

BENTO おべんとう展

食べる・集う・つながるデザイン

いただきます編

BENTO

Design for Eating, Gathering and Communicating

Vol.1: Itadakimasu



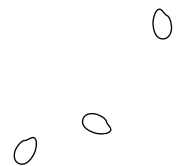


“Itadakimasu” is a phrase said by the Japanese before the start of every meal, meaning “I humbly receive.”



Bento's Possibilities for Communication Design

KAZUMI KUMAGAI



Bento's Possibilities for Communication Design

KAZUMI KUMAGAI

BENTO – Design for Eating, Gathering and Communicating is the third installment in the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum's "Arts & Life" series of exhibitions, which was launched after the museum's re-opening in 2012. The series homes in on the relationship between the arts, our everyday lives and society, in keeping with the museum's mission of becoming a "doorway to art" and a "haven for enrichment of the heart," taking art to be "nourishment for living." The installments to date have been Where will we live tomorrow? in 2012, whose theme was housing designs for the future, followed by Kubbe Makes an Art Museum in 2015, which foregrounded the communication that arises in the process of studying, gathering and exhibiting objects. This latest installment looks at an essential of life – food and eating – setting "food and communication" as the exhibition's theme. The focus is on the bento, a food culture of Japan that has mediated communication between people everywhere throughout the ages. The exhibition showcases bento boxes from the Edo period (1603–1868) alongside bento-themed works by contemporary artists, with the aim of reevaluating communication surrounding food.

The theme of food and eating may seem to some to be far removed from art and culture. However, food varies across races, country, religions, lifestyles: it is a custom that is formed socially and culturally. The "Gastronomic meal of the French" and "Traditional Mexican cuisine" were added to UNESCO's

Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2010, and "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese" in 2013. Meanwhile, Expo 15 in Milan became the first World's Fair to set a food-related theme – "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life" – and was further accompanied by an "ARTS & FOODS" exhibition held at La Triennale di Milano. In the Japanese legal system too, the 2017 amendment to the Basic Act on Culture and the Arts positioned culture and the arts at the heart of society. It clarified the need to organically integrate culture and the arts into policies on urban development, welfare, education and so on, and extended the scope of "culture and the arts" to include food culture.

Looking at our own society, however, there is no end in sight to its money-oriented values, and we have yet to glimpse a new social order that can surmount inequalities, alienation and economic instability. Nevertheless, recent years have seen a growing public interest in social activities that are not motivated by market forces alone, or that are intended to build connections. In areas associated with food too, there are more social businesses and NPOs working to tackle societal issues such as child poverty and food loss.

Beyond the everyday food culture of making and eating bento, there may in fact lie something akin to such systems that seek to create new social connections and value through mutual, autonomous, imaginative engagement between individuals.

This essay will evaluate the bento's possibilities for fostering communication through introducing the works included in the current exhibition. By assessing not solely the gustatory aspects of bento but also its ties to our society and way of life, I would like to reflect upon the richness and complexity of communication surrounding food.



1. Etymology of “bento” and the culture of eating

First, on the word “bento.” Bento is a portable meal that comes packed in a box, and although there are various theories on the etymology of the word, the following meanings are particularly relevant to the notion of communication and connecting people.

(1) “Sharing and apportioning”

(2) “Preparing in advance to serve a purpose”

(3) “Arranging something to suit the particular time and occasion”

