



# ISOLARI I

**SALMON: A RED HERRING**

**FOREWORD BY  
HANS ULRICH OBRIST**

**A correspondence with Cooking Sections throughout the COVID-19 lockdown**



**APRIL 20**

**HANS ULRICH OBRIST: First of all, I want to ask if you believe that generosity can change the world? And if so, how?**

**[DANIEL FERNANDEZ-PASCUAL]:** Definitely, yes. In our work, we think of generosity as related to its etymology: tied to genesis, plenitude and, even, genetics. Whether human or animal, all bodies rely on the generosity of other bodies. For the transmission of knowledge, affection, and sustenance.

**[ALON SCHWABE]:** Whether it be birds regurgitating food to feed their chicks or wolves chewing up meat for their pups, we live in a world of generosity. And it can be considered not only a sentimental act, but a mode of ingestion.

**[DFP]:** The proposition that generosity and genetics are connect-

ed at a most basic level is, of course, forever, in dispute and it is this that we're exploring in our practice—but, more so, generosity as a mechanism of giving and receiving across farms, food systems, economies, and at tables.

**Yes, I find that your practice has so much to do with generosity. I think the 21st century, and particularly this moment of crisis, needs generosity—to the point that generosity becomes the medium in a post-medium condition, no?**

[AS]: Yes, absolutely. We all need positive forms of generosity right now. Kinds of action that can bring us back to Earth. Generosity, however, swings both ways. There is also a kind of generosity that exists without care. We often return to how Marcel Mauss defined 'the gift' according to its double meaning in German—as a present and a poison.

## **How do you relate this to the current moment?**

**[AS]:** Never has this been so literal as it is now. Our love, gratitude, and warmth for something, might potentially contaminate it. And this kind of deadly generosity has been going on for centuries—pathogens have always been ‘gifted’ in and amongst species, from humans to animals and animals to humans, throughout the history of civilization. A kind of generosity estranged from empathy.

**[DFP]:** What concerns us is that in a post-industrial world, the poisonous will always be with us. It will always circulate and be passed on to other bodies and generations. So what is the economy, or the types of exchange, that distribute it? And how can we make this circulation visible?

**[AS]:** Yes—and COVID reflects this broader kind of poisonous,

material exchange. It not only precipitates a health crisis, but signals a deeply ingrained environmental crisis—part of a broader economy in which things are transmitted without care.

**How does this tie to *Salmon: A Red Herring*? Tell me about your book as part of *isolarii*.**

[DFP]: Any kind of gift or ‘transmission’ without care—like industrialized feed in cattle, chicken, or fish farms—is a deadly gift. It nourishes, but requires unsavory chemicals, antibiotics, and synthetic dyes to make it digestible.

[AS]: And, in the process, distant ecologies are ensnared: local fish stocks in Peru are depleted, the tropical savanna in Brazil is deforested, etc. This is exactly what concerns us in *Salmon: A Red Herring*—trying to find a way to better see, day to day, the ‘gifts’

of industrialization at the micro-  
and macro-scopic level.

**Do you have a personal anecdote that relates to this understanding of generosity that you could share? Is there such a story?**

[AS]: Well, the book maps this story. Our protagonist is farmed salmon, but as it emerges in the form of a little house sparrow that actually turned salmon, the color.

[DFP]: This is a real story that we heard about on the Isle of Skye, a sparrow whose feathers turned from brown to pink...

[AS]: It kickstarted our investigation—a kind of molecular thread that we pursue across the pages of the book, from Mexico to Norilsk, through species of all sorts.

[DFP]: In a healthy ecosystem, wild salmon eat shrimp and krill—

these tiny organisms gift salmon their distinctive pink hue. In salmon farms, disrupted ecosystems, salmon would not naturally turn pink—they would be gray. And so color is artificially fed to them, according to a color-chart called the SalmoFan.

[AS]: It is to these ends that we propose salmon is a red herring, as something that deceives and conceals at the same time.

[DFP]: The pink sparrow, much like ourselves in the world at large, got entangled in this web of synthetic color. It was unintentionally dyed. The book, in many ways, is a reflection on how we perceive color in our environment. An attempt to open up new ways of seeing—both as an artistic and ecological practice.

**Anecdote and word play is important for you. In the book, you distinguish between salm-**

**on and [salmon].**

**[AS]: Yes. This is a stylistic device—a way to transform a word on the page into a portal or window through which we can see the industrial processes that constitute color. We wanted to use an almost architectural intervention with the brackets and ask readers to look through an expectation or surface-level meaning, into the entwinement of color and life.**

**MAY 25**

**One of my recurring questions to artists is about their unrealized projects. We know a lot about architects' unrealized projects, but very little about artists', or poets' even. These could be projects that are too big, or even too small to be realized, utopian dreams. Or, as Doris Lessing said, a project**



**that you haven't dared to do... I'd love to know about all of Cooking Sections' unrealized projects.**

**[AS]: We've always been fascinated by the migration patterns of wild salmon. They swim thousands of kilometers back to their birthplace, orienting themselves through smell, magnetic fields, and chemical cues—returning to the river where they were born.**

