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Food and art: A Brief history

Isaac Rivera

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Food and Art: A Brief History

By

Isaac Rivera

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts Rochester Institute of Technology School of Photographic Arts and Sciences Spring 2004

Approved by

J. Weiss
Chair: Jeff Weiss
Associate Professor, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

Angela Kelly
Angela Kelly
Professor, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

Judith A. Levy
Judy Levy
Faculty, College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
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Degree: Masters of Fine Arts
Program: MFA in Imaging Arts Photography
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Foreword:

Part of this thesis paper is concerned with describing a timeline for the history of the interactions between food and art. Throughout the rest of this work I will refer to these interactions simply as food art. Although food art is certainly an exhaustible subject, it is nevertheless a broader subject than the scope of this paper can encompass in its entirety and complexity. The next few paragraphs define what has been included and excluded, and the selection criteria used.

Early in my research of food art I came to the realization that there is a remarkable lack of published compendia on the subject. This is true for English and Spanish publications as of this writing. This is surprising because, as stated by Barbara Fischer in the introduction to Foodculture, one of the few notable exemptions to this scarcity, since the 1980's there has been an obvious and growing interest in the genre (21). With this in mind, and in an attempt to add useful information to the limited existing bibliography, this thesis paper, as stated before, in part strives to draw a timeline of food art. Here, I try to bring up as much as possible all artists working with food that my research has brought to light, with a focus on the 20th Century. This should not be considered an exhaustive catalogue though. Many artists who have used food in their work have been purposely omitted.

For my own research, I categorize food art into three groups: art with food, art of food, and art about food. Each of these categories represents a specific correlation between food and art. Art with food is the most generic type of food art and art about food is the most specific. Art of food and art about food are
subgroups of art with food. These categorizations do not necessarily represent mutually exclusive groups. Instead, each signals a way of conceptualizing the use of food in art. I would like to remark that these categories should not be interpreted as natural or final in any way, rather as a convenient set of selection criteria based on some of the commonalities found on different types of food art. Let me briefly describe each:

As stated, art with food is the most generic category. It includes art were food is depicted or represented in any way. To belong to this group, a work of art only has to include food in some way. In fact, all food art belongs here. Both Baroque still-lives and Carolee Schneeman’s Meat Joy share space in this category, for instance. Foodstuffs’ presence in the artwork may be merely formal or incidental and its foodness tangential to the work’s intent.

The next level of complexity is art of food. This is art where actual edibles are used as medium or are incorporated in the final art object. In the case of performance, theater, and other forms of transient art, food is a substantial element of the event. Dieter Roth, Sophie Calle and Jeanine Antoni are good examples of this category.

The third group of food art is art about food. In this most specific type, food takes center stage as the subject. Food is what is being considered in the artwork, or at least it is an integral component of that which is being explored by the artwork. In this category we could include Wolfgang Laib and the collaborative works of Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre.
In keeping with the scope of this thesis paper, I will be mostly concerned with the second and third of these categories. Most of the food artwork that meets either or both of these two definitions has been produced in the 20th Century, which will be the focus of the history part of this paper. Yet, there is a lot of overlap among these broad definitions and some works that don't quite meet my art of food or art about food standards have been included in this brief survey. In each exception, I have considered that the works in question merit mentioning because of their importance, which will be explained in a case-by-case fashion.
I. Introduction:

During the past year and a half I have explored issues of food, memory, identity, profession, art context, authorship, audience, and religion in a project that I have titled 12 Meals. The project has been presented to the public on a website: http://www.foodtimesfunction.com. A CD-ROM version of this website accompanies this thesis paper. This version includes all of the functionality of the original website that the CD-ROM format allows. During the course of executing 12 Meals and the subsequent building of its website many questions arose. These will be brought up throughout this writing either explicitly or implicitly as the individual cases dictate. It is my aim to bring insight to them, and, where possible, answer them, based on the experiences lived during the project and the research conducted in relation to it. Many of these questions are not new; others have been successfully answered in the past. However, in 12 Meals and FoodTimesFunction I explore a unique combination of them, reframed by new contexts.

Before describing and analyzing these projects in detail, I will establish a historical context for them. The next five chapters of this paper delineate such historical context. The seventh and final chapter is dedicated to considering the projects within the framework of the established historical timeline.
II. A Brief Prehistory of Food Art:

It is arguable that food art is as old as art itself. The earliest surviving expressions of artistic activity by anatomically modern humans (AMH) are commonly agreed to date back to the Upper Paleolithic (c. 37,000 – 11,000 BC). These dates roughly coincide with the end of the Fourth Glacial Period (c. 1,600,000 – 10,000 BC). The most significant of these works, both in quantity and quality, amount to cave painting with some surviving examples of sculpture in mid to Southern Europe. The Lascaux and Chauvet grottos in Southern France, as well as two dozen caves in Northern Spain, among them Altamira and Candamo, all depict most prominently animals that were hunted by Magdalenians regularly for food (illustrations 1 and 2).

It is true that appending any particular meaning to these surviving depictions runs the risk of projecting modern values on events with which we no longer have a cultural continuity. This is well cautioned by César González Sainz, professor at the University of Cantabria and the author of half a dozen scholarly articles on the subject of cave art during the Upper Paleolithic in what is nowadays Northern Spain for Muse Digital Archiving Frontiers in Tokyo. In his own words:

"It is very difficult to know the meaning of this art. It is a fact that there has been an absolute lack of continuity in cultural tradition between the Paleolithic and our society [...] This partly explains the little progress made in research on the meaning or reason of art during the Paleolithic, and that most studies prefer to concentrate on documenting the techniques, themes, composition and even on the chronological ordering of the art. [...] The studies aimed at interpreting the meaning [of this art] have tended to reflect, unfailingly, the changes in mentality and the way of thinking and
considering the past that have taken place, and continue to take place, in our society, as well as the ideology of each researcher.”

