

SETTING THE AMERICAN TABLE

ESSAYS FOR THE NEW CULTURE OF FOOD AND WINE

BRÜCKMANN

COPIA | THE AMERICAN CENTER FOR WINE FOOD & THE ARTS

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THE INTERACTION OF PERFORMANCE ART PALLIATIVE PLEASURES

What we eat and drink has long been a favorite subject in art from early still life paintings to contemporary installation work and what is now known as performance art. The relationship between food and performance is not a recent development; the form has precedents dating as far back as Dionysian rituals, medieval pageantry and ritualized nineteenth-century banquets. For early twentieth-century avant-garde artists, food became part of their new “art-meets-life” aesthetics and a means to engage all of the viewers’ senses. More recent manifestations include the utilization of food as a material or subject in performances, which may range from small solo actions to large-scale spectacles.

Contemporary artists now actively “perform” with food, often using it to merge the practice of art with the experience of everyday life. Some artists focus on the task-oriented, theatrical nature of cooking and the ephemeral bodily process of eating. Others are interested in preparing and sharing meals with an audience, employing food and drink to evoke a sense of community or construct a social space. One may see the persistent link between food and performance as a continuing source of palliative pleasure.

FOOD AND

KAREN MOSS

I HORS D'OEUVRES APPETIZING
AVANT GARDE EXPERIMENTS

Like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else

Into one deep and shadowy unison

As limited as darkness and as day.

The sound, the scenes, the colours correspond.

BAUDELAIRE “Correspondences. *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857

Charles Baudelaire, viewed by many as the first modernist poet, wrote about the correspondences between art and nature, especially those located in the realm of the senses. His poem “Correspondences,” whose title refers to a musical term describing the synthesis between words and their musical effects, blends images of sights and sounds, tastes

and smells, as the aural and the visual conflate "into one deep and shadowy unison," known as *synesthesia*. Influenced by Baudelaire, the fin-de-siècle symbolist writers and painters combined poetry, theater, and music with visual art to evoke different sensory experiences. Reacting against naturalism, science, and late nineteenth-century positivism, their artistic and literary works emphasized ideas rather than ideals. As upheld by the Aesthetes and the Decadents, the highly refined symbolism sensibility favored the exotic, the erotic, the macabre and the morbid.

It is no surprise that food—a beautiful commodity subject to decay—figured prominently in the symbolists' activities. The Belgian symbolist group les XX, "The Twenty," formed at the Guillaume Tavernne in Brussels, organized

international exhibitions, recitals, and conferences, accompanied by gastronomic fare. A French group named the Nabis, the Hebrew word for "prophets," adopted special modes of dress and emulated ancient ceremonies and secret rituals at monthly banquets held at an artist's apartment or a restaurant. A well-known account of a symbolist event is the description of "black banquet" in Joris-Karl (J.K.) Huysmans's symbolist novel, *Au Rebours* (Against the Grain) of 1884:

The dinner itself was served on a black cloth, decorated with baskets of violets and scabiosae and illuminated by candelabra in which tall tapers flared. The viands were served on black-bordered plates—turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mule steaks, Frankfurt smoked sausages, game dishd up in sauces coloured to resemble liquorice water and boot-blacking, truffles in jelly, chocolate-tinted creams, puddings, nettarines, fruit preserves, mulberries and cherries. The wines were drunk from dark-tinted glasses—wines of the Limagne and Roussillon vintages, wines of Tenedos, the Val de Penas and Oporto. After the coffee and walnuts came other unusual beverages, kwas, porter and stout...

This lavish display of dark-hued exotic food and drink is described by the novel's infamous protagonist, des Esseintes, a dandy and decadent gourmand who has clinical synesthesia, the ability to "taste" colors or "feel" sound. The lurid detail of this fictional

account provides a thumbnail description of how the symbolists performed their aesthetics in highly codified rituals at the banquet table.

The Italian futurists of the early twentieth century admired these symbolist predecessors but rejected their grandiose ceremonies as decadent detritus of the outmoded nineteenth century. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti issued the first futurist manifesto in 1909 calling for *sintesi arte-vita*, a radical synthesis of art and life to reflect the speed and progress of the new century.

In 1930, during the second wave of Italian futurism, Marinetti wrote the *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking* and also authored the *Futurist Cookbook* with painter Luigi Colombo Fillia. The cookbook parodied everything that Italians revered: the dinner table, good taste, great recipes, even pasta. Proposing the use of food as a raw material for art and avant-garde experiments, it featured recipes for meals, food sculptures, and thematic banquets and also prompted the establishment of a futurist kitchen to serve experimental foods to the public. The Holy Palate Restaurant opened in Turin in March 1931; its First Futurist Dinner featured Intuitive Antipasto, Sunshine Soup, Sculpted Meat, and Elasticake—edible dishes presented in odd combinations and highly unusual shapes. The futurists staged elaborate culinary events based on recipes in the cookbook, including a fourteen-course meal with music and dancing between courses at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris, also in 1938. Other events extended beyond the gustatory: The Extremist Banquet presented food sculptures equipped with vaporizers emitting different odors, while diners at The Tactile Dinner Party wore pajamas, sat in

a dark room and buried their faces in salads while holding different everyday objects, listening to music or smelling perfumes. These futurist performances transformed the function of food from mere sustenance and the process of eating into an interactive, multi-sensory aesthetic experience.

