

Food and the Public Sphere is the culmination of twenty years dedication to the power of art and food that presents the socially engaging public works, sculpture and objects of internationally acclaimed artists Lucy + Jorge Orta, examining their practice within the context of major concerns of the twenty-first century: environmental change, species loss, food scarcity, food waste and sustainable development.

Communities all over the world—working from the scale of global food networks down to local methods for farming and cooking—are seeking ways to make the food system better serve the needs of people and the planet. After decades of successful food production in massive quantities, producing cheap goods, policymakers and citizens are recognizing the environmental and social cost of this process. The over-industrialisation of food has forced small farms to surrender to agribusiness, reduced biodiversity in favour of monoculture crops, and assaulted communities with debilitating chronic diseases. Lucy + Jorge Orta's work in this volume brings these pressing issues home, drawing people into a reflective experience of art that combines the aesthetics of eating, drinking, cooking, and dining.



FOOD AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

LUCY + JORGE ORTA

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CON TENTS

5 **INTRODUCTION**
CONTEXT, PROCESS, CONSUMPTION AND VALUE
Nigel Prince

11 **FOOD**
EXTRACT OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
Hou Hanru and Lucy + Jorge Orta

17 **70 X 7 THE MEAL**

139 **HARVEST**
70 X 7 THE MEAL, ACT XXXIX, PETERBOROUGH
Chris Erskine

141 **LIMITED EDITIONS**

151 **ARTWORKS**

231 **FOOD SERVICE**
SETTING THE TABLE WITH LUCY + JORGE ORTA
Ellen Lupton

237 **BIOGRAPHY**

238 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

INTRO DUCTION

CONTEXT, PROCESS,
CONSUMPTION AND VALUE

For the first time, this publication exclusively draws together the series of projects produced by Lucy + Jorge Orta since 1997 that use food as a means to examine and interrogate social issues surrounding production, distribution and waste. From the initial project *All in One Basket*, their *Food* series has evolved to now be centred on the ongoing artwork *70x7 The Meal* which draws

from the ancestral: the ritual of dining together. It is important to understand that the Ortas' practice revolves around two discrete yet interrelated processes: that of the establishment and engagement of a social dynamic—a gathering together of peoples and communities in public spaces—and the more formal objects, sculptures and installations that either accompany the meals, or are created independently to explore related subject areas, concepts, materials and aesthetics. As such they can be situated firmly within a discourse of social practice that has a strong contemporary currency.

These works or "Acts", as the Ortas describe them, have unfolded as a series of public installations transforming a familiar and fundamental daily event—that of the human necessity to eat to sustain us—into something unique, to be remembered and re-enacted forever. As such they also acknowledge the legacies of other artists who sought to use food as a social instrument, both as a means to engender belonging or a collective focus, and as a way to define space publicly. It is through this that they join the lineage of artists wishing to establish a critique of broader sociopolitical and economic realities by generating debate and discussion, questioning value while reflecting on the very acts of production and consumption itself.

Born in Romania in 1930, Daniel Spoerri is a Swiss artist and writer best known for his 'snare-pictures', a type of assemblage in which he captures a group of objects, such as the remains of meals eaten by individuals, including plates, cutlery and glasses, all of which are fixed to the table or board and displayed on a wall. His first snare-picture, *Kichka's Breakfast* (now in the collection in the Museum of Modern Art in New York), was created from his then girlfriend's leftover breakfast. Developing beyond these works, food has remained a major theme of Spoerri's practice, which he termed "Eat Art", as a way to examine how we take in information, 'digest' and thereby understand things. Other contexts in which he has worked with food include his series of shop-bought canned food which he signed and rubber-stamped "Attention: Work of Art" in 1961, and a performance made in Paris called *Restaurant de la Galerie J*, 1963, in which he cooked on several evenings, with art critics playing the role of waiters to the visitors—a metaphor for their role in interpreting, guiding and creating meaning for audiences. Building upon these initiatives, a crucial project developed in the late 1960s where Spoerri opened the Restaurant Spoerri in Düsseldorf, later evolving by 1970 to become the Eat Art Gallery. Through this, he paved the way for a younger generation of artists who invite us to participate in the production of the artwork itself.

