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From Farm to Table to Stage: Performing Food Politics

By

Catherine M. Duffly

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Shannon Jackson, Chair
Professor Brandi Catanese
Professor Julie Guthman
Professor Richard Walker

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

University of California, Berkeley

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This dissertation examines the civic function of the arts through an analysis of socially engaged performances that address issues of American food politics. Socially engaged performances – known alternately as community-based performance, theatre for social change, and activist art – seek to make people aware of the systems within which they are embedded. Food offers a particularly productive way of connecting the intimacies of social life with a larger apparatus.

Within the discourse of socially engaged performance there is debate about the best way to connect art practice with pointed political critique. Some critics argue for an approach that values harmony and community. Other critics suggest that antagonism and autonomy are the most effective approach. The discourse of food politics has its own debates and tensions that play out along similar lines: food as means of unification versus food as emblematic of social disparity. This project is unique in that it is one of the first studies to examine food-centered performances that not only use food as material and/or metaphor, but also attend to the systemic processes of the production, distribution and consumption of food.

Using interviews, performance analyses, and published reviews, this project examines the impact of artists’ use of food and food politics in their artistic work, as well as the way artists’ formal concerns and dramaturgical choices in turn impact the discourse of food politics. The research demonstrates that these performances are an ideal site through which to test the potential of socially engaged art. Through several case studies – including an installation piece that explores the space of the restaurant, a multi-media theatre piece that examines discourses of food politics, and a community-based theatre project that connects farmers and artists – this dissertation argues that the use of food not only facilitates more effective socially engaged performance, but can also expose the race and class blind spots of the food movement.
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This project was supported by the committed staff of the Theater, Dance and Performance Studies Department at UC Berkeley. The front office staff including Marni Glovinsky, Josh Hesslein, Meghan LaBelle, Grace Leach, David Kim and Michael Mansfield have helped this project through their knowledgeable and kind administrative assistance. Graduate Affairs Officers Mary Ajideh and Robin Davidson deserve so many thanks for their emotional support and deep institutional wisdom. My scholarly work has been enriched by my artistic work as a director. The department’s production staff – Cour Dain, David Elliot, Brian Fugelsang, Eugene Palmer, Wendy Sparks, and others – are a superlatively talented crew who have worked with me on numerous projects. I have been so blessed to learn from them, as well as Kwame Braun and Deb Sussel. Special thanks to the department’s fearless production manager, Kate Mattson, who has been generous to me in sharing her vast knowledge and insight, as well as her invaluable take on navigating the theory-practice divide. Thanks also to Marty Berman, the department’s beloved faculty supervisor for Graduate Student Instructors in acting, and a great mentor to me. The department’s professors, Catherine Cole, Joe Goode, Gail de Kosnick, Shannon Steen, and Lisa Wymore, have each been interlocutors and role models throughout my time at Berkeley. Thanks, in particular, to Peter Glazer who has been an important mentor to me, and who has encouraged and assisted my growth as a director.

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by a group of graduate students in Berkeley’s Performance Studies program who are as generous as they are intelligent. It has been a humbling experience to find myself in the company of such thoughtful, committed people. In particular, Michelle Baron, Nilgun Bayratkar, Kate Kokontis, Charlotte McIvor, Ariel Osterweis, and Brandon Woolf have, over the years, offered advice, feedback, humor, love, and food. It has been my privilege and great pleasure to learn from and with you. I hope to stay connected to you for many years to come. Furthermore, the Multi-Campus Research Program, Studies of Food and the Body, offered me a community of scholars working from various disciplinary perspectives on food. Thanks in particular to Charlotte Biltkoff, Julie Guthman, Lynette Hunter, and Carolyn de la Peña for their generous support and feedback, and to graduate student colleagues too numerous to name.

I owe a great deal to the mentorship of two professors from Macalester College during my undergraduate education. Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary allowed me to see how theory and practice are entwined. Thank you for showing me how to be a scholar.
who is also an activist and an artist. I hope to be for others the kind of teacher and mentor that you are for me.

I want to extend a special thank you to all of the artists who are the focus of this dissertation, and who are doing such amazing socially engaged work. Thanks to all of OPENrestaurant’s collaborators and in particular to Stacie Pierce, Jerome Waag, Sam White, Samin Nosrat, and Chris Sollars. Thank you to LightBox theater company, especially Ellen Beckerman and Madeleine George. Thank you to Open Waters Theatre Arts, in particular Jennie Hahn and Cory Tamler, and to Paula Donnelly of Cornerstone Theater for first telling me about the *Farms and Fables* project. Thanks to all of you for your patience with my questions, and for opening up to me about your projects and your process. You have taught me a great deal.

This project is deeply influenced by the four years I spent working as a server and bartender at Chez Panisse. I had the great fortune of joining a community of co-workers – often referred to as the “Chez Panisse Family” – who came together around a passion for food and a commitment to its sustainable production. In 2003, when the U.S. began the invasion of Iraq, it was with members of the Chez Panisse community that I found solace, and with whom I marched and rallied in opposition to the bombing and invasion. Many in the Chez Panisse community connected, as I did, the principles that we felt guided sustainable agriculture, those of mutuality and interdependence, to global social justice. It was to Chez Panisse that we would return in our off-hours, as a gathering site and a place to find camaraderie and a meal. Thanks to my experience there, I have first hand knowledge of the powerful force of eating together. I approach this project with a deep connection to and empathy for the tenets of the food movement, even as I seek to draw attention to its many blind spots. Thank you to all of my Chez Panisse comrades, especially Clare Bell-Fuller, Mark Congero, Melissa Fernandez, and Isa, the next generation food justice activist.