Beginning in the 1920s the surrealists moved from the sensory to the sensual, as they explored the relationship of oral pleasure to both eating and eroticism. There is no single definitive text on surrealist food, but Salvador Dalí's cookbook, *Les Diners des Galá*, named for his wife, includes illustrations of menus from such restaurants as Maxim's and la Tour d'Argent and recipes by their chefs. In this personal manifesto of "gastronomical theology," Dalí revels in the visceral, ritualistic pleasures of food, equating it

2 ENTRÉE MAIN COURSES OF POSTWAR PERFORMANCE

with transubstantiation and sex. The *Spring Banquet*, hosted by female surrealist Meret Oppenheim in April 1959, was a live performance expressing the connections between food and sex.

During the course of the event three couples took part in a “fertility feast” of wood anemones served on the body of a live nude woman. André Breton asked Oppenheim to restage this piece for the Exposition internationale d’Art Surréaliste (EROS) the following year, and this time a female mannequin, a non-living surrogate, was covered with fruits and nuts and silverware was provided for the participants. Clearly the product of a pre-feminist era, the *Spring Banquet* underscored our persistent desire for food and sex, as the woman’s body becomes a site of consumption performed by the audience.

After the postwar economic boom, artists began to explore the idea of food as both a sign of commodity and in relation to our own corporeality. The presentation and consumption of food was integral to the environments, activities, and *Happenings* created and named by artist Alan Kaprow in 1959. Kaprow created recipe-like instructions directing audiences to interact with static objects or environments, transforming his artwork into live events or “happenings” that blurred the distinctions between art and everyday life. In the early 1960s, artists associated with Fluxus, a loosely affiliated international group of musicians, poets and visual artists, wrote compositions or scores for simple performances called “events,” which also focused on the actions of the body and everyday experience. *Happenings* and Fluxus events often took place outside galleries and used food to emphasize the ephemeral action of eating and bodily functions.

In Kaprow’s environment *Apple Shrine*, spectators could choose to eat a real or fake apple; his 1962 *Eat* featured menus with different food selections. In *Household*, a sequence of events held in a city dump in Ithaca in 1964, Kaprow instructed men to apply jam to an old car, which was then licked off by a group of women. Contrasting the opposing forces of male/female, eating/sex, food/garbage, and consumption/elimination, in this event the artist’s instructions served as both a recipe for and record of the participants’ actions.

Fluxus artists used recipe-like scores to structure simple, everyday activities as well as larger communal events. Alison Knowles’s *Making a Salad*, an event consisting of



preparing vegetables and mixing them in a large bowl, has been performed at Fluxus concerts for the past thirty years. In Denmark Knowles used an upside-down kettledrum as her bowl, which amplified her movements while eating a meal; when the piece was finished she shared the salad with the three-hundred-person audience. For *The Identical Lunch*, Knowles ate the same meal—a tuna fish sandwich on whole-wheat bread with lettuce and butter, no mayonnaise and a glass of buttermilk or cup of soup—everyday for one year at the Ritz Diner in New York. Each time she dined with a different friend, and then made a silk-screen documenting the gastronomic and social moment. George Maciunas, the self-proclaimed leader and impresario of Fluxus events and publications, organized dozens of collective banquets, thematic

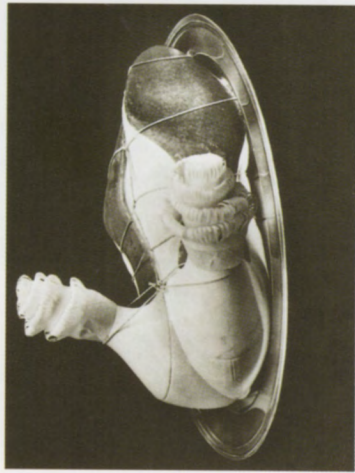
meals featuring “mono” foods or international cuisine, and a *transparent meal* consisting of barely edible gelatinous food and drinks. While the premise was collectivity and communality, sometimes the odd fare served revealed Maciunas’ own neurotic obsession with food and bodily functions. Other Fluxus artists have also explored food and drink: *Bottle, Bottle Opener* by George Brecht and Robert Fillou, was a wine bottle with a corkscrew in its cork that could be used to open another bottle of spirits, while Ben Vautier has been known for many years for the wines he produces near Nice, France that bear his own handwritten labels.

