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Kitchen Rag: Spaces of Food, Memory and Conviviality in Modern and Contemporary Art

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Kitchen Rag: Spaces of Food, Memory and Conviviality in Modern and Contemporary Art

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Emma Deutsch

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

“[T]he whole ritual, the symbolic expression of the meaning of life, appeals to all of the senses, just as also a medieval high mass involved all the senses, through the eye and ear to the smell of incense, the kinaesthesia of genuflection and kneeling or swaying to the passing procession, to the cool touch of holy water on the forehead. For Art to be Reality, the whole sensuous being must be caught up in the experience.”

~Margaret Mead

“Is that what art is? To be touched thinking what we feel is ours when, in the end, it was someone else, in longing, who finds us?”

~Ocean Vuong

“The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it’s a kitchen, if it’s a place where they make food, it’s fine with me. Ideally it should be well broken in. Lots of tea towels, dry and immaculate. White tile catching the light (ting! ting!).”

~Banana Yoshimoto

PREFACE / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was first planning this project, I thought I was going to write about food. I grew up in kitchens, whether the ones in the many matriarchal homes of my extended family, or the stainless steel beast of a classroom where my dad taught at Kingsborough Community College, which seemed vacuous and intimidating to my little kid eyes. I did not grow up with much visual art in my life, but I did grow up with the sights, smells, and tastes of meats, broths, stews, and stir-fries. I watched students learning how to cook as I was learning how to read, write, and think. As a teenager, and later, at Bard, I was always attracted to the most disgusting projects: anything with mold, grotesque figuration, mutated limbs, spills, or messes were my favorites. I thought my thesis would reflect that (and perhaps it does, a little). But really, as I got into the thick of writing, my thesis took shape not around eating, waste, and disgust, but around the spaces in which we learn how to eat, to cook, and how to be human together. It took on an architectural, feminist bent (for which credit is due to my amazing advisors Professor Olga Touloumi and Professor Alex Kitnick), and a communal, interpersonal ambition for the future.

With that bit of personal introduction, thank you to my generous mentors and board members: Olga, Alex, Katherine, Anne, and Vivien, for your patience, kindness, sensibility, and critiques. Alex and Olga, you have changed me from an opinionated little fungus into a stronger writer and more considerate thinker. To the entire Art History and Visual Culture department and to the many professors I have been lucky to have: I have relished and appreciated all of the courses I have taken: they gave me a sense of purpose. Thank you to the Center for Experimental Humanities and EHCN for supporting me in more ways than one throughout my time at Bard. To Grace my dear and the Eskins, you have been my second family: thank you for the endless compassion and for always letting me do my laundry at your house. To my family – Mom, Dad, Alice, Bubbie, Grandma, Zayde, Major Tom – and friends, who I wouldn't be here or myself without: I love you. Dinner soon?

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INTRODUCTION

I find myself often out of breath running between spaces of conviviality and privacy. Hiding in the kitchen and chopping enough onions for a week of stew sometimes feels like the only respite from a contentious, isolating world. On other days, carving out time with loved ones becomes the only way out from social media, the 24-hour news cycle, from ennui and anxiety. I have found much comfort in being a part of collective spaces and researching them: particularly those which celebrate and share the acts most fundamental to life. Perhaps the basest of these – and my entry point, in this thesis, to sharing stories of love, life, ambiguity, and struggle, using the voices of several artists – is the meal. There are few subject matters which transport us directly to our own kitchens, to our own daily rhythms of cooking and eating: these practices are so fundamental that, like the acts of loving or grieving, they can be carriers of intense emotion.

Beloved writer of the culinary, the domestic, and the feminine, M.F.K Fisher, for one, understood this power. Alice McLean writes that “Fisher wrote about food as a medium through which hungers, emotional as well as physical, could be nourished and fulfilled.”¹ Fisher once wrote, “Probably one of the most private things in the world is an egg until it is broken”: an endearing look at her ability to imbue food with its own agency and connection to the soul.² Fisher saw hunger as desire, and used food, in writings and in the kitchen, as a passionate way to satisfy and generate that desire. Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois concurrently referred to his physical appetite and hankering for intellectual discourse by using the word “hunger,” writing to friend and journalist Lester Walton that he had been hungry for a week or more. This was both metaphorical and an informal request for a shared lunch (a

¹Alice McLean, “Food, Sex, Language: The Lost Lovers and Later Words of M. F. K. Fisher and Elizabeth David,” *CEA Critic* 69, no. 1/2 (2006), 14.

² M. F. K. (Mary Frances Kennedy) Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*. San Francisco : North Point Press, 1988, 53.

common ritual between the two), where the pair could share conversation, thus nourishing both their bodies and minds.³ According to Alice Julier, “The meal is different from other food-related activities (such as eating a snack) [...T]he meal is particularly interesting because it is both physical and social, both a ‘metaphor for communication’ and ‘a physical event.’”⁴ The connections between physical/metaphorical, cooking/consuming and individual/society within the meal seem obvious, but are intensely rich in terms of artistic material.

In 1970, the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, known for feats of architectural machismo such as slicing buildings in half, suggested opening a restaurant to photographer/dancer Carol Goodden as a half-joke.⁵ She took him seriously, inviting Matta-Clark and video/performance artist Tina Girouard to open FOOD in SoHo (fig 1, fig 2). Scholars have focused on the restaurant’s place in a lineage of art restaurants, among them Allen Ruppersberg’s 1969 Al’s Cafe, an Americana lunch spot serving enigmatic “food” like toast and leaves, intended to bring the mystery of art into the familiarity of everyday life, as Allan McCollum writes (fig 3).⁶ The unassuming comfort of Al’s Cafe countered melodramatic performances and monumental site-specific works such as Richard Serra’s steel installations, which were popular at the time. Meanwhile, FOOD hosted avant-garde “guest chef” events, where artists were invited to play the role of cook for an evening. The artist-led feasts included a proposal (which never came to fruition) by Mark di Suvero where a crane would serve meals through the restaurant’s windows, Robert Rauschenberg’s more practical homemade chili, and Matta-Clark’s bone meal. On the evening of the bone meal, FOOD served a series of animal bones including frog legs

³ Jennifer Jensen Wallach, “Introduction,” *Every Nation Has Its Dish: Black Bodies and Black Food in Twentieth-Century America*, University of North Carolina Press, 2019, 2.

⁴ Alice P. Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 5.

⁵ Lori Waxman, “The Banquet Years: FOOD, A SoHo Restaurant,” *Gastronomica* 8, no. 4 (2008): 26.

⁶ Allan McCollum, “Allen Ruppersberg: What One Loves About Life Are the Things That Fade,” Accessed February 12, 2023. <http://allanmccollum.net/amcimages/al.html>.



Fig 1. The exterior of FOOD, SoHo, NYC. Source: Observer

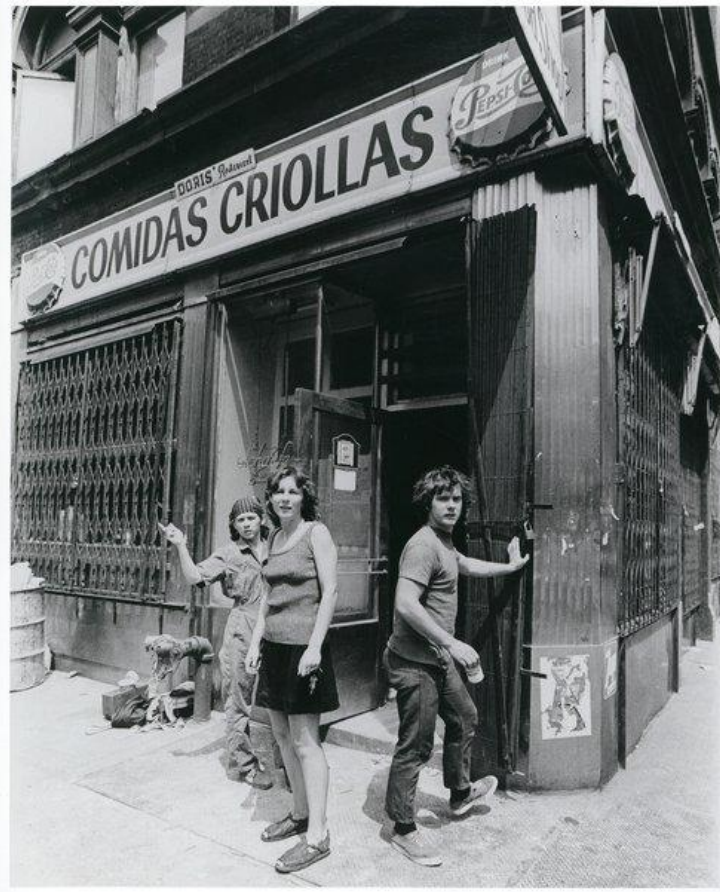


Fig 2. From left: Tina Girouard, Carol Goodden, and Gordon Matta-Clark in front of FOOD, 1971. The group bought the lease for FOOD from Comidas Criollas, a Puerto Rican lunch counter. Source: Autre Magazine



Fig 3. Allen Ruppersberg in *Al's Cafe*, 1969. Source: allanmccollum.net

and oxtails, their remains strung by artist Hisachika Takahashi into necklaces for guests to bring home with them. It is easy for these star-studded bursts of creativity to overshadow the daily running of the restaurant, where, under the direction of Goodden, staff served both comforting and unexpected meals to their community.⁷ The restaurant, open daily for three years and staffed by artists seeking a flexible day-job, served dishes such as gumbo, sushi, and vegetarian – meals which were unconventional for much of New York City at that time. It physically sustained creators at a time when the phrase “struggling artist” was not so tongue-in-cheek, and provoked them to think about gastronomy within the context and processes of art. FOOD set the tone, in its daily activity arguably more so than its spectacle, for concurrent food sculptures, performance art, and culinary projects, as well as for future works in relational aesthetics such as cooking installations by Rirkrit Tirjavanija, which channeled the power of the communal, often the feminine, and the everyday.

In this thesis, I investigate how artworks that situate food within quotidian rituals (using the formula of the *meal*) can articulate the subsumption of the individual into (and in resistance to) various, rhizomatic systems of relationships (social, environmental, political, economic). Rather than center the contributions to art by players such as Carol Goodden with FOOD, I hope to understand why certain artists involve food in their practices and what their work says about human relationships to cooking and eating. I use the thesis as an opportunity to put people in conversation with one another, to curate scholarship and artwork, offering a mix of argumentation, analysis, and personal narrative. This thesis uses recent research on food art (see: the edited volume by Bottinelli and D’Ayala Valva) to focus on “meal” projects – sculptures, photographs and installations which reference the

⁷ This DIY community-building was, Lori Waxman notes, done in an unforgiving space, designed by artists, not chefs, with illogical systems such as changing the menu every day, which made ordering ingredients nearly impossible and huge amounts of food waste inevitable.

architectural space of the meal-table (or lack thereof). Such projects emphasize the everyday (the quotidian, the mundane, often the domestic) as something simultaneously personal and communally shared. They include, but are not strictly limited to projects which Bottinelli and D'Ayala Valva label as food art. Rather, my focus is on artworks which emphasize the conviviality of mealtimes and spaces, as phenomena which implicate, at their core, the convergence of physical sustenance and metaphorical, soul-sustenance via sociality.

My theoretical approach situates food within systems of production and consumption that move beyond the kitchen, while using the kitchen as a sort of terrarium for our larger, shared "life." At the same time, I examine narrative moments of disarticulation, intimacy, and abjection, in an effort to resurrect the personal and relational components of food networks. Eating does not always provide comfort and *communitas*: it can also be disordered, disgusting, withheld in torture or as part of a hunger strike. Food is nourishment, but it is also excretion, disease, and decay. Beyond the kitchen and the world of the tangible lie vast systems of agricultural politics, medical infrastructures, and cultural food practices. But these networks are also guests at every dinner table. They sit, invisible, alongside family members, friends, and lovers. In meal form, political and social happenings participate in domestic gossip, grieving, and celebration. Likewise, scribbling a recipe to share, pouring tea, remembering someone's favorite candy, or ordering your last meal – the personal meanings we derive from food – are as much relevant to the life of a food object as its production is.

This thesis is based on an understanding of "food" from farm to table to landfill, and considers art as something both within and beyond high art spaces, to emphasize where such distinctions both serve and fail. Every food object is created by a network of systems of production and circulation: grain may be grown in Ukraine, from seeds that originated in Egypt, milled into flour in Pakistan, shipped to

Mexico where it is baked into bread, then shipped to the United States and sold in a Pennsylvania grocery store. After the food object (a loaf of bread, for example) is created, transported, marketed, and sold, it exits the purview of systems of production. But an object does not cease to exist after its purchase (or even after its consumption). Here, networks of personal and cultural interaction come into play. A family may transform a store-bought loaf into breadcrumbs for *kofte*. That same loaf may expire on the shelves of the store and decompose in a landfill miles away. By focusing on its material origins and extending the temporality of our view of the food object in both directions – to include its past and its future – we reveal the complex and interconnected structures behind the apparent mundanity of everyday life. Contemporary art projects which center food materials, cooking, and eating can operate like a scan of the nervous system within the body. They illuminate the food systems and cultural networks, which we may only see or know part of, that construct the quotidian, the personal, and the everyday.

At the same time, many artworks that seek to emphasize domesticity focus on craft media – embroidery or ceramics – or on spaces – kitchens or dining rooms – rather than using food itself as a domestic material. These works often focus on the ritual of the table setting or on the sociality of dining spaces more than the food itself. Where moments of cooking and eating often strike me as a moment of art within life, these moments of life within art (dinner tables, photographs inside the home, images of food, or performances involving cooking) may lack the same effect of mundane brilliance, although often the artist's intention is to call attention to these brilliances.

In defining the everyday, I channel certain aspects of late-1960s and early-1970s feminist thought: namely, recognizing that the personal is political. Silvia Federici has written on the cruciality of reproduction – the work undertaken, historically, by women, such as biological reproduction and

child care, but also caring for the environment, sustaining culture, and performing the household and agricultural tasks which are of utmost importance. She has said that “the policies brought in by the neoliberal agenda have, in fact, made reproduction a question for millions of people across the world. We’ve witnessed a tremendous attack on our means of reproduction - on every form of sustenance from wage employment to services to access to nature and the common-wealth - land, water, and forests.”⁸ Like pottery and other so-called decorative arts, cuisine was not included in early art historical designations, and was confined within the realm of domestic work. Both involve materials and products of the everyday; both are integral to the sustenance of life: pottery is one of the oldest human technologies for holding water and serving food. Both cooking and work with clay have been historically associated with women as well as peoples colonized by European powers. Over time, some examples of ceramics and cuisine have departed from function and developed into purely aesthetic or sensory experiences, introducing them into the high art world, and perhaps, in some cases, cleansing these practices of some of their functional, domestic, and ritual meanings. My thesis seeks new language to talk about food beyond its edibility, and asserts that many food art projects have meaning beyond a gimmick: namely, the political and convivial (social, lively, interpersonal) content which they address.

Sliman Mansour’s bread sculptures, which he created in the late 1990s, epitomize not only the symbolic and formal unity of bread and clay, but the inherent politicization of the everyday. His 1999 sculpture of a loaf of *taboun* (fig 4) is a dried round of clay, poked with holes and cracked so that it resembles not just a flatbread, but the surface of the moon. Mansour, most popular for his paintings of Palestinian figures and pastoral landscapes, consistently addresses issues of land, national identity, and

⁸ Silvia Federici, Lisa Rudman, and Marcy Rein, “The Means of Reproduction.” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 19, no. 2 (2012), 55.



Fig 4. Sliman Mansour, *Taboun* bread, 1999. Source: Instagram (@sliman.mansour)

sovereignty. By forming Palestinian loaves from Palestinian clay, Mansour connects his cultural identity explicitly and tangibly to its native land. Like many food artists, Mansour begins with the personal. He shared an image of his 1999 loaf of *taboun* bread on Instagram in 2021 with a caption about the first Intifada (1987-1993, one of many uprisings against Israeli occupation, where Palestinian civilians boycotted Israeli goods). Mansour posted his sculpture alongside a warm painting of *taboun*, persimmons, olives, and an unpeeled onion: a still life (fig 5). The Instagram diptych of sculpture and painting show two sides of *taboun*: one three-dimensional, dried out, and lacking; the other idealized in a domestic, and utopian context, nourished and nourishing.

Bread, formed from dough, and ceramic, formed from clay, both undergo a firing process which transforms them into something usable and no-longer malleable. Crucially, Mansour does not fire his bread sculptures. Rather, he allows them to dry and crack into brittle and fragile loaves. The loaf's coarse frailty signifies a deficiency analogous to its own inedibility. Without the proper tools (a kiln, an oven), Mansour suggests, an artist is unable to produce an effective sculpture, a strong bowl, or a tasty and nourishing loaf. Likewise, without a people's control over their own land, they are limited not only from a free expression of cultural vibrancy, but from the cultivation of crops and baking of bread endemic to daily life. Mansour's mud sculpture crisply joins material with message: Palestinian land is inseparable from Palestinian identity, as Yael Raviv argues on the behalf of other artworks.⁹ Israeli occupation harshly limits access to fields for growing wheat, among other indigenous crops, as well as access to water, education, and holy lands. These restrictions are, of course, alongside the constant threat of military attacks which utilize air raids, missiles, and drones. According to Al Jazeera, in 2022 alone, "more than 170 Palestinians, including at least 30 children, were killed across the

⁹ Yael Raviv, "Still Life: Performing National Identity in Israel and Palestine at the Intersection of Food and Art." In *Global Jewish Foodways*, edited by Hasia R. Diner and Simone Cinotto, 207–36, University of Nebraska Press, 2018.



