

All in One Basket (Act I)

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“The wastage is astonishing, and under the circumstances appalling. Half-eaten joints of meat and buckets full of broken bread and vegetables were pitched away like so much rubbish and then defiled with tealeaves. I filled five dustbins to overflowing with quite edible food. And while I did so fifty tramps were sitting in the spike with their bellies half filled by the spike dinner of bread and cheese, and perhaps two cold-boiled potatoes each in honour of Sunday. According to the paupers, the food was thrown away from deliberate policy, rather than it should be given to the tramps.”¹

George Orwell comparing a restaurant where he was employed to a “spike” or homeless shelter, where he had occasionally sought refuge while unemployed, in “Down and Out in Paris and London”.

Even today, most restaurants and supermarkets have a policy regarding the disposal of leftover food instead of donating to hungry people, just as George Orwell noted in 1933. Many supermarkets even grind up their slightly bruised or damaged fruits and vegetables to make a liquid pulp, instead of risking people rummaging through their garbage bins outside the back doors. Meanwhile, in large and wealthy cities like New York, London and Paris, where more food is disposed of in these kinds of ways than most other places in the world, thousands of inhabitants actually suffer from malnutrition.

In the summer of 1996 Lucy Orta watched, horrified, as French farmers dumped tonnes of fruit onto motorways to protest against European Union quota laws. Apparently a seasonal protest, Orta found it nonetheless “shocking and incomprehensible” as tonnes of perfectly ripe berries, plums and peaches rolled into the ditches or were squashed under the wheels of trucks. But the farmers’ protest, she realized, was just one example of waste within a much larger, utterly unbalanced system of food production and distribution. Proof: she’d been going to Paris markets for months to watch as vendors tossed thousands of bruised, dented or simply unsold apples, peaches, tomatoes and other fruit and vegetables onto the sidewalks at the end of the day. Referring to Orwell’s commentary on the restaurant, she said, “the scene at the end of the

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markets is also astonishing and the description portrays the Parisian streets as the hoards of municipal cleaners come to spray the streets down and wash the waste into the sewers”.

Orta noticed that a regular crowd of gleaners would gather after these markets to pick up the discarded fruit and vegetables before the street-cleaners arrived. These people included the poor, representatives of charitable organisations who collected food to redistribute it, ordinary persons, often immigrants, who supplemented their shopping with found food, or other people, like Orta, simply shocked by the amount of waste. This waste food provided vital sustenance and fresh produce for hundreds of Parisian residents. Orta started to join the gleaners, looking through battered plums and berries to find fruit suitable for eating. At the same time, she recorded interviews with the people working alongside her, in which they talked about the problems and benefits of gathering food in the city. One woman said: “A full basket is enough for me for one week, if I took more it would only go to waste”. Orta realised that the scavengers were, consciously or unconsciously, creating a pocket of urban environmental equilibrium. But surprisingly few homeless people took advantage of the market’s wasteful practices, and one explained: “Salvaging fruit, that’s for rich people, you need a fridge to keep them and an oven to cook them”. Nevertheless, this homeless man, like many other homeless people, gathered there to make conversation and see familiar faces, and he explained the activity taking place around him: “There are no beggars here, there are people who have dignity and use their initiative to forage”.

In her studio, Orta carefully sorted and washed the fruit she’d found and set about making a number of different jams, syrups and jellies, which she poured into small jars, labelled and dated. The dating was a reminder to the natural seasonal cycles, something we all think less of now as bananas and pineapple are shipped mid-winter into grocery stores or supermarkets. Orta explains that there was also a methodology in the collecting, washing, transforming and preserving which “in a sense, ‘re-civilized’ the waste, but the most important aspect was the process of transforming as a way of conserving my initial reaction and helplessness when faced with this problem”. The preserves became *momento mori* of her Saturday morning trips, and as the months passed and the jars multiplied — approaching 500 in number — she saw that her collection served as a testimony to the vast amount of good fruit being constantly discarded.