Yet we can infer some basic probable conclusions based on a statistical approach to these remnants. Again, Gonzalez Sainz:

"Among the animals, the basis of Paleolithic art, bovines - bison and wild aurochs -, horses, deer and reindeer, goats and chamois are the principal figures. In other words, the animals which were most commonly hunted and consumed [...] The animals are usually depicted in a more natural style than are human figures, whose faces are conventionally omitted or deformed. Many of the abstract signs are specific to each region, as will be seen later."

Nevertheless, many prehistorians have concluded that these paintings were intended as elements of "sympathetic magic", whereby the symbolic animals on the walls were intended to cause an abundance of game in the real world. This theory seems to be supported by the coincidence of the incidence of the remnants and the end of the Fourth Glacial Period. During this relatively short period of time, the warming up of the European landmass had as a side effect the withdrawal from the Southern latitudes of the abundant game herds that Magadalenians had become dependent upon. This may explain why earlier cave art shows a lower food animal to total animal depictions ratio than later, and closer to the end of the glacial period, cave art. For instance, Chauvin in central France, which is dated around 30,000 BC, roughly displays a 37 percent of hunted animals among its 447 animal depictions, while in later caves in Spain the paintings are almost exclusively depictions of hunted animals.

In the end, the sympathetic magic theory is an interpretation, and discussions of its merit belong elsewhere. But surviving Upper Paleolithic cave art, the earliest art known, is to a large extent composed of pictures of Paleolithic
food regardless of its original function or intention and, as such, is important in this survey.

Other early art that suggests a strong relationship to food include the Venus of Willendorf (circa 25,000 BC) found in 1908 near modern day Austria by archaeologist Josef Szombathy (illustration 3) and its younger cousin the Aphrodite of Laussel (circa 20,000 BC) found near Dordogne, France, by physician J.G. Lalanne (illustration 4). Both sculptures were carved in limestone and show striking anatomical resemblance; namely, the artists have chosen to emphasize similar attributes of the female body. First of all, both figures appear to be pregnant, as both display enlarged abdomens, bulging hips and enormous breasts. It has been interpreted widely that these do not represent actual people, but stand as divine representations or ideal states of mankind: their pregnancies symbolize fertility and their breasts abundance of food. This interpretation seems to be validated by the lack of detail on the figures’ faces: They seem to generically represent a human-like figure more than an actual person. The careful carving of the rest of the bodies let us know that more detailed representation of the faces would have been possible and is not a sign of lack of skill.

In short, it is very possible that the origins of art are closely related to one of humanity’s oldest concerns: the preoccupation with procuring a continued food supply.
III. Food Art form Antiquity through the Baroque Era:

Food as a legitimate genre in art is not to be officially born until the advent of the still life in Ancient Greece, according to historians. It was Zeuxis in the 5th century BC who "painted raisins which were so realistically reproduced that birds would try to pilfer them" (Still Life and Food).

There are hundreds of food still life examples between the 14th and 17th Centuries in European art, most of which fall under my most generic "art with food" category. Most of these are simply light and form studies of varying degrees of quality, but many seem to stand as metaphors of religious or economic significance. These relationships are interesting enough in their own right, but I cannot possibly explore them here in fair detail; yet there are a few that I have considered singular enough to be noted as follows.

The Milanese painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527 - 1593) produced some of the most remarkable likenesses of all times by assembling on his canvases foodstuffs in such a way that they retained their individual identity and yet as a whole clearly represented something else, usually a human figure. In his seasons series Autumn, Spring (illustration 5), Summer (illustration 6), and Winter are represented as human figures composed of produce and grains from each particular period of the year. Although his compositional technique may not be so strange if we consider that he began his artistic career as a stained glass designer, Arcimboldo's work is so unique that it has been considered instrumental in the development of unrelated disciplines. For instance, Dr. François Daniel Giezendanner of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of
Geneva considers Arcimboldo’s work as the earliest example of object-oriented abstraction in human thought. Object-oriented abstraction is a way of conceptualizing data that allows computer scientists to develop highly organized and modular computer languages that treat their data structures as real objects. Likewise, the theory of autopoiesis, developed by Chilean neurobiologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, which “has to do with how systems create, sustain and generate life while maintaining their overall structure and organization” is best visually explained by the paintings of Arcimboldo, according to its authors.

While discussing Arcimboldo, I should bring up a curious discovery. In *Fabulous Feasts*, Madeline Pelner Cosman describes how in the Medieval times it was not uncommon for the court’s hunting enthusiasts to be rewarded for a good hunt with “haslet” or the entrails and genitalia of the animals killed. It was considered a delicacy that could only be enjoyed occasionally. A version of mock haslet was popular and easier to feast on more frequently. This consisted of vegetables and nuts arranged and cooked in the form of the favorite animal parts (198). Is it possible that similar traditions surrounded the kitchens and tables of the courts and palaces that Arcimboldo frequented in his capacity as court painter to the Habsburg Crown?

The austere works of Spanish painter Juan Sanchez Cotán (1561 - 1627) have been described as “anorexic, taking this word in its literal and Greek sense as meaning ‘without desire’” (*Foodculture*, 58). In her brilliant essay *Food For Thought: Cucurbits in European Art*, Corinne Mandel, a specialist in the history of
Renaissance and Baroque art from the University of Western Ontario, deconstructs Cotán's 1603 *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (illustration 7) to show the complex symbolism of cucurbits, the taxonomic family of cucumbers, squashes, pumpkins and melons, during the Baroque period in European art. In her analysis, cucurbits were used in paintings to denote either good or evil (depending on how they were depicted and their compositional relationships to other vegetables and objects). In *Quince*, cucurbits tell a complex story of the author's indecision between secular and monastic life. To further support her theory, Mandel considers one of Carlo Crivelli's (1430 – 1495) many *Madonna and Child* paintings (illustration 8). Convincingly, she shows that in this work cucurbits are also used symbolically, this time to denote the author's sexual proclivity, which lead to his expulsion from Venice. Conclusively, food in European Baroque art was commonly used as a vehicle of subtle messages from cultural contexts that are now lost.

