

**F**ood 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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LUCY + JORGE ORTA



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# HARVEST

**70X7 THE MEAL ACT XXXIX,  
PETERBOROUGH  
CHRIS ERSKINE, WAITER**

**T**he Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that certain ideas and concepts need to be viewed as 'signatures'. Such signatures can be traced back through time via a series of historical moments in which they have left an indentation on our common knowledge systems. For me harvest is one such signature.

Harvest is an ancient idea which evokes many cultural-political dynamics: public celebrations, land ownership, food cycles, to name but a few. It is a signature which can beckon thoughts of abundance in one moment; and lack and tyranny in another.

I find this concept useful in seeking to trace my memories of the Harvest, a weekend-long public event commissioned by the Peterborough-based arts organisation Metal that took place on the 19 and 20 September 2015. Obviously the account which I give is from a singular perspective, but I shall attempt to gather around collective themes.

## **PARTICIPATION, HOSPITALITY AND WEAVING**

It seems to me the most striking impact of the Harvest event was the dimensions of participation it triggered. This was not only evident within *70x7 The Meal* itself (and the thousands that supported, performed, served, ate and observed the event), it also involved the countless hours of preparation that I witnessed during the months leading up to the event weekend.

The Harvest brought together unprecedented levels of imagination, care and involvement. Stretching from the Women's Institute and international artists to community members and local restaurateurs, it produced a rich canvas of engagement.

The heart of all this activity revealed one central desire, to make Peterborough a place of hospitality. A hospitality which stretched through and beyond the reach of family and friends, into the wider diverse communities of the city and region. A desire to love strangers as well as those best known to ourselves.

On Sunday 20 September, the day of the thirty-ninth Act of Lucy + Jorge Orta's *70x7 The Meal*, I was a waiter and so had the privilege of meeting a cross section of the people invited to eat. For me, the highlight was encountering people who had been spontaneously offered, just before the meal started, a 'seat at the table' (about fifty of the 500 individuals who were invited to eat at the immense table setting in Peterborough's Cathedral Square). Such contingency released a deeper sense of generosity and inclusion, which burst from the communal tables, bread and soup and into the conversations of everyone. The weave of participation and hospitality created an aesthetic which was beyond the imagination of any previously held expectations. The heart of the city was alive, with a spirit beyond consumerism and commerce.

The Harvest was not simply an act of community cohesion and celebration. Sown within various aspects of the event were seeds of a more challenging fruit. The main artistic installations

and interventions of Lucy + Jorge Orta, and of the accompanying ten artists in residence, sought to dislodge our acceptance and view of modern daily life. For me, and I'm sure many others, the imprints of the event also evoked deep political and cultural roots, which sought to raise questions regarding power, control and identity.

In this sense, *70x7 The Meal* acted as a Trojan horse, a gift of cheer and celebration, but within its belly was a fire of disruption and disquiet. Ancient songs of land rights filled the air while people feasted. Provocations burst forth as the freshly baked bread split open. The rites of Harvest have always held an ambiguous porthole into class, state, faith and wealth.

As the day developed, questions seemed to unfold. Passers-by raised inquisitive requests as to what was actually taking place. Social and individual memories of previous events of public sharing started to flow around the town square. There were simply too many stories, comments and thoughts shared on the day to capture them all, but it is worth just recalling one.

I met a man who had heard about the Harvest weekend via local radio, so he travelled from Norwich by bus on the Saturday—over two hours each way. He was so struck by the atmosphere of the event that, despite having to travel back that same evening, he returned the next day to witness the meal taking place on the Sunday. No-one knew his story, but fortunately he joined the meal via a spontaneous invite. Towards the end he approached me and shared the sense of joy and inclusion that he had experienced. He had spent most of his life (in his words) as an “observer of life”, but told me that his experience over the weekend made him feel like someone who was accepted and valued.

Further still, as the meal started to come to an end, a fresh wave of abundance started to sweep across the square. Passers-by, young and old, began a ‘second sitting’ from the sidelines. Bread, cheese and soup started to be taken by clusters of friends, individuals on their way home, and those who had none of these signs of comfort.

The uniqueness of the event continued to provoke the question: why was life not more like this all of the time?

#### **FUTURE HARVESTING**

Personally, this was the lasting effect of the weekend. How can the questions and feelings that emerged in and through the event be pursued? The ‘signature of harvest’ has always been coupled with subversive carnival. It has always been an occasion in which the political, legal and ideological authorities of the day were inverted. Cultural expressions of spontaneous ordering, DIY initiatives and deep mutuality created spaces of exception through which people could disregard, albeit temporarily, social positions and the concerns of life. Harvest signified the clearing of the ground, the opening for the potential of alternative future ecologies and economies. Spaces in which faith of the things not yet seen can be pondered and (literally) tasted!

The Harvest had its own ‘artistic twist’ amongst all of this historical inheritance. This twist brought potentiality and beauty, which provoked me to ask: what is a city for? Art offers various platforms through which connections and change can emerge: celebrations of identity and diversity, drawn out from the sharing of culture and food.

So I'm left asking, how can public space and interventions push us further to ensure that the city continues to love strangers? Peterborough finds itself on many geographical borders (river, fens, county etc), which in turn reflect the city's continual shifts in (global) human geography. The Harvest touched upon these wider issues in the tradition of all great festivals of harvest. The signature of this particular happening called people to push through the attitude of indifference to those outside of our atomised lifestyles. To sit, eat, drink and converse upon the city which is now, and that which we would want it to become.

**LIMITED EDITIONS**