



Art and food have been happy bedfellows from the days of Zeuxis, the 5th-century Greek painter whose depiction of grapes appeared real enough for the birds, to Marinetti's celebratory *Futurist Cookbook*. More recently, we have seen artists create community-orientated projects that use food as the focus, suggesting a move out of the gallery and back to the land

If you were to try to determine a useful entry point of food into Western art, you might look back to Leonardo da Vinci's late 15th-century *Last Supper* mural, or to the 16th-century Milanese court portraitist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose ingenious composite 'produce paintings' of royal patrons were prized for their novelty. Or maybe to the moment in the 17th century when artists could make a living painting nothing but over-abundant table-top spreads. This was also a time when court artists and designers were recruited to make elaborate sculptures formed of sugar and other edibles, signifying military prowess and political and social prestige. A sugar bust of Napoleon might loom from behind a platter of *entrecôte*, or peer at you from the other side of a tower of *foie gras*.

## The Palate, the Palette and the Planet

by Fanny Singer

At the beginning of the 20th century food emerged as the centrepiece of a very different kind of artistic practice in Italy. Launched in 1909, futurism aimed to bury staid traditions in favour of embracing the dynamism of new industrial technologies. FT Marinetti, the movement's founder, was possessed of a reorganising mania that extended across all activities, including gastronomy. In 1930 he published a *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking*, which elaborated a new vision for the Italian table. Pasta, for example, would be banned (for its contribution to lassitude and reduced passion); the knife and fork, too, would be abolished; and sculpted and transfigured foods would replace simpler, unmanipulated fare. Its guiding ethos was not unlike that behind the cuisine of early 21st-century 'molecular gastronomy', made famous by celebrity chefs such as Ferran Adrià. And even here the art and food worlds become cross-pollinated: Adrià saw his work temporarily assimilated into the sphere of high art when his restaurant, elBulli, was included in Documenta 12 as a remote pavilion, drawing two diners daily from Kassel, Germany.

Though the Italian futurists conceived a great number of antagonistic proposals designed to catalyse and provoke the public, their commitment to integrating food into their activities was far from superficial. They even went so far as to open a restaurant, named Taverna del Santopalato (Restaurant of the Holy Palate), in Milan. It became the venue for numerous experimental banquets and eventually gave birth to *The Futurist Cookbook*, published in 1932. Guests were served dishes with absurdist titles such as 'a rain of cotton candy' and 'broth of rose and the sun' meant to realign expectations of what could be considered food, or, more broadly, what *might* be considered art.



Facing page: Documentation of the performance *I Eat You Eat Me* by Mella Jaarsma in Jakarta, 2012, also performed in *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* at Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2012



The futurist table: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and friends, 1931

Tom Marioni's *Café Society* at Breens Bar, below the Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco, 1979 (from left, Howard Fried, Mary Hellman, her dog, David Ireland)

Scholars of the burgeoning – and heterogeneous – field of 'art and food' have often positioned the futurists as a useful point of origin. The University of Chicago Smart Museum's 2012 exhibition *Feast*, for example, attempted to contextualise a broad survey of food-related projects, both historical and contemporary. In fact, its curator, Stephanie Smith, credited the futurists' envelope-pushing dinners as the germ of inspiration for the show. Its aim was to feature the work of artists or collectives who had 'transformed the shared meal into a compelling artistic medium' – a generously elastic theme.

Among the works exhibited were Fluxus pioneer Alison Knowles's *Identical Lunch*, an ongoing performance initiated in the late 1960s and born of her daily habit of eating a tuna fish sandwich with a cup of soup or glass of buttermilk, and Bay Area conceptualist Tom Marioni's *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, an informal 'drinking club' begun in 1970 and still often hosted at his studio, in which a bar is conveniently installed. There was also a display of archival material from Gordon Matta-Clark's *FOOD*, an experimental restaurant opened in New York's SoHo neighbourhood in 1971 and re-created at Frieze Art Fair New York in 2013 as part of 'Frieze Projects'.