Florentine master Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519) comes down in my research as the first artist to use actual food to make art. Leonardo's relationship to food and kitchens is long and involved. Just before his birth, his mother, Caterina, married Accatabriga di Piero del Vacca, a Florentine baker. While being an apprentice at Verrocchio's studio, where he befriended Sandro Botticelli, he worked as a waiter at the local tavern *The Three Snails*. It is there that Leonardo acquires a profound distaste for the state of popular Italian cookery and it is there where he has his first try at running a kitchen, and fails, in the Spring of 1473. Entrepreneurial as his career and life always were, Leonardo
tries again, this time opening his own tavern in partnership with Botticelli. Again
the public of Florence rejects his "nouvelle cuisine" menu of simple, delicately
spiced meals served over sculpted layers of polenta (*Notas de Cocina*, 36 – 40).

As a child, Leonardo learned from Accatabriga to make sculptures in
marzipan that dried quickly under the sun. This technique of quick prototyping
must have suited well a genius of so many interests and talents and it plays an
important role in his destiny, for sometime in the late 1470's he sends Lorenzo de
Medici a set of blue prints and models for better assault ladders and other
weapons. Lorenzo was at war with the Vatican, but is confused by the marzipan
"cakes" that accompanied the blue prints, and serves them in a banquet. The
"cakes" were scaled models of the blue prints and Lorenzo, embarrassed upon
realizing his confusion, recommended young and unemployed Leonardo to
Ludovico Sforza, governor of Milan.

There is a lot of controversy and debate around the existence of the so-
called "Codex Romanoff" somewhere in the vaults of The Hermitage in St.
Petersburg. Even more suspicion surrounds the codex' only known copy from the
original: The 1940's Italian manuscript by the mysterious and otherwise unknown
Pasquale Pisapia. These days, the consensus seems to be that such a
manuscript may be based on a food codex that probably exists; however, it is
unlikely that the text is an actual copy of such codex. Regardless, the manuscript
details careful research by the master on nutrition, health and culinary arts, as
well as many engineering feats to improve cooking and food preparation and
consumption. For instance, Leonardo is attributed with the invention of the three-
pronged fork and the garlic press. Illustration 9 shows the sketches for a seventy-meters long nuts-reinforced polenta and marzipan brick replica of the Sforza Castle to be constructed for the reception of the wedding of Ludovico Sforza and Beatrice d’Este.
IV. Food Art in the XX Century, an Introduction:

We have seen that food has had a very long relationship to art. It is possible that the earliest surviving art is closely related to early human's barest of needs: survival in the form of ensuring sustenance and reproduction. Thus animals commonly hunted for food share a large proportion of the depictions in cave art of the Upper Paleolithic in Southern Europe (circa 25,000 BC).

We have also noted the birth of the still-life genre in Ancient Greece and scanned through a few of its examples during the Baroque period. These showed to us that, far from being simple composition and chiaroscuro studies, many of the genre paintings reflected deeply rooted myths about food and society. A cucumber may have stood in not only for the male gender, but also for masculine sexuality in specific social situations as well, depending on how it was depicted and its proximity to other vegetables in the composition.

Already in the XV Century, Leonardo started using actual food, marzipan and polenta, for making sculptures for events. Although this may have had to do more with the speed and ease of prototyping with soft, quick-drying materials, we learn that he was horrified when his audience ate his creations and remarked in dismay "I have observed with pain that my Lord Ludovico and his court gobble up all the sculptures I give them, right to the last morsel" (Foodculture, 71). This leads me to believe that, beyond mere decorative creations for occasions, he intended these pieces as art. Did other artists of the time use marzipan, polenta or other batters to make sculptures, or was Leonardo the first one? It is possible that, being the stepson of a baker, and having had a close relationship to food
and kitchens, he was in a unique position to introduce food to the art studio. For the moment this is a question that I have not been able to explore further.

Yet if a strong relationship between food and art has been there all along from the very beginning, concrete examples of clear symbiosis, like that of Leonardo, are scarce and occasional for the first 30 thousand years of their mutual histories. The 20th Century is a completely different story. Right from its opening, artists in Europe start using food to do all kinds of things. This explosion of exploration in art is not limited to food, of course. Art critic and curator Bill Arning, in On the Loss of a Three-Letter Word notes that “the art world has seemed to be on a nearly century-long path of self obliteration through relentlessly de-defining its own borders” (Foodculture, 81). In light of this trend, he offers an all-encompassing definition of the “A-word”: Art is “the effect of either an object or other phenomena that serves as a catalyst for thought, framed within the context of an art-discourse by either its author, creator or some other contextualizer” (Foodculture, 82). This safely covers most food art, but it does not explain why food has been such a provocative subject to many XX Century artists. Arning again on this issue:

“Food, I propose, has been a particularly appropriate fringe art activity because the growing, preparing, offering, eating of and the cleaning up after food have always operated under the same rules, the same dynamic, as the exchange between artist and viewer that characterize contemporary art. By merging the two we simply overlay one language on top of another revealing to ourselves hidden synonyms and symmetries. In so doing we nearly double our employable language for understanding each operation, gaining new ways to speak of and therefore understand food and art” (Foodculture, 83).

