

A good dinner party

Food as a medium for social change

Courtney Coombs

The last ten years have seen a re-emergence of artists who use food and the participatory act of dining as a platform from which to generate political and social discourse. When it comes to “free speech” it has become apparent that the politically correct mask donned throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s has now been dropped, as witnessed in the escalation of unashamedly racist, sexist and capitalist rhetoric. In the dominant English-speaking nations of the Western world, elected leaders are outspoken in their promotion of intolerant, misogynist and neoliberal ideologies. The world is literally burning and our “leaders” are denying the reality of climate change, building real and invisible walls, imprisoning those fleeing from unliveable conditions and eroding hard-won rights, the implications of which disproportionately affect First Nations peoples, diasporic communities and other minority groups.

When faced with the question of where to from here, the answer for some is to gather at the dining table. The dining table is a place where serious conversations about these issues take place in the home, where friends gather to connect, enjoy each other’s company and concoct future life plans. It is also where activists meet to devise their next move, where colleagues meet to network and collaborate, and where political leaders gather information and strategise. As feminist authors

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards articulate, “a good dinner party ... is just as likely to be a place to see politics at work as is a rally” because “our politics emerge from our everyday lives.”¹ Artists have long-embraced food and the social exchange of dining together to disrupt and break down the hierarchies of the artworld itself, turning the everyday materiality of food and the mundane act of eating into a participatory art that extends art beyond its commodified forms. Works that use food as a medium for expanding understandings of identity and connection to place are at the forefront of art practice today.

Politically driven performative and participatory food-based practice is most often linked to Nicholas Bourriaud’s definition of Relational Art and artist Rikrit Tiranavaniya, rather than correctly placing it in line with the history of Fluxus and Feminist practice. It is true that each invite participation via the act of eating but the key difference, as Claire Bishop highlights, is that the work discussed by Bourriaud is less about democratising art and more about creating exclusive art parties.² These exclusive parties are still as prevalent as ever, with the “haves” desperate to hold on to their piece of the mystical–decadent art experience that only money can buy. Among the plethora of artists embracing food as a material for making, I am interested in works that continue the work of challenging

the expected roles and barriers between art and its audience, drawing out a more responsive dialogue resulting in an expanded understanding of the world, and our relationship to it. A selection of Australian-based practitioners are exploring how we can come to terms with the environmental and cultural impact of our colonial past and migrant present, and move forward in a more productive and united way. Keg de Souza, Jamie Lewis, Jayanto Damanik Tan and Kieron Anderson invite audiences to broaden their understanding of the world through food to further explore these relations.

As an instance of this, the recent public conversation between Christine Black and Camila Marambio, presented by the Brisbane Free University at Bunyapa Park, strategised how we might best decolonise our relationship to the land and respond to the vast changes in our climate. Over the course of the evening, the two speakers drew from Christine’s book *The Land Is The Source of the Law: A Dialogic Encounter with an Indigenous Jurisprudence* (2011) to discuss different ways in which we might engage with and listen to the natural world. Across the conversation and question-time that evening, the message was to let go of ego, accept the impact that colonisation and neoliberalism have had on our planet, listen and adapt to the land as it is now while moving forward with respect and care.

Keg de Souza's practice adopts this position offering environments that reflect what has taken place and invite participation in the discourse. In her food-based works she constructs objects and environments out of vacuum-sealed food storage bags filled with dried produce. Each work is a site-responsive offering, *The Earth Affords Them No Food At All* (2017) takes the form of a row of suspended vacuum-sealed food storage bags filled with Indigenous food, introduced crops, early colonial settlement foods, immigration and post-war foods to generate dialogue about various Australian food culture narratives from pre-colonisation to the present.³ Taking its title from a statement by William Dampier in 1697 on surveying the Australian landscape, the titular phrase acts as a framing tool for the work, clearly articulating the colonial disregard for the existing cultural knowledge and identification with place, while simultaneously invalidating this position in an instant.

De Souza's site responsive collaboration with chef Lucien Alperstein, *The Only Rock We Eat* (2018–ongoing) was developed for *Plenty*, a food-based exhibition curated by Toby Chapman for Ace Open, Adelaide, in 2018. The installation and performance work was constructed as a dining room of sorts, with the walls made out of vacuum-sealed strips of salt. The installation houses a dinner table, used for the accompanying dialogic dining



Keg de Souza

The Earth Affords Them No Food At All, 2017
Installation view, IMA, Brisbane
Courtesy the artist



Keg de Souza with Lucien Alperstein

The Only Rock We Eat, 2018
Installation view, ACE Open
Photo: Sam Roberts
Courtesy the artists



events, with salt the central theme. Salt has a violent history, as before it was understood that salt could be found almost everywhere, “trade routes were established to transport it, governments taxed it, alliances and empires were built upon it, revolutions were precipitated over it, social classes were partly distinguished by it, and people were enslaved to secure it.”⁴ Responding to the drought-prone environment of South Australia, de Souza and Alperstein developed the menu from drought-resistant and salt-tolerant ingredients.

The disregard for local knowledge and systems of agriculture practiced by First Nations peoples, together with over-grazing of the land with incompatible livestock, has resulted in increased levels of salinity in Australian soils. Under the current

climatic conditions, there is also the very real possibility that Australia could run out of fresh drinking water. These and other concerns that have fuelled climate marches and the Extinction Rebellion filling the streets and social media channels of today, contributing to a growing public literature highlighting the very real issues at stake and the demand to act now. Rather than being stuck in the loop of denier vs activist, *The Only Rock We Eat* offers a third option of acceptance and adaptation, through reflecting on the history of food in colonising processes to acknowledge the damage that has been done and what is possible moving forward.