A very special thanks to goes my family. To Jessica Battilana, Leigh Lyndon, and Noah Michelson, who are my chosen family and have sustained me in so many ways. To my in-laws, especially Deedee Fudge, who opened her heart to me from the very beginning and whose joyful spirit sets such a great example. To my siblings, Thomas Duffly and Mieke Duffly, who, through their passion, intelligence, and humor, are constantly teaching me important lessons. To my parents, Nan Duffly and Paul Duffly, who are, each in their own way, socially engaged artists. Thank you for your unwavering support; you are both an inspiration to me. Thank you to my glorious daughter, Cora Quinn, who reminds me to breathe, and who sustains me with her fierce love. Finally, this project would absolutely not have been possible if it were not for Zack Duffly – a true feminist and warrior for justice, my partner in crime – who has spent uncountable hours supporting my work. For all the dishes and the childcare, for the drafts read and edited, for being my constant interlocutor, and for the amazing meals we have shared, thank you.
CHAPTER ONE

Socially Engaged Performance and the Politics of Food

“The term ‘foodie’ is no longer reserved for an exclusive club of chefs and discriminating diners. Today, food has become a focus – and a cause – for a broad audience… It’s no longer the fringe elements… We call it the new mainstream.’”

–Tracey Ryder, co-founder of Edible Communities publications

“ART IS FOOD. You can’t EAT it BUT it FEEDS you.”

–Peter Schumann, Bread and Puppet

In the last two decades, food politics have become a part of the popular consciousness, and in the past few years Americans’ obsession with food has reached a fever pitch. The Obamas tend an organic garden at the White House. Michael Pollan’s books, on the industrial food chain and on the demise of food culture, top bestseller lists. Cineplexes advertise movies about food politics. And even Wal-Mart, the epitome of American mainstream consumerism, now sells organic food and offers locally grown produce. The mainstreaming of food issues is remarkable for the way it considers not only the more pleasurable elements of food – how it tastes, looks and smells – but also how food is produced. The terms locavore, sustainable, and organic have all been used, with varying degrees of specificity, to describe a movement that values food produced and/or procured locally, in season, and without chemicals. This contemporary discourse of food politics connects consumers to multiple levels of food production through the inescapable act of eating; it asks consumers to think about where and how their food was grown and/or processed.

Americans’ preoccupation with this kind of food politics is evidenced not only by what they put in their shopping carts and on their dinner plates, but also by cultural representations, in fictional characters and storylines on television shows and in movies, novels, and plays. And while food politics sometimes appears in cultural representation as a comical or cynical marker of twenty-first century obsession with food and eating, for politically minded artists seeking to have effects on the social world, the use of food in performance is a means of engaging public consciousness.

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3 In the last eight years: Super Size Me (2004), Fast Food Nation (2006), King Corn (2007), and Food Inc. (2009).
This dissertation examines the civic function of the arts through an analysis of socially engaged performances that address American food politics. Socially engaged performances seek to make people aware of the systems within which they are embedded. Food offers a particularly productive way of connecting the intimacies of social life with a larger apparatus. I examine artists’ attempts to bring awareness of food politics into their aesthetic and dramaturgical choices. I use interviews, performance analysis, and published reviews to understand the ways this mode of performance might be seen to affect social actors. While previous studies have examined performances that use food as material and/or metaphor, this dissertation seeks to incorporate an understanding of the systemic processes of food’s production, distribution and consumption. I demonstrate that these performances are an ideal site through which to test the potential of socially engaged art. Food and performance can heighten each other’s capacity for social engagement, symbolic resonance, and affective connection.

A recent community-based project, *On The Table* (2010) by Sojourn Theatre, is one example of the ways artists seeking social engagement have turned to food politics and its surrounding issues. Sojourn Theater hoped to connect residents of Portland, OR with nearby small-town Molalla through a traveling theater piece and a shared dinner. The performance began simultaneously in two different locations, a Portland church and a barn in Molalla, population 7,500. Audience and cast then traveled by bus to Oregon City where they met in person, shared a meal, and completed the performance. Local journalist, Marty Hughley described the performance in *The Oregonian*:

> The loosely constructed story involves two families, one from the city, one from the country. So the Molalla audience hears reminiscences at the memorial service of a logger named George, while the Portland audience hears about a woman named Bess who lives among Russian immigrants in Albina and works at Meier & Frank [a Portland department store chain]. Jump forward 30 years, and we’re at the wedding of descendants, also named George and Bess… During the bus ride, Sojourn personnel pass out cell-phone numbers and members of the Molalla audience call those from the Portland crowd to talk – well, to shout over the rumbling road noise, actually – about what they’ve seen so far. Upon arriving in Oregon City, you get to meet face-to-face. Then, over modest portions of a delicious [Mollala-raised] elk stew and other Oregon-sourced foods, everyone talks about the issues presented…

Through this work, artistic director Michael Rohd examined the myths and realities around the urban/rural division in the United States, as well as the “connections between place, community, values and identity,” principles that are important to the contemporary food movement.  

A second example is Stolen Chair Theatre Company’s use of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model as a marketing strategy. Stolen Chair offers participants the chance to support the development of new work at the beginning of the season, much as CSA members support farmers by paying their fee before the crop is

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6 Ibid.
harvested. Says Jon Stancata, co-artistic director of the New York City-based company, “Instead of going home with a bag of sometimes imperfect but always exciting veggies, our [Community Supported Theater] members will get glimpses of our sometimes imperfect but – we hope – always exciting works-in-progress and related cultural events.” These two projects, along with the numerous others cited in special issues of performance, theater and art journals, exemplify how the tenets of the food movement are making their mark on performance.