Feminist artists of the 1970s used food in installations and performance to underscore its relationship to the body, sexuality, and gender-related activities. *Womanhouse* was a collaborative project created in 1972 by twenty-three women in the feminist art program at California Institute for the Arts under the direction of Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. Installed in multiple rooms of an old house in Los Angeles, this biting feminist critique of domesticity and housework included a dining table filled with platters of food and a sensuous pink “nuturant kitchen,” that featured floor-to-ceiling fried-egg “breasts” reiterating the role of female as both provider and object of consumption. For the opening of Judy Chicago’s 1972 *The Dinner Party*, Suzanne Lacy organized an international dinner party to celebrate women’s culture, a network of dinners for women in various locations across the globe. Since then, Lacy has organized many other meals, bringing together people of disparate backgrounds in communal dining situations to meet and converse in a social process that takes the form of a large-scale spectacle.

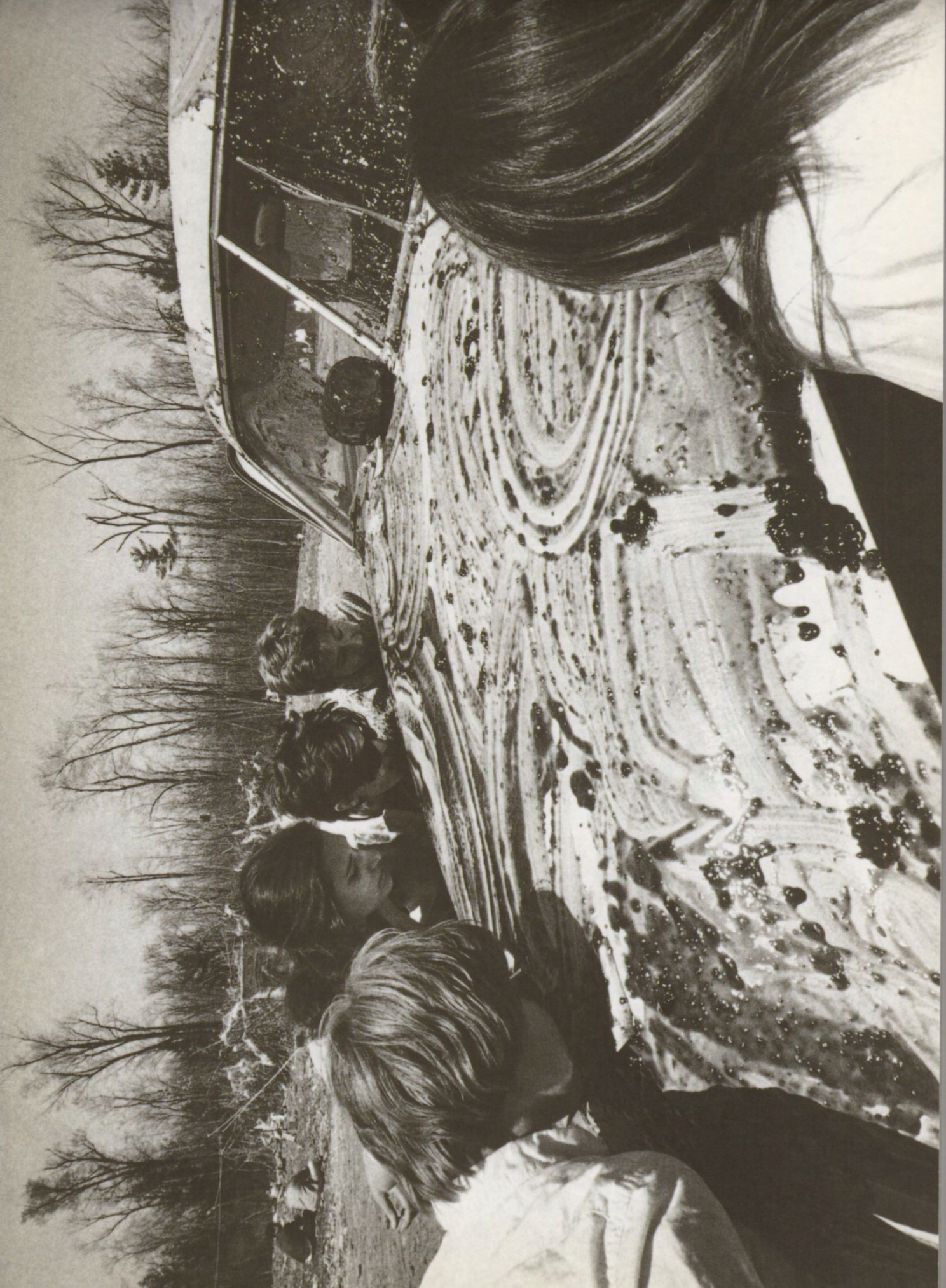
Harking back to 1970s feminist work, women artists of the 1990s made sculptural objects or installations using food as the residue of a performance action. For *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1991, Jana Sterbak clothed a mannequin in a dress made of fifty pounds of raw, salted, flank steak which gradually dried into a leathery corpse, a harsh reminder of the epithet of a woman as a piece of meat as well as of the mortality of the anorexic. Janine Antoni's installation *Gnaw* presents a six-hundred-pound block of gnawed chocolate, another of lard, and the candies and lipsticks she has made by chewing and spitting out the bits of each block. After gnawing and sculpting the chocolate with her teeth, she recycles it into a confection, a favorite food of obsessive-compulsive eaters, and transforms the lard into cosmetics, each transformation alluding to the issues of fat and female vanity.