Curator Jérôme Sans contacted Lucy + Jorge Orta to create an exhibition in the Forum Saint-Eustache Gallery, a contemporary art gallery connected to the Saint-Eustache church and soup

kitchen at the Les Halles marketplace. Les Halles is one of the oldest market places in Paris and its most famous. But in recent years the market itself has been “delocalized”, i.e. discontinued, its traditional space handed over to real-estate developers who have replaced it with an underground shopping mall that sells mass-produced knickknacks, brand-name clothing, CDs, etc. The destruction of the old Les Halles market has been likened by many French critics as equivalent to the recent “redevelopment” of New York’s 42nd Street, which has resulted in a “clean”, Disney-fied version of the historic 42nd Street we recall. Community has made way for tourism in both cases. Orta realised that Les Halles would be a perfect place to bring her concerns about food to the public, and might help to bring back a sense of community to a place in which such a notion has been lost.

Saturday, March 8th 1997 marked the historic beginning of the Orta food projects, which they were planning to stage in a series of ‘Acts’. For the opening of their exhibition ‘Dans Le Meme Panier (All in One Basket) Lucy + Jorge hosted an open buffet made out of abandoned fruit, for which 300 kilograms of produce collected off the ground from the local markets were transformed into a variety of sweet dishes with the help of Stohrer, a local celebrity chef. Samples of jam, jellies and puddings were available in small bowls for free “tasters” and visitors could buy souvenir editions of the artist’s labelled preserves. During the course of the day, thousands of people stopped by to eat and discuss with Orta the problems of food production and distribution which had inspired the buffet. The visitors included members of the art community, shoppers, children, tramps, students and immigrants, so impressed by Stohrer’s delicacies, then all visited the Saint-Eustache Gallery where Lucy + Jorge Orta had installed a series of sculptures and objects built out of wooden fruit crates, and the “labelled” preserves along side photographs of mounds of discarded market produce. The artworks included small boxes or ‘Reliquaries’ and mobile caddies ‘Collect Units’ with attached walkmans playing back the interviews recorded with the gleaners at the weekly markets.

Many artists in the past have held suppers as a work of art, including Gordon Matta-Clark, Suzanne Lacy and Rirkrit Tiravanija. The suppers have been used to promote the dematerialization of art, to pay respect to certain sections of the public, to foster intercultural exchange or, simply, conviviality. Orta, too, had many of these issues in mind with the “open-air buffet”, but they also wanted to push this history of “meals as art” one step further, by stressing the origins of the meal itself, all found in the public domain. As with all of the artists’ projects, participation was an entirely voluntary act, and it is this aspect that created, at least temporarily, a

revived sense of community at Les Halles.

A few months after their exhibition buffet, Lucy Orta said: “Food is still discarded and destroyed for hygienic reasons by restaurants and supermarkets rather than given to the poor but this system has changed greatly thanks to charitable initiatives. For example, in 1985 a French comedian, Coluche, founded a series of soup kitchens. He campaigned to change the system by opening the stocks in the European food banks, and in the 10 years of the charity’s activity, volunteers have distributed around 50 million meals. More recently volunteers have organised collections at the end of the markets for these soup kitchens, but what if waste was organised as part of the vendors’ cleaning-up duties, as I have witnessed in Munster Germany, it could be collected and distributed more efficiently?” Orta’s project demonstrated exactly what Coluche championed 12 years earlier, that a concerted effort by just one individual could begin widespread public discussion and change.