Of course, the use of food in performance is not an altogether new phenomenon. Food has been both a powerful metaphor and a recurrent material object, appearing in performances ranging from 16th century courtly banquets to late 20th century feminist performance art. Bread and Puppet Theater, founded in the early 1960s, famously dramatized their commitment to making theater as necessary as food by offering homemade bread to audiences. Founder Peter Schumann explained,

> We sometimes give you a piece of bread along with the puppet show because our bread and theatre belong together. For a long time the theatre arts have been separated from the stomach. Theatre was entertainment. Entertainment was meant for the skin. Bread was meant for the stomach… We want you to understand that theatre is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce that you think it is, where you pay and get something. Theatre is different. It is more like bread, more like a necessity.

The group’s use of bread was both a metaphor – “art is food” – and a powerful material or prop that they hoped would bring their audience and performers together in a feeling of communitas. Twenty-first century artists like Rohd and Stancata draw from this long tradition of using food as metaphor and/or material in performance. Arguably however, these artists use food with a unique awareness of food systems that differs from that of their predecessors, precisely because they attend to the means of production. In a context where food politics seeks to connect the intimate act of eating with larger, systemic issues, these artists extend the intimate encounter of performance outward, joining the micro with the macro scales of performance and social engagement.

In what follows, I explore some of the key ideas, debates and concerns that inform the multi-faceted goals of this study. Food’s peculiar qualities as powerful material and metaphor make it particularly productive in socially engaged performance. Located in a field with multiple disciplinary debates, socially engaged artists mobilize food in different ways and to different ends depending on their aesthetic frame of reference. Their embrace of food politics further complicates and deepens how we read the performances of this dissertation. I conclude with a discussion of the current issues in food politics – not only the popular discourse, but also critiques of the movement’s blind

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spots. Throughout I am attentive to parallels in the debates within socially engaged performance and the food movement.

**Food as/in Performance**

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has been one of the more prolific writers on the subject of food and performance in the field of performance studies. Known for her work on the aesthetics of everyday life and the performance of everyday objects, it is not surprising that she should also be linked to the study of food, one of our more ubiquitous and meaning-laden of objects. Indeed, her writing on food is a significant contribution not only to the discourse of food and performance, but to performance studies more broadly. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses food to animate her theorization of performance, proposing a model in which “to perform” can be further classified as “to do,” “to behave,” and “to show.”

In the first instance, wherein “to perform is to do, to execute, to carry out to completion, to discharge a duty,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that we read the performance of food as the making and serving of it, involving “materials, tools, techniques, procedures, actions.” An example of this kind of food performance might include a home cook, taking down a dog-eared copy of *Joy of Cooking*, roasting a chicken, and setting the table. We might just as well imagine a restaurant cook, swiftly and skillfully juliennng carrots, emulsifying a dressing or plating a dish of pasta. The second sense of performance, to behave, refers to “habit, custom, or law … the social practices that are part and parcel of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*.”

Regarding the performance of food, this refers to what we have come to know as “table manners” – no elbows on the table, no talking with your mouthful, etc. “Behaving,” with regards to food, also refers to rituals surrounding food preparation – a Jewish Seder for example – or simply the act of clinking glasses together in tribute or salutation. The third sense of performance in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition is to show. She writes, “When doing and behaving are displayed, when they are shown, when participants are invited to exercise discernment, evaluation and appreciation, food events move towards the theatrical and, more specifically, towards the spectacular.”

As such an integral part of our everyday life, as much in the mundane and habitual sense as in its connection to ritual and taboo, food holds powerful symbolic significance when taken up within a representational frame.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is part of a wider conversation about the significance of food in/as performance. Richard Gough has explored the topic of food through his scholarly and performance work. Gough elaborates upon Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s reference to food as “a material with strong presence,” pointing to the significance of food as both medium and metaphor in performance. He suggests that the importance of

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10 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s use of food to illustrate performance theory has been used as a key example in the central performance studies textbook, Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32-33.
12 Ibid., 1-2.
13 Ibid., 2.
14 Ibid., 14.
the food object in performance lies in its capacity to be both “merely” itself – a thing of substance and sustenance – and a symbol of something else. Gough states, “What fascinates me is how food is prepared and how the occasion of eating food is presented and how much of society, its power structures and symbolism, is expressed through, confirmed and galvanized by that.”15 Yet, the material presence of food in performance is powerful not only for what it signifies, but also for how it destabilizes the audience-performer relationship. For example, in his early performance banquets (1976, 1979), Gough served food to his audience. His later performance project, The Origin of Table Manners (1989) focused on “the rituals of eating, the customs, the etiquette,” and asked the questions, “What happens to manners in a moment of crisis? What happens to your etiquette at a moment when your life is in danger?... How are you trained in your manners in the first place?”16 Gough’s performances call attention to habitual elements of food’s preparation and consumption. He simultaneously challenges the conventional theatrical relationship between audience and performer. This destabilization of the audience-performer relationship, is further theorized by theater scholar Helen Iball, who has offered up a helpful term for thinking about the effect staging food has on audiences: the “foodie gaze.”17 Iball writes, “Food staged and screened has the capability of capturing the gaze, maybe only momentarily, but certainly, in that moment, totally, and propelling the spectator into a more bodily experience which, along with visual impact, etches itself on to the memory.”18 In performances that incorporate food as a significant object, food upstages the actor in such a way that the spectator becomes more aware of her/his own corporeality than that of the performer’s. Food that is cooked, ingested by, or smeared on the performer’s body activates the spectator, who has an individually evocative reaction to the food. Embodied experiences occasioned by the use of food thus carry the potential to activate spectators, possibly revealing social hierarchies and prompting political action.19 Implicit in Iball’s discussion of the provocative nature of food on stage is the fact that the spectator’s corporeality is foregrounded by food’s threatening permeability. Iball writes, “food draws attention to its own life, its own presence, and in so doing, heightens the ‘liveness’ of theatre by forcing the acknowledgment of its permeability.”20 This permeability – the smells of the food on stage, the absorption of the theatrical prop into

16 Ibid., 52.
18 Ibid., 80.
20 Iball, “Melting Moments,” 70.
the actor’s body – is threatening both to the conventional relationship of spectator and audience and to the very boundaries of the body itself. Food both entices and threatens. Indeed, it is this unsettling quality of food that makes it such a potent prop.