This social intertwining of art space with domestic ritual was taken even further in 1971 by FOOD, a restaurant founded by artists Caroline Goodden, Gordon Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris and Rachel Lew at 127 Prince Street in SoHo, New York City—an endeavour which sustained itself for three years before eventually closing due to financial difficulties in 1974. Before establishing this project, Goodden and Matta-Clark had already begun to host informal dinners at their

loft space and make sculptural celebrations with other artists and musicians involving food, such as the *Brooklyn Bridge Event*, 1971. As a logical extension, FOOD achieved its intention to evolve as an active and dynamic site, serving 41,272 customers in 1972. It was noted for using fresh and seasonal foods, a notionally countercultural idea for the time, and was one of the first New York restaurants to serve sushi and vegetarian meals—its menu containing further innovations including everything from ceviche to anchovy onion pie, canary pudding to used car stew. Many meals were given out for free or sold for much less than their actual ‘material’ value.

While undoubtedly acting as an artistic intervention into the urban setting, FOOD was also a thriving business with all the pressures of real-world existence and was designed to provide a community space to support and sustain the art community of downtown Manhattan. As such it describes a particular moment in conceptual practices revolving around certain individuals in New York during the 1970s. FOOD was a place where artists in SoHo, especially those who were later involved in *Avalanche* magazine and the Anarchitecture group, could meet and enjoy food together but also establish precedents of how art and the process of thinking and making might fulfil a social function and affect real change. This blurring between what might characteristically be defined as artwork, combined with a slice of everyday life, should be recognised as a key moment. Designed by Matta-Clark, FOOD’s kitchen was open and visible to the dining area, making the creation of every meal a performance, as if, according to Matta-Clark, “the whole event [was] a live ‘piece’”. These qualities can be considered ever more merged within the context of Matta-Clark’s broader work, in that the restaurant contained some of his first carpentry experiments leading toward his cutting pieces, additionally demonstrating his interest in recycled, reshaped and reworked materials. These were treated in much the same way as food is: from its initial cultivation, through to its raw state, to its processing into edible foodstuff. Such aspects are further revealed in the documentary film made by Matta-Clark with photographer Robert Frank that shows the ordinary workings of the place while also drawing attention to its materiality, the architectural details of the site, its open kitchen, its clientele eating and chatting; the everyday events and activities of the working environment.

The direct legacy of FOOD, with such integration into everyday life, can be seen in the practice of artists contemporary to the Ortas, including the Danish group Superflex, founded and directed by Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen and Bjonstjerne Christiansen. Since 1993 they have examined the dynamics and dependencies created by economic systems, while developing ‘tools’ to be used as an attempt to transform or propose solutions to real problems. A specific example of this is an ongoing collaboration first begun in 2003, where Superflex initiated a partnership with a guaraná farmers’ cooperative from Maués in the Brazilian Amazon, who had organised themselves to produce the Guaraná Power soft drink in opposition to corporate influence. A consortium of multinationals had exercised their monopoly on the purchase of seeds as raw material and had driven the price down, while the cost of their products to the consumer had risen. In order to draw attention to the struggle of the guaraná farmers, Superflex planned to take this relationship forward when they were invited to participate in the 27th São Paulo Biennial in 2006. However, the proposal met with resistance from the President of the Biennial Foundation, forbidding the display of the Guaraná Power soft drink and removing any mention of the name of the product—a ploy Superflex smartly sidestepped by taking the censorship further and striking out all text in the biennial reader related to themselves and the project. In addition, a huge Guaraná Power party was held the day before the biennial opening and the soft drink distributed in the park outside the biennial building during the opening. While their projects deliberately enact such socially conscious actions, they move beyond a modernist utopian impulse, rather intending to liberate, to produce individual and collective change, with the projects functioning as replicable models made available through the free distribution of instructions. Their work too can have a more playful suggestion of proposed change, not necessarily opposed to commercialism and globalisation but instead rendering economic structures visible. *Flooded McDonald’s*, first shown at the South London Gallery in 2010, comprises a film made in a set constructed as a life-size replica of the interior of a McDonald’s burger bar. Without any customers or staff present, it gradually floods with water, lifting up furniture while trays of food and drinks float around, electric short-circuit and the space eventually becomes completely submerged.