Fig 5. Sliman Mansour, *Palestinian meal*, 1980. Source: Instagram (@sliman.mansour)

occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.”¹⁰ As bodies fill with bullets and the soil fills with shrapnel, the wheat cannot grow as it once did. It must be imported from abroad or yield a minimal crop, and thus, the bread changes alongside both people and land.

Work such as Mansour’s *taboun* – truly earthly and relatable work – may allow us to feel as if we can walk across a mud bridge, see another space, and choose, either to return to our islands, or to stay: a power that Neil Gaiman suggests good fiction also has.¹¹ In Mansour’s object, “food” is reduced to one of its simplest forms. The sculpture is one unit, a single loaf. One person may eat this loaf over the course of a week, or one family may share it at a meal. A loaf is stretched in times of poverty, and celebrated or worshiped when there is excess. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins and Basma Fahoum discuss how “[b]read is considered sacred in all Abrahamic religions, and can be found hanging next to dumpsters,” in many countries in the Middle East, rather than being tossed inside of them, to signify its valued position over other trash objects.¹² Channeling sacred and communal associations with bread, Mansour shares how a ubiquitous product can motivate and unite a people. The loaf can establish the barriers of community and potentially, if offered a hunk, invite solidarity. The simple loaf of clay expresses both physical sustenance (the struggle for nourishment under apartheid rule) and the ideological sustenance of resistance, a cultural identity of connection to the land, of struggle, that exists in the (Palestinian) everyday. The loaf effortlessly reflects those things, fundamental to our daily existence, like land and nourishment, that some may overlook if the security of those things is not threatened. Both the struggles and the privileges of accessing healthy, culturally fulfilling food are part of a larger, shared everyday.

¹⁰ Zena Al Tahhan, “Israel Raids: Why Are so Many Palestinians Being Killed?” *Al Jazeera*, January 26, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/26/why-israeli-raids-killed-many-palestinians-this-year-explainer>

¹¹ Neil Gaiman, “Chapter 11,” *American Gods*, 984. Accessed April 17, 2023. <http://archive.org/details/AmericanGodsNeilGaiman1>

¹² Basma Fahoum, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2020), 237.

The ingredients someone uses and the way they prepare and share them are inseparable from what happens outside the house: from systems of international trade to the cultural traditions, family recipes, and culinary techniques they were raised with. Daily life revolves around food, and in turn our meals structure personal routines, social patterns, and cultural behaviors which come to shape identity. Simultaneously, these meals come from systems of farms and markets, from centuries of cultural and cross-cultural production. By referencing the edible materials of their lives or sculpting it into forms significant to mass audiences, many food artists activate food on both the personal and universal levels. The quotidian can be mundane and private, but it can also be radical, exuberant, and intensely social and political. The everyday is exploitative and alienating, safe and dangerous, domestic and worldly. Behind every drumstick, as Psyche Williams-Forsion explores in *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, are decades of beloved family recipes, strenuous kitchen labor, and ugly, violent stereotypes.¹³ Food encapsulates that, while both the personal and the political are often experienced individually, these things are both formed and shared communally.

Responding to the historical limitations of scholarship on the everyday, food studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary field to analyze aspects of culture and humanity through what we eat. Warren Belasco, who played a large part in solidifying food studies as an academic field, acknowledges that while food production is studied across the social and physical sciences, food consumption has not received much attention, despite (and because of) its proximity to personal life.¹⁴ Food scholars seek to bridge the academic separation between production and consumption by investigating the role of food in culture. Jeff Miller, in his introduction to *Food Studies*, posits that food studies experts do not analyze food itself, as a food chemist might. Rather, food scholars explore the “relationships between

¹³ Psyche A. Williams-Forsion, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. Black Women Writers Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹⁴ Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (Berg, 2008), 1.

food and the human experience,” often taking an interdisciplinary approach.¹⁵ Research in food studies demands consideration of the food-informed identity, where “identity” is defined as something simultaneously personal, social, and cultural-political. According to sociologist Claude Fischler, “[t]o incorporate a food”—that is, to consume food, to take it into our bodies—is “to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat.”¹⁶ The identification with the food we eat composes identity, which Fischler asserts creates the barriers between one community’s specific eating habits, and another (the Other). For example, Krishnendu Ray, a food scholar known for his sociological research on the “ethnic restaurateur” has written that disgust – an emotion in this context encapsulated by aversions to certain foods – divides cultural communities and often serves as a “metaphor for otherness.”¹⁷ Similarly, food is not only a major component of personal, cultural, and national identity; it also plays a key role in memory, shaping how we individually and collectively remember the past, as Jennifer Jordan posits in her chapter on apples, identity, and memory in post-1989 Germany.¹⁸

Throughout art history proper, scholars have discussed the symbolic powers of food as subject matter in paintings. I think of Anne Vallayer-Coster’s intimate and charged still lifes such as one where the sharp angle of a knife in a fleshy ham embodies a possible tension within the home (fig 6), or the more obvious bread and wine as the sacrificial body and blood in Catholicism and depictions of the Last Supper (fig 7). Only in the past decade have scholars focused on food art – using food either as material or as part of an artwork’s process – categorically, alongside exhibitions such as *Eating the*

¹⁵ Jeff Miller, in Jeff (Jeffrey P.) Miller and Jonathan Deutsch. *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods*. London ; Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 3.

¹⁶ Quoted in Zhang, Jenny. “The ‘White People Food’ Meme Is Trapping Us All | Bon Appétit.” August 23, 2022. <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/white-people-food-meme-explained>.

¹⁷ Krishnendu Ray, “Meals, Migration, and Modernity,” In *The Migrants Table: Meals And Memories In Bengali American Households*, Temple University Press, 2004, 152.

¹⁸ Jennifer A. Jordan, “Apples, Identity, and Memory in Post-1989 Germany,” In *Debating German Cultural Identity since 1989*, edited by Anne Fuchs, Kathleen James-Chakraborty, and Linda Shortt: Boydell & Brewer, 2011, 47.



Fig 6. Anne Vallayer-Coster, *Still Life with a Ham*, 1767. Source: Wikiart

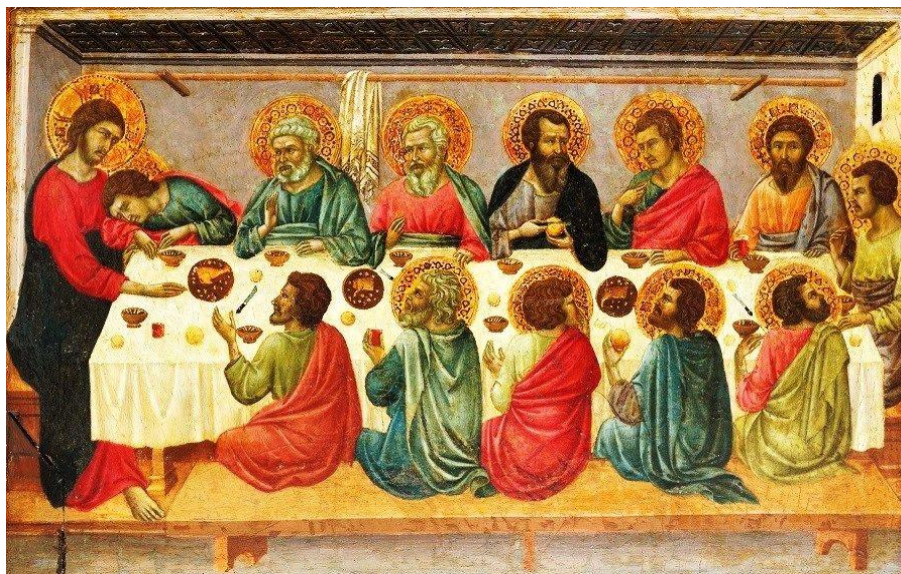


Fig 7. Ugolino da Siena, *The Last Supper*, 1325.

Universe in Düsseldorf (2009-2010), *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* in Chicago (2012), and Milan's *Expo 2015: Feeding the Planet*.¹⁹ Food art, as defined by Silvia Bottinelli and Margherita D'Ayala Valva in their 2017 edited volume, entered into the contemporary art canon throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Artists such as Janine Antoni use edible materials as a medium for sculpture or as part of a performative process. In *Gnaw* (1992), Antoni chewed away at two 600 pound cubes of chocolate and lard, respectively (fig 8). She spit out each mastication, then used the chewed material to create heart-shaped chocolate boxes and tubes of lard lipstick (fig 9). The food art genre finds precedence in modernist art projects such as the Futurist Cookbook, which published avant-garde recipes seeking to reframe how we consider food – and life – in modernity. In his manifesto on Futurist cuisine, Italian Futurist ringleader F.T. Marinetti condemned pasta, blaming it for the skepticism and laziness of Italians. He suggested a new cuisine for Italy that would center chemically-engineered artificial food (all necessary nutrients in the form of pills or powders) and imaginative, theatrical “food sculptures.”²⁰ Despite Marinetti's radical claims and impact on art: particularly on the synthesis of performance, music, food, painting, and sculpture, the national emphasis on pasta persisted. The Futurists could not overturn the cultural history, cheap price, or daily significance of pasta to Italians by virtue of spectacle – art – alone.²¹

Anthropologist David E. Sutton argues for the study of food in its quotidian form: the meals we eat every day and on annual special occasions create the rhythms of our lives. Meals both rare (Christmas dinner) and common (midday coffee), we may hold our breath for all year or all morning,

¹⁹ Bottinelli and D'Ayala Valva, *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices*, 7.

²⁰ F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings: F.T. Marinetti*, Edited by Gunter Berghaus. Translated by Doug Thompson, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, 397.

²¹ Carol Helstosky, “Time Changes Everything: Futurist/Modernist Cooking,” *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices*, 45.



Fig 8. Installation view of *Gnaw*, 1992. Janine Antoni. Source: janineantoni.net

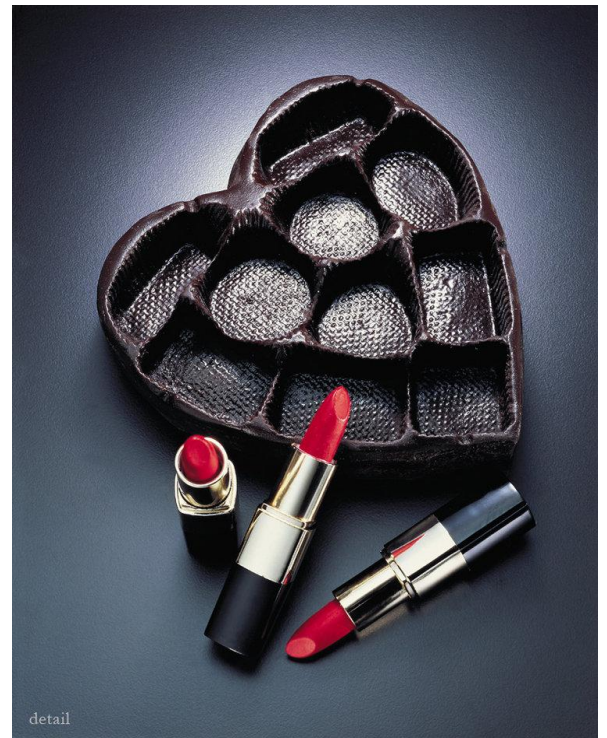


Fig 9. Detail of *Gnaw*, 1992. Janine Antoni. Source: janineantoni.net

thus shaping the nature of each day. Likewise, the food we prepare and eat both reflects and is reflected in our behavior and choices. This extends to artmaking whether the artist knows it or not: when an artist uses meat as material, or photographs their own kitchen, they channel the power of the everyday. It is often when artists utilize food's materiality (for example, in creating sculptures made of edible materials or meals which can actively nourish audiences) that they access its potential. They channel the essence of things brilliantly mundane (what Jane Bennett terms "vibrant matter"): landfills and compost bins, bones, leaves, pits, and seeds. Food art can, by referencing that which we all know so well, reflect a lifetime of family dinners and backyard cookouts, channel starving or nourished bodies, remind us of sharing a pint of ice cream with a partner or eating it alone after a breakup, connect us with community justice movements sustained by shared meals. By focusing on everyday meal-spaces in modern and contemporary artwork, I often highlight how food establishes and perpetuates certain domestic notions: I look at where the edges of the home kitchen and personal art practices bleed into the public, rather than focusing on public art or public cooking (ie. the community mural or fine dining restaurant).

Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, an onslaught of technologies, ideas, and trade routes crossed the previous Soviet and Western blocs, yielding the globalization and neoliberalism of not only most of the United States and Europe, but world markets at large. In the twenty-first century, the vast majority of people are more alienated from one another, and from the production of what we eat (farming, baking bread, raising livestock), than ever before.²² Artists responded to the obvious consumerist values of the 1990s with blatant institutional critique and calls for countercultural communities of mutual support and political resistance. To paraphrase Silvia Federici, globalization

²² Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (Berg, 2008).

structurally needs social inequality, which both perpetuates itself and spurs resistance among the people. While not all of my objects of focus are North American artworks born out of the 1990s, I focus on this locale because of its embodiment of the post-1989 globalist moment as well as because of its art historical context (not to mention because of my own familiarity). At this point, American art writers in particular began to develop a language of food art, in the context of relational aesthetics. Relational aesthetics projects, defined by Nicolas Bourriaud as the driving theoretical force behind art in the 90s, seek to establish interpersonal encounters or a sense of community in response to the depersonalization of society via the Internet and transition to a service-based economy.²³ Relational artists often used food and cooking in their attempts to transcend individual ego and to simulate what Tim Ingold has termed the “mesh” of society: a tangle of systems and interactions that compose the texture of the world.²⁴ Notable in this category are Rirkrit Tiravanija’s installations, beginning with 1990’s *untitled (pad thai)* and 1992’s *untitled (free)* (fig 10, fig 11). In these works, the artist prepared and served noodles (*pad thai*) and curry (*free*) to gallery visitors, hoping to create bonds via the collective consumption of a flavorful meal. Tiravanija envisions not just the food made or the social dining, but the act and tools of cooking, as constitutive of his works of art. These installations are also critiques of what the museum considered *art*: static, expensive objects and not social affairs, ephemeral things, or domestic objects. By cooking at venues such as MoMA, Tiravanija effectively expanded this

²³ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” *October* 110 (2004), 53-54.

²⁴ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. New edition. London: Routledge, 2022.



Fig 10. Rirkrit Tiravanija presents *untitled (pad thai)* at the Paula Allen Gallery, New York, 1990.

Source: South China Morning Post



Fig 11. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled (free)*, 1992. Source: 303 Gallery

definition. By using the post-1989 moment and relational aesthetics as a framework, although not necessarily a strict requirement, I am able to use languages of community, critique, and identity that are crucial to my analysis of food art and the everyday. This framework also allows me to incorporate feminist methodology of the latter twentieth century, and to analyze art projects of the modernist and contemporary moments as confluent, rather than binary.

Scholars have historically considered much of the significance of food art to be institutional critique: that they question what is considered art, who is considered an artist, and what types of creation belong in the museum space. I argue that some works of relational aesthetics, particularly those which fall outside the performer-spectator binary, can epitomize larger cross-cultural and interpersonal relations, critiquing structures both within and beyond the art world. Food art, in its elevation and scrutiny of the quotidian, is widely accessible theoretically. It does not demand, as some plastic arts do, an understanding of centuries of art historical references. Its impact is visceral and embodied, sometimes conceptual but always grounded in the corporeal.

Paying attention to the matter that surrounds us provides awareness of the profound resonances that even the most mundane objects hold. From Bruno Latour's actor network theory and Jane Bennett's concept of thing-power, we learn that quotidian objects such as food carry both their own affect and various effects on human lives, and should be treated as such. As Latour writes, in his call for an object-oriented politics, one of humanity's most damaging and consistent phenomena is "to be crowded with objects that nonetheless are not really integrated into our definition of politics."²⁵ Édouard Glissant calls us to understand the poetics in the complex relationships around us: between

²⁵ Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik." In *Making Things Public*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 4–31. MIT Press/ ZKM, 2005, 6.

individuals, between cultures, between person and plant.²⁶ These poetics are often beautiful and disturbing, and in any form key to understanding and creating the rhythms of life. Across disciplines, scholars investigate the life of one person to texture our understandings of history, power, or culture. Meals provide a source beyond diaries, interviews, or letters for examining the impact of these categories on lived experience, and food art is accessible in ways that food alone isn't: it is conserved, in one form or another.

This thesis serves as a collection of case studies centering the ritual of mealtime, in particular. It does not offer a survey of food art, nor investigate one specific outstanding case, but suggests, as others have, that personal life and political themes lurk beneath both works of art and daily life. Many of the projects I discuss create spaces within the art world, which are originally and fundamentally external to the art world: often from the domestic context via the home table. This, for me, serves as a crucial intervention into an art world that is historically isolated from daily rituals and esoteric in references and enthusiasts. Due to their visuality and non-paint materialities, these works address viscerally the relationships between architectural spaces, edible material, the body, and the bodies of others, in a way that is both accessible and personalized.