In another work that creates the occasion for dialogue, inviting conversations about place, memory and nostalgia, *The Long Lunch* by

Jamie Lewis has taken several forms over the years. In each iteration Lewis prepares food to share based on recipes from Singapore, her home country. In 2017 Lewis was invited to present the work at the Museum of Brisbane to accompany their exhibition *Tastes Like Sunshine*. For the free one day event, Jamie set out the ingredients for Eurasian sandwiches, including Egg Sambal, Cucumber Samba, Ham and Achar, Smoked Otak and Mayonnaise, Grilled Cheese and Kimchi, and Butter and Kaya. Visitors were presented with these recipes and invited to construct their own sandwiches based on the various recommended combinations of ingredients. The Eurasian menu, signifying Singapore’s colonial history, clearly represented a challenge for some attendees.

Jamie Lewis

The Long Lunch at the Museum of Brisbane.
Photos: Georgie Sedgwick



The ingredients were laid out on the table individually, and the participants were free to construct any sandwich of their choosing, yet the combinations that Jamie was suggesting were so unimaginable that all of the food (most of which, on its own, was familiar) became alien and inedible. Jamie did not insist on following a formula and in response to hesitation merely mentioned that her mother had always suggested that she try everything at least once. These instances became opportunities in which she was able to engage in dialogues about the inextricable link between food and the long-drawn out impact of migration and colonisation.

While we may live in a bubble where the language of contemporary art is expansion, empathy and criticality, Lewis embraces these

moments of discomfort in her solicited interactions to plant the seed for deeper understanding and acknowledgment of her country's long and fraught history of colonisation by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese and the British. Presented in a space predominantly frequented by tourists or those outside of the arts community, *The Long Lunch* produced more unexpected and challenging conversations that reached further than those anticipated by an already primed arts community.

Jayanto's Damanik Tan also addresses feelings of displacement via representations of interactions with food. Jayanto's installation and participatory work, *Ritual Everywhere But Nowhere* (2019), was exhibited at Firstdraft, Sydney, earlier this year. The exhibition included a hanging piece produced from used tea bags and

string, and a video performance work featuring the artist walking down a busy path, sans clothing, upon a floor mat covered in fabricated food, such as artificially coloured lotus chips, eggs on Chinese soup spoons, rainbow cake and various phallic objects. These materials spoke to Damanik Tan's culture, connection to place, history, and sexuality. A Chinese-Indonesian Peranakan immigrant living in Sydney, part of the Chinese Diaspora, the work felt like a gift, an invitation to learn about someone else's world. These elements were amplified during the opening night performance for which Damanik Tan invited Mayu Kanamori, the Australia-Indonesia Youth Association and Indonesian Welfare Association to join in a sharing of sweets laid out on banana leaves in the entrance to the space. Visitors could



Jayanto Damanik Tan
Ritual Everywhere But Nowhere, 2019
Installation view, FirstDraft
Photo: Stine Baska

Opposite:
Stills from *Place of Abundance*, 2019
Filmed and edited by Nikki Michail



not access the exhibition without negotiating the feast that was taking place. All were welcome to sit down and engage with those enjoying the feast in traditional cultural attire.

In a conversation with a member of the FirstDraft committee, I learned of a visitor who was somewhat enraged by the performance. They claimed they were excluded, without entry to the space or the work. And yet they were free to participate in any way they chose. Once again, a select few members of the cis, white, privileged audience, who did not see themselves or their everyday items represented, felt alienated from this generous work.

Enlarging on the role of the artist as educator, Kieron Anderson, chef and director of Yalabin Dining on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) uses native foraged foods that employ ancient Aboriginal cooking and preparation techniques.⁵ These practices are documented and reflected upon in a video work, *Place of Abundance* (2019). Filmed and edited by Nikki Michail the video was shown as part of *Seeing Country*,

curated by Freja Carmichael for the Redland Art Gallery. It presents the experiences and commentary of the Quandamooka people—Sandra Delaney, Nunagal, Goenbal Ngugi woman, the curator’s mother, Ngugi woman Sonja Carmichael, senior Noonuccal songman Joshua Walker, and Anderson himself, a Ngugi man and chef. In Anderson’s piece, he speaks to the food resources of Minjerribah and the sharing of knowledges passed down to him through community, while importantly stressing the traditional and ethical practice of only taking as much as is needed from the land.

Place of Abundance was exhibited with the work of artists who share a deep connection to the land and waters of their Country, and use the “old ways ... [to] make visible and celebrate the ongoing importance of distinct ecologies, ancestral connections, and practices of place,” as Carmichael states in the exhibition catalogue.⁶ As a move towards healing the ecological crisis, it is a fact as noted by Bruce Pascoe in *Dark Emu*, that “Indigenous plants

promise huge economic bounty for the country, and our future prosperity.”⁷

As these artists demonstrate, each of these food-based practices and works privilege the generous act of sharing the bounty as ethical citizens of this land. They extend the legacy of food-based participatory art, adopting ordinary materials and the action of eating to generate and facilitate significant and vital discussions around place, history, culture, and climate in a changing world.

¹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. ² Claire Bishop, *C. 2011. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, New York: Verso, 2012. ³ See portfolio at www.kegdesouza.com. ⁴ Cynthia M. Kennedy, “The Other White Gold: Salt, Slaves, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and British Colonialism”, *Historian*, 69(2), 2007, pp. 215–30. ⁵ See Kieron “Wardeen” Anderson; *Quandamooka Chef*: redfest.com.au. ⁶ Freja Carmichael, *Seeing Country* [exhibition catalogue], Cleveland: Redland Art Gallery, 2019. ⁷ Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*, Broome: Magabala Books, 2014.

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