Julie Kristeva highlights food’s capacity to corrupt the wholeness of the individual, turning to a fraught performance from childhood. A parent offers a child a glass of milk. As the child’s lips come into contact with the thin skin that has formed on the surface of the milk, she pulls away, retching. Her response – gagging, nausea, disgust – separates her from the parent who proffers the milk but also distinguishes herself from the food they offer.\footnote{Kristeva’s term for this self/subject constituting event is abjection. Through abjection, the subject is able to create the illusion of wholeness and purity by rejecting all elements that threaten to disturb the identity of the subject or disturb the structures that order a subject’s life. The most precarious sites of this breech occur at points of contact between the inside and the outside of the body. The mouth becomes a potentially dangerous site for this contamination.}{Kristeva highlights food’s capacity to corrupt the wholeness of the individual, turning to a fraught performance from childhood. A parent offers a child a glass of milk. As the child’s lips come into contact with the thin skin that has formed on the surface of the milk, she pulls away, retching. Her response – gagging, nausea, disgust – separates her from the parent who proffers the milk but also distinguishes herself from the food they offer.\footnote{Kristeva’s term for this self/subject constituting event is abjection. Through abjection, the subject is able to create the illusion of wholeness and purity by rejecting all elements that threaten to disturb the identity of the subject or disturb the structures that order a subject’s life. The most precarious sites of this breech occur at points of contact between the inside and the outside of the body. The mouth becomes a potentially dangerous site for this contamination.}{Kristeva’s term for this self/subject constituting event is abjection. Through abjection, the subject is able to create the illusion of wholeness and purity by rejecting all elements that threaten to disturb the identity of the subject or disturb the structures that order a subject’s life. The most precarious sites of this breech occur at points of contact between the inside and the outside of the body. The mouth becomes a potentially dangerous site for this contamination.} Indeed, it is this unsettling quality of food that makes it such a potent prop.

I am drawn to Kristeva’s example because here the food item, milk, represents mother and thus home, comfort, and love, and yet is simultaneously threatening and disruptive. As we are all increasingly aware, in the wake of mad cow disease and peanut butter recalls, the food we eat sometimes threatens to contaminate the purity and wholeness of our bodies.\footnote{Kristeva’s work on abjection is heavily influenced Mary Douglas’s work on pollution. Douglas argued that societies are established by creating boundaries separating that which is acceptable from that which is not. See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 1966).}{Kristeva’s work on abjection is heavily influenced by Mary Douglas’s work on pollution. Douglas argued that societies are established by creating boundaries separating that which is acceptable from that which is not. See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 1966).} However, even as it holds the potential to pollute and corrupt the body, eating a meal is often a moment of conviviality. The act of eating together can create a sense of community, building on shared cultural traditions, and/or offering a sense of fellowship through shared experience.\footnote{See David Sutton, Remembrances of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001); Sidney Mintz, Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, culture, and the Past (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).}{For all of these reasons, food has been a powerful metaphor and material throughout art and performance history. From the courtly banquets of the 15\textsuperscript{th}, 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries to the present, food and performance have a long-standing relationship. Yet it is the polyvalent quality of food – as a nourishing, comforting substance and as a disruptive material – that makes it such a powerful prop for contemporary socially engaged performances. Artists have made use of this tension, at times finding the political potential in food’s ability to bring people together, and at other moments allowing food’s abject qualities to prompt viewers’ critical reflection.}{For all of these reasons, food has been a powerful metaphor and material throughout art and performance history. From the courtly banquets of the 15\textsuperscript{th}, 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries to the present, food and performance have a long-standing relationship. Yet it is the polyvalent quality of food – as a nourishing, comforting substance and as a disruptive material – that makes it such a powerful prop for contemporary socially engaged performances. Artists have made use of this tension, at times finding the political potential in food’s ability to bring people together, and at other moments allowing food’s abject qualities to prompt viewers’ critical reflection.} For all of these reasons, food has been a powerful metaphor and material throughout art and performance history. From the courtly banquets of the 15\textsuperscript{th}, 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries to the present, food and performance have a long-standing relationship. Yet it is the polyvalent quality of food – as a nourishing, comforting substance and as a disruptive material – that makes it such a powerful prop for contemporary socially engaged performances. Artists have made use of this tension, at times finding the political potential in food’s ability to bring people together, and at other moments allowing food’s abject qualities to prompt viewers’ critical reflection.

\footnote{“I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that they see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.” Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.}{“I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that they see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. 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Socially Engaged Performance

This dissertation’s three primary case studies identify variously within the multidisciplinary field of socially engaged performance. These case studies might at turns be identified as social practice art, community-based theater, and post-Brechtian, ensemble performance. They have roots in both theater and visual art practice and thus have differing artistic, theoretical, and political investments. These investments include: the influences of Situationism and Minimalism, concerns of an art-historical trajectory; an emphasis on the underlying values and principles of democracy and social justice; a commitment to reciprocity and ethical engagement between artists and communities; and post-dramatic formal experimentation. Though all of the socially engaged practices use food to enhance their participation in public discourse, artists’ use of the prop has different significance from each disciplinary vantage point. Furthermore, in the discourses of socially engaged performance and certain iterations of contemporary food politics, there are parallels and reciprocal terms - for example, the differently weighted relationships to community-building and localism/site-specificity. Though each discourse animates the terms differently, the fact that there are shared terms and overlapping concerns further imbricates food and performance.