These were shown alongside more recent and far more politically charged works such as Chicago-based Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen (Food Truck)* of 2012, from which the artist of Iraqi-Jewish descent presented Iraqi cuisine on paper reproductions of plates looted from Saddam





Iraqi refugees and American war veterans who operate Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen (Food Truck)* 2004 – ongoing

Hussein's palace by US soldiers during the Iraq war – part of a continuing project begun in 2004 for which he compiles Baghdadi recipes and teaches them to different audiences, including war veterans and school children. In fellow Chicagoan Theaster Gates's incarnation of *Soul Pavilion*, a recent addition to his Dorchester Projects (a block of derelict South Side buildings converted into a community-centred cultural hub), guests were served a soul food meal intended to bring people together across race, class and culture, while a live soundtrack was provided by a group of musicians called the Black Monks of Mississippi, who later that year performed with Gates at Documenta 13.

But these projects barely scratch the surface of what has been produced internationally within the ambit of food-focused art in the past 10 years.

The Flatbread Society at IASPIS, Stockholm, 2012, from a project by Amy Franceschini



The amount of programming in art institutions that is centred explicitly on food has likewise increased exponentially. A number of factors have probably contributed to this: a need to satisfy visitor quotas with more convivial content; to appear to be warmer, more welcoming community destinations; to create more interactive displays in line with education-dependent funding; and, perhaps most cynically, to allow institutions to 'greenwash' themselves by reflecting back the politics of artist-activists more progressive than themselves. And then there are the spectacles aimed at attracting museum patronage. A universally lampooned example was the Marina Abramovic-orchestrated MOCA gala dinner in 2011 at which shirtless men carved into a naked life-size cake replica of the artist. Similarly catastrophic was Jennifer Rubell's *Creation*, a made-to-be-eaten installation conceived for Performa's opening celebration in 2009, at which moneyed donors and celebrities sipped champagne and plucked barbecued ribs from massive piles and cookies from gigantic vats – ideal fodder for the press, less 'food for thought'.

Though initiatives tackling the subject of food have wildly diverse ambitions, generally speaking there are two dominant strands. One operates within the legacy of the futurists, where food serves as a kind of medium (not in the sense of making tableaux out of pasta – although such a branch of mediocre art practice does exist – but rather art that tends to preference the meal as a format). The other emphasises the politics of food and so-called social practice or socially engaged art – referring to a wide range of artistic approaches designed to effect change both on micro and global levels. The past decade has seen a flourishing of enterprises defining



Artist Laure Prouvost participating in Karen Guthrie's *House of Ferment* at Borough Market, London, in 2015

themselves in this way, influenced by the 1970s strategies of artist-activists such as Suzanne Lacy, yet venturing beyond the gallery-walled confines of 1990s relational aesthetics-era experiments with conviviality (such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's ongoing 'pad Thai' meal-performances, begun in 1992). Contemporary practitioners have tended to move away from a commodity-based practice towards collaborative, reflexive and – at their best – genuinely impactful projects. Their 'medium' is the co-operation, coalition-building and mobilisation of invested publics and art audiences.

In London, Delfina Foundation is currently in the middle of a four-year programme whose theme is 'The Politics of Food'. The first season brought together dozens of artists, activists, anthropologists, chefs, curators, scientists and writers from around the world for a series of lectures, meals, residencies and exhibitions. The second is now underway and examines the 'connections between sex, diet, disasters and food in both historical and contemporary contexts'.

A recent exhibition there, *Stirring the Pot of Story: Food, History, Memory*, featured artists Leone Contini, Mella Jaarsma, Christine Mackey, Mounira Al Solh, Raul Ortega Ayala and the collective Cooking Sections. Coming from countries including Lebanon, Mexico and Indonesia, as well as western Europe, they produced a show that looked at the connection between power and the control of food. Coinciding with this more intimate investigation, curator Germano Celant has organised a splashy, big-budget exhibition, *Arts & Foods: Rituals since 1851* (until 15 November), in conjunction with the Milan Triennale. Claiming to investigate the 'multifaceted relationship between art and food' and how it manifests across artistic media, it is the largest show ever to have focused on the subject. Though it is set in the context of a universal exposition with the urgent theme of 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for

Life', Celant's inclusion of such tongue-in-cheek works as Dennis Oppenheim's *Sleeping Dogs* 1997 and Claes Oldenburg's *Leaning Fork with Meatball and Spaghetti II* 1994 suggests a pop-y, altogether unpolemical presentation.