3 DESSERT SWEET INTERACTION

Since the Italian futurists, artists have created their own cafés and restaurants as sites for artistic production and social interaction. This interest resurged in the 1960s as artists sought alternative, public, and non-institutional sites—where food and alcohol could engage friends and visitors—for displaying their work. In the early 1960s, Daniel Spoerri would invite artists and celebrated figures to dinner and then affix the remains of their meals to the tabletop and display them as wall-based *tableaux piéges* that he called *Snare Paintings*. In 1963 he opened Restaurant Gallery J in Paris for twelve days with poet John Ashberry and critic Pierre Restenay serving as waiters; afterward he exhibited all of the 723 cooking utensils used in the restaurant performance. Later, he opened his successful



(ABOVE) ROLLAND AELLIG, *MA GOUVERNANTE*
(MY NURSE), 1936



Restaurant Spoerri in Dusseldorf. Installation artist Gordon Matra Clark's *Food* opened as an artist-run co-op; it eventually became a popular Soho eatery. In the Bay Area, Tom Marioni, founder of the Museum of Conceptual Art, used the first floor of Breen's Restaurant as his "saloon" and presented countless performances of *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*. When the work premiered at the Oakland Museum in 1970, Marioni also exhibited the party debris.


Today a younger generation of artists are using eating and drinking as strategies to activate installations as well as create social spaces. Some, like their 1960s and 1970s predecessors, make site-specific works in public or quasi-public locations, but many choose to work within institutions. Since the mid-1990s Rirkrit Tiravanija has created installations and events in which he sets up a provisional kitchen and cooks Thai curry, sharing the meal with audiences in galleries, museums, and other locations. Some installations are spare, others more elaborate, but the presence of people is the key interactive ingredient that transforms the work into a communal activity. Tiravanija continues to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life as he creates situations subject to elements of chance and circumstance, interrupting usual institutional practice in the process.

Lee Mingwei's *The Dinner Project*, which began in 1997, is an ongoing series of Asian dinners prepared in his studio, galleries, or museums to stimulate meaningful, one-on-one conversations between himself and his guest. He chooses museum visitors randomly, dines with them, and then documents the conversation and re-presents it in the gallery the



(OPPOSITE) SOL GOLDBERG *LICKING CAR* 1964
(ABOVE) MERET OPPENHEIM *SPRING BANQUET*,
1959, PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

following day so that others may experience the exchange. Lee presents a different version of *The Dinner Project* on the Internet: Visitors to the website find a personalized interface, complete with recipes and a response form so the artist can appropriate the strategies of e-commerce to a more personalized technology. Lee extended the concept to his participation in COPIA's exhibition *Active Ingredients*. For this project he also used a video camera to capture the dining interaction between him and his guest; the tape was projected onto a reflecting table in the gallery after the performance took place. Like many other contemporary artists, several in this exhibition orchestrated participatory culinary experiences intended to revitalize communal and social interactions.

Observing Tiravanija and others whose practice pivots around interactive experiences, in 1996 critic Nicolas Borriraud used the phrase "relational aesthetics" as a "way to consider the productive existence of the viewer of art and the space for participation that art can offer." Rather than creating autonomous and private work, relational art considers both human relationships and social context as a starting point. At the cusp of two centuries dominated by entertainment spectacle and simulated unreal images, food—the sustenance of "real" life and the body—continues to be a source for artists' performances. These performances explore the boundaries of social interaction and sensory experiences, establishing an aesthetic that honors everyday life and ordinary situations. Created in an increasingly automated world, these works, in addition to their artistic value, possess a human one as well—they are palliative pleasures, reuniting us with the fundamental reasons for food and drink, and with our communities and kin at the table. 



(ABOVE) LEE MINGWEI *THE DINNER PROJECT*, 1994
(OPPOSITE) UMBERTO BOCCIONI *CARICATURE
OF A FUTURIST SERATA*, 1911