According to Hirokazu Arakawa, the original sense of the word “bento” was “sharing and apportioning,” which then came to signify “preparing in advance for a purpose” or “pre-preparing and apportioning food and drink.” Eventually, this meaning extended to signify the actual contents and containers of these meals.¹ On the other hand, according to Takeshi Shibata, it was what was originally called *mentsu* (面桶) in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) that gradually became bento containers.² The *men* (面) in *mentsu* means “each person,” and *tsu* (桶) a “hand-sized tub.” *Mentsu* was therefore a container used to serve one-person portions of food, an extremely simple and handy container made by bending a thin board of Japanese cypress or cedar into a boat-shape. It supposedly served more as a rice bowl than as a portable utensil. In the Kan-on pronunciation scheme derived from Tang-period Chinese, the characters for *mentsu* (面桶) can also be read as “bento”; this new sound then came to be written as “便当,” signifying “convenience.” The character for *ben-*, “便,” then changed to “弁,” meaning “to put in order” or “to process” (as in 弁償, “compensate,” or 弁済, “settle/repay”). In combination with the character for *-to*, “当,” which has the sense of “ad hoc,” “bento” gradually came to designate something arranged and put in order for particular circumstances and purposes.

Japanese food culture reached maturity during the Genroku years (1688–1704) of the Edo period, but it was around the Bunka-Bunsei period (1804–1830) that saw the advancement of these bento boxes.³ Bento boxes developed as utensils used at banquets by the aristocracy, namely court nobles and the samurai class. As such, many of their designs demonstrate a wish to amuse and astound guests at the banquet, rooted in the philosophy of *omotenashi*, hospitality. To give examples from the exhibition, there is the wooden bento box in the shape of a tea kettle, which appears to be made of iron (see p.35); or the bento box for firefly viewing outings, which is speckled with silver studs in the image of glowing fireflies. Masahiro Kariya, then-owner of the Hanbey Fu restaurant that runs the OBENTOBako Museum, stated in a magazine interview about these unusual boxes: “What seems to surprise everyone the most is that this is lacquerware, not ironware. Pick it up and you’ll see how light it is. To give the guests a pleasant surprise, the craftsmen have used all manner of techniques to reproduce the look of a tea kettle, from the subtle roughness of its surface to the coloring with its impression of weight [...] The essential purpose of the Japanese bento box is to spice up the outdoor eating occasion with its visual beauty, curiosity and seasonality, and to allow guests to enjoy all the seasonal foods arranged inside. I think that is what the traditional food culture of Japan is all about.”⁴

The bento carries with it a long heritage of hospitality and playfulness – characteristic traits of Japanese culture – that seeks to cater to each time and occasion. One might say that it is a gift which the maker has designed with a sense of hospitality and playfulness, accounting for the circumstances surrounding the eater and the eating.

¹ Arakawa, Hirokazu. *Utage to Tabi no Utsuwa: Bentobako – Tokushu Seishi Korekushon* (“Containers for Feasts and Travel: Bento Boxes – Special Paper Edition”). Shiksha Tosho Hanbai, 1990.

² Shibata, Takeshi. “Bento to Bento-ire” (“Bento and Its Containers”), *Koza Shoku no Bunka* vol.4: *Katei no Shokujiki Kukan* (“Lessons on Food Culture vol.4: Eating Spaces at Home”). Ajinomoto Foundation for Dietary Culture, 1999. p.409.

³ Okumura, Ayao. “Bento kara Bento he – Yurai to Keihu” (“From Bento to Bento – Origin and Genealogy”), *vesta* vol.62. Ajinomoto Foundation for Dietary Culture, 2006. p.3.

⁴ “Bi to Iki wo Tanoshimu Obentobako” (“Bento Boxes for Enjoying Beauty and Style”), *EPTA* vol.74. Kishohin Kagaku Kaiho Kenkyujo, 2015. pp.47-48.

0

2. Bento as a “gift”

The word “gift” is also key to discussing bento-related communication design, and may offer us a hint for thinking about connections in society of the future. In this chapter, I would like to look at the communication that arises in the process of preparing and eating bento – a topic addressed by many of the exhibited works – and to explore the bento’s possibilities as a gift.