In the Lake District, nestled in the hills above Coniston Water, sits Grizedale Arts, an organisation that runs a varied programme of events, projects, residencies and community activities. In so far as it stresses the potential for art and artists to adopt practical roles in effecting social change, the organisation has become a prominent player in the food-art-politics conversation. In July Grizedale, together with Science Gallery London, presented Karen Guthrie's *House of Ferment*, a pickle-based mobile installation devised to challenge our relationship to food and the future of its production and preservation. Meanwhile, in Stockholm, Maria Lind, director of Tensta konsthall, continues to work with former Grizedale resident artists, including Madrid-based Fernando García-Dory, to explore regional urban/rural friction within the context of long-term museum programming.

García-Dory might be best known for his ongoing *Shepherd's School*, launched in 2004, which adopts the practice of cheese-making in northern Spain as a scaled ecosystem to restore value to a marginalised culture, but another of his projects is the 'para-institution' INLAND. The subject of both a current exhibition at Turin's Parco Arte Vivente and a show at Utrecht's Casco, this organisation fuses art and farming as a way to expand creative thinking and sustain site-specific artistic practice – an initiative that chimed with Lind's ambition to investigate local discord following the disappearance of agricultural lands around Stockholm. While working in Tensta, García-Dory focused on Håsta Gärd (or Model Farm), an historical farm bordering the suburbs. He worked with Swedish artist Erik Sjödin to involve

A shepherd tutor and his pupil in 2008, from Fernando García-Dory's *A Shepherd's School as a Microkingdom of Utopia* 2004 – ongoing







Participants in a workshop at Homebaked, a Co-operative Bakery and Community Land Trust in Liverpool



Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estate #15* (before and after), commissioned by the Walker Art Center, 2013



local actors, Hästa farmers and cultural institutions in the process of 'situating crucial contemporary questions such as the role and function of arts, territorial transformations, biopolitical tensions, multidimensional crises, necessary transitions to sustainable models, troubled identities and imagined futures'.

While Hästa Gård did not prevail as a functioning community farm, there are a number of artists working in this vein whose aim, broadly speaking, is to focus attention around food production in places – predominantly urban – where a connection to the land has been lost. Among these is the California-based Fritz Haeg, who for the past ten years has been creating *Edible Estates*: gardens around the world designed to help to acquaint local communities with the notion of growing one's own food. In 2012 Haeg was commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial to create a similar type of long-term project. He seeded an edible and wild landscape in the city's contested Everton Park site, to be used by local residents as a means to 'reconcile a distant deep natural history and a more recent fraught social past'.

Amy Franceschini of the Bay Area artist collective Futurefarmers was also tangentially involved in the Liverpool festival when her Flatbread Society project moonlighted at Homebaked, the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk's biennial-commissioned community bakery in Anfield. Franceschini initially gained notoriety for her *Victory Gardens 2007–9*, the most visible feature of which was an edible demonstration garden planted in the square directly opposite San Francisco's City Hall. Her current project fuses some of the ideas behind *Victory Gardens* (to grow networks of farmers and home

gardeners) with the Flatbread Society, which was conceived to define 'the commons' of Bjørvika, a new waterfront development in Oslo, Norway. The site now contains a bakehouse and cultivated grain field, and has resulted in the formation of a parallel urban gardening community called Herligheten. The society aims to make it a 'permanent stage for art and action, as well as a shared resource revolving around urban food production and the preservation of the commons'.

The idea of permanence is likewise expressed in Jeremy Deller's *Speak To The Earth And It Will Tell You*, his ongoing concept devised in 2007 for the next instalment of Skulptur Projekte Münster, which convenes every 10 years. The artist asked local gardeners to keep nature diaries of their allotments, to be exhibited at the next Projekte in 2017.

That these initiatives have, at their core, a commitment over time would seem to indicate that artists are looking to move away from the white cube interiors of museums for a wander outside the institutional exhibition structure, whose demand for constant change provides little sustained support for long-term work. Food-focused projects that emphasise reconnecting with the land – and encourage local communities to do the same – reflect an increasing imperative to get out from under the shadow of the futurists and back to the future of the planet.

**GROW IT YOURSELF**, Parco Arte Vivente, Turin until 18 October. **The Politics of Food** season is at the Delfina Foundation.

Fanny Singer is a writer who lives in St Ives. She is researching a book on art and food.