**[DFP]: But when farmed salmon, born in a hatchery lab, escape confinement, where do they swim to spawn? Where is their birthplace? We want to find a way to track them and study how they interact with their 'wild' peers. Some scientists claim escapees swim back to the lab but it's still unclear and there's very little research on the subject.**

**JUNE 25**

**I'm in Kensington Gardens interviewing a swan. I wanted to ask what would be your question to a swan?**



**[AS]: Before you addressed it, the swan was already snorting at you. They want to be part of our**

conversation! Recently swans—associated with eternal love and romantic lakes—have been turning Flamingo. Like the little sparrow in Scotland, her majesty's swans have been turning pink too, from London to Glasgow. They are perhaps trying to communicate with us; something is wrong in their environment.

[DFP]: This is what scientists call the 'Pink Feather Flamingo Syndrome,' which is a form of discoloration in their feathers as a result of being fed moldy white bread. And this is a problem with us, humans, inventing what swans 'like' to eat and disrupting their ecology.

[AS]: Such swans exist in, what we call, in our *isolarii*, the 'chromatmosphere,' then.

**Say more.**

[AS]: Well, color is a substance

that no longer flows through bodies. There are so many chemicals and synthetic components around us that we could think of bodies actually flowing through color. We can see the atmosphere, then, as a 'chromatmosphere,' a manifestation of colored toxicity through which we move.

[DFP]: So our question to the swan would be: what do *you* see when *we* see your feathers change from white to pink?

JULY 14

**I want to ask about the instruction piece you wrote for the Serpentine 'Back to Earth' project. It is called "if your salmon were not fed on synthetic color, their flesh would be grey." It's an homage to Yves Klein's Blue Cocktail from 1958, yes? I have spoken a lot about him and his close friend, Claude Parent, the archi-**

**tect of the oblique, with whom he worked on a series of amazing, unrealized fountains.**

**Cooking Sections**  
(2020)

if your salmon  
were not fed on synthetic colour,  
their flesh would be grey  
(after Yves Klein's Blue Cocktail, 1958)

Char two beetroots in the oven.  
Scrape off the black crust.  
Cut, season well, and eat.  
Look at the colour of your urine.

You have been dyed.

**[AS]: Exactly. For the opening of his show in 1958, Yves Klein prepared a blue cocktail. It was made out of Cointreau, gin and methylene blue. Visitors drank it while queuing. But blue wasn't only for the eyes, it stayed in people's bodies, waiting to be noticed when urinated hours, or days, after.**

[DFP]: I think we're often surprised that color can integrate with our body, even when this is a natural process. This instruction to dye yourself was a way to provoke a consideration of metabolism and color, but also to parallel, in a less poisonous sense, the experience of farmed salmon.

[AS]: It's great you mention Klein's collaboration with Parent. Their vision for an immaterial air architecture was revolutionary—especially their fountains of water and fire as a way to control climate.

**What does instruction mean in your work? There are so many types of instruction: musical scores, John Cage's 'open scores', the fluxus instructions...**

[AS]: What is interesting about the score is that it's something

that needs to be rehearsed, embodied and performed by people, normally lots of people. Recipes in our practice function like this: not just prescribing what you eat, but also aiming to change the way we produce, consume, and imagine food collectively.

JULY 24

**When I spoke to Jef Geys for ‘Do It,’ he said that it’s not only about doing ‘it,’ but thinking everyday about what you can do for someone else. So I want to ask Cooking Sections what can you do today for someone else?**

[AS]: This brings us full circle. We try to listen as much as we can. To listen carefully to others, with curiosity and attention, because it’s sometimes in the most irrelevant, banal details that one can find the crux of things.

**[DFP]: Yes, and it is this that will hopefully mobilize action and make people attentive to what is happening underwater. And that is perhaps the lesson we've learned over the years and that we are trying to pass on to others.**

**That leads into my final question, which is about future generations. It's a very precarious moment in the world right now, when the next generation needs our support. Rainer Maria Rilke, as you know, wrote this little book *Letters to a Young Poet* and I was wondering what your advice would be—in July/August 2020—to a young artist?**

**[DFP]: Rilke wrote that no one can advise you—there is only one way to go and that is to look within. I would add that this can be taken literally—'following your gut' in its truest sense! From an environmental perspective, any route forward will have to emerge from an**



**in-depth understanding of micro-organisms and biochemistry.**

**[AS]: We're living in a time when governments are forcing people into precarity. And so it's not easy to give advice, but young artists are poised to address this, to find new forms of self-governance. Anna Tsing reminds us that in capitalism the most precarious develop the art of noticing—seeing the growth amidst destruction. From the ruins, new imaginaries, cultures, and social organizations can emerge. And young artists, who are gifted with the art of noticing, are, perhaps, the best equipped to understand and reshape our current moment. To do this will require looking for loopholes and cracks, but also remaining attentive in times of crisis. Never letting the powers of observation be occluded.**

**—HUU**

**April-July 2020 London**