I have chosen to use the term socially engaged performance to refer to a set of cultural practices that seek to have effects in the realm of the social.25 I am attracted to the way the term marks a shift from the idea that society begets culture to the notion that the cultural has a potential to influence the social. I use the term performance because it is inclusive of both theatrical production and durational art practice – a practice that, while stemming from an art historical genealogy, is time-based and relies on a live encounter between audience and art/artist. Yet there is a whole field of terms clustered around what I refer to as socially engaged performance. These practices are marked and in some ways defined by an overabundance of terminology and a slipperiness of definition.26 It often seems that validating the work is one of the primary preoccupations of critics and scholars. As the terms are used they can begin to accumulate negative

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25 Here I define culture as the heterogeneous ways people artistically, creatively and/or symbolically represent lived experience. I define the social as human interaction and coordination that can encompass the various structures – religious, economic, political – that make up society.

baggage – art and performance practices associated with “political” or “community” or “collaboration” tend to be denigrated for their lack of aesthetic and/or formal innovation, achievement or quality – until scholars feel the need to find a new, unencumbered term. The work of naming and re-naming these practices is linked to a desire to value the work as innovative art; to name something is to give it value and currency.

The key debates within the broad field of socially engaged performance revolve around a unique overlap of aesthetic-social concerns and claims to efficacy. These debates tend to involve a common set of questions: if these are practices that hope to have effects on the social, what are those effects? In what manner do artists go about getting effects? And how do scholars and critics evaluate said effects as well as the artists’ means of attaining them? Answers to these questions vary and have different emphases depending on one’s disciplinary or genre-specific locality. Regarding the evaluative frame of socially engaged practices, Shannon Jackson writes, “Our evaluations of work depend not only upon critical histories but also upon disciplinary perceptual habits that can make for drastically different understandings of what we are in fact encountering.” Jackson argues, furthermore, for a “contingency of perception” that suggests a way of understanding performance that is reliant upon a viewer’s disciplinary orientation, and also refers to the relationships of inter-dependence that some of these art practices perform. To some, engaged performance fulfills the promise of theater’s potential to gather people both in community and in protest, as well as to imagine (utopic) alternatives. To others it represents the worst kind of instrumental art for the way it advocates a material usefulness that is easily co-opted and threatens to undermine art’s special potential to transform representation through more opaque and non-literal means. To some it signifies a new mode of aesthetics, which suggest that formal considerations might include attention to our embeddedness in social systems. To others it is simply “bad art.” As Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus describe, performance that claims social engagement “often conjures up a patronizing image of untrained amateurs getting together haphazardly to put on a play with forgotten lines, ill-fitting costumes, or wobbly sets.” Below, I draw the contours of this broad category. I identify common concerns and points of overlap as well as significant differences and areas of tension between theater and performance scholars, who have one set of concerns regarding these questions, and art critics and scholars, who have another set of concerns and sensibilities.

Coming from the realm of theater and performance studies, scholars such as Jan Cohen-Cruz, Petra Kuppers, and Sonia Kuftinec, along with Haedicke and Nellhaus, have tried to speak back to the negative assumptions about community-based art by articulating some of the common elements of a range of performance projects. Taken

28 Joe Kelleher writes, “[The] political-ready quality of theatre includes its liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens now and that it gathers people… around issues of disagreement but also of common concern. There is further political potential in the theatre’s capacity to pretend, to say and show things that are not so and hence to propose alternative realities to how things are at present… The theatre ‘represents’ us, both in the sense of showing us images of ourselves and in the sense of standing in and standing up for us,” in Joe Kelleher, Theatre & Politics, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 10.
29 Haedicke and Nellhaus, Performing Democracy, 3.
collectively, their work identifies several aspects of applied and community-based performance: they are often collaboratively created, participatory, process-based, and committed to localism/site-specificity. These techniques of artistic production are in many ways a response to a history of American theater that is marked by exclusion – from racist representation on stage and the scarcity of nationally recognized plays by women and people of color to racially segregated audiences and the prohibitive cost of mainstream theater tickets.

Indeed, community-based performance often has a vision of social change. It seeks to use the realm of representation and the symbolic to respond to social issues, make art more accessible (physically and metaphorically), and to represent the under- and mis-represented. Cohen-Cruz defines community-based performance as, “a response to a collectively significant issue or circumstance. It is a collaboration between an artist or ensemble and a ‘community’ in that the latter is a primary source of the text, possibly of performers as well, and definitely a goodly portion of the audience.” Many community-based artists seek to blur the boundaries between the artists/performers and the spectators as an aesthetic strategy for political engagement. Taking up Augusto Boal’s notion of the “spect-actor,” community involvement encourages a sense of agency among participants. This Boalian contraction of spectator and actor points to a participant who moves between roles and, as Boal suggests, is empowered to take action outside the realm of the performance. Community-based performance’s process-based approach both values the process of creation and the multiple voices, talents, and unique knowledge, of community members.

Though socially engaged theater artists strive to foster work about, by, and for a participating community in a location that is culturally and economically accessible, some struggle with definitions of community that rely on commonalities and universals. While the practice of participatory democracy is often the goal, it is not always realized. Furthermore, scholars differ in their evaluations of a work’s social and formal efficacy. For example, well-known community-based theater company, Cornerstone Theater has been the subject of such difference of opinion. Sonia Kuftinec finds their process of collaborative creation to be one that “allows for difference and dissent.” But, in a now infamous article published in TDR about Steelbound, Cornerstone’s collaborative project in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Sara Brady found their process to be overly mediated by the artists in such a way that, in her opinion, ultimately failed to fully reflect the diverse voices of the participating community.