This explanation is a good place to start. That there are uncanny similarities
between food making and art making should be self evident to anyone who has spent some time in both the studio and the kitchen. However, there is a basic difference, the activities that prelude the consumption of food, culture-centric as the case may be, lead to the satisfaction of a core biological necessity, namely, the supply and replenishment of all the essential nutrients our bodies need to further their healthy existence. Art, on the other hand, is a luxury of the intellect that we choose to engage in. All other animals live happily without art, not so without food. However, food preparation and food fare are creative domains that every culture layers with many coats of tradition, myth, and taste. These layers greatly distance the kitchen from nutrition and bring it closer to the studio and the gallery as the last hundred years seem to be determined to prove. Let us proceed with the survey.
V. Food Art in the XX Century:

The first food artists of the last Century honor goes to the late Italian Futurists. In 1932 Alexandrian born Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876 - 1944) published the *Futurist Cookbook*. The book summarizes a series of talks staged between Milan, Paris and Budapest, and opened with a manifesto inviting Italians to revitalize their culture by changing the way they ate. The *Cookbook* intended “to take food out of its 19th Century bourgeois past and bring it into the dynamic, technological, urban 20th Century.” It attempted “to overturn concepts of family, table, great recipes, and established notions of goodness and taste” (*The Futurist Cookbook*, 7). It is interesting to note that Marinetti and the futurists saw food as the catalyst for the changes they wanted in Italian society. The *Cookbook* is filled with anecdotes of performances and events around food as well as recipes and other culinary suggestions proper for the new modern era the futurists envisioned (illustration 10).

The Catalan Surrealist Salvador Dalí (1904 – 1989) seemed to have three recurrent motifs in his work: his beloved wife Gala, bread and eggs. Many of his paintings are dedicated to the last two (illustration 11). He made famous a three-elbowed bread loaf which he had bakers make for him and now adorn the wall of *La Casa Galatea* in Figueres, Catalonia, Spain (illustration 12). In fact, once in the 1940’s he gave a lecture to an audience of anarchists “with a large loaf of bread strapped to his head” (*Surreal City*).

Marcel Duchamp (1887 - 1968), ever the pioneer of all trends 20th Century, made one of the first actual food art sculptures of the modern era,
Sculpture-morte or Still Sculpture in 1959 (illustration 13). Made of marzipan and insects on paper and mounted on Masonite, it measures about 13 inches high by 9 inches wide by 2 inches deep and hangs at the Centre Pompidou of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. It is a portrait in the style of Giuseppe Arcimboldo made for a joint venture with Robert Lebel.

It only seems a logical extension of his work that the German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys (1921 - 1986) was as committed and spontaneous in the kitchen as he was in the studio. In fact, the two spaces may not have been distinct from each other for him at all. His recurrent use of foodstuffs like fat and honey, among others, in his art objects and performances has been well studied. Too many to be accounted for here, let me present just take one of the best-known works as an example. Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz (Honey Pump in the Workplace) was executed during the 1977 Documenta 6 at the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany (illustration 14). It consisted of a two-motor installation. One of these moved a pump that constantly propelled several hundred gallons of honey through a gigantic system of Plexiglas tubes that ran from the basement to the roof of the museum. The other motor rotated a crankshaft coated in thick layers of fat. On its way through the Fridericianum the honey pipeline led into the backroom that Beuys had chosen as the location for his Free International University (FIU), and in which, at the information office of the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum, he spent one hundred days talking, debating and preaching. Keeping in mind Beuys' concept of "social sculpture" which underlies most of his works, one might interpret
Honigpumpe as a device to foster communication and the circulation of creative thoughts and ideas leading to a re-shaping of society.

A recent publication in Italy from a close friend of the artist, Joseph Beuys: The Art of Cooking by Lucrezia De Domizio Durini gives us an interesting if clumsy personal account of Beuys in the kitchen. She emphasizes the role of food and meal sharing in Beuys’ career as a natural extension of his art. For instance, every day during Documenta 6 in 1977, at the same time Honigpumpe was pushing hundreds of gallons of honey through the structure of the Fridericianum, Beuys would join the hundreds of students who came to Documenta in the patio of the museum for an improvised picnic-lunch (illustration 15), where, mediated by food and drink, the talks could continue in a more intimate, more spontaneous setting. But Beuys was as charismatic in the privacy of his kitchen in Drakeplatz as he was among the masses and he is well remembered for his “Veer-style salt cod” (illustration 16) and his “Drakeplatz stew”.

Contemporary to the messianic Beuys is his profane compatriot Dieter Roth (1930 – 1998). In Roth’s work, food is also a natural and recurrent material: sausages, lamb, chocolate, bananas, spices and other “foodstuffs” are the raw materials of Dieter’s whimsical creations during the 1960’s and 70’s. However, if in Beuys’ oeuvre food is an affirmation of the creative, an invitation to regeneration, in Roth’s it is an affirmation of the processes of decay and change.

In the first two sentences of her introduction to Roth Time: A Dieter Roth
"Is it appropriate to mount a retrospective of an oeuvre that seems so obviously geared toward its own undoing? The question arises in view of the organic, ultimately self-destructing materials used in the images and objects that have made Dieter Roth famous. The process of change is undoubtedly a constitutive element of his oeuvre" (12).

This is not just a curatorial irony. The work itself is ironic. Food, up until now in this survey of art, has either explicitly or implicitly served as an affirmation of life. Food nourishes the living and, so far in this survey, it has been used in accordance to this principle. Yet in Dieter's work it is used to underline the inevitable processes that everything alive undergoes: change and decay. Generation and degeneration are just two faces of the same coin. Roth literally produced hundreds of food art pieces that anyone seriously interested in the subject should spend time getting acquainted with. Let me quickly highlight one of his early representative series.