The first chapter of my thesis is a short chapter that centers Alice B. Toklas in the context of the historical legacy and contemporary realities of the dinner party. Dinner parties are a historical and sociological phenomenon worth many books and theses (my gratitude to those that have already been written), and Alice B. Toklas's story sits at the intersection of many matters that dinner parties often implicate: class, gender, race, servitude, queerness, art, cooking, cookbooks, and hosting, to name a few. Toklas is also significant to this thesis given that she hosted celebrity artists at her Paris home and

²⁶ Édouard Glissant, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

contributed, perhaps slyly, to modernism in the early twentieth century (both in the visual arts and literature). This chapter, and writing about Toklas herself, allows me to connect and introduce themes of sustenance, servitude, the dinner party, art and artistry, gender roles, queerness, and the avant-garde, all of which I touch upon throughout my paper.

In the second chapter, I populate our proverbial table with two seminal artworks and one contemporary complication. This chapter specifically concerns the table as a site of ritual, socializing, and enforcing/subverting stereotypical roles, particularly those related to gender. At the front of this chapter, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* are juxtaposed, both as iconic feminist artworks and commentaries on what domesticity means. I balance their successes and limitations in terms of addressing the relationships between food, gender, and hospitality. The kitchen, as established by Carrie Mae Weems in her *Kitchen Table Series*, is the center of social production and private socialization. The dining room, for Chicago, is a stage: a place for formality, history, and (political) theater. I balance both of these artist's visions and approaches to gender liberatory artworks with a more recent and fluid food art project: the queer cooking collective Spiral Theory Test Kitchen. Spiral Theory Test Kitchen, active from 2018 to 2022, hosted several immersive, communal, and often aesthetically abject meals which embody the attitude of our current generation's young, queer food movement. Their work exposes a queer agenda in food art which both builds upon and separates itself from a woman-focused feminism.

The third chapter centers memorial and afterlife in three aesthetically and conceptually potent artworks of the meal. It retains a feminist methodology by studying abjection and disempowerment in Lee Miller's Surrealist surgical photographs. It also touches upon male artists who, in their work with food art, expand the reach of (the) feminist movement(s) via the domestic sphere. I introduce how

Daniel Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* portray the dining table as a social site, and also how these works address life and death through memorial. In memorializing shared and individual meals by capturing their remnants, Spoerri calls attention to the ephemerality of food and life. I end the thesis with a treat to take home. I discuss how, in his 1991 *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)*, Félix González-Torres uses an offering of colorfully-wrapped candies to juxtapose the consumption of food with the destruction of bodies and lives affected by the AIDS epidemic. In depicting a deceased ex-lover as a pile of candy open for taking, Gonzalez-Torres takes advantage of the powerful relationships between body and nourishment, questioning ideas of memory, consumption, and death. Each of these cases balances and blurs the lines between life and death, body and world, and the self and other in visual and somatic forms which the artists mediate through food.

Each chapter's examples focus on the appearances of conviviality and the quotidian in a particular way. In each, food, like art, becomes an entrypoint into the social. In the first chapter, Alice B. Toklas orchestrates a social scene which is lively, but runs on formality and gendered, hierarchical roles. In the second, Judy Chicago, Carrie Mae Weems, and Spiral Theory Test Kitchen challenge domestic hierarchies, manners, and dining conventions on their respective tables. The third chapter highlights how Daniel Spoerri, Lee Miller, and Félix González-Torres cast aside the social conventions of dining to use the architectural spaces and quotidian rituals of meals as both metaphorical and representational material for life itself. To put it more simply, this thesis focuses on the sociopolitical and personal structures behind artistic portrayals of the meal. I take a pluralistic approach to this, attempting to stitch a sort of quilt of perspectives and artworks, which can speak more vastly than any single driving argument. Urging that we all try to make more sense of the relationships between "issues" and the mundanities of life is my argument, more so than any claims made regarding

individual artworks or artists. Ecologically, socially, and politically, paying close attention to the shared objects and phenomena of our everyday seems like the only way to move forward in a baffling and complicated world. While it may be on the nose, I invite readers to pull up a chair while I continue to set the table, and to apply your own experience to its offerings.

CHAPTER I

SETTING THE TABLE: ALICE B. TOKLAS AND THE DINNER PARTY

When most people think of a daily meal, we likely think of the main area that we eat in and the vessel we eat upon. For me, that is the kitchen and the kitchen table, respectively. For others, it may be the dining room and dining table, or a restaurant and bar counter (and so on: on a couch in front of the TV, in a deck chair on a porch, in the car, in bed, walking from home to work and back again). Each of these incarnations changes, slightly, our relationships to food, labor, socializing, and dining. Each site of eating has its own relationship to privacy and publicness: the kitchen table being private and casual, the dining room a space for formality and generosity, where families and friends may interact with one another, the restaurant a space for strangers, where at least a certain composure is urged, even if formality is not. Likewise for the type of meal. As Alice Julier writes in the introduction to *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*, “potlucks, dinner parties, brunches, and barbecues all express something about the relationships being enacted. Each involves different degrees of formality, different roles and social expectations for participants, and different divisions of labor in the actual production of the food.”²⁷

Where the kitchen or dining room table can be a place for privacy or social intimacy, it can also be a point of inviting a larger sect of the outside world in. The privacy of the family unit turns itself inside out (rather, outside in) by inviting members of other households to a dinner party. The dinner party in art, as in life, has been fostered within the elite and sustained by tradition. Salons and soirees were a constitutive part of the social scene of art, particularly in twentieth century modernist Europe.

²⁷ Alice P. Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 6.

As Debora Silverman has pointed out, within modernism, “two registers coexist: the Wagnerian legacy of art and revolution and the Leopoldian spectacle of art and empire.”²⁸ This statement stands for what I argue is one of the major sociocultural legacies sustained by modernism: the dinner party – a product and perpetuator of imperial hierarchy, a result of colonial export, and a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (including food, clothing, music, table decorations, and furniture).

Rachel Rich writes, on dining and design in London and Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, “[a] dinner party was as much an opportunity for display as it was a risk of social embarrassment. The setting for the meal was judged by the guests, and if found lacking could have an effect on that most highly valued of bourgeois possessions: reputation.”²⁹ For Rich, the Victorian dinner party functioned first and foremost for the elite to gain cultural capital: hosting a dinner party meant that one could show off her family’s personal graces, taste in decor, wealth, and worldliness in a single evening. The same was true decades later: as Julier writes, postwar dinner parties were “very rooted in the Western social class model of aspiration,” with purposes ranging from impressing one’s boss to flaunting your new set of porcelain dishes.³⁰ Books on domestic hospitality continued to urge upper-class hostesses (the exclusive demographic for such how-tos on formal dinner parties) to hire servants well into the second half of the twentieth century. Of course, it is because of this reputation and origin that Mao famously claimed that revolution is not a dinner party: for a Communist rebirth, people are encouraged to overthrow both those individuals with the most financial capital and social capital as an idea.

²⁸ Debora L. Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I | West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture: Vol 18, No 2.” Fall-Winter 2011.

²⁹ Rachel Rich, “Designing the Dinner Party: Advice on Dining and Décor in London and Paris, 1860-1914.” *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (2003), 49.

³⁰ Quoted in Alissa Wilkinson, “How Dinner Parties Became the Fuzzy Blanket of Adulthood,” *Bon Appétit*, July 1, 2022. <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/dinner-party-history>.

That being said, formal events labeled “dinner parties” are not the only occasions where people convene over food. Across the globe, different kinds of meals – potlucks, holiday celebrations, tea ceremonies, barbeques – provide an opportunity, and often an occasion, to interact with people outside of your family. Historically, dinner parties or similar gatherings were rare events when women and men from different families could converse. According to Sally Hastings, on dinner parties in Meiji Japan, “[c]onsideration of the dinner party complicates our understanding of Japanese women’s participation in modernity by challenging the binary opposites of home and outside world, private and public life. In the late nineteenth-century West, the dining room and the parlor constituted a third type of space, one in which both men and women had a legitimate place, albeit not on equal terms. Moreover, this was a semi-public space in which a family interacted with non-family members of both genders.”³¹ For certain women and men who would not otherwise meet new people or strike up engaging conversations, a dinner party would have been exciting not only as a socially capitalist venture, but as a vessel for much desired social contact. It is through this lens that we come to understand the coexistence of dinner parties as formal events whose stress and labor rested on the backs of unwilling or socially coerced hostesses and servants, and as special events which can bring comfort, friendship, anticipation, and joy.

The dinner party – a ritual now ubiquitous in the Western world – has been built upon farcical expectations perpetuated mainly by middle class white women (that a good wife and hostess should prepare multiple-course, often French-inspired meals for non-family members regularly, to fulfill her social role), when, in fact, elite and upper class hostesses in the early and mid-20th century would have hired kitchen and house staff to perform most of the dinner party labor. Modernist writings reflect the

³¹ Sally A. Hastings, “A Dinner Party Is Not a Revolution: Space, Gender, and Hierarchy in Meiji Japan.” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal. English Supplement*, no. 18 (2000), 108.

attitudes surrounding the dinner party at the turn of the century: both those in favor, as Alice B. Toklas represents, and those against, such as the Italian Futurists, who demanded a change in conventions and argued for meals that are louder, less polite, and more performative. Well into the turn of the twenty-first century, we see attitudes shifting again. Both historically and contemporaneously, the dinner party can be both/either a socially rigid, gendered, and racially hierarchical space and/or a liberatory, inclusive, and subversive space, depending on its circumstances, expectations, guests and hosts. As Julier writes, appropriating the Western formula for a dinner party can be a way to parody or satirically perform such events, and to have fun doing so.³² It is “a gender- and class-based performance filtered through what Omi and Winant (1994) refer to as the racial formations that structure American culture.”³³ Ultimately, the dinner party reflects those whose company constitutes it.

Best known for her “autobiography” written by companion Gertude Stein, Alice B. Toklas published a cookbook in 1954, after Stein’s death, where she documents (from her own point of view!) a lifetime of recipes learned and meals shared, alongside volunteering during the first world war and a steady, complicated love. Toklas is often mentioned in accounts of the Paris avant-garde, usually as a supporting character to Stein’s literary genius, Hemingway’s social life, or Picasso’s success. By hosting and selecting such acclaimed artists at their Paris home and providing feedback on their work, it appears that the Steins (others have argued Gertrude Stein, I would argue for Toklas’s role) held together and puppeteered this community of modernists. Janet Malcolm has written on the publicly known intensity of the Steins’ relationship, which was never claimed to be outrightly lesbian, as per the period, but understood by all as such. According to Malcolm, the couple was imaged as “a kind of parody of the conventional society portrait of a husband and wife” in a photograph taken by Man Ray

³² Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*, 77-78.

³³ Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*, 99.

in 1922 (fig 12).³⁴ As such, it may or may not surprise that while Stein led the intellectual parlor conversations, Toklas tested recipes, planned menus, provided critiques, and often decided who was or wasn't invited to dinner.

Although she did not consider herself an artist or writer, Toklas provided sharp judgment of her peers' work (not to mention their looks and personality). As Stein narrates from her partner's perspective, on meeting British poet Edith Sitwell for the first time, the writer was "[v]ery tall, bending slightly, withdrawing and hesitatingly advancing, and beautiful with the most distinguished nose I have ever seen on any human being. At that time and in conversation between Gertrude Stein and herself afterwards, I delighted in the delicacy and completeness of her understanding of poetry."³⁵ To host such guests and satiate the rapacious Stein in the day to day, Alice Toklas was constantly practicing and learning (often from friends and hired servants) the art of cooking. Toklas's art was in the preparation of food, and the nourishment of a social scene that perhaps enabled it to become a "scene" in the first place. Toklas's cooking encapsulated her passion, her intellect, and her diligence, as perhaps only the flavor of her food, having been consumed over a century ago, can attest. However, as Janet Malcolm and Linda Simon have shown, from Toklas's own writing in the cookbook as well as archival materials, we can parse the personal relationships – to Stein, to France's upper echelon and working class – of a life spent hosting.

Gertrude Stein was utterly reliant on Alice B. Toklas, and Toklas was completely subservient, although strong-willed, as Stein's wife. Her domestic obligations were ostensibly fulfilled out of love,

³⁴ Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*. New Haven, Conn. ; Yale University Press, 2008, 45-47.

³⁵ Gertrude Stein, "Ernest Hemingway and the Post-War Decade: *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Iv*." *The Atlantic*, August 1, 1933.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1933/08/ernest-hemingway-and-the-post-war-decade-autobiography-of-alice-b-toklas-iv/650661/>.



Fig 12. Man Ray, photograph of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas at 27 *rue de Fleurus*, 1922.

Source: Getty Museum Collection

although some (including this writer) might see their power dynamic as emotionally manipulative. As Janet Malcolm describes it in *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, “[t]he division of household labor between the two women, with one doing everything and the other nothing, was another precondition for the flowering of Stein’s genius.”³⁶ Malcolm also cites that the couple played “a regular repertoire of sadomasochistic games.”³⁷ Toklas performed all of the domestic tasks (cooking and cleaning, or more often, overseeing the paid servants who would do so – in between-war periods of peace and plenty, Toklas cooked only one meal per week herself).³⁸ After Gertrude Stein wrote each day, Toklas typed, edited, and likely contributed to Stein’s writing. Malcolm describes the uncannily similar tones of Toklas’s Cook Book and Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, wondering, “Was Stein imitating Toklas when she wrote in Toklas’s voice in the *Autobiography*, or did she invent the voice, and did Toklas then imitate Stein’s invention when she wrote the Cook Book?”³⁹ Where both Toklas and Stein referred to the latter as a “genius” (a word drenched in masculinity), in reading Toklas, I cannot help but imagine a glint in her eye, a feminine genius looming behind her partner’s solid frame and even more substantial ego: a genius (I use the term as sardonically as I would use it for Stein) that lay not only within her own planning, gossiping, letter-writing, editing, and advising, but within routines of planning meals and events, although not – for stretches of many years – cooking daily herself. At the heart of Toklas’s passion was the nourishment of her companion and her community: this became not only an art, but an identity. To quote artist Joseph Beuys, “By adding food to the work of art, life turns into art, in order to lead art back to life.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*. New Haven, Conn. ; Yale University Press, 2008, 40.

³⁷ Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 63.

³⁸ Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

³⁹ Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 4-5.

⁴⁰ Stacie Cassarino, “The Work of Art in the Age of Artful Food.” In *Culinary Poetics and Edible Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Ohio State University Press, 2018, 165.

Much of the contemporary research on dinner parties centers the issues of gender, colonialism, and class: typically using literary, architectural, or domestic design references. Less researched, especially from a material standpoint as it relates to empire or identity, for example, is the substance of any said dinner party based on its menu. While this thesis does not undertake that work, I plan to continue to look for menu analyses in the future, and it seems useful to note, at this point, one observation based on the recipes (and stories) included in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. Toklas tells several stories throughout the book, touching upon her own and Gertrude Stein's travels, restaurant visits, and daily life at home. Across all of these, including those which center the couple's residence in rural, Nazi-occupied France during World War II, Toklas never mentions their Jewishness. This may seem like a measure of self-protection, based on the couple's continuous residence in Europe throughout both world wars (particularly in Vichy, France), although I wonder if some self-imposed, Anti-Semitic shame, or lack of identification with Jewish identity are also at play. Likewise, Toklas's recipes are overall consistently French, with a few exceptions: among them hashish fudge (acclaimed as the first published recipe of its kind, although it is debated whether this recipe was Toklas' at all), Caribbean turtle soup (part of the "Food in the United States" section), and seven different versions of gazpacho.⁴¹ Amongst exceptions and French recipes for poultry in sauces, boeuf bourguignon, fried frog legs, and artichoke soup alike, none of the dishes are distinctly Ashkenazi or Jewish American. In their lives as in their writing, Toklas and Stein separated themselves from Jewishness, and to this day seem to strike readers first as famous modernists, lesbians, or expat elites, before Jewish. Malcolm concurs that the Steins distanced themselves from their Judaism throughout their lives in France,

⁴¹ Aimee Levitt, "Classic Cookbooks: The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book." The Takeout, May 27, 2021. <https://thetakeout.com/classic-cookbooks-the-alice-b-toklas-cook-book-1846937836>.

including some borderline anti-Semitic passages in Stein's *Wars I Have Seen*.⁴² An excessive interest in French culture and cooking contributed to masking Jewish identity: the Steins built a new identity through facade, references, wealth, and networking. Part of this "networking," Janet Malcolm asserts, included protection by a Vichy bureaucrat and Nazi sympathizer, Bernard Faÿ: this brings the ethics and choices made by the Steins (why and how did they remain in France at any cost?) further into question.⁴³

Toklas's cooking was as much an exercise in servitude and keeping up appearances as it was an expression of queer care – an expression of a specific and privileged queerness at that, as her life in queer companionship was enmeshed in gendered, racial, and socioeconomic hierarchies. Her recipes display her status as an educated, expat Jewish American in Paris, and the majority of both her lavish dinner parties and daily meals for herself and Stein were cooked by members of a permanent staff – a rotating cast of European women followed by a few, in Toklas's words, "Indo-Chinese" men (the perspectives of whom Monique Truong explores in her parafictional novel *The Book of Salt*).⁴⁴ Lucy Delap and Fanny Louvier assert that having at least one or two household servants at a time was common across multiple social strata in twentieth-century Britain and France.⁴⁵ Despite its normality depending on location and period, it seems crucial to investigate and acknowledge all who were involved in accomplishments attributed to one person (much like how Toklas herself was underappreciated for decades as an editor and co-conspirator to Stein). Toklas kept her staff under

⁴² The anti-Semitic quote in question, according to Malcolm: "that the Jewish 'instinct for publicity' is 'the real basis of the persecution of the chosen people.'" Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 94.

