

Pot Luck: Food and Art

Curated by Cynthia Morrison-Bell and Anthony Key. Organized by Art Circuit Touring Exhibitions. PM Gallery and House, London, October 23, 2009 – January 2, 2010. Also shown at The New Art Gallery Walsall, May 22 – July 19, 2009 and the Aberystwyth Arts Centre, July 29 – September 23, 2009.

Diana Yeh



Intentionally circumventing a historical survey or a contemporary “who’s who” approach to food in art, curators Cynthia Morrison-Bell and Anthony Key playfully conceived this exhibition as a spontaneous “pot luck” meal, by inviting a number of guest artists to bring a “dish” (or artwork) to the table. While a potentially risky venture, the intimate yet international gathering created an exciting and wide-ranging exhibition, which perhaps surprisingly for an exhibition on food offered no conventional feast for the senses but rather an opportunity to explore an impressive array of contemporary artistic, social, ethical, and political concerns.

Certainly works such as Gayle Chong Kwan’s *Cockaigne* (2004) foodscapes, Helen Chadwick’s *Meat Abstracts*

Diana Yeh is based in London. Her research lies in the interdisciplinary fields of art, ethnicity, and migration. She currently teaches at the University of East London and is a member of UEL’s Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging. dianayeh@mac.com

(1989), or Lia Anna Hennig's *Salamirain Salamidream* (2009) made use of the excess materiality of fleshy foods to provoke contradictory sensations of curiosity, desire, and repulsion. Yet, for the large part, the works on show steered clear of exploiting the obvious and immediate sensory powers of food. This was partly due to "pot luck": as a touring show, its incarnation at each venue differed. At Walsall, audiences were invited to sample snacks from a local Chinese restaurant, while Helen Chadwick's famous *Cacao* (1994) initially enticed and subsequently nauseated them with its ever lingering and increasingly suffocating presence (see Davies 2009). Still, even among the collection of artists' recipes solicited for the catalogue, Manuel Saiz gave instructions not on how to cook but on how to fast, while Han Bing offered tips for growing cabbage, where only a willingness for hard labor, a seed, sunshine, and rain were deemed necessary ingredients.

This asceticism perhaps reflects that, as Marko Daniel (2009) pointed out in the accompanying catalogue, the use of food in contemporary art seeks to mine less its sensory effects than its potential as a medium by which to explore interactions between people, and their relationships to the world. In a riposte to Kant's defense of aesthetics as a form of pure, disinterested pleasure, it seems that for many contemporary artists, aesthetic pleasure and sensual effects (rather than gratification) have become inseparable from ethical and political commitment. Certainly, the works in this exhibition demanded an expanded notion of the senses beyond the conventional Eurocentric five, which concepts such as *shentigan*—referring to more complex mind-body experiences not only of hunger and thirst, but also of hope and anxiousness—seem to offer (see Hsu 2008).

Mona Hatoum's beautifully economical *Grater Divide* (2002), for example, disrupts our bodily emplacement in the world by scaling up a humble kitchen utensil, the cheese-grater, to human-sized proportions. Set out like a folded screen, with its razor-sharp edges and punctured shafts and puckers reminiscent of intricate Islamic pattern-work, the work is visually stunning but physically intimidating. Whether evoking the sexual division of domestic labor or religious/ethnic conflicts over home, the work disrupts cozy associations of food as means of bringing people together with a steely architectural precision.

In a global context where hunger remains an intense source of human suffering, many of the works highlight food as an essential life force, and its shortage as extreme form of inequality and social division. In Antony Gormley's line of mouth-sized morsels of bread laid out on the ground, those on the *Bread Line* (1979) are ever at risk of being trodden on underfoot. In Han Bing's *Walking the Cabbage* (2000–present), films and video shots capture the artist's darkly absurdist performance interventions in tiny rural villages and sprawling cosmopolitan metropolises across the globe. Shot in a

Figure 1

Damien Hirst, *The Last Supper* (1999) and Antony Gormley, *Bread Line* (1979). Installation view. Photo: ©Suzie Maeder, courtesy Art Circuit Touring Exhibitions.



style where fashion photography meets tourist snapshots (both newly burgeoning interests among the rising classes in China) the artist poses not with a pampered pooch, a key symbol of new wealth, but a cabbage, still the life force of the majority of the nation's starving population. In Subodh Gupta's contribution, *Cheap Rice* (2006), a spindly rickshaw bulging with shiny brass pots promises plenty, but in fact highlights the plight of itinerant workers in urban India, who carry a society's spirituality (the pots are used to hold holy water) in return for a meager staple. Nearby, Lucy and Jorge Orta's recycled *Mexican Kitchen* (2002–2008) testify to the artists' projects of salvaging discarded fruit and vegetables from local markets and turning them into communal meals.