Between 1961 and 1974 Roth worked on a series of Literaturewurst or Literature Sausages. The concept was simple but illustrative of a uniquely Rothian sense of humor and logic present in many of his pieces. Start with a sausage recipe and where it indicates to use "7 pounds of fresh ground pork" substitute for "one fresh ground book". More idiosyncratic even was the choice of literary works that had the honor of being "sausaged". If he did not like a book, or if he was particularly envious of the success of its author, the book qualified. Some of the titles that made the series include Günter Grass's The Tin Drum,
and Dog Years; Alfred Andersch’s The Redhead; Robert Kennedy’s To Seek a Newer World; and Martin Walser’s Halftime (illustration 17).

If Dieter Roth’s use of food during the 1960’s and 70’s signified a departure from its “traditional” use in the visual arts until that moment, those decades (and to this day) also witnessed the use of food in art in ways that not only challenged the choice of proper art materials, but the very definition of art.

In 1963 Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri (b. 1963) opened a restaurant (eventually he would run three consecutive restaurants) named EAT-ART in which he acted as chef. He considered that every meal served at EAT-ART was a singular work of edible art prepared for the patron. At the same time he was making his tableaux piège or trap paintings, which consisted of boxed compositions of leftovers from social gatherings such as coffee cups, cigarette butts and food. One decade later in SoHo, New York City, a community of artists would open a restaurant and call it Food. Their goal was to support and sustain the art community of downtown Manhattan by providing a workplace where artists could earn quick money (illustration 18). This effort was conceptually spearheaded by Gordon Matta-Clark (1943 - 1978) and backed financially by Caroline Gooden (b. unknown). According to Paul C. Ha, Executive Director of White Columns, Food, which operated between 1971 and 1974, showed us “that art can feed us, literally and metaphorically” (Food, 7).

It is possible that EAT-ART and Food, which beyond the art concepts they embodied also functioned as social spaces, may be the antecedents to much of the performance-based food art of the 1990’s. Both the Argentinean born
Thailandese Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961) and the Taiwanese Lee Mingwei (b. 1964) have used food preparation and sharing as art in similar ways. The conceptual difference between their works is slight. Tiravanija believes that art is the social interactions and relationships that revolve around actions and objects while for Mingwei art lies in the mediation of culture-based differences.

Tiravanija and Mingwei are only two of a new generation of food artists. According to Barbara Fischer, for this generation "it is especially the site and sociality of the Kitchen that has come to be of particular interest, such as the preparation of the meal itself, the sharing of the dinner, and the conversations over eating" (Foodculture, 23). Other artists in this camp include Elaine Tin Nyo and myself, as we will see in the final part of this thesis paper.

Elaine Tin Nyo has worked with the idea of tradition and generational change in her mother’s work. In Egg Curry, 1997 she performed at the Artlab the preparation of her own recipe for the dish while projecting images of her childhood near her mother and making reference to her own and her mother’s mother’s recipe for egg curry.

Other young contemporary artists whose work I have come across include Diane Borsato, Pancho López and Iwan Inojo. Borsato is a young contemporary Canadian artist whose work tends to be related to traditional kitchen wisdom. It usually takes the form of photographs of performances and in-situ installations. In Sleeping With Cake, she goes to bed with “comfort foods” while feeling sick to find out if that would make her feel better, while in Warm things to chew for the dead, she randomly places home-baked goods on the graves of strangers in
cemeteries. She explains: “It seemed to me that if you were cold and dry and dead for a very long time, you'd probably miss the heat and succulence of things from bakeries, rotisseries and restaurants. I visited several old graves and left warm things to chew for the dead”.

Pancho López lives in Mexico City where he started a series of sidewalk food performances. I met him in New York City in the Summer of 1998 where he was treating the City to a small tour of his performances, which consist of setting a small table with a single place setting in a public space. Carefully, he then proceeds to serve a single meal and consume it to the surprise of casual pedestrians (illustration 19).

Iwan Inojo is a native of Java who at some point in the 1990's worked with Pancho Lopéz in Mexico. At his return to Jakarta, Inojo did a series of performances where he shared simple meals with the homeless. His idea was to give to these people meals that they would normally desire but not have access to. In his view these were tourists' food, so he chose for his performances meals from McDonald's.

The German Wolfgang Laib (b. 1950) has done much art with edibles. In Wolfgang Laib: Substance as Essence, Margit Rowell describes his work as:

“pollen squares, milkstones, rice houses (made of marble or beeswax), dishes of pollen, jars of pollen. Their common premise is that all the materials come from the world of nature. Furthermore, whereas in their natural state, milk, stone, pollen, beeswax, rice may appear static, they are living substances which participate in the ongoing organic processes of fertilization, birth, growth, decay. Paradoxically, their existence is so familiar as to be unfamiliar in that they are universally present, yet their imperceptible transformations barely capture our attention”.
His pieces are assembled in a way that the integrity of the materials is respected and their aesthetics are emphasized. These are collected seasonally with utmost care and patience. In his choice of materials, his identification with their seasons and his exaltation of their individual properties he underlines a way of life in which individuality is not important and the ecology of belonging to something larger and wondrous is remarked.