⁴³ Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 48-49.

⁴⁴ Alice B. Toklas, Francis Sir Rose, M. F. K. (Mary Frances Kennedy) Fisher, and Ruth Reichl. *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. HarperPerennial ModernClassics. New York: HarperPerennial, 2021, 186.

⁴⁵ Lucy Delap, "Introduction," *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Fanny Louvier, "Beyond the Black and White: Female Domestic Servants, Dress and Identity in France and Britain, 1900-1939." *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 5 (October 20, 2019), 581–602.

strict observation, controlling their menu choices and taking credit for their recipes. As she writes in the *Cook Book*, “Nguyen cooked Chinese dishes and French dishes, and to perfection, but objected to preparing a menu with both. [...] Finally he compromised. The first course – soup, fish or shellfish with noodles or rice – would be Chinese. What followed would be French.”⁴⁶ Toklas blames this “compromise” on her dinner guests, but I suspect that her influence was not light in Nguyen’s change of mind. What fills only a few pages of the *Cook Book* – Toklas’s brief, condescending entry on the personalities and styles of her Vietnamese cooks – has invited an entire book (Truong’s *The Book of Salt*), as well as what seems like a significant area of research for myself and other scholars: that of servitude and hierarchy in relation to art in the 20th century, perhaps using the formula of the dinner party).⁴⁷

Toklas’s meals expressed devotion to her Lovey, Gertrude Stein, whom Toklas believed was the genius in their family. While she learned, recipe-tested, and hosted, a masterful if atypical Eurochic wife, her dinner party meals were almost always prepared by unacknowledged immigrant chefs: other avant-garde innovators who were neither of French nor ex-pat modernist high society, but who spent their lives perfecting the French recipes which Toklas loved so dearly. These meals also were the reason, at least once a week, for the Parisian avant-garde community to converge, socialize, and critique one another’s work. Toklas’s hospitality cannot be ignored here as a powerful force, if unequal in labor to that of her servants. While she prioritized etiquette and perpetuated class-based and racial hierarchy in the home, Toklas created spaces which people enjoyed returning to. Toklas had what many other

⁴⁶ Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, 188.

⁴⁷ Ruth Cowan and Tamara Mose Brown come to mind in terms of the contemporary politics of care: motherhood and servitude in the American context of the decline of servants/the narrative of the happy housewife and nannying and transnational motherhood (respectively). Fanny Louvier, Lucy Delap, and Laura Schwartz address the intersections between gender, servitude, and feminism in 20th century France and Britain: reading more of their work and the literature around this topic will aid me in future research.

hostesses do, a simultaneous appreciation for “comfort and formality,” despite these things seeming oppositional to one another.⁴⁸ The same power survives in the homes of people around the world, as well as in the works of artists who invite us into their spaces. These works may live within formal institutions such as museums, where politeness and quiet are expected, but a strong artwork can make us feel comfortable and intimate, even when it holds tension or trauma. It can also make us want to make us run away from art, from dinner parties, and from all institutions, screaming profanities at the world.

⁴⁸ Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*, 27.

CHAPTER II

SOME DINNER PARTIES AND A KITCHEN TABLE

Touching upon different aspects of the community values, avant-garde social scene, and formality embodied by Toklas's modernist soirées, more recent installations such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and Spiral Theory Test Kitchen's immersive dining experiences offer both critiques and perpetuations of the formal dinner party, while Carrie Mae Weems *Kitchen Table Series* uses photography to bring us in to a space which is utterly multipurpose, and yet consistently private and comfortable.

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (fig 13), although a dinner party only in form and decoration (it lacks the key ingredient(s): food) asks the important question of who, as a society, we invite. The feminist installation, now permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum, was created collaboratively by a team led by Judy Chicago, from 1974 to 1979. Chicago founded the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts in 1970, and much of the *Dinner Party* team consisted of students and program affiliates. The installation is regarded as a pivotal work of institutional critique which uses the dinner party as a metaphor for those "invited" cultural and technological contributors: the male elite. Chicago seeks to subvert this by choosing to populate her dinner party only with notable women – fictional, mythological, and celebrity – throughout history.

The installation consists of a black room with a spotlight, three-sided table set with three-dimensional, mostly labial ceramic plates. Each plate is personalized with glaze colors and motifs that suit the memory and fame of each woman, whose name and an accompanying design are embroidered on the tablecloth beneath her place setting. Chicago's media: ceramic and textile, are both



Fig 13. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979. Source: artribune.com

a testament to and a “high art” elevation of materials historically labeled craftwork or women’s work, art left out of museums for centuries.

To Chicago, *The Dinner Party* is its own feminist project, a continuation of the legacies of women’s rights activists and women in general. In her book *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*, Chicago writes that she intended *The Dinner Party* to be “a symbolic history of women in Western civilization.”⁴⁹ This version of history is devoid of male figures, and progresses chronologically from the prehistoric primordial goddess to medieval and Renaissance figures to suffragettes, modern artists, and explicit feminists - making, particularly, American women’s suffrage and feminist contemporary art seem like the endpoint to centuries of various and diverse contributions by women. Her progression mimics the timeline of survey art history courses (until recently, the accepted History of Art), which centers Greek and Roman artists, who historians have claimed were inspired by Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, and who went on to inspire Western European Renaissance masters, ending with the rebel modernists and contemporary artists (Chicago seems to suggest herself as a member of this last category). Each of Chicago’s “stages” of history includes thirteen women (the number of people at the Last Supper), and constitutes three sides of a dining-room triangle (recalling the Holy Trinity...and perhaps a reference to the lives lost at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory?). For Chicago, a Jewish woman, to reference Christianity and the established art history canon so heavily, is telling. A staple of second-wave feminism, Chicago sought to repopulate history with women, and to subvert the reigning tropes by asserting that men were not the only figures to paint, write, or change the course of politics. At best, Chicago simply repopulates the established, Western “history” with different characters. Her dinner party is a collection of mostly

⁴⁹ Judy Chicago, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2014, 10.

white, either famous, elite, or mythological women: perpetuating the narrative that one's contributions are only worthy if they are widely known.

As my adviser said to me while in the process of this paper, no one has ever eaten at Judy Chicago's dinner party. *The Dinner Party* is a sacred and ceremonial space to worship women goddesses (some literal, like Ishtar; others historical but nevertheless worshiped: Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keefe). The installation is really more of a temple than a dinner party, particularly given that it memorializes quite a few mythological women alongside historical figures (although often, the line is blurred, and what's the difference anyway?). The silence in *The Dinner Party*'s dark, theatrically lit room at the Brooklyn Museum is palpable if not tense, and one would feel guilty bringing in so much as an unwrapped granola bar, not to mention eating an entire meal. Such a regal dining room is at odds with most peoples' kitchen tables or dining rooms; the artfully decorated plates are entirely commemorative; the table is functional only as a metaphorical dais for conversation. The place settings and title provide only the basest of references to real dinners.

Activist and writer Lolette Kuby, in her 1982 review of *The Dinner Party*, writes, upon first hearing of Chicago's installation:

[o]f course I supported it wholeheartedly. Sight unseen. Not only a tribute in content to women, but one ingeniously executed with the very materials of art which were the only ones available to women cloistered in their kitchens and parlors. Not the monumental bronzes and marbles and granites and walls of grand cathedrals upon which male artists immortalized their visions, but bits of cloth and thread and china plates, stitchery and kitchen-ware, fragile, perishable like the identities of the women themselves.⁵⁰

She goes on to critique the excessive labial motifs in *The Dinner Party*, claiming that each vulva essentializes the women: artists, goddesses, and great thinkers, that they are meant to represent,

⁵⁰ Lolette Kuby, "The Hoodwinking of the Women's Movement: Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party.'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 6, no. 3 (1981), 127–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346227>.

reducing them to “sexual symbolism.”⁵¹ Kuby also condemns the installation as “sterile,” “stilted,” and “mechanical.” Crucially, she adds, the scene is lifeless: the seats are empty at Judy Chicago’s dinner party. This last piece of criticism is most resounding to me. Without people in the seats, political dinner conversation, a meal that a woman may have been proud of and simultaneously coerced by patriarchy to prepare, *The Dinner Party* is an empty metaphor. In contrast to the installation *Womanhouse* (1972), which Chicago organized alongside Miriam Schapiro and CalArts students, Chicago’s *Dinner Party* is holding its breath, a space uninviting. *Womanhouse* is interactive: people are welcomed to walk through the rooms of a seventeen room art-transformed house, watch performances, and point out, for example, the egg-and-breast wallpaper kitchen installation (fig 14). Here, *Womanhouse* is not only a comfortable environment reminiscent of more domestic spaces, but its kitchen contains key visual references to food and the body in the context of gender, which *The Dinner Party* lacks.

Civil rights activist Sojourner Truth has been referred to as the only non-white woman in the installation (although this assumes that Ishtar, Sacagawea, or Hatshepsut are white).⁵² At least among the more recently living figures commemorated in *The Dinner Party*, Truth is the only Black woman acknowledged. In addition to the work’s necessarily blatant underrepresentation of womankind, Sojourner Truth’s plate is not decorated with a sensitively tinted abstracted labia as thirty-seven of the thirty-eight others are (the notable exception here is Ethel Smyth’s plate, which is adorned with a protuberant grand piano). Rather, Chicago chose to paint, on Truth’s plate-canvas, a design of three African masks – each in a different style, one crying, all in black and gold (fig 15). Alice Walker wrote, upon seeing the piece: “It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists [...] can not imagine

⁵¹ Kuby, “The Hoodwinking of the Women’s Movement: Judy Chicago’s ‘Dinner Party,’” 128.

⁵² “Sojourner Truth, the Only Black Woman Invited to The Dinner Party.” *Beyond the Canvas*, July 9, 2020. <https://www.beyondthecanvasblog.com/post/sojourner-truth-the-only-black-woman-invited-to-the-dinner-party>



Fig 14. Still from *Womanhouse* (1974), a film by Johanna Demetrakas documenting the installation of the same name. Source: Youtube

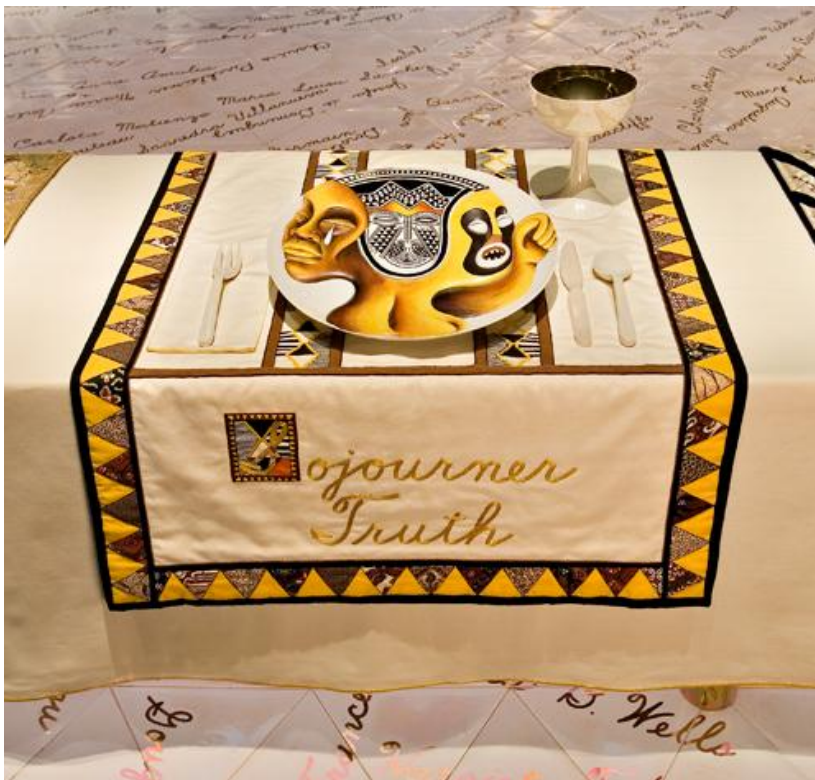


Fig 15. Sojourner Truth's table setting in *The Dinner Party*. Source: The Brooklyn Museum

black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go.”⁵³ In *The Dinner Party*, as so often they become in the minds of white feminists, Black women are the exception; that which breaks the rule (alongside, in this case, Ethel Smyth, who Chicago also uses to break her own rule...due to her fame for piano compositions?).

While I respect the imagination of Chicago’s piece: a meal where every admirable woman from history can join in conversation, uninterrupted by husbands or fathers, it is as fantastical as any desire to resurrect Napoleon and Caesar, or Einstein and Plato, and overhear what they might say to one another (as modeled by *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*). It follows the traditional, art historical model that “greatness” in art progressed from Egyptian architecture to Greek sculpture to French and Italian Renaissance paintings, thus buying into a story where naturalism is centered and where white Americans are the finishing point. *The Dinner Party* also includes no testament to “common people,” people who are not famous or historically recognized, further buying into a fame economy.

Compared to the still and silent permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Dinner Party*, during its making, was a collaborative, conversational project. Chicago employed over a hundred laborers: most of these artists were women, and even those who weren’t likely engaged in considerable discourse, while working, about gender, patriarchy, and feminism.⁵⁴ While working on the installation, Chicago’s staff surely discussed theory, art, and their personal lives over pizza or a round of beers: things that one couldn’t do at the formal *Dinner Party* table. Contributors to *Womanhouse* and *The Dinner Party* have said that the Feminist Art program was simultaneously intellectually/socially fulfilling and included “hostile” and “frustrating” power dynamics.⁵⁵ Then and now, perhaps the

⁵³ Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own." Ms. 8 (August 1979): 47 +.

⁵⁴ Lucy Lippard, "Judy Chicago's Dinner Party," *Art in America* (April 1980).

⁵⁵ Ulrike Müller, "Re:Tracing - the Feminist Art Program." Accessed April 15, 2023. <http://www.encore.at/retracing/index2.html>.

greatest gift that *The Dinner Party* has given us is material which sparks discourse. For non-men to debate whether or not the installation is feminist is, to me, the most feminist possibility that it holds.

Although, as with Chicago's work, it does not center food itself, Carrie Mae Weems's iconic *Kitchen Table Series* (fig 16) captures moments of quotidian brilliance within the common space of the home kitchen. Weems continues Chicago's legacy of creating feminist art: the two shared a professional world, as Weems graduated from California Institute of the Arts in the early 1980s (Chicago had established her Feminist Art Program there in 1970). In the series, Weems's own kitchen table becomes a many-pronged, fluid environment, as it often is in reality. For Weems, the table is a space of mourning, of habit, of love and sex, of hosting and relaxing, and of discussions that shift from hilarity to solemnity and back again. The table is a place for oneself and for one's community: it hosts resistance and sustenance; friendships are born and relationships ended. The kitchen space changes from private to communal, and back again, reflecting, as the emotional tone of the images changes from scene to scene, how our identities are shaped by our social relations, often over a meal or a drink.

For Taylor Ndiaye, Weems's kitchen is "a focal point of the private sphere."⁵⁶ The table stays constant while Weems's props, characters, and costumes change: corresponding to the changing personalities and relationships of any given kitchen's many inhabitants. Weems posits in a 2016 interview that critics incorrectly assume that the work is about Blackness, as they do with works by many Black artists, she says, whereas countless works by white artists are assumed to be universal.⁵⁷ Indeed, *Kitchen Table Series* accesses a quotidian reality that is universal, and yet uncompromising.

⁵⁶ Taylor Fama Ndiaye, "Sisterhood: Locating the Photography of Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana Lawson Within a Rhizome of Black Feminist Discourse," 41.

⁵⁷ Steph Eckardt, "Carrie Mae Weems Reflects on Her Seminal 'Kitchen Table' Series." *W Magazine*. April 7, 2016.



Fig 16. Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Source: carriemaeweems.net

As Ndiaye notes, *Kitchen Table Series* opposes racist notions (supported by early twentieth-century sociological photographs of empty apartments in segregated neighborhoods) that the homes of the “other” conform to one standard type that is morally or physically dangerous.⁵⁸ Weems’s photographs of the domestic resist racist imaging and othering on two fronts. Firstly, they capture the decoration and liveliness – signs of culture and comfort – that sociological photographs, in capturing mainly rooms without occupants, family photos, or tchotchkes, lack. Secondly, by presenting *Kitchen Table Series* as a collection of images with many characters, Weems counters the ignorance and exoticizing that conceives of any community as limited to one way of living. Where othering negates the individuality of the other, Weems asserts vivacity in each of many incarnations of the same kitchen table. In doing so, she replaces the myth of universality, of white male objectivity through the lens of a camera, with her own possibilities for reality. Her gaze is both in front of and behind the camera. Sometimes she approaches the table in solitude and other times in socialization, making no promises for who each character is or may be. In other words, she *lives* in front of the lens and preserves life’s fluidity in photographic form.

