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Vanishing Taste: On the Sensual Experience of an Artwork

The aim of this article is to consider various aspects of taste experience in art. Since the 18th century “taste” had been an important issue in aesthetics, but only it was understood metaphorically, as an ability to recognise a beautiful object. Taste as one of the senses was not considered a subject appropriate for aesthetic reflection. Carolyn Korsmeyer (2002) wrote about various reasons that led to this exclusion. The sense of taste was thought to be too subjective to become a suitable matter for philosophical inquiry. Moreover, its bodily, physiological aspect was a major drawback that made it seem inadequate as a part of artistic experience. Food was not perceived as a proper artistic medium, since it was linked with biological needs and therefore could not meet the requirements of disinterested judgment that was central to Kantian aesthetics. The idea of hierarchy of senses is deeply rooted in European philosophy and culture, and it shaped the aesthetic discourse in which only vision and hearing were defined as aesthetic senses (Korsmeyer, 2002: 11–12). The senses of taste, smell, and touch were considered animalistic and even primitive and thus they were not appreciated. Taste was condemned for epistemological and moral reasons, as well. Kant (1996) divided the senses into objective (touch, hearing, sight) and subjective (taste and smell); he argued that the latter “are more subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object” (41). The philosopher neglected the epistemological potential of the lower senses. Mark M. Smith (2007) emphasised the moral aspect of taste, as it was believed that it had to be disciplined, because the indulgence in taste-related pleasures could lead to the sin of gluttony. Reasons listed above led to the longterm exclusion of taste from the scope of interest of aesthetics.

Nowadays, scientist and philosophers recognise the complexity and value of taste. With the growing interest in food, investigated in the context of both social practice and scientific research, taste becomes a prominent topic. Karen Grøn (2017: 7) noticed that “using food, we can comment on particularly anything: social problems, cultural habits, our identities, our understanding of nature, setting

boundaries, our sensibilities and our visions of the future.” This interest can also be observed in the art world, as more and more artists look at food and eating as “sapid” topics.

This article concentrates on various aspects that are related to the presence of taste in art: its multisensory properties, ability to communicate various meanings, ephemerality, its emotional aspect and potential to evoke memories. I would like to address all those issues to reflect on why and how artists engage taste in their projects and how it changes the way we perceive an artwork.

For ages food was an important motif in art and it was often saturated with religious and/or symbolic meaning. Obviously, the actual taste experience was absent from artistic representations of food (but it does not mean that artists did not attempt to visually represent taste). With the emergence of avant-garde movements, food actually started to be present as an artistic medium and used in performance art (Bottinelli, D’Ayala Valva, 2017). The avant-garde developed an interest in food but also in eating, where taste was taken into consideration as an element of engaging with an artwork. The rising numbers of artists who engage in food art and use food as a medium of their artworks proves that it is important to reflect on how taste is experienced.

One of the most important aspects connected with the use of real food products as an artistic medium is that experiencing art becomes multisensory. Food and eating engage various senses – taste, smell, touch, sight and even hearing. Barry C. Smith (2017: 62) described this complexity of taste as follows:

We don’t just taste with the tongue. What we call tasting is always a combination of touch, taste and smell: the texture and temperature of food in the mouth, the aromas reaching the nose from the plate and from the mouth all add to the taste sensations on the tongue. The brain has to weigh and integrate all these factors in order to arrive at single, unified perception of flavour.

This way, Smith emphasises the role of various senses in taste experience. For instance, the sight of the meal contributes to its taste; also the feeling of the texture of the food is important. Even sound can affect taste. This aspect was present, for instance, in Heston Blumenthal’s famous dish, *Sound of the Sea*. In our everyday experience we do not often reflect upon our taste experience and its complexity. Nevertheless, taste is not a simple physiological act, it is shaped by various factors. The fundamental aspect of taste experience is also its connection with smell. The relation between those two senses is so essential that it is impossible to perceive flavour if the perception of smell is somehow disrupted.