1) Communication of eating

Setting aside the bento for a moment, there is a key difference between human beings and other primates regarding the nature of communication surrounding eating in general. According to primatologist Juichi Yamagiwa, humans are the only primates that regard food as a tool for coordinating relationships. Other than human beings, no primates hold back their appetite in order to sit over a meal with their companions.⁵

The philosopher Seiichi Waseda points out how human beings attach meaning to the act of eating based on their relationships with others, remarking as follows: “That we must eat in order to live – this is a fact central to human existence. Nevertheless, what seems to me an even more crucial fact is that the very significance of human survival and experience is condensed in the act of eating, of tasting. This is why, sometimes, human beings adamantly refuse even this absolute prerequisite for survival.”⁶ Human beings judge whether or not to eat not only based on their sense of taste, but also on their perception of the human relationship and context in and through which the food came to be made. These factors can even affect how food tastes to them. When babies sense that their mother’s attention is not focused on them (for instance, from changes in the

0

0

0

temperature of the milk), they have been known to refuse their milk.⁷ Am I being treated as an individual, as a human being? Am I being valued just by existing, even if I am not doing anything in particular? Human beings supposedly try to gauge this in how food is provided to them.⁸ Eating is the act of assimilating something alien into one’s own body, of choosing to accept something from the outside world. It is through such an act that human beings sustain their very existence. “Choosing what one finds desirable and refusing what one finds disagreeable, thus deciding whether to maintain or break off one’s relations with others – in this very process lies the basis of what makes each human being an irreplaceable ‘somebody.’” On what sort of relationship and communication the act of eating is founded, whether the provider of the food acknowledges the eater as an irreplaceable ‘somebody’⁹ – these are the important issues. Washida cites the example of those in nursing care who are, like infants, unable to eat by themselves. He makes the following observation about the food provided to them: “Meals that do not account for individual taste deny the basic human impulsion to *ginmi* (to scrutinize and select according to one’s taste), and as such, they are ipso facto not tasty, however elaborate they may be. The reason is that in such a situation, the subjective ‘I’ is reduced to being merely one of multiple and anonymous individuals. If the attention of the carer is directed toward other members sat at the same table, then regardless of how much time the carer otherwise devotes to the person, the food will not be tasty for the subjective ‘I.’ That is because the ‘I,’ at that precise moment, is not the ‘recipient’ of the other person’s attention and affection.”¹⁰ What is important is whether one is the intended recipient of someone’s feelings: a particular somebody, not an anonymous existence among many.

If we are to reconsider the bento along these lines, what sort of bento is it

0

7

⁵ Yamagiwa, Juichi. “Shokutaku no Shinkaron” (“On the Evolution of the Dining Table”), *Shoku wa Yandeiruka: Yuragu Seizon no Joken* (“Is Food Ailing?: The Faltering Conditions of Survival”). Wedge Inc., 2003. p.170.

⁶ Washida, Seiichi. “Shoku no Hokorobi” (“Rifts in Food”), *Shoku wa Yandeiruka: Yuragu Seizon no Joken* (“Is Food Ailing?: The Faltering Conditions of Survival”). Wedge Inc., 2003. p.15.

⁷ Ibid. p.15. ⁸ Ibid. p.30. ⁹ Ibid. p.20.

¹⁰ Washida, Seiichi. “Shoku no Hokorobi” (“Rifts in Food”), *Shoku wa Yandeiruka: Yuragu Seizon no Joken* (“Is Food Ailing?: The Faltering Conditions of Survival”). Wedge Inc., 2003. pp.29–30.

that the eater can eat without hesitation? I believe it is bento provided in a way that allows the eater to acknowledge that he or she is the particular intended recipient of the preparer's attention – in other words, bento that is provided as for a particular "somebody," an irreplaceable and non-anonymous individual.

In terms of this exhibition, photographer Satoru Abe's work *Hiruke – Lunch Time* captures people absorbed in their bentos. Seeing them eating their bentos, we cannot help but imagine them to have been made based on such personal relationships. In the images of these figures engrossed in their bentos, one can sense the people who prepared the meals; one can also sense that each eater is the special recipient of the preparer's attention. Abe has commented in interview that he can see within these images of people eating bentos, which have been made by someone for another, "something genuine about their homes" that is usually unseen. When they eat these bentos at their workplace, Abe says, "maybe they find themselves back at home in a way, and become their plain, genuine selves for the time being. I think that's what I want to capture." Perhaps bento designed as a gift contains moments of communication that allows one to reaffirm that one is being valued by another as an individual.