Throughout *Kitchen Table Series* as a whole, characters as distinct and overlapping as the stern mother, the intimate lover, the joking friend, and the solitaire player exist within the space of the same table – and, quite possibly, within the same person: it is left ambiguous whether Weems is playing different characters or representing different incarnations of the same woman, seen at various moments in her life. Regardless, the consistency of the table, the brightly glowing overhead light, and the kitchen space itself anchors each figure in the same world. Whether or not they all know each other, Weems and her supporting ensemble have, despite their range of situations, emotions, and props, a grounding,

⁵⁸ Ndiaye, “Sisterhood: Locating the Photography of Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana Lawson Within a Rhizome of Black Feminist Discourse.”

domestic space in common. The characters circulate care and emotion as I imagine they circulate through one another's homes, reappearing in different images and contexts within the series. In one image, Weems's character breathes deeply, allowing a friend to tend to her hair (fig 17). In another, she works alongside her daughter (fig 18). Weems makes space for a full range of emotions, for both silence and noise, normality and rareness, privacy and conviviality. She captures herself alone and depleted, her head pressed to her knees (fig 19), and grieving with the support of two friends (fig 20). These same three women also cackle together, perhaps at the expense of some despicable neighbor or ex (fig 21).

Weems's feminist project, with this work, could be described as documenting and creating a space where women can be complex, everchanging, and completely unbridled. In this case, that space is the kitchen: this is significant, as it complicates what many feminists have claimed: that the kitchen is a purely oppressive space for women, as it is inextricable from the systems of white supremacist patriarchy that have confined female-bodied people to working in the home. Weems proposes that the kitchen, despite and conditionally because of its exploitative past, is also a space which can lend itself to liberation: it is a room for a woman's self and for collectivization, for fulfilling her own needs and caring for her kin.

Weems's kitchen table is private in its safety, individual ownership, and comfort. And yet, *Kitchen Table Series* holds signals of the outside world, as every kitchen does: no house is removed entirely from the public sphere. Weems turns her kitchen table public upon photographing it and displaying it in museums and galleries. Additionally, in the context of each image, the wall decorations, snacks, drinks, cigarettes, and conversation (unknown to the viewer, but seemingly there) are from a world of political and public being, which come to rest in an intimate, although often social, setting. In



Fig 17 (left). Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled*, 1990.



Fig 18 (right). Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled (mother and daughter)*, 1990.



Fig 19 (left). Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled (woman and phone)*, 1990.



Fig 20 (right). Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled*, 1990.



Fig 21. Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled*, 1990.

Source (figs 17-21): carriemaeweems.net



Fig 22. Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series: Untitled (Man Smoking/Malcolm X)*, 1990.

Source: The Brooklyn Museum

Untitled (Man Smoking/Malcolm X) (fig 22), Weems sits at the head (or foot) of the table, facing a male companion and a bowl of peanuts. In front of each figure is a glass: a bottle of dark liquor accompanies these. A scattering of peanut shells trail away from the man's left elbow. The man in this photograph is smoking and both figures are playing cards, not talking. But I get the sense, from the intensity of Weems's gaze, from the half-drained glasses, the haze of cigarette smoke, and from Malcolm X gesturing from his position on a wall poster, that these characters are caught in a moment of silence outnumbered by moments of debate and discourse. With this sense comes even more questions: are they lovers? Are they sharing the peanuts and, for that matter, the cigarette? Is the woman hiding her smile with her hand as a poker face for their card game, or does she have some secret, some further corner of privacy in her kitchen that is kept, not only from us the viewer, but from those closest to her? Does this couple live together? And thus, share the kitchen? Or is the woman allowing the man to rest and play within her space? Weems's omnipresence in the series as a whole makes me think *yes* to this last question: this kitchen table, even if within a shared home, is Weems's domain, which she both hoards and offers.

Kitchen Table Series pays homage to the everyday: it records some of the vast array of encounters someone may have within a day, a week, or a year, all in the context of their own home. Weems's depiction of the private sphere is fluid and many-pronged – the series extends a multiplicity of the quotidian: many options that may be equally plausible for one person or for many. Weems has said that she uses her body in these photos “as a landscape to explore the complex realities of the lives of women.”⁵⁹ The plural “realities” implies that each person has many lives; changing form, like a chameleon, for her husband, children, and friends. But it also implies many disparate realities – for

⁵⁹ Eckardt, “Carrie Mae Weems Reflects on Her Seminal ‘Kitchen Table’ Series.”

different people – that constitute one shared, communal reality. One kitchen table stands in for many. In Weems's series, there is no need to specify *whose reality?*, since reality is something understood to be simultaneously subjective and common.

The informality and personal nature of Weems's kitchen table counters the formal dinner party model perpetuated by Judy Chicago, itself a product of white female identity. Where Weems's kitchen scenes do not include much clutter, they are clearly lived in, with stacks of peanut shells, ashtrays, and art on the walls. In Weems's series, a kitchen can be both private and social, but it is always a haven, always reliable, casual, and comfortable. No one in the images feels like an outsider; once inside the home, the kitchen, and the camera's lens, every figure is swathed in hospitality. Chicago's dining room, however, is all decoration and decorum, exhibition, performativity, and memorial: it is not comfortable or reminiscent of daily life. Neither work centers the meal totally, but some images in *Kitchen Table Series* include a snack, glasses of wine, or cans of beer; one shows a full lobster dinner. While Weems and Chicago demonstrate sociality and lack thereof of the kitchen table and dining room, respectively, both pieces leave me wanting more in terms of conviviality as connected to food itself, and not just to the setting one might associate with food. That being said, in *Kitchen Table Series*, the lack of food highlights the range of personal scenarios which dominate Weems's kitchen. None carry the express purpose of fueling the body. Here, Weems reminds me that there is always more to life than just food (emotion surrounds us at every meal!).

In looking at texts and works surrounding the dinner party, it has been engaging to follow where food is or isn't invoked to assert a sense of domestic or quotidian identity. For example, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* is meant to attack the masculine nature of twentieth century soirées, often organized by but not meant for wives and women (here, the Steins are an apt exception). Her dinner

table does not include food: this would refer too much to the positive value of domesticity – the crucial labor of providing sustenance, attention, and family values at the table, which has historically been used to justify the relegation of women to the domestic sphere. In a post-gender world, I think we can expect, and are already seeing the elevation of community care, cooking, dinner parties, and hosting as liberation: identifiable more by our ability to connect people and nourish bodies and souls in a way which transcends the real, historical ties to racial and gendered subjugation.

This calls to mind the male artists who engage with food production, craft, and the domestic, and in doing so, whether or not they know it, engage with a feminist agenda of redistributing such work. Rirkrit Tiravanija, known for his happenings such as *untitled (pad thai)* (1990), often cooks a meal in a gallery or museum space, then serves the dish to exhibition guests. Curator Rochelle Steiner writes that Tiravanija's work "is fundamentally about bringing people together."⁶⁰ Like his predecessors from the Fluxus collective, including Alison Knowles and George Maciunas, Tiravanija seeks to build relationships between others, wherein orchestrating a social space becomes an artwork, and where food is the tool used to create such bonds. Tiravanija's work enriches museums and galleries with the possibility of food as art, and calls attention to the aesthetic value of cooking and eating communally. While the relationships which Tiravanija and other artists create are metaphorically powerful, they are likely artificial: a brief smile, a potential friendship which survives only in memory beyond the art event, born around a meal not extended to those who don't or can't show up to an opening at MoMA. The cooking becomes a spectacle and the meal an elite experience once inside the doors of an art institution, despite Tiravanija's anti-capitalist intentions.⁶¹ And yet, Tiravanija

⁶⁰ Calvin Tomkins (October 17, 2005), *Shall We Dance?* *The New Yorker*.

⁶¹ Enid Tsui, "Exclusive: Rirkrit Tiravanija Defends His Pad Thai Performance Art." *South China Morning Post*, May 15, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/arts-music/article/3133456/rirkrit-tiravanija-defends-his-pad-thai>; This as opposed to the dangers faced by street cooks, whose operations are frequently policed and shut

nourishes: his artwork physically, non-metaphorically feeds empty bellies, which is a far more tangible impact than many visual artists can claim (particularly Judy Chicago's dinnerless dinner party).

Socialist feminists have argued that domestic work, and the women who have historically performed this, were confined to the home because their type of labor did not contribute to capitalist production. Silvia Federici and the Wages for Housework movement argue against this critique of domesticity, claiming that the reproduction of daily life – cooking meals, cleaning, caring, loving, having sex – serves to perpetuate the driving force of accumulation and the resulting exploitation under capitalism. Federici, in a talk at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies in April 2023, added onto this view, positing (as many decolonial scholars have also suggested) that collective, anticapitalist, feminist, and active construction of new societal models – not blatantly refusing to provide cooking or care – are our best chance for a more just world. *We must all eat: so why not cook together?* – as Federici points that the collective *Commodores Populares* do. According to Arlene Avakian, who published an edition where feminists reclaimed *and* critically analyzed their (often emotional and deeply personal) relationships to food, “[c]ooking is something that was and continues to be imposed on women, but it is also an activity that can be a creative part of our daily lives. As such, the work of cooking is more complex than mere victimization.”⁶²

Seed-keeper and artist Vivien Sansour, in critiquing corporate agriculture and mass-produced foods, contributes:

As I write this. I hear the million criticisms from how supermarket manufactured food has allowed women to work, to more predictable critiques about how advancements in agriculture has created more ‘civilized’ societies. At the risk of upsetting a lot of people, I am not interested

down, in American cities such as New York in particular. Government and police institutions block them from making a living, as well as providing affordable and authentic sustenance to their communities: the same sustenance which certain artists seek to recreate and appropriate in museum spaces.

⁶² Arlene Voski Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*. Oxford ; Berg, 2005, 6.

in being a working mother who has to carry the burden of both childrearing and being a financial provider nor am I interested in becoming more civilized. Both options feel violent and more oppressive than what came before them, and both carry with them a uniform approach to life.⁶³

Sansour's vision rests on collective care: one of her objectives is to honor and protect the legacy of our ancestors' recipes, crops, seeds, and stories by taking these on in great numbers. In a conversation with Sansour this February, we discussed our own proclivities for home cooking; how our preferences for certain domestic tasks like folding laundry over intellectual or corporate ones exist in tandem with (and perhaps descend from) our mothers' lack of choice: their restriction to the home. Our rejection of taking on every role at once or any role in particular: child care, financially providing, hosting, girlbossing, or providing emotional resilience, and choosing, first and foremost, to nourish, coexists with the limitations and choices of other women who seek liberation from their kitchens, care-giving roles, and full-time jobs alike. Women have always worked, in the home and in the environment. What has changed, over time, is the way that this labor has been valued. My feminism (or lack thereof), which progresses and diverges from those of the past, centers the sharing of domestic labor – growing, cooking, working, cleaning, teaching, and caring – and the understanding that these labors are fundamental to sustaining life.

Following such a model for gender liberation and the elevation of domestic labor, twenty-first century, intersectional queer circles reclaim the dinner party, both building upon and subverting the servant/hostess/guest model maintained by Alice Toklas and her contemporaries. These groups, both official organizations and casual groups of friends and chosen family, present a model where collaboration and communality come first and foremost. There is not necessarily one host who is

⁶³ Vivien Sansour, "The Unseen as Fertile Ground for New Wisdom." *MOLD :: Designing the Future of Food* (blog), February 19, 2021. <https://thisismold.com/space/farm-systems/the-unseen-as-fertile-ground-for-new-wisdom>.

socially pressured to perfectly execute a long list of tasks with grace. Nor is there a team of employees who will perform the labor but not enjoy the meal or invite their own guests. Young, queer cooks present a rich body of multifaceted relationships to food and cooking, which are constantly in flux and often seem incompatible or contradictory to one another – something we share with Avakian’s feminist cooks of the late nineties. How can someone be an environmentalist but love eating meat? How can a femme person believe in women’s liberation from domestic labor but love to cook as a way to care for their partner? Too easily, I have found. Now inactive, queer cooking collective Spiral Theory Test Kitchen (STTK) presented immersive experiences, where founders Bobbi Salvör Menezes, Quori Theodor, and Precious Okoyomon infused their own queerness, art practices, and ideals of collectivism into creative food, cooking, and dining, thereby destroying and adapting certain rules and hierarchical aspects of conventional dinner parties. Equal parts art experience and dinner party, Spiral Theory’s events rip pages from *The Futurist Cookbook*, which encourages abolishing the fork and knife, building more unique and aesthetically motivated platings and table settings, and involving sound, performance, and strong scents to make meals more multisensory.⁶⁴

Spiral Theory Test Kitchen is a name which references chaos, absurdity, doom, and mental illness (“spiraling” out of control), as well as the “spiral of silence” sociological theory, which states that “people’s willingness to express their opinions on controversial public issues” is affected by their perception of the collective opinion.⁶⁵ Plus the more obvious comparison to test kitchens, where new food products and experimental recipes are developed. Okoyomon has said about the project and its meaning, “You can’t spiral by yourself, otherwise you’re just falling. The whole thing about the spiral is

⁶⁴ F. T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*. San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1989.

⁶⁵ “Spiral of Silence | Sociology | Britannica,” January 24, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiral-of-silence>.

that you need to be collectively holding each other so that you can spiral upwards.”⁶⁶ Spiral Theory composed itself as a family unit, where each member clung to one another, collaborating to create a meaningful occasion with some sense of upward direction. In their meals, intimacy was key: guests often had to feed one another: in one case attaching popsicle ball gags around each other’s heads (fig 23); in another, working together to pull a lamb’s meat apart from its carcass and the shibari-style binding which contained it (fig 24). Such collaborative and messy tasks recall artist Allan Kaprow’s 1964 happening, *Household*, which included a group of women licking jam off a car (fig 25). Menez once said that STTK’s dining style “takes you to the edge of your comfort around sharing and hygiene and what is appealing and what is appetizing.”⁶⁷ These tasks, simultaneously desperate and silly, horrifying and mouth-watering, connected each participant’s body more closely to the reality of the food they were eating, as well as to the bodies of those sitting around them. The meals were process, community, and experience based, continuing the momentum from the Fluxus artworks of the 1960s which had similar goals. Spiral Theory created a chosen family at each of their events, where queerness was both practiced and developed through eating; each bite filtered through an extreme of scenarios (both aesthetic and culinary: bondage, fermentation, spicing, maceration) leaving guests with confused taste buds and emotions.

In their work, STTK has championed aspic (fig 26), pigeon, and other dishes considered outdated or gross in the mainstream cultural climate. By combining flavors such as Szechuan peppercorns and yuzu, mixing a kombucha Shirley Temple, fermenting and drying a pig’s heart, or

⁶⁶ Ling, Isabel. “Meet the Queer Food Collective Serving Otherworldly Dinners.” *Eater*, January 28, 2020. <https://www.eater.com/2020/1/28/21080632/spiral-theory-test-kitchen-queer-food-collective-events>.

⁶⁷ Katy Schneider, “The Model-Actor-Artist-Cook Creating a New Queer Food Project.” *The Cut*, December 17, 2019. <https://www.thecut.com/2019/12/inside-bobbi-salvor-menez-spinal-theory-test-kitchen.html>.



Fig 23. Menez and an edible ball gag, 2019.



Fig 24. 52-spice shibari bound lamb, 2020.



Fig 25 (left). Sol Goldberg, Photograph of participants in Allan Kaprow's 'Women licking jam off a car,' from his happening, *Household*, 1964. Source: Tate



Fig 26 (right). Menez and their rose water aspic, with suspended corn hair, papaya orbs, and spilanthes, 2019. Source: Vogue

reviving the gelatin mold, STTK delivers camp cooking. In Susan Sontag's original "Notes on Camp," she argues that Camp taste – which "relishes, rather than judges" that which is awful – is homosexual taste, and, to a lesser degree, Jewish taste.⁶⁸ STTK queers cooking by enlivening kitschy, out of style recipes or deeply traditional methods (ie. fermentation) with fresh senses of youth, risk, irony, and cross-cultural flavors/ingredients (this style is distinct from fusion cooking, due to STTK's observance of few rules and rare claims to authenticity). David Mehnert writes, in his 2002 article on queer food, "You can pick out fags in a diner because they *always* order BLTs."⁶⁹ What may drive this statement, which feels resoundingly true, despite being difficult to explain, is a simultaneous respect for the gaudy, overdone, all-American BLT, alongside a love for its simplicity of flavors and slight eccentricity as a lunch order. STTK maintains the spirit of making the old youthful again, and adds an equally queer dash of thrill, fun, strong flavors, and bold aesthetics. Mehnert continues, "[m]ost of us will agree that, while gays and lesbians did not invent good or bad taste, they have always held the monopoly on the judicious mixing of the two."⁷⁰ There is a certain serious commitment to irony – relics of the past, love for the ugly, the dangerous, and the disgusting – which STTK, alongside a larger spectrum of young, queer people, hold and practice in their art. According to Isabel Ling:

In a 2018 Eater essay on queer food, Kyle Fitzpatrick writes that what makes food queer is not necessarily flavor or form, but rather an inherent ability to create temporary utopias, culinary experiences that defy typical conventions of what "works" and what does not. Similarly, the elaborate dinners hosted by STTK operate in a playful sort of suspended reality, one where guests are instructed to dissect their meals with their hands and feed one another, and where it is normal to dine alongside a pet eel or a performer playing a 17th-century stringed instrument.