Martin Yeomans (2008, see: Smith, 2017: 63) claims that “multi-sensory integration may be at its most extreme in the case of the flavour perception, since few other experiences offer opportunity for concomitant stimulation of all major senses.” The multisensory aspect of taste is a rich field of inspiration for artists. For instance, Australian artist Jo Burzynska experiments with wine and sound, as she tries to study how different tones affect the taste of alcohol. Multisensory qualities

of food were also very important for the Futurists. For Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (2014) cuisine was one of the crucial elements of the futurist utopian project in which the fundamental feature was the creation of a “new human.” The future lifestyle of new Italians required agile and slim bodies, and this was to be achieved with novel, light diet. Therefore, food became one of key issues in futurist writings and art. In the famous manifesto of futurist cooking, Marinetti (2014) condemned the Italian predilection for eating pasta, as he believed this particular food product made them slow and lazy. The futurist interest in cuisine resulted in the opening of the first artistic restaurant, *The Holy Palate*, in Turin. This place quickly became the centre of culinary experiments. Most of the futurist experiments were aimed to astonish restaurant visitors. Reading the famous futurist cookbook one may discover that playing with the senses was one of the key features of futurist cuisine. For instance, Marinetti or Fillia (2014) proposed dinners during which no food was actually eaten. Instead of being consumed, food products were only touched or smelled. Futurists were well aware of the multisensory aspects of eating and of how the whole environment and setting affect the experience of food and taste. Therefore, for instance, in *Tactile Dinner Party*, Fillia proposed to concentrate on the haptic aspects of the feast. Waiters served salad without cutlery, so that the diners had to touch it; the meal was also accompanied by music. Futurists fully acknowledged that surroundings affect the taste experience so they concentrated not only on meals themselves but also on everything that went with them. The taste itself was also important in Marinetti’s vision of the cuisine of the future. Marinetti (2014: 35) proposed the “abolition of traditional mixtures in favour of experimentation with new, apparently absurd, mixtures” and the abolition of “everyday mediocrity from the pleasures of the palate”. For Futurists, taste had an important social and even political meaning, and the new cuisine was a key aspect of their vision of the future society.

After Futurists, more and more artists became interested in cuisine as art and they launched their own restaurants (for instance, Gordon Matta-Clark and Daniel Spoerri). There are many artworks and performances in which artists use food products. But it is important to indicate that not every artwork or project that uses food concentrates on taste. Many artists focus on the social and relational aspects of eating and they use food to create a certain social situation. For example, in her performances, Elżbieta Jabłońska prepared simple meals for the audience. For her, the communal aspect of food and the bonds that are created when people gather to eat together were crucial, for which reason actual taste of prepared dishes did not convey any particular meaning. In such projects, the consumption of food and the “disappearance” of taste is not an obstacle that a researcher has to face during analysis. Similarly, taste is not a significant issue when an artwork is only made of food products, but it is not destined to be eaten, so the actual taste experience is absent (for example, Kijewski/Kocur’s sculptures made of jellies and sweets).

However, there are artists for whom, just like for Futurists, flavour is a very important aspect of their projects. For instance, in the works by Anna Królikiewicz,

taste is fundamental. She often concentrates on physiology of taste perception and creates unusual and surprising taste experiences. Królikiewicz uses taste and smell (which is in some cases inseparably linked with taste sensation) experiences to create narratives about memory, loss and longing. In her work, *Flesh Flavour Frost*, she treated the audience with ice cream whose flavour was to resemble the taste of human body. With the addition of cumin, she wanted to create an aroma that brings to mind the smell of human skin on a sunny day. As artist recalls she used also “Japanese tofu, almond milk, smoked salt, birch-tree juice and black truffles” (Stronciwilk: 2018) because of their biological-like smell. Królikiewicz also spoke about the response of the audience, most of the members of the audience seemed to enjoy the taste, although it was unusual. Only two persons reacted with the disgust response, however the response did not occur during the tasting but afterwards when artist revealed to them that the taste was thought to resemble the taste one feels when their tongue comes in the contact with human skin. This example proves that the disgust reaction is not only physiological but often it is based on cultural associations. In this case it was not the taste itself that was perceived as disgusting but the idea that it resembles the taste of human body. The concept of transgressing one of the most powerful food taboo – the anthropophagy became the source of repulsion.