FOOD can also be considered to have laid the foundation for what was to become labelled in the 1990s as ‘relational aesthetics’, a tendency identified by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”.¹ While having clear precedents in the earlier histories of community and participatory practices aligned with Conceptualism, contemporary artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija have played a key role within this context. His work is essentially about bringing people together and about ideas of interaction and exchange, that, in and of itself, provides an interesting touchstone alongside projects by Lucy + Jorge Orta that began at a similar time. Beginning with *pad thai*, 1990, at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, Tiravanija has

¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002, p 113.

NIGEL PRINCE

consistently rejected traditional art objects altogether and instead cooked and served food for visitors over the course of many exhibitions. While projects blur the distance between artist and viewer—an untitled work at the Carnegie International exhibition in 1995 presented a wall text of written instructions for cooking Southeast Asian green curry which was then prepared for visitors, and his contribution to the Paris Triennale in 2012 transformed the main nave of the Grand Palais into a large-scale, twelve-hour banquet, composed of a single meal of Tom Kha soup—his work is more about the organics of social productivity and thus demonstrates an antipathy toward an easy categorisation of his practice under the label of ‘relational aesthetics’. Catalysing non-material, non-hierarchical social networks, Tiravanija ignores the prescribed division between art and life, constructing communal environments that offer an alternative venue for activity. When he does make objects, they are most often ephemera: commonplace objects used for cooking or camping serving as memories and designed to stimulate new interactions, a residue from one event ripe to be revisited or redeployed anew.

A clear indication of this broader intent of his practice is the ongoing project *The Land* (begun in 1998), a collaborative artistic, architectural and environmental recovery project in San Pa Tong, Thailand, initiated anonymously and without the concept of ownership. The land was to be cultivated as an open space, though as a place of, and for, community, social engagement, discussion and experimentation. Here an ever developing list of residents and artists (including students from the University of Chiang Mai, Superflex, Prachya Phintong, Tobias Rehberger, Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Atelier van Lieshout and Mit Jai Inn) have been welcomed to use a plot of land as a laboratory for development, encompassing activities such as cultivating rice, building sustainable houses or channelling solar power. While a specific context informs the nature of projects that evolve there, it chimes in part with the collective environment founded by Lucy + Jorge Orta in 2000 at Les Moulins, a complex of former mills and thriving paper industry situated along an 8-kilometre stretch of the Grand Morin valley at Boissy-le-Châtel, France. Seen as an extension of their practice, the site is ripe with potential to evolve projects that might host models for change.

While the very act of preparing produce, cooking and eating, and the social dynamic that is established through these types of performative activities, is one aspect of the Ortas’ work, the other side is the objects and various accoutrements that accompany the events. Sculptural qualities, as noted earlier, were present in FOOD and integrated into the very fabric of its space. This was extended further by ideas put forward by Goodden that soup could be used for painting, for example, or in the meal using marrow by Matta-Clark, where the bones were cleaned and used to create necklaces for the diner to wear after eating. The physicality of this exchange continues the process of transformation present in the act of consumption itself.

Perhaps more closely tied to the Ortas and in some way reflecting the strong design aesthetic of the settings for the various iterations of *70x7 The Meal*, while simultaneously encompassing the celebratory nature of a symbolic event, is *The Dinner Party*, an epic installation by feminist artist Judy Chicago produced from 1974 to 1979. While contentious for a variety of reasons across a number of quarters, it is nonetheless a piece of considerable undertaking, comprising an immense, open triangular table covered in fine cloth resting on a porcelain floor of 2,304 hand-cast, gilded and lustred tiles, on which are inscribed the names of 999 important women. The table itself is set with thirty-nine unique place settings, thirteen on each side, each commemorating a goddess, historical figure or important woman, including figures such as Virginia Woolf, Sojourner Truth and Eleanor of Aquitaine. As a collaborative work, again a parallel to the Ortas’ approach, it employs a range of carefully crafted media, from ceramics and china painting to various textile techniques, honouring the history, traditions and achievements of women in Western civilisation.

Such notions of value should also be considered within an analysis and appreciation of Lucy + Jorge Orta’s *Food* series beyond material presence. This may take many forms outside of the physical qualities present in the actual forms of utensils and vessels, extending into a conceptual questioning regarding how worth becomes inscribed in an object, be it through intrinsic material values or, just as importantly, through the very partnerships and allegiances that might be formed through the act of participation with, and use of, these objects.