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⁶⁸ Susan Sontag, *Notes on "Camp."* Penguin Modern 29. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2018. Note 56.

⁶⁹ David Mehnert, "What Is Queer Food?" *Slate*, April 3, 2002. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2002/04/what-is-queer-food.html>.

⁷⁰ Mehnert, "What Is Queer Food?"

⁷¹ Isabel Ling, "Meet the Queer Food Collective Serving Otherworldly Dinners." *Eater*, January 28, 2020. <https://www.eater.com/2020/1/28/21080632/spiral-theory-test-kitchen-queer-food-collective-events>.

There is no doubt that having spoonfuls of semifreddo fed to you through a glory hole constitutes a fantastical, utopian reality of its own: such an act is a subversion of what we know of club spaces, queer spaces, dinner parties, or fine dining (combined, something which feels so wrong, yet so right).

By producing queer meals and experiences, Spiral Theory Test Kitchen puts into practice much of what *The Bastard Cookbook* lends a sardonic voice to: issues of cultural purity, “fusion food,” and globalization. All of which, chef-artist Bastard Brothers Rirkrit Tiravanija and Antto Melasniemi uplift as “bastardization”: a process of making do with what you have access to, experimenting, and saying *to hell with* authenticity. Their subsequent bastard recipes include pad thai macaroni and cheese and fish sauce ice cream, which play with cultural purity and disgust. They expose what readers and eaters determine as “going too far,” and why that might be. As Krishnendu Ray is quoted in the cookbook’s introduction, “Disgust is the ultimate rule of belonging. If you share my disgust then we’re probably from the same community.”⁷² In “Eating the Other,” bell hooks likens the desire to “try new foods,” or “try food from every culture” to a particular white male desire to fuck girls of each race: a conceptualization of the Other as tokens to be collected, whether by sexually or physically consuming them.⁷³ hooks condemns the commodification of difference (selling specialty spice blends for white consumers to *try something new*), where Tiravanija and Melasniemi applaud the flattening of difference in bastard dishes. Spiral Theory attempts to sidestep this discourse by centering members’ own cultural backgrounds, and by combining flavors, ingredients, and methods of various geographic origins without fussing over the authenticity of their food or trying to market any dishes as more than experiments, poetry, love letters to food and to culture itself.

⁷²Antto Melasniemi, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Lola Kramer, and Kaarina Gould, eds. *Bastard Cookbook*. New York: Garrett Publications : Finnish Cultural Institute in New York, 2019, 35.

⁷³ bell hooks, “Eating the other: Desire and resistance.” In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 21–39. Boston, South End Press, 1992.

Spiral Theory's aesthetic, especially in their earlier work (you can see by scrolling backward through their instagram feed @spiral_theory_testkitchen) aligned with the colorful, organic cakes and other photogenic dishes that have become popular on social media in the past handful of years. The group's posts from 2018 and 2019 feature gelatinous cakes (fig 27), melons, squash blossoms, and even tiny octopi poised to perfection (fig 28): more reminiscent of an Alexander McQueen gown than something you might prepare for dinner at home. STTK's fashionable bent is unsurprising given the group's adjacency to the fashion industry (specifically Menez's career as a model). Over time, the group's aesthetic became less curated, colorful, and Instagrammable. As Rachel Hahn writes in her *Vogue* article about Spiral Theory, "[i]n an era when chefs are increasingly optimizing their food for maximum Instagram posts, STTK pushes in the opposite direction: their creations are intentionally unwieldy, messy, and hard to encapsulate in just a few characters."⁷⁴ Their dishes, once garnished with edible flowers and caviar, turned darker, often looking more like dung-piles than frosted cakes. More recent meals featured entire animals, ball gags, and other references to BDSM practices and radical carnivorousism. Pushing their guests (and themselves) became a crucial theme to STTK: the menu for one conceptual dinner was based around specific attendants' "food fears": dishes included an edible, frozen cucumber ball gag engineered specifically for puppeteer Frank Oz, who "has a distaste for cucumber."⁷⁵ Perhaps some background to the concept of pushing oneself, Okoyomon is a proud meat-eater while Theodor and Menez are vegetarian. Rather than let this become a point of tension, the group embraced their differences in diet, allowing vegan dishes to coexist on alongside Okoyomon's flavorful meat compositions (inspired by their Nigerian mom and often sourced from local NYC butchers, who

⁷⁴ Rachel Hahn, "Spiral Theory Test Kitchen Wants to Change the Way You Taste." *Vogue*, December 4, 2019. <https://www.vogue.com/article/spiral-theory-test-kitchen-queer-cooking-collective>.

⁷⁵ Hahn, "Spiral Theory Test Kitchen Wants to Change the Way You Taste."



Fig 27. Five layer cake, 2019.



Fig 28. Rose petals, octopi, and fresh labneh, 2018.

Source for figs 23, 24, 27, and 28: Instagram (@spiral_theory_testkitchen)

would happily provide parts unwanted by most customers such as pig's heart and blood to Okoyomon – except one butcher who accused them of being a witch).⁷⁶

As a restaurant model, given their lack of a cemented kitchen, staff, or dining room space, STTK is antihegemonic. There are no front of house members separated from back of house, the producers of the meal are also its consumers, and dinner guests must get their hands dirty. Everyone must serve themselves and others in order to eat. Spiral Theory's meals are wholly participatory: they do not follow a binary model where some receive and others prepare. This continues the legacy of food projects in relational aesthetics where the art is in the social, communal creation. According to Katy Schneider, "[t]he idea [of STTK's dining style] is to break down the barrier between near strangers."⁷⁷ This is the same mission that Tiravanija set out to accomplish with his feeding works. But STTK flips Tiravanija's more wholesome, public-facing meals into events that are uncomfortable and invite-only, with a "fear-factor" ambience. Where Tiravanija practices all the cooking for his guests, invites them to eat, and hopes that conversation over personal bowls of curry will bond people, STTK demands that dinner guests feed each other, using touch as a way to become further connected. That being said, Okoyomon, Theodor, and Menez still prepare and cook their dishes ahead of time, meaning that there is some level of separation between producers and consumers, less so than in, for example, Alison Knowles's *Make a Salad* (1962), where Knowles and performance-attendees collaborate to chop, toss, and dress vegetables for a huge salad (fig 29). The trade-off, here, is that STTK's meals likely taste much better than Knowles's amateur, crowd-sourced salad (although both activities center hands-on fun).

Spiral Theory's dinner parties still hold the dinner party form: many people seated around one

⁷⁶ Katy Schneider, "The Model-Actor-Artist-Cook Creating a New Queer Food Project." *The Cut*, December 17, 2019. <https://www.thecut.com/2019/12/inside-bobbi-salvor-menez-spiral-theory-test-kitchen.html>.

⁷⁷ Schneider, "The Model-Actor-Artist-Cook Creating a New Queer Food Project."



Fig 29. Photograph from Alison Knowles's original *Make a Salad* performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1962. Source: news.artnet.com

large table, although guests are invited to eat with their hands, move around, touch, and interact in ways which would not be included in an Alice B. Toklas handbook for dinner party manners. Their meals often required many hard-to-procure and expensive ingredients, probably subsidized when hosted by an institution (for example in their pre-show feast in Florence's Palazzo Corsini for friends of the brand Telfar, fig 30).⁷⁸ The group's cultural positionality and expression of Camp values, as a queer collective, has its own roots in socioeconomic and imperialist hierarchy. Sontag writes, "[a]ristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste. But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste."⁷⁹ But STTK's opulence and appropriation in cooking is part of a larger movement of people who spare no expense on what they eat: even when it brings them down to the last dollar. Hedonistic, perhaps, but also anti-capitalist, in that these decisions prioritize cultural production, quality of life, and community building over the accumulation of wealth.

A group operating with some degree of institutional support, STTK's methods occur across the globe in more private, less publicized, and institutionally-independent circles: there is queer innovation in cooking, cross-contaminating cultural dishes with new spices and methods, and someone taking on a new fermentation project every day. Spiral Theory is not an example meant to close what may appear to be a chronological story (from 1920 to 2020 via the art of the dinner party). Rather, I bring them as an offering, an incarnation of what a "dinner party" can look like. Likewise, Toklas's handcrafted, Francophiliac menus, hand-cooked by private cooks. Likewise, Marina

⁷⁸ Ling, "Meet the Queer Food Collective Serving Otherworldly Dinners."

⁷⁹ Sontag, *Notes on "Camp,"* Note 50.



Fig 30. Telfar runway, performed in the aftermath of Spiral Theory Test Kitchen's *Bloodshed Dinner*, 2020. Source: Instagram (@spiral_theory_testkitchen)

Abramovic's Spirit Cooking installations and gala events, which have featured writing instructions on the walls with pig's blood, traditional Eastern European soups, and nude human centerpieces (fig 31, fig 32). These have been attacked as satanic rituals and exploitative to staff by right and left wingers, respectively.⁸⁰ In an effort to consider meal artworks and mealtime anecdotes that are not performative in nature, I recognize that hosting is in many ways the ultimate performance. Despite this, I wonder to what extent our attitude toward dinner guests, our home, the furniture in it, and the dishes we cook are a facade, and to what extent they compose our personhood.

⁸⁰Alyssa Buffenstein, "Marina Abramović Dinner Party Mistaken for Satanic Ritual." Artnet News, November 7, 2016. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/right-wing-mistakes-marina-abramovic-dinner-party-for-satanic-ritual-736247>; Michael H. Miller, Observer. "Losing Our Appetites: Pictures from Marina Abramovic's MOCA Gala," November 14, 2011. <https://observer.com/2011/11/losing-our-appetites-marina-abramovics-moca-gala/>.



Fig 31, fig 32. Images from Marina Abramovic's controversial MoCA Gala, 2011. Source: Observer

CHAPTER III

LEFTOVERS, WASTE, AND AFTERLIVES

To iterate that time is a fat circle, I close by bringing some historical precedents to more recent examples of meal art. Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri, in some of his efforts to bring art and life closer to one another, focuses on the table itself, using the physical remnants of eating as his material. According to Thomas Marks, “Spoerri had been a professional ballet dancer who fell in with artists, becoming one of the founding members of the Nouveau réaliste movement in 1960.”⁸¹ By the end of the decade, Spoerri had opened a restaurant and gallery in Düsseldorf for the movement he called Eat Art, which sought to create post-aesthetic experiences, often relating to multisensory, sometimes unpleasant interactions with food works, in order to encourage critical thinking about artistic value.⁸² The gallery hosted artists including Joseph Beuys, Dieter Roth, Robert Filiou and George Brecht. These artists used food as experimentally as they used paint, performance or polyurethane – creating, for example, sculptures in sugar and birdseed or executing a twenty-four hour fast.⁸³ In the restaurant, Spoerri would serve uncommon foods like rattlesnake, or once, an entire elephant’s trunk.⁸⁴ After the meals, or sometimes in the middle of them – while people were still eating – Spoerri would repurpose his diners’ dirty place settings and leftover food for his *tableaux-pièges*, translated typically either as “trap-paintings,” or “snare-pictures.” In doing so, he made double, or even triple the profit on singular meals in his restaurant: diners had the option of paying not only for their meal, but to have it preserved in a trap-painting, and later, Spoerri would sell these to art buyers – great artist and great hustler? This

⁸¹ Thomas Marks, “The Frozen Dinners of Daniel Spoerri.” Apollo Magazine, June 9, 2021. [//www.apollo-magazine.com/daniel-spoerri-snare-pictures/](http://www.apollo-magazine.com/daniel-spoerri-snare-pictures/).

⁸² Cecilia Novero, “Artists and Friends: Daniel Spoerri’s Eat Art Gallery” in *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices*, University of Arkansas Press, 2017. 193.

⁸³ Novero, “Artists and Friends: Daniel Spoerri’s Eat Art Gallery,” 191-192.

⁸⁴ Marks, “The Frozen Dinners of Daniel Spoerri.”

“hustle” also serves to critique some of the absurdity of both the restaurant and art worlds. Cecilia Novero writes that Spoerri “interpolates” the food world “with art to investigate both the culinary and art (their institutions).”⁸⁵ The meal-to-art format also makes these works collaborative: it was not only Spoerri’s hands who created these works, nor his brain who composed them, but entire tables of people behaving naturally, out of their own appetites and desires. The convivial nascence of each work, as well as the social environments which were endemic to each of their creations, remain as a sort of footprint, an essence of life retained in the *tableau-piège*.

The *tableaux-pièges* are typically planks of wood (“tabletops”) to which leftover plates, cups, utensils, and food scraps are glued, replicating and simulating the original table (fig 33). The table scenes are then hung vertically on the wall, as you might hang a painting. To my untrained ear, *tableaux-pièges* seems to translate more along the lines of “captured setting” in English (*tableaux* meaning a painting or board, also reminiscent of the word *tableau*, or “frozen scene,” and *pièges* meaning “trap,” like one you might set to capture a bear). This translation expresses the thought process behind Spoerri’s works, which seek to capture the “trapped” repasts of meals in wall-hanging form, although the translation “picture-trap” has also been used, and “trap-painting” certainly has a better ring.

That being said, Spoerri’s *tableaux-pièges* are not paintings. Photographs of these works look just like bird’s eye view photos of dinner tables after the guests have gone. But in person, they are rather unsettling installations, as we are used to seeing all of these objects horizontally, every day of our lives, and Spoerri has flipped them vertically. What unstable and unexpected paintings to have pieces jutting

⁸⁵ Cecilia Novero, “Daniel Spoerri’s *Gastronoptikum*,” *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*. NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 146.



Fig 33. Daniel Spoerri, *Sevilla Series No. 16*, 1991. Source: MOCAP

out at the viewer! In a sense they are literal and three-dimensional still lifes. They have an inverse *trompe l'oeil* effect, where the illusion of depth created by paint is replaced by an illusion of flatness, in the *tableau-piège*'s reference to painting with its vertical orientation. The *tableau-piège* is also an assemblage, comparable to mixed media works by Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and Robert Rauschenberg, Spoerri injects three dimensional objects into wall space that is typically reserved for canvas. Like Duchamp's *Fountain*, Spoerri's trap-paintings bring everyday objects into museum and gallery spaces. But perhaps Spoerri's compositional continuity with real life is what makes his works stand out compared to other "life = art" assemblages. His so-called trap-paintings are scenes captured from real life: not just imitations on canvas or paper, but plates, utensils, crusts of bread, bones, and glasses taken from their placements in meals that Spoerri himself often attended. Each image is not just a representation of something the artist saw; it *is* the dinner scene, captured as if by photograph, but physically preserved as the diners left it. I concur with Cecilia Novero that the verticality of Spoerri's trap-paintings, while it creates an allusion to painting, "does not erase the materiality of its base."⁸⁶ Spoerri's interest in the culinary as a valuable art medium and his opening of art into post-aesthetic, multisensory experiences is part of why Novero categorizes Spoerri as a ringleader of the "neo-avant-garde" (within the terms and timeline of this paper, Spoerri is in fact a neo-avant-garde postmodernist reacting to Toklas's modernist avant-garde).

The trap-paintings suspend material in mid-air and allow for viewers to see objects from multiple angles, rather than constrict viewership to the angle of the painter's eye or camera's lens. A photographic image provides a sense of finitude: it may document that a meal *happened*, but is no longer *happening*. Spoerri's meal tables, however, are found objects, theoretically undisturbed except

⁸⁶ Novero, "Daniel Spoerri's *Gastronoptikum*," 151.

for their preservation and fastening to a wooden board. Therefore, Spoerri's captured scenes provide an illusion of infinity: that the meal's remnants, conserved in an art space, will continue the meal's timeline, effectively forever. He transforms food objects and meals, which are necessarily ephemeral, into permanent installations. This addresses part of the reason that culinary arts and visual arts had not been merged for several centuries: paintings can last for centuries while food is momentary. Does the dinner party end when the guests leave, or when the dishes are cleared, washed, and put away? Spoerri ignores this question by suspending the party, infinitely, person-less, and yet somehow realistically, retaining the spirits of his guests, for as long as the objects will last.

In *Kichka's Breakfast* (1960), Spoerri memorializes the morning meal of a girlfriend (fig 34). He captures some of her cultural and personal quirks, and the fact that this table belongs to a couple is undeniable: there are two eggshells left in two egg cups, two bowls and two spoons, but only one glass with coffee dregs, a full ashtray that may have rested at Kichka's right elbow. But so much escapes Spoerri's trap: how many minutes did Spoerri or Kichka cook their soft boiled eggs? What was in the two white bowls? What did Kichka's voice sound like? Did each partner enjoy an egg, or did someone not like eggs, and the other eat both? What did the couple talk about? Conversation – hearing – is among the many sensations involved in mealtimes which Spoerri's visual installations, like all still visual materials, leave out. But according to Spoerri, who would interrupt diners at his restaurant at random and ask to fix their meal to a tabletop, each *tableau-piège*, before fixation, was “already a story.”⁸⁷ We, the viewer, are permitted to create a narrative for each scene, which may or may not align with the reality of the event or characters.