Deborah Lupton argued that tastes are strongly connected with emotions as she wrote that “there is particularly strong link between senses of taste and smell and the emotional dimensions of human experience” (1996: 31). This is another reason which makes tastes an inspiring artistic medium. Tastes are often linked with very intimate and personal memories. Also, our response to taste sensation is very direct and immediate. *Flesh Flavour Frost* is an emotional narrative about loss, absence, and longing, since the work she created was a response to the absence of a particular body. In Królikiewicz’s projects, taste experience is linked with place, memory and emotions. It is especially visible in her projects in which she works with the memory of a certain place by creating smells and tastes that are in various ways connected with the history of the site (e.g. *Drugstore*, *Absolutes*). For instance, her work *Drugstore* (2012) was placed in a closed shop in Gdańsk which once offered soaps, perfumes and cosmetics (often with oriental provenance). In *Drugstore* Królikiewicz prepared a special set of sweets – cakes, muffins to which she added a distinctive aroma of patchouli and lavender. Therefore, Królikiewicz created a scent and taste based experience which was a reference to the history of the site. The members of the audience were experiencing the presence of the past through their bodies and sensory stimulus. Interestingly, artist concentrated on her own olfactory memory, translated it to tastes and scents and allowed others to participate in it. Also in this case Królikiewicz recalls that some members of the audience considered the “sweets” she prepared inedible, especially the strong patchouli flavour was something they described as repulsive (Stronciwilk: 2018). Nicola Perullo (2017) tried to discuss the issue of relation between cuisine and art. Perullo describes various aspects of cuisine considered as an artform, for him the cuisine is

an art of joy and pleasure – therefore he does not see a possibility of creating deliberately distasteful or repulsive dishes:

Now, if in contemporary art one can research expressions that provoke disturbing feelings in the viewer that are distressing and shocking, the same is not possible for cuisine for theoretical reasons. [...] This expressive limit in cuisine has often been used as an objection to its artistic possibilities (Perullo: 2017: 37).

Artists who refer to cuisine are not constrained by such limitations; therefore, they can often experiment with taste(s) in wider aspect than chefs. For Perullo, the pleasure of the eater lies in the core of the cuisine, even if it is creative and experimental. Examples of works by Królikiewicz show that artists are more open to experiment with tastes which are not pleasant, as for them the expressive aspect of taste is more important than the comfort of the “viewer” (or rather eater). Interestingly this creates a different, new and fresh space for gastronomical inquiry – art is a space where the cultural and social boundaries of taste can be examined.

The fact that taste is intertwined with memory is another key aspect of flavour that makes it a fascinating medium for artists. The famous “Proust effect” refers to olfactory memory and ability of smells and tastes to evoke memories. Scientists prove that such memories are different from those evoked by words or images, they are more emotional, long lasting and they are often connected with early stages of life (Chu, Downes, 2000).

Jennifer Fisher indicated that situations that involve “eating art” are both “ephemeral (they can’t last) and contextual (they present edibles in a particular situation)” (1999: 39). This ephemeral and contextual aspect is clearly visible in the works of Królikiewicz, which are often designed for a particular place. Many of Królikiewicz’s artworks are narratives about memory and how sensory experience is intertwined with embodied memory. Consequently, she also allows her objects and installations to become only a memory in the minds and bodies of those who experienced them.

Ephemerality is a persistent aspect of contemporary art practices. With the development of Conceptualism, dematerialisation of the art object has become one of the most significant aspects of artistic production. Also, performance artists accustomed the audience to the momentous and ephemeral ontology of art. Many contemporary artists use non-permanent materials, while decomposition of the artwork becomes an important aspect of its meaning. When artists decide to use food products as a material for an artwork, it becomes almost inseparably linked with ephemerality. I would like to emphasise the difference between art that uses food and an artwork that is actually edible. I believe that there is a significant difference between the ephemerality of an artwork that can be documented/photographed and an edible artwork that is based on taste experience. For instance, it is easier to reconstruct and analyse performance pieces that are mostly visual than performance art that focuses on taste sensation. In the latter case, taste is a medium for the meaning –flavour carries and evokes memories and emotions. The