In chef Ayumi Ooshio's project *The Bentos of Ayumi Shokudo*, her support for those wishing to make bento for a particular "recipient" has been expressed in the form of recipes. In this project, which began as a feature series on *Asahi Shimbun Digital*, Ooshio created bento recipes in response to readers' letters that disclosed their gratitude or support for others, then delivered the recipes to these readers with bento boxes to match. These recipes were "gifts" from Ooshio to the bento-makers. Ooshio says that she felt a connection with these readers – the would-be bento-makers – and that her own role was to accompany them, helping them to fulfill their wishes. Even when eating it alone, Ooshio claims, a bento can serve

as a good-luck charm of sorts that can serve as a reminder of the existence of the person who prepared it. This project of Ooshio's was one that used online communication to support those who wanted to make such a "charm" for a special someone.

2) Communication of making

Next, we will discuss the communication that occurs in the process of bento-making. Though preparation of bento is a humble everyday endeavor, it in fact holds possibilities for enlivening and renewing pre-existing relationships. Preparing and arranging a meal for a particular "recipient" is an extremely complex, integrated operation: one needs to incorporate ingredients in the refrigerator, cook to a deadline, and arrange it all within a box of a given format. It is an act of bricolage that requires one to be creative as a practitioner of life.

Contemporary artist Toru Koyamada's *Daddy Bento* demonstrates the possibilities that lie in the continued routine of preparing the "gift" of food for others. The work is an archive of the Koyamada family's day-to-day routine by which his daughter conceives and produces a sketch of a bento for the family's youngest son, then Koyamada himself prepares the bento based on the sketch. The communication involved in collaborating on this "gift" for another – the youngest brother – creates a new circuit in the familial relationship between father and daughter, that of equal project members. Moreover, one can see in this work Koyamada's wish that his daughter grow up not to be someone who is necessarily good at cooking, but the sort of person who can make bentos that take other people's circumstances into consideration. This is precisely a wish for her to be someone who can build relationships with others, treating them as individuals.

Filmmaker Yasuhiro Moriuchi's *Making of BENTO* is a work in which children make bento by themselves, then make documentary videos of themselves making

bento. According to Moriuchi, the children's bento-making process is "practice for active and independent involvement in everyday life." Usually, children have bento or other food provided to them at home, or, if they are purchasing it, are on the receiving end of a service. Moriuchi says that by creating bento by themselves as "gifts" for themselves, children may learn to act for themselves, and grasp something that will lead to a more proactive attitude to life.

Another important element of bento-making is communication with the natural environment, including of course the ingredients. The intended recipient of the "gift" is not limited to the one who eats the bento. "Fermentation designer" Hiraku Ogura takes the bento as a tool that allows us to communicate with nature, in a way that we cannot do through language. This is the background concept incorporated in Bento Days. Bentos often contain seasonal ingredients, which can give off a sense of the changing seasons. In the context of Ogura's field of fermentation, for example, brewing sake is an activity that involves processing rice, which is a gift from nature, into sake and offering it back to the gods. Bento too held a place at hanami (cherry blossom viewing), an occasion where people would pray for a plentiful harvest, where the gods were supposed to partake in the feast with humans. Ogura argues that bento, therefore, can also be a "gift" given in return to nature.

Nor may we skirt around the issue of how to leave the limited resources and Earth's environment itself as a "gift" to the coming generations – how to achieve sustainability so that we can share these resources with the next generation. This is the question addressed by the "eating designer" Marije Vogelzang. In intangible bento, the "Spirit of Bento" speaks to us, telling us stories about aspects of bento that cannot be seen by the eye. In addition to intangible elements like memories and the connection with the ingredients' producers, the Spirit also speaks to us of

other possibilities that include bento boxes made of eco-friendly seaweed-based bioplastics, and soya- and insect-based foods as meat-alternative sources of protein.