Spoerri continued making *tableaux-pièges* throughout his career, including more realistically

⁸⁷ Marks, “The Frozen Dinners of Daniel Spoerri.”



Fig 34. Daniel Spoerri, *Kibka's Breakfast*, 1960. Source: MoMA

preserved food objects and more complex table settings as his technique advanced. Later works also became more documentary of group meals or restaurant tables, whereas early *tableaux-pièges* are more intimate and personal scenes of home. *Sevilla Series: No. 3* (fig 35) and number twelve of the same series (fig 36) include several slices of bread each, and utensils seemingly as banquet attendees left them, angled haphazardly on plates and against the tablecloth. *Sevilla Series: No. 12* even includes wine glasses with the dregs of a last sip remaining in them, and the unconventional table dressing of a skull in the top left corner. If I were to zoom in on just one plate, Spoerri's work would appear like a Jackson Pollock painting: smears and drips of sauce and oils on a white porcelain canvas. Each single plate stands as a sort of "all-over painting;" so does each of Spoerri's tablescapes, most arranged in disarray post-meal, with plates, glasses, and ashtrays lying around; centerpieces pushed aside to the table's corners so there is no encouraged focal point or sense of horizon. But where Pollock's and Kandinsky's all-over paintings have been called formalist or meaningless (in my opinion, this is much more true of the former artist than the latter), Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* are grounded in reality. Despite his references to the tradition of painting and to art made by his contemporaries (ie. assemblages), Spoerri's work brings much of quotidian life – content from outside the art world, a world where art is typically peripheral to life – into art spaces. They depict something which actually occurred: more like a three-dimensional, after-the-painting embodiment of a still life than anything else. And yet, the complication that the *tableau-piège* does not depict. Rather, the place settings and food leftovers are the real thing: Spoerri's work stands as evidence of events which occurred. However, much akin to how many photographs are taken as factual records, but could have been staged or edited, there is the question of how "authentic" Spoerri's images are: are they evidence of meals that really happened, or



Fig 35. Daniel Spoerri, *Sevilla-Series No. 3 (Fondue-Essen)*, 1991. Source: art.co



Fig 36. Daniel Spoerri, *Sevilla-Series No. 12*, 1991. Source: Pinterest

did he take artistic liberty in their compositions? Are they more significant as nonfiction stories, or as aesthetic objects like a still life? It seems to me that Spoerri's meal assemblages refuse to answer these questions, perhaps intentionally, as their materials, installation, and composition blur the borders between which parts are art and which are life.

As Novero notes, Daniel Spoerri did not view his snare-pictures, which captured in three dimensions the remnants of a person's meal, as a true part of the Eat Art movement.⁸⁸ They do not, according to the artist, posit institutional critique of accepted aesthetic experiences within the art world (although their appropriation of verticality and use of avant-garde materials suggests this). Instead, the *tableaux-pièges* access issues of personality and memory by activating the materiality of leftover food and its associated objects. The type of cup that someone has used to drink from and the leftover crumbs (if any) on their plates tell us a significant amount of personal content about that person's character and socio-environmental context. Novero writes that "the trap-painting – through chance (*hasard*) – also produces an image of the self (the artist or diner who eats) as other than himself or herself."⁸⁹ We may not recognize ourselves by what we leave behind on a plate, but that portrait or reflection still captures a version of us, like looking in the mirror in the dark. While Eat Art questions what belongs in a museum space, Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* question what belongs inside our bodies, and how what we eat affects our perception of ourselves and by others. These works are not like Chicago's cold dinner party with empty chairs: they are proof of lives that have been lived; of social circles; each one evidence that a meal, complete with wine, bread, and conversation, occurred.

⁸⁸ Cecilia Novero, "Daniel Spoerri's *Gastronoptikum*," *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 150.

⁸⁹ Novero, "Daniel Spoerri's *Gastronoptikum*," 158.

Spoerri's trap-paintings are immobile while meals are constantly moving: being prepared, consumed, digested, and excreted. By disrupting the natural rhythm where plates would be scraped and washed, leftovers discarded or packaged for later, Spoerri calls attention to the elaborate choreography of even the simplest actions of daily routine. Mounted on the wall, Spoerri's tables jump out at the viewer. The meals invade a viewer's space rather than inviting the viewer to come, sit, and pick at their remains as a table on the floor might. The wall orientation positions these images alongside paintings, as "art," for one, but it also eliminates the possibility for dishes to be cleared, the trash to be taken out, for new groceries to be purchased, for the rhythms of life to progress beyond the snapshot of one meal. Thus, the images present and disrupt the food everyday. They are quotidian in content, but not in temporality. Without movement, a meal becomes eerie and ominous, a symbol of death rather than life.

Spoerri's trap-paintings, particularly their immobilization of life itself, seem particularly robust when one considers diaspora and the historical context of Spoerri's childhood and early adulthood. Daniel Spoerri was born Daniel Isaac Feinstein in Romania in 1930. His father had converted to Christianity and changed their family name before the second world war, but was nonetheless arrested and murdered during a Romanian-led pogrom in 1941.⁹⁰ Spoerri remained in Europe during and after the war, gaining Swiss citizenship but living, for most of his adult life, nomadically. His trap-paintings became a sort of a movable feast: Spoerri extended hospitality across Europe after a time that was most inhospitable to himself and his family. The works, when taken together, become a record of Spoerri's personal relationship to home and homelessness within post-war Europe. He has stilled many scenes of "home" from kitchens and dining rooms all over the continent.

⁹⁰ Olga Stefan, *The Wild Child of Iasi*, 2016. <https://olgaistefan.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/daniel-spoerri/>.

Another early trap-painting, *Prose Poems* (1959-1960) (fig 37), on view at the Tate, captures a solo meal (or couple of meals), complete with matchboxes, an ashtray, and a book of poetry by Swiss poet Robert Walser. The book, *Dichtungen in Prosa* (translating to “prose poems,” the title of the work) hints at its owner’s sensitivity, intellect, and linguistic identity. It provides a legible signifier of the personal identity which we already glean from Spoerri’s more culinary *tableaux-pièges* such as *Kichka’s Breakfast*. A literal book of poetry stands in for the ambient hints of personality that one can see in leftovers and litter. In the context of the *Prose Poems* table – Spoerri’s own table – poetry is an essential part of the everyday. Based on the detritus of this scene, we can imagine that the book rested at his elbow while he ate, perhaps open, the pages stained by milk at breakfast, broth at lunch, and sauce at dinner. In fact, *Dichtungen in Prosa* was close to Spoerri’s heart: it was given to him by a beloved uncle, and the artist has said it is one of his favorite books.⁹¹ Whether one knows this information or not, we can feel the intimacy which Spoerri must have had with this book, given its proximity to daily life. In 2021, Spiral Theory Test Kitchen continued Spoerri’s association between poetry and mealtimes by including ribbons printed with poetry phrases in one of their avant-garde dining experiences (these poem ribbons served to tie ball gag lollies onto each guest’s head). The themes of Robert Walser’s poetry only serve to enrich the elevation of the quotidian which Daniel Spoerri undertakes. Walser writes on his own smallness in the world, his amazement at nature’s beauty and rhythms, and the solace he finds as a part of them. Spoerri, too, seems to find solace in the natural rhythms of meals coming and going, people congregating and dispersing. In viewing a trap-painting, we understand Spoerri’s love for rhythm through the tension of stillness which he has orchestrated.

Where we expect a plate to be cleared and perhaps crave for its crumbs to be brushed off the

⁹¹ Tate, “‘Prose Poems’, Daniel Spoerri, 1959–60.” Tate. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spoerri-prose-poems-t03382>.



Fig 37. Daniel Spoerri, *Prose Poems*, 1959-1960. Source: Tate

plate and onto the floor, Spoerri's images are eerily still. Cecilia Novero associates the stillness of Spoerri's *tableaux-pieges* with death, arguing that the immobile scenes of consumption are reminiscent of the consumption of life by time. She writes, "[i]n the trap-painting, life is caught as the process of being consumed by/in time" and that "the trap-paintings are threatening because of their immobility."

⁹² For Spoerri, the trap-paintings allude to the movement of life itself, not despite, but because of their freezing scenes of constant mobility. Spoerri's attention to "the dialectics between stasis and motion" is particularly poignant given the restless migration within his own life.⁹³ He has said, "My trap pictures should create discomfort, because I hate stagnations. I hate fixations. I like the contrast provoked by fixating objects, to extract objects from the flow of constant changes and from their perennial possibilities of movement; and this despite my love for change and movement. Movement will lead to stagnation. Stagnation, fixation, death should provoke change and life, or so I like to believe."⁹⁴ By petrifying objects of movement and vivacity, Spoerri channels death in order to produce life (and vice versa). He addresses the simultaneous mundanity and ecstaticism of everyday moments such as eating alone; of life ending with death, reminding us that mortality makes life all the more valuable.

I would further argue that Spoerri's trap-paintings are not necessarily images of death, but of memorial. In death, our bodies decompose, whereas Spoerri's petrified meals will not decay. Rather, they are intended to withstand long periods of time and, like a gravestone, pronounce the existence of someone who may no longer be remembered. Also like a gravestone, Spoerri's images can attest to characteristics of that individual's personality. But these claims go beyond "loving father" or "man of God." A meal's remnants serve as a capsule for a person's likes and dislikes, cultural background, and

⁹² Cecilia Novero, "Daniel Spoerri's *Gastronoptikum*," *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 153.

⁹³ Novero, "Daniel Spoerri's *Gastronoptikum*," 152.

⁹⁴ Tate, "'Prose Poems', Daniel Spoerri, 1959–60."

everyday habits which would be difficult to otherwise memorialize. A breakfast is so quotidian that others might not think to salvage the remains and use these as a relic. But the potency of Spoerri's work is that one might recall a special breakfast with a lover forever: perhaps the best one, or the last before breaking up, and his trap-paintings document this phenomenon. Cecilia Novero's analysis of Daniel Spoerri's work delves into the theoretics of temporality and the digestion of consumer society's own digestion. These, although aptly describing the broad strokes of the project, look past Spoerri's specific attention, at least within his trap-paintings, to the personal and the everyday.

Novero uses the word "petrification" to describe Spoerri's snare-pictures, but perhaps, to capture the incessant qualities of movement in these scenes of stillness, to address their equal and inseparable acknowledgements of life and death, the word *preservation* is also apt. Food artist and writer Adriana Gallo has written,

Though the aesthetic qualities of rot and preservation may vary, we cannot consider preservation without engaging with disgust or abjection. Fundamentally, as Julia Kristeva claims, 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'⁹⁵

Although not abject in its aesthetic, Spoerri's preservation of meals: its liminality between life and death, food and trash, is what produces discomfort in seeing it. Complicating this, one does not experience only discomfort when looking at it: comfort is also present, in the familiar forms of cups, bowls, and spoons. Familiarity and unease, a sense of presence and yet a lack thereof, are all embodied by memorials. Gravestones, coffins, and roadside monuments – even the bones of the deceased, provide a similar sense of life and death, where the two are taken out of their temporal contexts and preserved

⁹⁵ Adriana Gallo, "Cooking for the End of the World." *MOLD :: Designing the Future of Food* (blog), October 18, 2022. <https://thisismold.com/convivial-cosmogonies/on-preppers-and-preservation>.

together. Furthermore, the way that vegetables are preserved from rotting when pickled or fermented, waste is not wasted in Spoerri's snare-pictures. Rather, wasted food becomes permanent leftovers. Waste is given a new life as a work of art, reminiscent of the life cycle, of reincarnation – like how plants are fertilized by excrement and the decayed bodies of their ancestors.

Krishnendu Ray writes: “sometimes it is not the food itself but the making of it that is the source of comfort.” He attributes “the routine, the control over a recipe, the predictability, and the stability” to being the reason we might prepare a comfort meal, rather than the taste or nourishment of the meal itself.⁹⁶ Spoerri's trap-paintings remove the comfort of routine from the equation: leaving us not even with taste or sustenance, but unwanted remains. Instead of discarding, Spoerri repurposes. But in reusing, he petrifies only the empty parts of the meal. Devoid of ritual, time, nutrients, flavor, and people, his sculptures are themselves devoid of human life, although they are the remnants of living. By removing temporality from meals, Spoerri calls attention to the essentiality of food routines to the comfort and sustenance of not only our bodies, but our lives. Spoerri's sculptures limit food objects not only to their picked-over forms, but to interpretation via the act of seeing – often the first interaction we have with food, but rarely the most important. To see the remnants of a meal, hung like a painting, although beautiful in composition, affirms that the visuality of eating is not the extent of its power. Preparing and consuming meals are temporal and multisensory processes, simultaneously personal and social. Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* address this in their very lack of capturing sound, touch, characters, and conversation. Their stillness reminds us that life is anything but.

Where Spoerri's frozen tables encapsulate social vibrancy, timeliness, and proof of delicious meals via smeared plates, photographer Lee Miller presents a dining table that is uneasy and

⁹⁶ Krishnendu Ray, “What I Learned from M.F.K. Fisher About Living After 9/11.” *Gastronomica* 2, no. 3 (2002), 15.

unappetizing. Miller was an American fashion model, fashion photographer and, later, wartime photojournalist who was associated with the Surrealist movement, both as an artist and a muse of Man Ray. During her time in Paris, Miller also worked as a photographer at a local hospital, where she acquired the literal and thematic material for two photographs from 1929 (fig 38, fig 39).⁹⁷ The photos capture a dining scene at an angle similarly voyeuristic to the camera's gaze in Weems' series. But where the camera, in Weems' photos, is horizontal with the table, seemingly spying on the kitchen's inhabitants, Miller's camera approaches the table from above, as if preparing to take a seat and cut into a steaming meal. The contents of the plate, upon first glance, might be a slice of blueberry pie or a severely undercooked chicken breast.

The gooey contents, wrapped in what appears to be a thick leather shell or crust, rest on a crisply lined napkin, which appears to have just been taken out from a drawer and unfolded. There is only one place setting, photographed twice to create the illusion of two diners, two servings of the same dish. In fact, the plate has been rotated between photo one and photo two. The table setting appears untouched (for good reason): there are no smears on the utensils or droplets on the napkin. If we look past one of the stills, we might imagine someone sitting down to eat a meal in solitude. We could imagine faint classical music in the background, or perhaps a heavy silence, only disturbed by the clink of silverware against the plate. Rather than using an ironed napkin, multiple utensils, or a decadent tablecloth, Miller opts for a simple spoon, knife, and fork; a recently folded napkin-as-placemat; a dish set for one (but photographed twice). The atmosphere of her images is eerie, private, and personal. Likewise, we realize, is their subject matter.

⁹⁷ Emma Merkling and Christy Slobogin, "Season 1 Episode 1: Severed Breasts, Lee Miller, and Surrealist Photography," *Drawing Blood*, December 2021.



Fig 38, Fig 39. Lee Miller, *Severed Breast from Radical Surgery in a Place Setting I and II*, 1929.

Source: leemiller.co.uk

Whether we realize it from the series' parenthetical subtitle – *Severed Breast from Radical Surgery in a Place Setting I and II* – or by recognizing the curve of a nipple protruding from flesh, Miller has plated a woman's breast, surgically removed in an early mastectomy. She photographs it from two sides, the diptych alluding to a person's two breasts, as well as creating the sense of a romantic dinner for two. Despite this sense of a couple's date night, and unlike the other imagery in this paper, Miller's scene is not a social one. The photographs reek of loneliness and decay. Miller's choice of two images, rather than one, does not allow for one breast to feel accompanied: rather, it suggests a scientific approach of turning one's subject to show it on both sides, almost like a mugshot.

The images become a macabre play on “you are what you eat,” where a patriarchal public is invited to consume part of a woman likely traumatized by her bodily loss and the early surgery itself. Seeing her breast on a plate, we are shocked and disgusted by our own cannibalistic thoughts. These photographs by Miller share something with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*: shock factor. Both works elicit shock resulting from material one would not expect in dining environments. In Chicago's work, this shock quickly becomes the joy of female inclusion or the humor of double entendre: we see only women in her dinner company, and there is nothing to “eat” but the O'Keefeian forms on the plates. In Miller's work, the shock is revolting: there is no lighthearted play on words or confident feminist gesture. Rather, there is gore, disease, a sense of loss and disconnection at the sight of a human breast where a twelve-ounce steak might be.

