in other words, is a heterogeneous set of connections, always expanding. Using a technology like Skype to do ethnography is not "ethnography at a distance," she implies, rather it is the field site manifested through a multiplicity of connections. It simply reflects the ever-changing set of relations that comprise our world.



Tools for the sensory ethnography of the kitchen. Borrowed from Travelin' Librarian @Flickr.

After Susan has cut up all the longer-cooking vegetables and set the chili sauce to simmer, we disconnect. At 5:15pm, we connect again. Susan unwraps the tofu, and something isn't right. She calls Mimi into the kitchen, and, after some deliberation, they decide that steak will need to replace the tofu. It's a disappointment as the tofu would have tasted best with the sweet chili sauce.

The sonic landscape of Susan's kitchen has been, up to this, point, fairly solitary and controlled. When Susan welcomes Mimi in, the kitchen becomes a lively space of conversation, interaction, and negotiation. The production of the sonic space in the kitchen, from solitary preparation to lively interaction, is a crucial part of Susan's art. The kitchen has undergone what Brian Massumi, in his essay "Floating the Social," calls a "modulation of the dimension of perception [rather] than an encoding of separate pieces of data or a sequencing of units of meaning" (41). Such a sonic modulation challenges the narrative of lone artist-chef creating object-meal. Rather than segmenting the meal into a set of data blocks (chef, food, preparation time, and eater), Susan orchestrates the art of cooking as participatory with Mimi.

In the kitchen, Mimi also examines the tofu. She offers some information about it, and then joins Susan to figure out what other protein might work.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/eggsschicken.mp3>

Once the steak is decided upon, Mimi exits and Susan works again at preparing dinner.

Susan's sonic modulations, in this case conversation, allow for immersion and engagement in the lively sonic space of her kitchen. Mimi and Susan create a co-constitutive relationship between chef and eater. Unlike on *Chopped*, the eater is a participant rather than a judge.

Susan and I disconnect from Skype to give the steak time to thaw. We connect once again, at 6:20PM, once the steak has been properly thawed. As we discuss how Susan learned to cook, the smoke alarm suddenly comes to life.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/smokealarm.mp3>

An unplanned sonic intervention has occurred. The smoke alarm has its own desires; it insists on total control of the sonic space. Susan's response is a necessary modulation. She counters the smoke alarm's desire for sonic control with words, saying that it triggered accidentally because of the steak, sizzling in the pan. The interruption of the smoke alarm exemplifies how Susan's cooking technique is not one of dominance. Rather than producing clear boundaries between chef and eater, the food and the preparation, the kitchen and its outside, Susan allows for fluid boundaries, welcoming chance and the unknown into her art.



Setting off the alarm image borrowed from Gwenaël Piaser @Flickr.

In the context of Susan's kitchen, Massumi's definition of modulation applies, however subtle. These domestic modulations are not a movement toward total control, but, instead, a lively negotiation with a set of partly unpredictable relations – an orchestration of the sonic space. The idea of sonic orchestration allows us to consider the complex set of possibilities existing between the choices made by the subject, here, the chef, and the presence of a set of potentialities, such as the smoke alarm. To Susan, the art of cooking is not the reduction or elimination of "threats"; her art is the negotiation of modulations. In contrast to *Chopped*, where careful boundaries are

constructed in order to protect the privilege inherent in its definition of art, Susan's art lies in her engagement with the lively potentialities of the sonic art of cooking.

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