3) Communication of gathering

Finally, I would like to discuss the communication that occurs at occasions where people gather and eat communally. Today, when people eat bento communally, it often happens that each person brings bento and exchanges portions with others. Everyone brings a little bit of extra food to share with others, thus establishing mild, easy-going connections. Sometimes, parts of the menu will be agreed upon beforehand, and the participants will divide the labor of preparing the meal. Either way, these are occasions of mutual sharing.

Contemporary artist Jun Kitazawa has set up FRAGMENTS PASSAGE, a work that addresses this phenomenon of sharing extra portions – osusowake in Japanese – and the feelings that it engenders. Kitazawa's practice to date has revolved around art projects that explore the relationship between community and individuals; for this exhibition, however, his goal was to recreate, with the public in a real public space (i.e. the museum), the sort of "mild connections" that arise at communal eating occasions today. His focus is on the possibility of a "gift" that targets multiple recipients, which can be glimpsed in the osusowake of bento. Perhaps a bento box and a cloth to wrap the box are all we need to produce humane spaces for ourselves, even in an urban environment like Tokyo where use of space is regulated. Perhaps bento can be a tool that allows people to share space, gently breaching rules and regulations, and build mild connections. These were the ideas that lay at the heart of this work's production. As part of the exhibit, people bring along things to osusowake, share them with others,

and engage in giving “gifts” to each other without using currency. The work is an experimental space in which participants can contemplate how society might be if such a scheme were to be realized in actual society.

The above discussion has examined through the exhibited works the possibilities of communication design involving food, setting bento – a culture with a capacity to establish connections – as its departure point, and the idea of “gift” as its keyword. When it comes to eating and other such day-to-day actions that are motivated by physical needs, it is all too easy to overlook their value in our everyday life, or even to dismiss their importance when “greater causes” and ideologies are at play. The works in this exhibition are filled with hints that will help us to pause at such moments and consider how to live in a grounded manner and build enriching relationships, without being overly rational. What kind of prospects will the exhibits evoke in your mind? It is my hope that your experience at this exhibition will inspire your thinking about communication design surrounding eating, an activity that sustains our lives.

Kazumi Kumagai

(Assistant Curator, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum)

BENTO

Design for Eating, Gathering and Communicating

EXHIBITION

Dates

July 21 (Sat) – October 8 (Mon), 2018

Venue

Gallery A, B & C, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum

Organizer

Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum
(Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture)

Support

Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
Nara Prefectural Government
Nara Prefecture Federation of Wood-Industry Cooperatives
New Constructor's Network Co., Ltd.
KIRAKUSHA, Inc. (*Sotokoto*)

Curation

Kazumi Kumagai (Assistant Curator)

Curatorial Assistance

Sawako Inaniwa (Curator)
Yumi Kono (Assistant Curator)
Natsuko Ohashi (Associate Curator)
Itsuka Yanbe (Assistant)

Venue Design

FUJIWALABO
(Teppei Fujiwara, Mizuho Watanabe, Kanako Otagawa)

Graphic Design

BAUM LTD.

Venue Construction

TOKYO STUDIO CO., LTD.

Event Facilitation

Appreciate Approach

CATALOG Vol.1: Itadakimasu

Editing/Writing/Interview

Keiko Kamijo, Itsuka Yonezu,
Kazumi Kumagai, Sawako Inaniwa

Translation

Yasumasa Kawata (Art Translators Collective)

Design

BAUM LTD.

Photography

Taro Hirano (p.031–063, p.066)

Printing

Yamada Photo Process Co., Ltd.

Publication

Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum
(Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture)
Address: 8-36 Ueno-Koen, Taito-ku, 110-0007 Tokyo
TEL: +81(0)3-3823-6921

Published on July 20, 2018

This catalog is the first of a two-volume set on the exhibition. The second volume, titled *Gochisosama*, is scheduled for print in December 2018.

0

0

0