By putting the breast in an edible context, Miller alludes to the connection between women and the creation of food, and to the eroticization of the female body as if a product to be consumed. Miller questions, by using the milk-producing breast as a stand-in for the entire woman, whether the only purpose of a woman is to nourish someone else. The images also invoke the many meanings of the

word “consumption.” On one hand, these photographs present a breast as something to be physically ingested. On a symbolic level, they address the visual and sexual consumption, through images, of women’s bodies. I think of silly but disturbing videos of women eating bananas, the term “melons,” erotic images of papayas, and other (often fruit-related) parallels between food and the sexualized body. Miller was a victim of rape as a child: ideas of bodily exploitation and sexualization were likely prevalent in the formulation of this work.⁹⁸

When the visual association between body and food is reversed – when someone substitutes a human body part where an edible object might be – the result is far from sexually desirable. Miller’s bloody, gory breast, removed from its functional and aesthetically pleasing home on a woman’s chest, epitomizes abjection four decades before Julie Kristeva coined the term. As Kristeva writes, what causes abjection is not what is unhygienic per se, but what disturbs the separation between internal and external, between the self and the other: for example, pregnancy, vomit, sex, or rape. Particularly in the second image, someone’s gristly, innermost breast tissue is exposed to the elements on a porcelain plate. Meanwhile, we are invited, as strangers, to consume the body of a person who we know nothing about. We are asked, grotesquely, to dissolve (or rather, digest) that barrier between self and other. A breast from the front is desirable, but, when seen from the inside out, without a body attached, it is unsettling and stomach-turning. As such, food on a plate typically presents nourishment: a delicious meal might quicken the heart rate as seeing a naked woman also might. But here, what is being served is not only unappetizing, but entirely off-putting. Kristeva writes that “[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.”⁹⁹ The photographs disturb the notion that we

⁹⁸ Charles Darwent, *The Independent*. “Man Crush: When Man Ray Met Lee Miller,” January 25, 2013. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/man-crush-when-man-ray-met-lee-miller-8463783.html>.

⁹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1982, 2.

are separate from what we eat, they place the body on a plate when the latter is typically a vessel for sustaining the former. Miller's breast-on-a-plate asks the shuddering question, *Are we food?*

Miller's dining table is a sterile environment, reminding us of medical facilities. Gory breast tissue rests on a stark white plate and crisply folded placemat, as if recreating the surgery itself – a woman's body prepped, wrapped in gauze, and sliced open. In doing so, Miller alludes to the ways in which performing surgery mimics baking, decorating, and serving a cake, or how a butcher carves a duck or a pig. In each case, the goal is to extend human life (by removing disease or feeding the human body). But as the caption on Lee Miller's website attests, the mastectomy which provided material for these photographs was a "novel surgery." For a woman to undergo an early cancer-removing process such as breast removal, would have been terrifying and risky. According to Ilana Lowy, "[i]n the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the only cure for cancer was surgery, often of a radical kind."¹⁰⁰ These surgeries often resulted in fatalities, especially while in development (see: Deirdre Cooper Owens on experimental gynecological surgeries, among other dangerous operations performed on enslaved women).¹⁰¹ To date, the removal of a breast creates a torturous psychological response in many people: as Audre Lorde writes in *The Cancer Journals*, women are encouraged to replace their breasts with prostheses after mastectomy, in part to "make women feel the lack of a breast as a stigma: a sign of shame, a token of lost sexuality, and therefore an indicator of cultural worthlessness."¹⁰²

In a mastectomy, the breast is removed to stop the cancer from spreading further into the body: from consuming it. By offering a cancerous limb as the object to be consumed, Miller redirects the threat of cancer. She suggests that we internalize the disease, the afflicted body part, ourselves:

¹⁰⁰ Ilana Löwy, "The Gender of Cancer." *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, no. 37 (2013), 70.

¹⁰¹ Deirdre Cooper Owens, "Black Women's Experiences in Slavery and Medicine." In *Medical Bondage*, 42–72. Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology. University of Georgia Press, 2017.

¹⁰² Quoted in S. Lochlann Jain's "Cancer Butch." *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 4 (2007), 507-508.

perhaps to assert power over the disease, or perhaps to continue the cycle of consumption. In Miller's photographs, food, the body, and memory are linked in a powerfully embodied and emotional way. On one hand, the breast is disembodied from its owner, both from surgery and via Miller's possession – without consent from the patient – of what was once inseparable from her body. Miller does not allow us to know this woman: her breast stands in as a metonym for womankind. But some viewers may not help but also think of who that woman was. We remember her, in a sense, although the real woman's identity is unknown. Thus, Lee Miller's severed breast is a memorial to the woman who lost it, as well as an elegy to the metaphorical and physical consumption of women's bodies. The memorial breast is reminiscent of votive body parts found across Europe which date back to antiquity. While feet and hands were common, sculptures of "other body parts – legs, arms, breasts, and even heads," often stood in for the corporeal form of their dedicators.¹⁰³ One suspected intention for these objects was to create a vessel for a diseased or injured body part: one that would externalize the affliction and thus remove it from the human body to the artificial limb. Ittai Weinryb references votive lungs in wax or fired clay, intended to cure tuberculosis, as well as uterine, fetal, and pregnant belly sculptures meant to aid a woman's health during or following childbirth. Some of these votives also take breast form (fig 40) – like Miller's photographs, I wonder whether they are meant to signal fertility, sex, or affliction?

Miller alludes to the votive object by photographing human, surgical waste on a plate, asserting both its independence from and origin within the body. But her photographs also suggest the internalization of the cancerous part, through consumption. Perhaps someone eating their breast, Miller pokes, might heal that person's cancer. Every sane person shudders at the thought. Miller's

¹⁰³ Ittai Weinryb, "Votive Materials: Bodies and Beyond," in ed. *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 2018, 37.



Fig 40. Stone votive breast, Cypriot, 4th-3rd century BCE. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

images separate disease from body and body from soul by depicting a breast without its person – but we know that a person was once there. The breast, therefore, is both memorial and votive. The eating of a cancerous breast – which looks (and is) uncomfortably similar to the breast of a chicken – also reminds me of the carcinogenic threat of eating artificially-treated foods. Miller’s breast on a plate addresses a series of spooky connections: reminding me of one of my earlier characters, a woman who loved to eat, and ironically died of stomach cancer after years of being fed like a Christmas turkey three decadent meals a day: Gertrude Stein.¹⁰⁴

SOMETHING SWEET

Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991), (fig 41) by artist Félix González-Torres, much like Miller’s severed breasts, is an object which serves as a metonym for the body (Miller’s breast, of course, is more synecdoche than metonymy, technically speaking). Many of González-Torres’s works are ostensibly about his relationship with the Canadian biochemist, poet, and sommelier Ross Laycock, who died from complications of HIV in 1991. According to his eulogy in *Outweek*, Laycock’s persona could be recognized not only in his lover’s artwork, but in his Toronto home’s “kitschy/classy furniture, red boudoir walls, an original print of *Piss Christ*, a bookshelf full of volumes of poetry, cuisine and gay history, a lime-green-and-blue bedroom, and, of course, a Bang & Olufsen stereo.”¹⁰⁵ In *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, staged for the first time the same year as Laycock’s death, González-Torres piles bite-sized candies wrapped in shiny, multicolored plastic in a gallery corner. The installation adds bright color to a sterile white gallery, turns our attention downward to the floor, and

¹⁰⁴ Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, 88.

¹⁰⁵ Joe Clark, “Ross Laycock,” *OutWeek*, March 27, 1991, http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_91.pdf.



Fig 41. Félix González-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991.

Source: The Art Institute of Chicago

provides a sweet snack for museum guests, who are invited to take one. In fact, taking candy from the pile activates the conceptual meaning of the piece. Upon installation, the candy pile's weight is equal to Laycock's body at its healthiest (175 pounds). According to Sharon Hecker, "Visitors could eat González-Torres's candy, although the diminishing quantity reflected an unsettling detail: Laycock's weight loss and suffering prior to his death."¹⁰⁶ As Hecker points out, the factory which manufactured González-Torres's candies is now closed, bringing future reinstallations into question and further epitomizing the effect of time on both life and art.

Untitled (Portrait of Ross), like so many of Félix González-Torres's works, is a piece about love. 1992's *Untitled (Petit Palais)*, in which two strings of lightbulbs flicker, burn out, and must be replaced, and the ever-diminishing candy pile *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)* each contribute their own version of mirroring the effect of time on relationships. In 1987-1990's multiple versions of *Perfect Lovers*, the artist hung two synchronized clocks side by side, anticipating (and including in the artwork) their inevitable desynchronization from one another (fig 42). According to Shawn Diamond's masters thesis on González-Torres:

'Untitled' (Perfect Lovers) depicts two figures always in proximity but unable to unite and become a single body. As a result the lovers are forced to individually suffer the blows of biology. The inaction of the government represented a chilled kiss of death as Felix was forced to watch the love of his life brutally pulled away at the young age of twenty-nine.¹⁰⁷

Curator Jasper Sharp referred to this piece as a "memento mori" - a reminder that death is inevitable.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Sharon Hecker, "Luciano Fabro: Bitter Sweets for Nadezhda Mandelstam," in *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices*. University of Arkansas Press, 2017. 130-131.

¹⁰⁷ Shawn Diamond, "Requiem for the Shadows: Poetry, Spirituality, and Future Memory in the Light Strings of Felix Gonzalez-Torres". Master's thesis, Kent State University, 2016. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=kent1461781004&disposition=inline. Archived October 28, 2017, at the Wayback Machine. Retrieved January 30, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Museum Wien, Kunsthistorisches (March 6, 2018). "Jasper Sharp on Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Lombardo." *YouTube*.



Fig 42. Félix González-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987-1990.

Source: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

For me, it is also a reminder that love is both perpetual and ever-changing. Likewise, *Portrait of Ross*, a memorial to González-Torres's lost love, is simultaneously a beacon of love and of death. (Does love die with us? Is it never-ending?). The beacon (or should I say, mountain) of candy is also ever-changing, as González-Torres invites the public to take pieces of candy with them. Each visitor to the work takes a souvenir home with them, and in doing so changes the identity of the piece and contributes to its meaning.

Portrait of Ross, unlike other of González-Torres's testaments to Ross and the couple's romance, is a depiction of Ross himself, as opposed to an abstract rendering of the wavering connectivity between a couple over time. *Portrait of Ross* has a unique relationship to Laycock's body, and to the human body in general. This is primarily due to the sculpture's edibility. González-Torres chose not just gelatin or another product which happens to be edible, but candy: something packaged specifically for consumers; something that nearly everyone, from childhood, relishes eating. According to The Art Story, "As the viewer unwraps and eats the candy, he or she becomes complicit in the disappearing process - akin to the years-long public health crisis of HIV/AIDS."¹⁰⁹ In one sense, participants of this artwork are tricked into (or rather, made oblivious to) the metaphorical damage which they enact by consuming something which seems unassuming, benign, and even pleasant. Thus, González-Torres targets the ignorance of the public, particularly the many who lived their lives throughout the 1980s without concerning themselves with voting choices or political activism which would save the lives of thousands. In this piece, perhaps González-Torres takes on the role of the American government, which, by providing corporations extensive rights and freedoms (compared to focusing on, for example, public health crises), distributes innocent-seeming, distractingly-wrapped,

¹⁰⁹ The Art Story, "Gonzalez-Torres Artworks & Famous Paintings." *The Art Story*, 2021. www.theartstory.org/artist/gonzalez-torres-felix/artworks/#pnt_6.

and unhealthy products to an audience which blindly snacks and does not know whose or how many lives are at stake elsewhere.

While the artist certainly intends his work to be political, it is not the type of “activist art” that Americans have come to expect—sensational, graphic work that tells you how to feel about a certain political phenomenon. Rather, González-Torres’s art operates in a more ambiguous plane, where politics is tied to identity, yes, but also where love and grief are inextricably and painfully connected to politics. The intimate candy piles, as a representation of the lives of AIDS victims resting in the careless hands of the public, neither approves of or denies the politicization of queerness. Nor does this work command its viewers to stand up and fight AIDS. It operates more subtly, luring viewers into the pain of the virus and sneaking into spaces of power (the museum) with strong visual forms.

As much as I see the rage of losing a loved one in this work, and the almost-righteous desire to blame this death on everyone around, perhaps this portrait comes from a more generous place. After all, it does offer something delightful and tangible to its audience. The candies are given as freely as the Body of Christ is to Catholics. Noting González-Torres’s assumed relationship to Catholicism having grown up in Cuba, *Portrait of Ross* is quite Eucharistic. The candies live somewhere between metaphor and reality of Laycock’s body (given the pile’s correspondence to his actual weight). They are vessels for the memory and actuality of Ross. Thus, when eaten, consumed, and metabolized by participants, like the Holy Spirit in a Communion wafer, perhaps the spirit of Ross lives on inside them. While the candy itself is fleeting, the legacy of this artwork, and thereby of Ross Laycock, is long-lasting and mutable. The work is a memorial spanning many years and many encounters, as the candies change location and form when carried away, and as the pile is replenished and redistributed with each installation.

When put into pockets and carried out of a museum or gallery, as many pieces of candy were when *Portrait of Ross* was first staged in Los Angeles, they travel away from the public, the spaces monopolized by the art world, and into the private home. Not only do the individual candies spread the metaphor of Ross's legacy and the eternal impacts of the AIDS epidemic, they attach themselves to new people and new locations. At the exhibition, in the same room as Ross's proverbial decaying body, the candy may be unwrapped and eaten, or thrown away. Later that day, it may board an airplane, drop into a sewage drain, or roll into an unreachable corner. It may hug the linings of someone's pocket, become lost, become found, or be given to someone else later on a first date. The candy changes form and quality, adding a particular physical memory to the diminishing pile where it originated.

In each of these works: Spoerri's trap-paintings, Miller's severed breast, and González-Torres's *Portrait of Ross*, a life is condensed and distilled within one image. In the lattermost case, Ross's life dwindles as the work continues to exist: the candy depletes over time, like all of our mortalities. But in each case, there is an unexpected and pleasant implication that life continues beyond death. A photograph of an abandoned kitchen, the surgical aftermath of a mastectomy, a rotting corpse would feel deathly. But these living artworks are just that: living pieces, memorials of lives past, ever-changing in meaning to each person they touch, if consistent in form. Each work addresses, in its own way, the changes that the body and our lives undergo over time: proof of fluidity within existence. Each work also uses the language of food and of mealtimes to transform an art experience – a focus on visuality, an extreme attention from the eyes – into a more embodied experience: something that combines stomach, mind, heart, hands, and soul. Cecilia Novero writes that the “gaze finds its eye in the stomach, or else the laws of the stomach are juxtaposed to those of optics.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Novero, “Daniel Spoerri's Gastronomikum,” 150.

It remains inexplicably true, rare, and sweet to me that death, body, memory, and healing coexist in the frames of these images. Banana Yoshimoto writes, in a passage on cancer and dying in her book *Kitchen*, “Why is it we have so little choice? We live like the lowliest worms. Always defeated—defeated we make dinner, we eat, we sleep. Everyone we love is dying. Still, to cease living is unacceptable.”¹¹¹ Where everything decays and every meal is fleeting, art can help us to preserve the abundance and social splendor of dinnertime, to remember someone’s life at their most lively.

¹¹¹ Banana Yoshimoto, trans. Megan Backus. *Kitchen*. New York: Grove Press, 2006. 82.

CONCLUSION

I started this thesis hoping to write a study of food art as a way to pay respect to all of the themes and thinkers that I value. In the end, there was more theorizing than food, and not as many examples of politics, nor poetics as I originally planned: this thesis is more about people, spaces, and stories. While my focus honed in on the meal, my commitment to cramming as much as I could of what I have learned over the past four years, and who I have wanted to commune with, has stayed. This thesis is long and scattered, and yet invites so much more research: perhaps I bit off more than I could chew. I hope that I continue to relish arts of the everyday, food, and overall gross and social projects. I also hope that the generality of this project (and the associated successes and limitations) will allow me to become more specific in my future projects, particularly regarding more defined historical periods and individual artists. I have taken a broad approach, which invites myself and other scholars to focus on particular examples and anecdotes in the future.

While art alone cannot end apartheid or provide the American working mother with a more secure infrastructure, I have become convinced of art's ability to resist: at its best, without pandering or oversimplifying issues, and communicating the emotional content of personal-political issues in visual and sensory forms. Food is crucial to so many of these issues: it binds sovereignty, resources, domesticity, gender, and the many varieties of routine that someone's life can take. As I hope you have seen, eating together and creating art-meal spaces have the potential to disturb gender roles, plot resistance, memorialize our ancestors and those we have lost, and materialize utopian visions.

Looking back upon this project and its research and writing process, I have many questions (some more easy to put into words than others). How can specific artworks and stories supply a richer

sense of the politics and poetics involved in food art? How can the art of life be portrayed in works of art intended for the museum? My intention was to focus much more on anecdotal, political content than perhaps I did, in paying my due diligence to art history. In the future, I hope to bring more specificity, and more historical and contextual weight to the issues behind artworks (and those which are independent from art), which I believe to be the material most worth writing about. That being said, I will look fondly on this project for the widespread research and application of theory which it has allowed me to achieve.

I am interested in continuing my research on dinner parties, both formal and informal, related and unrelated to artistic practice, as models of and against hegemony (particularly the relationships between servitude, domesticity, and feminism in the 20th century, as inspired by the case of the Steins). I am also hoping to learn more about recipe development and pre-colonial foodways, as well as historic and persisting indigenous farming practices, seed- and recipe-keeping, in an effort to preserve sustainable methods of cohabitation within the environment and our local communities (this inspired by Iron Path Farms and other indigenous organizations). It would benefit both my own research and the field (art history, food studies, food art, material culture studies) to investigate more specific, non-Art examples of artistry and sociopolitical context in food making. This research may involve art history and visual culture, and it may take me out of these realms into a focus more on material culture, anthropology, food studies, or other disciplines. I am happy to continue this work, either way, in an effort to abandon strict categorizations of knowledge and develop a more intersectional and cross-disciplinary practice. I'm not sure where this exploration will lead – there are many kernels here which may pop in many different directions, but I'm happy to tuck into any and enjoy the next journey.

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