crucial aspect of this kind of sensory artworks is presence, as they can be perceived only with the actual presence of the viewer. They cannot be transmitted, recorded or photographed, or, more precisely, documentation of this type does not tell anything about the essence of the artwork, which lies in the direct and embodied sensory experience. Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) noted that an actual experience of performance requires that the viewer is present at the site where it takes place (32). Still, watching a recorded performance can give us some insight into its meanings and how it was conducted, even if it does not mean that doing so we can fully experience it. However, it is different in the case of edible artworks where taste, touch and smell experiences define their essence. Sensory experiences cannot be recorded or transmitted, therefore photographs of Królikiewicz's installations, for instance, are almost absolutely useless for the researcher. Of course, visual aspect is also important for her, and photographs can give us some idea about what her artworks looked like, but it is taste that is crucial and therefore visual information is insufficient to provide the insight into the meaning of the artwork. Unlike with traditional, visual artworks (for instance painting), one cannot go to a gallery or museum to perceive the artwork, as it usually no longer exists.

It might seem that the only way to somehow preserve a taste-based artwork is to collect recipes, but Królikiewicz does not reconstruct her artworks or installations. They are often site-specific and they are linked with the memory of a particular place, so they cannot be recreated in other conditions. Moreover, what is very important is that following the recipe does not guarantee recreating the exact taste. What is particularly difficult in reconstructing taste is that taste itself is affected by many factors. Therefore, even the same ingredients in the same amount will not produce exactly the same taste, as the quality or *terroir* of ingredients may vary. Even though collecting recipes does, unavoidably, contain the risk of imperfection of reconstructed works, still it could be one of the important ways of documenting food art. However, not every artist would be eager to share their recipe, as they do not accept it as a form of preservation of their art. What is more, food art often concentrates not only on what is eaten but also how, where and with whom, just like it was in the case of futurist banquets.

Królikiewicz's artworks are mainly documented with photographs and descriptions. However, what seems the most important for her is not the object but the experience. Food-based art completely blurs the distinction between the subject and the object, as the artwork is incorporated into the body of the viewer. It might almost seem that experiencing the artwork is inseparably connected with its destruction. Yet the main aspect of those artworks is the sensory experience itself, not the edible object. Therefore, Królikiewicz accepts the consequences of creating sensory and ephemeral artworks: since they cannot become a part of museum collection, they cannot be collected or preserved. What remains from her artworks are often only leftovers – both in literal and metaphorical sense. Metaphorically, those leftovers are memories, narratives and photographs that can only give a glimpse of the actual artwork.

As in any sensory experience, taste vanishes when the stimulus is no longer present. This aspect concerns every sensory experience, even visual and auidial, but I believe that in case of experiencing smell or taste, documentation and reconstruction becomes especially difficult. But what is also crucial is that perhaps some of those artworks do not require such attempts, as artists accept the ephemerality and vanishing of taste. The desire to preserve the object is somehow typical for an art historian, or museologist. However, conceptual art made us accustomed to the fact that the object is not fundamental. We accepted the fact that ideas and concepts are equally important and thus they can be preserved, regardless of the existence of the object. But in case of some food-based artworks it is the bodily experience that is crucial, not only the concept that lies behind it. Very often, the sensory experience of taste cannot be repeated or reconstructed. This is also because taste experience cannot be separated from the subject who experiences it.

Jim Drobnick (1998) wrote about olfactory dimension in contemporary art, but his writings can also be referred to taste sensations, as those senses are strongly linked. In this context, Drobnick mentions (1998) “the difficulty of writing about volatile, ephemeral works”; he also points out the “general indifference towards artistic production that resists categorisation as enduring (and marketable) visual objects.” He also emphasises the tradition of reduction of sensuous stimuli in the space of “white cube.” The gallery space was thought to be devoid of any “unnecessary” sensuous stimuli. The experience of an artwork was considered purely intellectual, and the body remained absent.

The lack of vocabulary used to describe taste and smell experiences makes it even more difficult to reconstruct that kind of experience. Therefore, a researcher who tries to describe a food-based artwork often faces major difficulties. The abundance of taste sensations one experiences are produced from only four types of tastes: salty, sour, sweet and bitter (McLaughlin, Margolskee, 1994). Even if the fifth taste – umami is added, still it is difficult to describe the complexity of this sensation with such limited vocabulary. It seems reasonable that when studying food art, a researcher should “borrow” vocabulary from gastronomy and chefs, since artists who use food often experiment with various gastronomic techniques. It can be seen that nowadays researchers struggle with the description and analysis of food- and scent-based artworks. The language of art history is almost purely visual, so a significant amount of vocabulary of the discipline is not useful in describing artistic projects that focus on taste. Drobnick (1998) emphasised an immediate aspect of such artworks stating that “in culture heavily dependent on images and texts as the means by which to access art, the privileging of presence serves an effective counterpoint”.