If in these works, a concern with food as a basic source of survival is privileged over its sensory pleasures, others evoke the deprivation and desensitization of the senses in contemporary life. In societies of plenty, the "sensuous logic of late capitalism," it seems, inoculates against pleasure (Howes 2005). In the arrestingly clean graphic lines of Damien Hirst's *The Last Supper* (1999), a series of thirteen lithographs mimicking pharmaceutical labels, a selection of working-class British fare – corned beef, eggs and chips, steak and kidney – is distilled to their purported chemical breakdown: chicken, for example, labeled "Concentrated Oral Solution Morphine Sulphate 20mg/ml." Here the fun, colorful eye-candy of commercial branding collides with a blind faith in multinational corporations; nutrition is met by food substitutes; old age and the inability to eat seem to prophesy the death of a culture.

The estrangement of the senses in contemporary life continues in Manuel Saiz's three film sequences, *Parallel Paradises* (2007). In



Figure 2
Mona Hatoum, *Grater Divide* (2002). Installation view. Photo: ©Suzie Maeder, courtesy Art Circuit Touring Exhibitions.

Ecuador, a llama stands hesitant in a silent supermarket, its twitching ears and flaring nostrils searching for a familiar sound or smell, as it gazes but cannot make sense of its brightly colored surroundings. While the timidity of the displaced creature imbues this piece with comic bathos, a much darker atmosphere pervades the two other intensely charged films. In one, a woman engages in a reverse process of shopping. From sitting alone at a table, in her bare, silent house, she packs shopping bags with food from her cupboards, drives to the supermarket, unloads her shopping into a trolley, and scans it at the check-out, before walking up and down the aisles, replacing each item in turn in the empty space in which it once sat. Job complete, she returns to her car, and collapses in tears. Neither practices of consumption nor abstinence, it seems, are able to rescue her. In another, a young woman, with junk food snacks of

Figure 3

Lucy and Jorge Orta, *HortiRecycling Mexican Kitchen* (2002–08) and Subodh Gupta, *Cheap Rice* (2006). Installation view. Photo: © Suzie Maeder, courtesy Art Circuit Touring Exhibitions.



sweets, crisps, and fizzy drinks tied to her clothes, wanders slowly and aimlessly through the top floor of an empty office building. One by one she detaches the snacks, takes a bite or swig before dropping the rest on the floor, barely registering her actions. By the end of the film, she huddles fetal on the floor among the detritus of litter and spills, her attempts perhaps to enliven her senses or quell an unknown thirst or hunger frustrated.

While these films seem to gesture to the anaestheticization of the senses in contemporary life, others point rather to their deception. In Karen Tam's *Miss Chinatown* (2009), a life-size re-creation of a Canadian Chinese restaurant, signs of Cathay in the twenty-first century are fabricated through architecture, décor and a collection of ubiquitous chintzy items – lanterns, lucky cats, and horoscope place mats. The allure of the exotic, however, is punctured by a behind-the-kitchen-door glimpse of the mundane process of making plum sauce from industrial-sized plastic vats of vinegar, water, and pumpkin. Yet, as this work suggests, such constructions of cultures have long and highly contested histories: on the cutesy pink walls, openly racist “Ching Chong Chinaman” advertisements for theatrical shows from the early twentieth century jostle with photographs of early restaurateurs and a video of an oral history narrative detailing the everyday life of an immigrant restaurant worker.

The economic necessity involved in manufacturing seductive versions of one's “own culture” continues in the nonchalant presence of Anthony Key's *Gold Mountain* (1997) at the foot of stairs. A palette of raw materials in the form of upturned takeaway boxes piled up like gold ingots captures the makeshift way in which food has become the building block of Chinese diasporas worldwide. Yet, in Gayle Chong Kwan's *Manipulated Memory Tasting Booth* (2006), the creative act of translating memory through the sensory experience

of eating derails simplistic notions of the consumption of cultures. At a cardboard cut-out pagoda, visitors are invited to eavesdrop on memories sparked by food. As speakers bite into a proffered Chinese spring roll, they may rather predictably taste distant lands, but also more curiously hear the crackling sound of death, or, ironically, find themselves re-embodiment a sense of Jewishness.

Like this work, the exhibition as a whole confounded expectations regarding the uses of food in art. By turn intriguing, challenging, and thought-provoking, it unfolded on a global scale the myriad of ways in which our relationship to food transcends the purely sensual and confronts us with the basic dilemmas of our existence. At a time when galleries, museums, and supermarkets seem intent on



Figure 4
Karen Tam, *Miss Chinatown*
(2009). Installation views.
Photo: ©Suzie Maeder,
courtesy Art Circuit Touring
Exhibitions.

bewitching the senses for profit or numbers, "Pot Luck" provided a stiller, leaner, space in which the potentiality of food is used rather to enable us to fully intuit the nature of the contemporary world and our place within it.

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