Akin to this, we might consider Italian artist Cesare Pietroiusti, who is principally concerned with questioning perceived worth, where and how this resides in objects and forms, the logics of economy and consumption, as well as problematic and paradoxical situations that are hidden in common relationships and in ordinary daily acts. Projects such as *Eating Money*, 2005, quite literally bring into focus questions concerning a notional transformation through the process of ingestion and evacuation involving the artist’s body. Other works such as *Enriching Food*, 2007, equally and pointedly share the politicised aspect with the Ortas’ *All in One Basket*, while similarly delineating a space that is as celebratory as it is socially dynamic. Consisting of a mammoth 24-hour stint, the artist took over Café Ikon as head chef at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, and offered guests a range of Italian food from a specially devised menu. When they had finished their meals, diners received the equivalent value of the various dishes they had ordered in cash, visibly and tangibly revealing what had actually been consumed while placed into a different register.

Other young artists sit parallel in their occupation of a space that draws upon the legacy of FOOD while also employing ephemeral events as a means to develop a social critique. Based in Sydney, Australia, Keg de Souza is an interdisciplinary, self-described “anarchitect” who works on community-driven, large-scale interventions. Typical projects involve the creation of inflatable structures to provide and define a prototype space, in which issues such as food security, spatial politics and community building are discussed, often over themed meals. As with *70x7 The Meal*, in de Souza’s wider practice there is a strong focus on community participation and collective conversation, the ensuing exchange often intrinsically linked to the situated circumstances in which it is created. In many ways such events enter into the folklore of a place; individual participants’ recollections and memories forming part of the ongoing repercussions and having the potential to trigger transformation.

The ongoing propositions by Lucy + Jorge Orta fit within a lineage of discourse and practice shared with historical precedents and contemporary peers. As is clear from their initial project in 1997, where the artists hosted an open-air buffet in one of the busiest central shopping districts in Paris, Les Halles, they are consistently engaging with ways and means to draw attention to significant global subjects. Made with discarded fruit from nearby markets, this project targeted issues that can be identified as part of a growing engagement of artists with topics such as consumer food waste and the inequalities of global food distribution, within the broader set of concerns governing production, consumption and value. These are the moments that provide potential pressure points to address what can seem to be daily news items, be it information of yet more over-production or farmers paid to reduce output, while in other parts of the world conflict or climate change creates failed harvests. If we consider our society as one becoming ever more fractured, or that there is an increasing sense of disenfranchisement with large-scale politics, then specific, issue-led work becomes ever more pertinent. As with food, so too the Ortas engage with other related themes such as environmental politics and mobility of peoples, with ongoing projects like *Antarctica*, or shelter and habitat, via projects such as *Refuge Wear*. Yet this is not rooted merely in an exclusive or idealistic attempt to affect a shift in consensus. What the Ortas provide in *Food* and other projects is a questioning that reflects this urgency in real-world ideas and issues. While encompassing process and materiality that is at once both poetic and sharply determined, their Acts suggest possible changes in policy or thinking, thereby revealing ways and means that might contribute to the broader discussion challenging the status quo.

BIOGRAPHY

Nigel Prince has been Executive Director of the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver since 2011. He has overseen a complete reinvigoration of the organisation across its programming and operations, whereby CAG is now understood as one of Canada’s premier arts institutions. While in Canada he has served as a jury member on a number of national awards including the Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Awards, RBC Canadian Painting Award, and the Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize, Toronto.

Prior to this he was Curator at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, where he was responsible for an international programme, making solo exhibitions and publications with artists including Arturo Herrera, Donald Judd, Olafur Eliasson, Susan Collis, Martin Boyce, Shahzia Sikander, Ryan Gander, Victor Man, Marcel Dzama, Steven Shearer and Susan Philipsz amongst many others. His exhibition of paintings and drawings by Cuban artist Carmen Herrera in 2009 was critically heralded as the “discovery of the decade” by the *Guardian/Observer* and *The New York Times*.

He has also worked as an independent curator and writer. Exhibitions include: *Itself*, Transmission Gallery, Glasgow; *In the Midst of Things*, Bournville, Birmingham; *Jim Isermann*, Camden Arts Centre, London; *Andrea Zittel, A–Z Cellular Compartment Units, The Mailbox, Birmingham, and Andrea Rosen, New York; Heather & Ivan Morison...*, IPS, Birmingham and national tour; *Nina Katchadourian, Accent Elimination*, as part of *The Genealogy of the Supermarket and Other New Works*, Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York.