Another artist whose food work I would like to bring up here is Sophie Calle. In 1992 Paul Auster published his novel *Leviathan*. In it there is a character named “Maria”, who in part is based on some of the episodes around the life of Sophie Calle. In return, Calle dared him to write a fiction that she would impersonate. What she got in response was *Personal Instructions for Sophie Calle on How to Improve Life in New York City (because she asked…)*, a set of ritualized and arbitrary actions to be enacted by her. These of course, fit perfectly the realm of Calle’s work which Alfred Pacquement, director of the National Museum of Modern Art’s Center for Industrial Creation, has characterized as existing in the space between photography, writing and performance. He summarizes her formula as “action=doing” to explain her conceptual twist. It is not that her life is a continuous performing of a series of fictions, but rather that in order to generate her art she has to create the contexts for it by acting them out. In his words: “not to feign it, but to execute it in order to give birth to a story” (*Sophie Calle*, 22). Simply put, she writes fictions that she then makes real by enacting them, and documents them with photographs.
In *The Chromatic Diet*, during the week of December 8th to the 14th in 1997, Calle enacts some of the traits of María, Auster's character. In the novel, María would occasionally indulge in a “chromatic diet” or eating exclusively from foods of a single color on a single day. As with all of Calle’s work *The Chromatic Diet* was documented in photographs (illustration 20). She concluded her enactment week by preparing a banquet of each of the six previous meals for six guests. She fasted for the occasion.
VI. Other Food Art in the XX Century:

There are many other food artists that I have come across in my research but I did not include in the above survey. For completeness’ sake I would like to list them here and remark that their omission does not in any way reflect an opinion about the quality or merit of their works. Simply, there is no space in a work of the scope of this paper to bring all of them up in detail. They include in alphabetical order: Alison Knowles, Antoni Miralda, Ben Kinmont, Ben Vautier, Carolee Schneeman, Doug Hammet, Félix González-Torres, James Lee Byars, Jeanine Antoni, Judy Chicago, Shelley Miller and the collaborative work of Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre. I will briefly mention some of these when appropriate in the next section.
VII. 12 Meals and FoodTimesFunction:

My own interest in producing art made with food began in the late Spring of 1998. Then it was more of an aimless desire to use bread as art; the process of kneading and baking as art making; the kitchen and the oven as studio. Gradually over the preceding decade-and-a-half, I had become more and more involved with the kitchen and cooking. It may have all begun with separation anxiety over leaving home to go away to a foreign land to attend college. Home cooked meals are such a focus of the nostalgic mind! In an attempt to take a bit of home with me, I asked my mother to teach me how to cook. I was 20 years old. I could not have been aware of it at the time, but this desire to hold on to the familiar through food was already part of a worldwide generational phenomenon, which has seen an outlet in many young artists that came to light at the close of the 20th Century (Fischer, 23). I have already discussed a few of them like Lee Mingwei and Elaine Tin Nyo.

In 1998, growing discontent with what I was doing in the darkroom led to more time spent in the kitchen as both escape and comfort. Soon enough every cook attempts to bake. Immediately I discovered that baking bread was not just powerfully therapeutic, but remarkably similar to art making as well, as stated before, Bill Arning has written about these similarities. I started baking daily and I became obsessed with the quality of the bread’s ingredients and with the aesthetics of the loaves produced. It was sometime then that I began to rationalize that, for the most part, art objects are produced to be experienced by anonymous consumers. Rarely does the artist know the face of his work’s future
audience while working on a piece. This idea of an *anonymous audience* sometimes leads artists to conceptualize their artworks as offerings they just put out in the world. A similar process motivated me to an unnamed bread project in the Summer of the same year in which I baked and distributed an indefinite number of bread loaves around the city of Rochester. The bread, wrapped and labeled with the ingredients used in its manufacture, was left behind on random public locations for anyone interested to take. The process was documented with photographs up to the point of its distribution (illustration 21). What happened to the loaves after they were anonymously dropped around that city is unknown to me.

Bread has been around for six thousand years. Though fermentation of dough was discovered in Egypt, in some form or another all the cultures that developed in symbiosis with one of the ancient grains, barley, corn, millet, oats, rye, and wheat (with the only exception of rice) developed some form of bread as a staple (Jacob, 12). Such a long history of co-dependence and daily communion is inevitably bound to the rise of myths and ceremonies. This needs no explanation in the Western world. When Jesus said, “I am the bread” and broke a loaf to share it with his disciples, he was birthing a millenarian rite, but the metaphor he was creating must have made sense at the time for it to have such a strong and immediate mass appeal. Becoming one through the act of sharing food is not too distant an idea from becoming one through cannibalism and in the Last Supper Jesus forever married the two. The study of sociological anthropophagy or cannibalism encompasses many different forms of humans.
consuming other humans, but at least one of these, exocannibalism, is thought to be specifically related to the idea that through eating another human one might acquire their physical and/or mental traits (Bell, 2). In other words, you are what you eat. Inevitably, some artists will explore such concepts in their work. A relevant example is the work of collaborative contemporary artists Ingrid Falk, born in Stockholm, and Argentinean Gustavo Aguerre, collectively known as FA, who have worked extensively with bread. One such work, *The Lady in Bread*, which consisted of a female bread sculpture, was exhibited at the Piazza San Marco in Venice during the Biennale of 1993. There, “the pigeons picked and nibbled, the tourists helped themselves to chunks and, at night, Venetian hooligans finally ravaged her.” (Falk). Similarly to my bread project, *The Lady in Bread* explores the free and indiscriminate giving of food in public spaces. With the remnants of *The Lady*, which strikingly have the appearance of mummified body parts, Falk and Aguerre made another show in Stockholm. *Reliquias* displayed the surviving bread parts in museum-like cases over a bread-tiled floor. Visitors were obliged to walk over the bread to reach and observe the cases. Dove-shaped cookies were given at the show’s entrance, which the audience consumed while visiting.