Brady critiqued the Steelbound project for inadequately representing the diversity of the Bethlehem community: “for example, it include[d] no residents of the mostly Latino/a public housing neighborhoods.” Furthermore, community stories were

30 Cohen-Cruz, Local Acts, 2.
34 Ibid., 64.
mediated by the playwright, she criticized, and ultimately, the play did not agitate for change in a town that had been devastated by the closing of the steel mill. Brady found that there was an “absence of any call for social change, or even an attempt to tell a fuller story of the Steel [mill] (its economics, its place in the global economy, etc.).” Brady states that the Steelbound project did not, “inspire change, provide the best social, political, or environmental alternative to a community in need, or even… come close to including a whole community.” Nor did the project “challenge the social order.” Further complicating matters, Brady’s article resulted in a flurry of letters to the editor, from participating community members and artists who disagreed with Brady’s assessment. Nevertheless, Brady’s article raised important issues about the limits of socially engaged performance, arguing that the Steelbound project did not go far enough in addressing race and class inequities within the deindustrialized town. Indeed, in an effort to build inclusive, collaborative, accessible works, socially engaged artists sometimes fail to grapple with difference, missing opportunities to address race and class inequalities.

For Brady, part of the failed radicality of the Steelbound project was due to its celebration of cultural heritage in lieu of social change. For others, an emphasis on cultural heritage is crucial to the project of community-based art. Such an emphasis is sometimes articulated as a commitment to localism. Cohen-Cruz defines community-based performance as, “theater that stays close to its origins in terms of place, ethnicity or circumstances.” Taking up the ecological implications of the term, “grassroots theater,” she calls upon farmer, author and cultural critic Wendell Berry’s linkage of culture and agriculture. Cohen-Cruz writes, “The traditions, new ideas and interactions that generate systems of human meaning-making are like the particular soil, amount of rainfall and growing season that determine the particularities of plant life.” Community-based theater must be as committed to the peculiar ecology of place as a farmer. For example, theater companies like Roadside Theater of Appalachia are intensely place-bound, committed to preserving the traditions of the region. Cohen-Cruz’s reference of Berry highlights community-based performance and food politics’ shared commitment to the local. Within the field of food politics, a rhetoric of localism reflects, in part, a response to an era of globalization in which people fear that technologies of communication and travel have alienated people from their local communities. For theater, site-specificity means reaffirming a commitment to (inter)connection – between artist, audience and place – and reflects a similar anxiety over the effects of globalization.

35 Ibid., 65.
36 Ibid., 53.
39 Ibid., 3.
Visual art scholars and critics have articulated evaluative criteria analogous to those of the theater scholars referred to above. Grant Kester frames the debate with a few key questions: “What is the relationship between art production and more direct (or at least more conventionally recognizable) forms of political struggle and protest? What constitutes an activist art practice? And what is the role of criticism, and the critic, in relation to such a practice?”

Yet the relation between visual art forms, collaboration, and visual art markets have different stakes. What theater artists take for granted, namely a durational, time-based encounter between art/artist and audience, has been a mode that visual artists have turned to, in large part for the ways it unsettles an art market’s need for a salable art object. Unlike theater artists, for whom process-based work and participation are linked, in part, to the socio-political goal of making theater more accessible, for visual artists, the turn to process-based and collaborative modes of art-making means a turn away from the commodification of art and a refusal to submit to the market’s desire for a single author. This issue of accessibility is, however, taken up by visual artists seeking to call attention to the ways gallery and museum spaces are exclusionary. In particular, feminist visual artists sought to address the racist, sexist exclusionary practices of galleries and museums. For example, artist Faith Ringgold began protesting the lack of representation of artists of color, particularly black women, in the art world in the 1960s. Her use of quilting as a means of calling attention to the devalued and unacknowledged artistic contributions of black women’s handicrafts parallels other feminist artists’ incorporation of food into their artistic practices.

The debate over the aesthetic validity of community-based interaction and participatory artistic creation cuts across the field of socially engaged performance, though, again, it is animated differently within the fields of theater and visual arts. Cohen-Cruz identifies a polarization within critiques of socially engaged theater as, “use-driven on the one end, aesthetically-driven on the other.” Part of Cohen-Cruz’s scholarly project is to put an end to the assumptions that socially engaged performance “is necessarily high on the useful end of the spectrum, but also that usefulness is in inverse proportion to aesthetics – that is, that high on the one scale means low on the other.”

Similarly, artist and critic Suzanne Lacy articulates criteria that take seriously visual art’s social and aesthetic engagements. Her criteria emphasize: “the quality of the imagery, including the question of beauty and the relevance of invention; the artist’s intention and the effects of the work, whether measurable or hypothesized; and the work’s method of conveying meaning.” The hope is that socially engaged art can function “simultaneously within both social and aesthetic traditions.” Establishing criteria for assessing socially engaged art is not a matter of shunting aside the aesthetic in favor of more socially efficacious modes of action.