The fact that the taste or smell experience is difficult to verbalise can also be understood as a way artists want to avoid the textual reading of an artwork. Therefore, the problems which appear with the description of taste-based artworks should not perhaps be perceived as a kind of drawback, but rather as an important aspect of these artworks. Artists try to create different and very direct way of

experiencing art which requires not only the presence of a viewer in a certain place and time but also their opening for the radical proximity and incorporating the artwork inside one's body. The artwork is experienced **inside** the body. It cannot be perceived as an outside object. To not incorporate it is to miss its full significance. It reveals its meanings only when it is eaten and tasted. This could be challenging, as artists sometimes propose tastes that are surprising, not evident and even not pleasant.

In many examples of food art, the bodily experience is more important than the verbal interpretation of the artwork, which often reveals the insufficiency of language to describe the experience of taste. However, it is also crucial to highlight the fact that taste experience can still convey meanings even if they are difficult to verbalise.

A sensuous experience of an artwork becomes very intimate and personal, but on the other hand, tastes and aromas can communicate meanings and emotions because they have cultural and social dimension. An actual experience of taste will be different with every individual, but sensory experiences are also deeply rooted and shaped by culture. In some cases, artists refer to almost universal taste dislikes or preferences to evoke certain reactions, memories or emotions. For instance, in Królikiewicz's *Tear Flavoured Ice-cream*, the bitterness of the ice-cream is a way to convey its meaning related to bitter emotions. The taste of the ice-cream was a bit unpleasant, as the dislike of bitter taste is almost universal. Researchers indicated that bitter taste often signals poisonous food (Rozin et. al., 2006). Consequently, people have a tendency to avoid it, and it often triggers their disgust. Another almost universal tendency is the liking of sweet flavour. Those almost universal aspects of tastes can be used by artists to elicit certain emotions or reactions. But most food artworks are based on more nuanced taste experiences. For instance, *Tear Flavoured Ice-cream* consisted of not only bitterness but also a salty aftertaste of a tear and an addition of a sweet flavour. Therefore, they reflected contrasting emotions what can be read in the context of the Black Protest, since the *She-Gastronomes* exhibition during which they were sold was linked with it. This example proves that tastes can have critical and political meaning, as well.

Flavours can communicate various meanings because we exist in particular culture and we are accustomed to dominant taste preferences. This aspect was visible in Oskar Dawicki's performance piece, *The Treatise on the Anatomy of Bad Taste* (2011). Every dish he proposed with an anthropologist Ryan Bromley during the performance was edible, but taste combinations were so unusual that the feast became somehow unpleasant for the diners. Bromley (2016: 26–27) recalls that he

conceived and developed a menu of canapes which were aesthetically pleasing, yet which were subtly distasteful. An example was a truffle made of 100% chocolate, which is bitter and cloying, with finely diced pith from a grapefruit rolled within the chocolate so if the participant was to try to replace the bitter-cloying flavour of the chocolate truffle, they would find it instead heightened by a salty panna cotta with mildly fermented berries.

The only drink available during the feast was meat infused vodka; although meat and vodka are very often consumed together, combined in one liquor they created an unusual and even unpleasant taste. In the video-documentation of the performance Dawicki raises the toast with this special drink, and it is visible that it is difficult for him to swallow as he starts to expectorate. The important aspect of the project was the contrast between the plausible visual presentation of the food and its unusual, disturbing tastes.

Dawicki's performance was an experiment in which taste preferences were examined. The dual meaning of "taste," as an aesthetic category and as a sense, seems crucial for this performance, which can be read as a word game with these two meanings. But the reason why Dawicki's feast could affect the audience in certain way is because of the cultural aspect of taste. Therefore, even if absolutely edible, some taste combinations are perceived as inadequate or even disgusting. Dawicki's performance raised the question about the standards of taste – both in the context of art and food. The visitors, faced with "distasteful" dishes, did not behave as they would have behaved had it been an ordinary everyday situation, because rather than rejecting the food, they started consuming it. Bromley (2016: 27) wrote: "Rather than following their biological signals to reject the distasteful food the audience began instead to celebrate the violation of this chemical safeguard. Culture trumped physiology as a cultured audience celebrated the violation of their bodies and descended together towards the boundary between their cultured and bestial natures."