Research I have conducted further supports and expands the idea of the *anonymous audience* for me. John Dominic Crossan has studied in detail the revolutionary counter-culture of food sharing in early Christianity. By subverting the simple, but heavily coded, traditions of table manners around the first century, Jesus and his followers were attempting to change society. Crossan
explains: "The Kingdom of God as a process of open commensality, of a nondiscriminating table depicting in miniature a nondiscriminating society..." (Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 66 - 70). Commensality is the name anthropologists give to a cultures' table etiquette. These set of traditions somehow represent all of the codes and social rules of that culture at large. This way, the table becomes a small stage for the whole culture, a microcosm. "Open commensality" in Jesus' practice, as defined by Crossan, implied a grass-roots attack on the Ancient Jewish and Roman table culture, and, by extension, on those cultures' social order. The basic form of this movement, as Crossan has outlined it, is defined in Luke 14:21-23 and Mathew 22:9-10, but Mathew 22:9 should suffice: "Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find." This versicle can be summarized in the following manner: Share your abundance without social discrimination. Give regardless of merit. Do not judge.

Food preparation and sharing as art more and more began to embody these concepts, literally and metaphorically, for me. Recently, I have revisited the idea in a series of Public Offerings (illustration 22) in which I lay a table place setting on a public space and serve on it a hot, home made meal. Just like in the bread project, I do not participate in what happens next. Indiscriminate sharing is also present in the food art of artists like Ben Kinmont and Félix González-Torres. Both have made work where the audience is invited to take samples of food, like in Torres' candy spills, or come to the artist's kitchen, like in Kinmont's Waffles for an Opening. However, the food artwork of these artists seems to be
focused on redefining the politics of art as a commodity. For instance, in the case of González-Torres’ spills, Bill Arning has deducted that the artist is interested in transferring to the art collector ownership of pleasure giving to anonymous strangers (86). Yet, I am more interested in the interpersonal connotations of sharing food. Sharing food is an act of intimacy, an implied agreement of friendship and equality. This is what it meant in the early Christian context. Offering someone food made with your own hands, the very same food that you will consume yourself (or accepting such an offer from someone else), is a statement of equality among the participants. The work produced for this thesis, *12 Meals*, and its online exhibition, *FoodTimesFunction* (http://www.foodtimesfunction.com), further explore this idea, but before I explain that in detail, let me describe the project itself.

Between April 2003 and March 2004 I organized a series of twelve meals (*12 Meals*). In each of these events, I cooked for one or more people a simple recipe specially designed for the occasion. The preparation and cooking of the meal was always performed in front of the guest(s). The main course was photographed while being prepared. Most of these meals happened in my kitchen at 194 Court Street in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, New York. Some of them took place in the kitchens of others, where I asked to host the meal. The first meal took place at 194 Court, exactly one month after my 35th birthday, on the 25th of April. Its main course consisted of a simple and delicious spaghetti frittata. The last meal was performed and photographed on my birthday, one year after the project’s initiation, March 25, 2004. For the occasion I baked pizza at home.
As this involved baking bread again, this event wrapped up not just 12 Meals, but the 1998 bread project as well.

On first impression, 12 Meals appears to be a direct successor to the happenings-like food art of the late 1990’s. I already have discussed the works of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Lee Mingwei in which food is the vehicle for what the artists define as the real art, namely the social interactions that arise from the preparation and sharing of the food. Indeed, there is a strong relationship in the form of my recent food art and that of these artists. However, conceptually I think of 12 Meals as more in line with a different thread in the history of food art; one in which food is used for its transformative powers. The Futurists believed that by changing Italian diet they could change Italian society. Likewise, Beuys believed that the food substances that he recurrently used (fat, honey, oil, wine) were vested with powerful energies that could influence the outcome of events. Two thousand years ago, a simple peasant in Galilee humbly attempted to overturn the discriminatory ways of humankind by simply subverting good table manners. 12 Meals belongs in this camp. However, there is another strong influence in the work that should be noted before explaining any further.

I have stated how Sophie Calle’s work operates in the space between fiction writing, performance and photography. We, her audience, experience her work in the form of photographs and text; however, the work is first authored in actions. In other words, in order for it to come to exist in those forms, it has to be performed, which, in her case, may be better described as lived. Sophie Calle lives her ideas so that they may exist in photographs and text. What is most
attractive to me of this formula is that the action is more-often-than-not performed in secrecy. The most wonderful things in life come unannounced, and for us, her audience, so does her work. She is of course not alone in this endeavor. We might recall that many of the early performances of Chris Burden happened at the exclusion of the spectator. Take for instance White Lights, White Heat (1975), Five Day Locker Piece (1971), or Oh, Dracula (1974). In all three examples viewers are prevented from experiencing that which is happening right in front of them. In both Calle's and Burden's work, the concept of anonymous audience discussed above is reversed. In these performances the audience is known, but the artists are hidden from it. 12 Meals operates similarly.

In 12 Meals art begins with the meal's planning and ingredients selection. Food gathering and preparation are important parts of the work, which lie in the domain of performance. Beauty and showmanship are necessary ingredients in the cooking of a good meal, like in the hands of a master sushi chef; the preparation of a meal is a display of elegance and grace, not unlike the exercise of a skilled tai chi practitioner. This may very well explain the relatively recent boom in the popularity of televised cooking shows. In my kitchen, this performance may or may not be noted by the invitees, but it is nevertheless staged for them.

Next, the meal is made taking great care in ensuring that the result will be extraordinary: a well-balanced gamma of flavors, textures and colors which will provide the audience with a complex aesthetic experience. Each serving is treated as the individual piece that it is. It is true, as stated by Jim Drobnick in
Recipes for the Cube: Aromatic and Edible Practices in Contemporary Art, that the “visualist histories of modern art” have relegated taste and smell to the “minor” arts (Foodculture, 69); however, as accounted, already in the 1960’s and 70’s Spoerri and Matta-Clark were serving food as art.