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Though many scholars reiterate Lacy’s assertion that socially engaged practices can combine attention to both aesthetic and social concerns, the arguments against socially engaged practices as instrumental are persistent. They range from Adorno’s critique of Brecht for being overly didactic, to art critic Claire Bishop’s insistence on what she refers to as an aesthetic “antagonism,” which, in Bishop’s use of the term, resists intelligibility and thereby resists state cooptation of the arts.\(^{46}\) As Jackson writes of this debate,

Art practices that seek to create a harmonious space of inter-subjective encounter—i.e., those that “feel good”—risk neutralizing the capacity of critical reflection. Furthermore, art practices that seek to correct social ills—i.e., those that “do good”—risk becoming overly instrumentalized, banalizing the formal complexities and interrogative possibilities of art under the homogenizing umbrella of a social goal.\(^{47}\)

Brecht is a key example of this tension. On the one hand, Brecht sought a kind of theatrical alienation that would activate the spectator into recognizing the characters’ historically produced conditions and thus take action to change his/her own conditions. On the other hand, Adorno saw Brecht’s “do-good-ness” as overly instrumental and a capitulation to popular culture.\(^{48}\)

While there are those who would seek to avoid instrumentality altogether by creating work that resists legibility and “usefulness,” there are some who would have us articulate a (re)definition of the aesthetic that includes social efficacy. Unsettling this binary requires a change in the parameters of how art is defined. For example, Haedicke and Nellhaus argue that artistic commitment necessitates a shift in what we identify as art: “Art is now defined not solely as a set of formal features: it also involves a set of social relationships.” This shift poses a challenge to “conventional performance aesthetics.” As Kuppers argues, community performance offers, “a new way of understanding art-making… an aesthetic of access that redefines who makes art, what art is, the nature of beauty and pleasure, and appropriate ways of appreciating art.”\(^{49}\)

Cohen-Cruz extends this argument for the re-definition of aesthetic criteria. She suggests that we change not only our understanding of aesthetics and its relationship to the social, but also our understanding of what aesthetic efficacy looks like. When she articulates the efficacy of engaged performance as an “ability to bring people together [which] can contribute slowly to culture change, without which policy change has limited

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\(^{46}\) Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York Continuum, 1982); Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79; and Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44 (February, 2006):178-83. The terms of these debates are complex and laying out their nuance would fall beyond the scope of this chapter. See Jackson’s *Social Works* for a genealogy and a clear articulation of the theoretical, political, and artistic concerns over the instrumentalization of the arts.

\(^{47}\) Jackson, *Social Works* 47.


\(^{49}\) Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance*, 3-5.
effect,” she is acknowledging that effects look differently for the arts than they do for other public sectors.50 Furthermore, she advocates for a re-examination of not only aesthetic criteria, but also aesthetic effects.

Jackson’s efforts to read the aesthetic in (inter)relation to the social further complicate how we might understand the related matters of efficacy and aesthetics. Her emphasis on contingency, as inter-dependence with a recognition of the importance of infrastructural and systemic support, highlights not only the significance of the social systems themselves, but also the necessity of locating formal and aesthetic innovation in the realm of the social. Jackson highlights this socio-cultural contingency through her use of a cultural geography concept: the interdependency of spatial scale. In particular, she turns to geographer Neil Smith’s notion of “jumping scales,” that is, “cultural and social projects [that]… foreground the systemic interdependence of intimate and global spheres.”51 Smith has articulated a theory of the ways space has been radically reconfigured in twentieth century global capitalism. He explains how geographical scale defines the boundaries and “bounds the identities around which control is exerted and contested.” Spatial scales – global, national, regional, urban, community, home, and body – are not easily partitioned off from each other, and, Smith argues, these scales are shifting and reorganizing. Scales are produced (and maintained) by political, economic, and social processes that participate in the making of place through the production of scales. In other words, the maintenance of scale reproduces social and economic relationships that facilitate capitalist production and accumulation. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of these scales is an important project of socially engaged cultural production.52

Smith’s discourse gives the practice of food-centered performance politics more traction, especially when we consider the ways eating on stage or in a gallery collapses the distance between actor and audience through the performance of an intimate act. In the examples I cite in this dissertation, when artists and audiences eat food in a theater or gallery space, the interconnectedness of bodily scale with other, larger scales is highlighted. Eating is usually considered a private act, often performed in the home. It is especially intimate in its connection to the body’s sensual organs (mouth, lips, tongue, anus) and to the penetration of the boundaries of the body. Some food movement activists seek to reveal the inter-relationship between consumers and the means of production of food. The rhetorical effects of the movement do part of the work, but the performances I examine take that effect farther, joining social and aesthetic structures as they take up both food politics and food’s metaphorical and material qualities.

An example of food’s social and aesthetic imbrication in performance is Sojourn Theater’s performance project, which uses food as a central metaphor for the interconnection of place and community. Rohd states, “Politically, we’re engaging people around the notion that action in Place A impacts action in Place B, and vice versa… Actions that happen far apart from each other are not necessarily distinct in their impact and meaning. You can use the journey of food and the activity of food as a way into those

50 Cohen-Cruz, Engaging Performances, 71. (emphasis in original)
51 Jackson, Social Works 35.
complicated issues.” While Sojourn doesn’t explicitly take up the discourse of food politics, the language they use to describe the piece is resonant with elements of a certain kind of food politics. Through the shared meal and multiply-sited performance strategy, On the Table exposes the embeddedness of rural and urban spaces. Performed simultaneously at more than one site, audience members had an awareness of their counterparts in other locations, as well as having contact with them via cell phone as they were all en route to their second location. Extending the sense of the performance’s social engagement into the realm of metaphor, Rohd stated that he hoped the performance would lead to a deeper partnership between the city and town, what might be thought of as a “civic marriage.”