The performative space became a laboratory in which each individual experimented with neglected taste sensations as well as with their own and cultural taste restrictions. Dorota Koczanowicz (2018: 329) states that the complexity of sensory perception lies in the fact that on the one side the senses are a source of "subjective experience but at the same time private feeling is a subject of cultural and social conditioning." The experience of taste is both extremely private and socially shared. Priscilla Ferguson argued that taste is the most singular of all the senses and that "tasting subject requires heightened intimacy with the taste object defined by corporeality and ephemerality" (Ferguson, 2011: 371). She writes about "egoism" of taste, as in the strictest sense no one can taste the same object at the same time as someone else. But taste is shared in other ways, as "every culture works to counter the physiological singularity of food" (Ibid.). Ferguson mentions such social practices as "samplings that extrapolate from the tasting of a dish, language that communicates tastes; and a focus on the common gustatory space of the meal." The same concerns food art, where tastes can be perceived individually by various individuals but also shared when they communicate and discuss their sensations. Individual dislikes (or preferences) and food avoidances do not exclude the existence of shared taste associations.

Examples discussed above prove that taste experience is both ephemeral and persistent. Tastes often carry with them certain meanings, associations and emotions. But those meanings are even more difficult to grasp than in the case of visual

artworks. Tastes and smells do not have codified meanings, they do not have fixed symbolism, but it does not mean that they cannot be used to communicate a message or form a statement. Drobnick (1998) wrote that: “these meanings may vary considerably from context to context, from community to community, smell factors prominently in acts of memory, social affinity and definitions of place, character, mood” and this can also be referred to taste. As in many cases in which artworks are edible, taste itself disappears with the consumption of the artwork. But again, very often it is not the food itself that is crucial, but the whole situation around it – the space, surroundings etc.

The stories created by tastes are contextual, unobvious and not everyone will be able to “read” them. But even when the meaning of the taste remains unclear, what is always present is the bodily sensation – pleasant, disturbing, thought provoking, surprising, etc. When experiencing art pieces of this kind the audience experiences the object and their bodily reactions at the same time. The body and art become inseparably linked and intertwined in a complex, multisensory taste sensation. Some artistic works of this type can therefore be referred to Richard Shusterman’s project of somaesthetics. The philosopher wrote about reflective and heightened somatic self-awareness emphasising that “intensified body consciousness need not disrupt but rather can improve our perception of and engagement with the outside world by improving our use of the self that is the fundamental instrument of all perception and action” (2008: 8). Artistic projects that focus on sensory experience can often raise the awareness of bodily sensations among members of the audience. As they engage with unfamiliar and novel tastes, they might reflect on the taste experience itself.

What makes tastes so appealing for artists is their ephemerality, the fact that they engage the body and blur the distance between the subject and the object. This is a different way of experiencing the artwork, as it has to be incorporated into one’s body. Focusing on tastes and smells opens up the possibilities of non-verbal and non-pictorial communication. It might seem that aspects of food art that are most challenging for the researcher are the same that make it so exceptional and fascinating. Also, regardless of whether the art historian accepts it or not, the fact of vanishing of taste often lies in the core of food art projects and it supplements their meaning.

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Abstract

The main aim of the article is to analyse the uniqueness of taste experience and its presence in contemporary art. Ephemerality of the sensual experience becomes an important challenge for researchers, art historians, and conservators. The article concentrates on the various aspects of experiencing taste, its place in aesthetics and different ways in which artists engage this sense in their works. The analysis is focused on artworks and performances of two Polish artists: Anna Królikiewicz and Oskar Dawicki. What remains as the taste vanishes? How to "preserve" taste? Why contemporary artists concentrate on non-visual senses? Those are the main issues raised in the article.

Keywords: taste, aesthetics, food art, Anna Królikiewicz, Oskar Dawicki, senses in art

Słowa kluczowe: smak, estetyka, jedzenie w sztuce, Anna Królikiewicz, Oskar Dawicki, zmysły w sztuce

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