Finally, each meal’s serving operates as an implied contract between the author and the consumer of the meal or audience. This is true of any such exchange between two or more parties (Foodculture, 83). Furthermore, each meal is intended to make author and audience a little less unalike, a little more the same, in the same spirit of early Christianity. It is true that in 12 Meals the photographic remnants omit the audience of the actual event; the consumption of the food and the exchanges among the participants brought about by it are not documented. This is true of Félix González-Torres’s spills and of Ben Kinmont’s Waffles for an Opening as well. In González-Torres’s spills, all that we see is straight-on photographs of the candy-filled gallery corners where they were displayed to document the work. In Kinmont’s piece, which consisted of a table with paper plates where the invitation for breakfast was hand-written with the artist’s contact information, likewise, photographs remain documenting the process of writing on the plates. Neither artist shows evidence of the actual exchange of food. Lee Mingwei’s late Dining Project consisted of a dinner table installation with an embedded audio playback system. On the wall a sign invited people to fill their contact information on a provided piece of paper and put it in the adjacent ballot box. Every night a randomly chosen participant was treated to a dinner with the artist. The meal was consumed at the site of the installation.
The conversations carried out during the exchange were recorded and these were in turn layered over the previous dinner's track and then played back at the site were of the installation during the daytime. This sound recording did provide a glimpse of what was happening during the event of food exchange; however, soon the over sampling of recordings rendered the sound unintelligible and it became more of a conceptual testament to diversity than a window for visitors to peek into the events. Omitting the event's food exchange details in 12 Meals reiterates the idea of the anonymous audience. It is not important who receives the gift. The promise of such a gift itself is self-contained. A mathematical formula of equality takes the form of $x = y$. It is not necessary to know both $x$ and $y$ to solve the riddle. It suffices to know one of the two and the mystery is revealed. Likewise, in 12 Meals I reveal one side of the equation. In showing the process of preparing the food, and in showing the final dish, I attempt to say something about the offer being made and the possible outcome of the event.

*FoodTimesFunction* is an online exhibition of photographs from 12 Meals. Given the sequential nature of the work (12 Meals), I decided to explore the format of a journal where anecdotal stories and recipes could complement the photographic remnants of the actual meals. The stories reflect narratives not unlike the conversation subjects that took place during the dinners. The recipes share the food with an even wider anonymous audience than that afforded by the real events. The World Wide Web seemed like a natural choice as the delivery medium as it is expansible and it allows live exchange between participants—like in a real dinner—as well as the widest possible audience. The journal, as a
virtual space, was intended to function as an all-inclusive forum, where both food enthusiasts and art connoisseurs could find a place to meet their individual expectations, yet not be overwhelmed by each other. Design-wise, the website exists as middle ground between the highly polished and cold corporate food-network-type websites, and the charming but hardly-functional personal-recipe-collection websites; it was planned to be attractive, interactive, and functional. The journal entries are organized in a calendar-like fashion for ease of navigation. Visitors can print the recipes and are encouraged to partake in an online forum area provided for their free exchange about food or anything else as if they were eating together.

In 12 Meals and FoodTimesFunction, collectively, I explore issues of food, memory, identity, profession, art context, authorship, audience, and religion. This exploration raises many questions: Can normal human activities be raised to art by the intention of the practitioner or by his/her awareness of belonging to a larger tradition? Are art objects and practices transubstantiated by the context of the art ritual? Does acting out our concepts and ideas make us artists/authors? Are witnesses to such acts an audience, or do they have to be aware of their condition of witnesses to be called so? Is the kitchen (or anywhere else outside of the gallery or museum for that matter) a proper art context? Is the World Wide Web an adequate art delivery medium?

All of these questions have been asked before. Some of them have been resolved. 12 Meals and FoodTimesFunction provide a unique combination of them and take them into new arenas of action—like the web. The process of
these projects and their analysis on this thesis paper have answered some of these questions; some are left for the reader to decide; still some others are never to be answered to the satisfaction of most. In the end, it is not the answers that matter, but the complexities that are brought to light by the tenacity of doing.
Illustration 1: Stag, Lascaux Grotto
Illustration 2: Bison, Altamira Cave
Illustration 3: Venus of Willendorf
Illustration 4: Aphrodite of Laussel
Illustration 5: *Spring*, Arcimboldo
Illustration 6: Summer, Arcimboldo
Illustration 7: Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber, Juan Sanchez Cotán
Illustration 8: Virgin and Child, Carlo Crivelli
Illustration 9: Sforza Castle sketch, Leonardo da Vinci
Fisticuff Stuff
(formula by the Futurist art critic P.A. Saladin)

Cover the bottom of a round plate with fondue lightly perfumed with grappa. On one side of the plate put equidistant from each other three halves of red pepper shaped into cones which have been cooked in the oven and filled with a green paste composed of asparagus tips, celery and fennel hearts, little onions, capers, artichokes and olives. On the opposite side set out in a row three boiled leeks. An arabesque of grated truffle which starts at the second pepper and winds its way finally to the one on the edge completes the dish.

Cubist Vegetable Patch
(formula by the Futurist art critic P.A. Saladin)

1. Little cubes of celery from Verona fried and sprinkled with paprika;
2. Little cubes of fried carrot sprinkled with grated horseradish;

Illustration 10: Recipe page from The Futurist Cookbook
Illustration 11: The Broken Egg, Salvador Dali
Illustration 12: Torre Galatea, Salvador Dali
Illustration 13: Sculpture Morte, Marcel Duchamp
Illustration 14: *Honey Pump at the Workplace*, Joseph Beuys
Illustration 15: Joseph Beuys with students
Illustration 16: Joseph Beuys preparing cod
Illustration 17: Literaturewurst, Dieter Roth
Illustration 19: Sidewalk meal at 34th St & 6th Avenue, Pancho López
Illustration 20: Chromatic Diet, Sunday, Sophie Calle
Illustration 21: Bread Project, Isaac Rivera
Illustration 22: *Offering #1*, Isaac Rivera
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