HORTIRECYCLING (ACT II)

Two years later Lucy Orta was able to stage Act II of her food-recycling endeavour in Vienna, commissioned by the Wiener Secession for her solo exhibition opening in June 1999. The Wiener Secession has an interesting history and it is important to dwell on this in the context of Orta’s installation proposal, which breaks with the tradition of the static monographic exhibitions. Founded in 1897 by artists Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Max Kurzweil, Otto Wagner, and others, the Secession artists objected to the prevailing conservatism of the Vienna Künstlerhaus with its traditional orientation toward Historicism. The Secession building could be considered the icon of the movement. Above its entrance was carved the phrase "to every age its art and to art its freedom". Secession artists were concerned, above all else, with exploring the possibilities of art outside the confines of academic tradition. They hoped to create a new style that owed nothing to historical influence. In this way they were very much in keeping with the iconoclastic spirit of turn-of-the-century Vienna.

Opposite the Secession is the city grocery market, Naschmarkt. Once again Lucy could take advantage of the proximity of the gallery and the energetic Secession curators and artists to implement her new idea for a pilot social-enterprise “HortiRecycling Enterprise”, which would

involve collecting, processing and preserving the surplus fresh produce discarded by the vendors at the end of the market. Unlike the previous lone artistic action in the Parisian markets, Orta set about attributing specific roles to individuals and citizens who wished to participate in her pilot enterprise.²

The gallery on the second floor immediately became a permanent kitchen complete with a wooden winch, reminiscent of the medieval pulley systems used to haul groceries in baskets to the upper floors of tall buildings, which served as the point of collection for produce collected on the Naschmarkt. Lucy + Jorge designed a series of 'Processing Units', mobile sculptures made from an assemblage of grocery caddies, freezers, hotplates and washing sinks, which could actually be wheeled out of the gallery to clean, chop and process the ripe produce immediately on the market below.

A series of pilot actions were staged prior to and during the exhibition, which involved the team distributing brightly coloured bags 'Collect Units' to a selection of enthusiastic partner vendors. The mobile 'Processing Units' facilitated the rapid transformation of the produce into either preserves or small fast-frozen packages for later consumption. Stohrer, the famous Austrian jam maker who, equally motivated by the aims of the project, enlisted the help of his staff to cook and sterilise the produce to comply with food regulation, seconding the success of Paris's celebrity chef Stohrer.

As Lucy has mentions in her interview with Hou Han Rou in the accompanying exhibition catalogue: "Each Act is part of an evolving process that becomes more complex and embedded with the possibilities that each locale allows". Since the early outcomes of the food projects in Paris and Vienna, Lucy + Jorge Orta have channelled the universal collective power that food and

² I don't see the museums as inert spaces any longer, they are small fragment of part of a wider team-web which helps coordinate the various stages of the artistic process. There is still a physical gallery space for an audience to capture notions of events that have happened elsewhere outside the space. And the static exhibitions is a forum to reflect upon a subject and raise concerns to another level of debate. With the SECESSION I am experiencing an incredible change in curating and real-time organisation of the "HortiRecycling Enterprise". As we speak initiatives are being put into place by the team: discussing the idea with Naschmarkt vendors, enlisting the renowned Viennese chef Staud, who will compose the recipes for the rejected fruit, ... My role is to mediate these different initiatives so that the issues we're hoping to communicate are heard. Vendors will be given "Collect Units" to fill with rejected produce throughout the day and these will be collected by the mobile kitchens, "Processing Units", then the produce can be transformed by Staud and re-distributed on site. The gallery space will house a second enterprise where the "Collect Unit pulley" offers an alternative system of collect. A pilot HortiRecycling action will take place both on the market and inside Secession as part of a multiple of possibilities and this in turn implicates the venue, the street and the respective audiences. It is this type of relationship that I wish to pursue. Extract of interview with Hou Han Rou, Secession catalogue June 1999.

eating inspire into the third phase of research: '70 x 7 The Meal'. The Meal project acts on the force of multi-citizen participation to generate actual debate and move forward concrete solutions. Little did they know that 'Act III', for 3000 local farmers in the small agricultural town of Dieuze in the north east of France would become the first in a series of 'endless' buffets and their most successful networking projects bringing important actors of the community around the same table.