Of course, critiques of On the Table will vary depending on one’s disciplinary lens and/or one’s approach to formal-aesthetic and socio-political concerns. It might depend, for example, on whether you decide to give weight to Sojourn’s level of community engagement (e.g. What are the definitions of “community” they employ? Is the engagement a reciprocal one?) or their formal-aesthetic choices (e.g. What does the use of cell phones do to the boundaries of the theater space? What does it say about the “live” encounter of the theater event?). Others might argue that the convivial act of gathering for a meal negates the possibility of critical reflection. Food activists and scholars will have yet another set of concerns and questions with regards to this performance. For instance, Sojourn uses food as its central metaphor, but not as a means of advocating people to “buy local.” Nor do they use food as a way to change eating habits according to their differently sited positions along and within this urban/rural divide. Might food scholars and activists look at a performance like this one and see it as failed social efficacy? Commitment to heterogeneous definitions of community and efforts to bridge the urban-rural divide might resonate with food justice activists, but formal-aesthetic concerns that push at the boundaries of theater could be seen as diluting the work’s efficacy. Each disciplinary metric weighs differently the issues of community-building, site-specificity, pleasure and aesthetics. We must attend to their moments of overlap to locate a language unique to food in/as performance.

Other attempts at articulating a vocabulary for food performance have not fully taken into consideration the specificities of food systems. Just as a variety of corporate brands have co-opted food consciousness as a marketing tool, performances can run the risk of capitalizing on the food movement’s popularity without considering its complex history. Stolen Chair Theater Company’s appropriation of the community-supported agriculture model through their “Community Supported Theater” project illustrates this dilemma. The theater company implemented the fundraising strategy as a clever play on a recognizable and successful business model drawn from the popular food movement. Yet, is Stolen Chair’s re-purposing of a small-farmers’ strategy a co-optation that adopts a term without recognizing its larger history? On the one hand, finding a parallel between

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54 In many ways, this multi-sited performance mode recalls Federal Theatre Project’s simultaneous openings of plays like Sinclair Lewis’s It Can’t Happen Here and the Living Newspaper’s Power. The FTP plays opened concurrently in multiple cities nationwide, giving viewers the feeling of participation in a larger, national community of viewers.
55 Hughley, “Sojourn Theatre’s ‘On the Table’ Inspires.”
supporting local art and supporting local agriculture seems astute, as does a wider parallel between the entertainment industry and industrial agriculture. On the other hand, perhaps Stolen Chair’s Community Supported Theatre project is no different than any other theater company’s efforts to raise funds by offering season tickets or annual membership – the local-growing ethos is just another marketing technique. It becomes clear that to fully address the issues presented in the moments where food and performance intersect, we must deal with the contemporary food situation.

**Food Politics**

Contemporary food politics has roots in early protest against processed foods and the 1960s back-to-the-land movement. Many Americans who were inspired by a burgeoning environmentalism and an ethos of dissent moved to rural areas, joined communes, and started to grow “organic.” This organic growing model was most often derived from the J. I. Rodale’s publication *Organic Gardening*, whose ideas were in turn based on Englishman Sir Albert Howard’s theories about organic growing. The techniques included cover-cropping; composting and the reuse of agricultural waste on the farm; and the elimination of chemical inputs. Since these early experiments in alternative agricultural models, an entire industry has grown around the now legalized label “organic.” Companies are now profiting from foods that were once considered fringe or “countercuisine.” As a result, many conventional growers have converted to organic, creating a market for organically grown foods.

Broadly speaking, “food politics” refers to the social relations that impact and are occasioned by the production, distribution and consumption of food. The food movement has been positioned as a response to a current state of alienated eating, the industrialization of food that has shaped the way we currently Americans produce, distribute, and consume food. Technological innovations of the production, processing, and transportation of food and the exploitation of labor have contributed to this growing industrialization of food. Higher levels of food production have been made possible by advancements in chemical engineering, such as industrially produced chemical inputs (fertilizer and pesticides) and, biotechnology in the form of genetically modified organisms. A few growers and processors have prospered, while many more farmers

56 Beginning as early as the late 19th century, food movements had begun to address contamination in processed foods. The movement for the U.S. Pure Food Act was initially concerned with “food adulteration, a widespread phenomenon when processed foods first marketed in impersonal, extraregional markets and bulk-producing additives were introduced as a cost-reduction measure… [The Pure Food Act] unleashed a still-to-be-quieted concern that food safety could be compromised in the pursuit of profit and productivity.” See Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5. Other early protests were roused by Upton Sinclair’s muck-raking book about the unsanitary conditions of meat-packing plants, Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

57 Genetically modified crops have higher yields and are resistant to certain kinds of pesticides but raise concerns about food security and the unforeseen ramifications of under-tested new technologies on the world’s food source. For more on agricultural industrialization in the U.S. see William Friedland, Amy Barton, Robert Thomas, *Manufacturing Green Gold: Capital, Labor and Technology in the Lettuce Industry* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Harvey Levenstein,
have been caught in a bind between mounting debt – resulting from the purchase of more land and new machinery and chemical inputs in an effort to increase production – and the falling price of their crops. Farms that once grew a diversity of crops, raised livestock, and recycled their waste products back into the land now grow single crops. The result is a system of monoculture that is damaging to the farmer’s sustainability and the environment. On industrial farms and in food processing plants across the nation, workers plant, harvest, and process foods for low wages, in dangerous working conditions.  

Industrialized food has impacted not only farmers and farmworkers, but also the diets of consumers. On the one hand, more food is available at cheaper prices; on the other hand, the availability of cheap, processed foods (especially “fast foods”), high in fats and sugars has resulted in what many are calling an “obesity epidemic.” Food safety is another major issue with numerous E. Coli scares and food recalls in the past decade alone. Indeed, the popularization of food politics is, in part, a response to these fears around food contaminants, and a national discourse that that threatens a growing “epidemic.” This popular discourse of food politics, perpetuated in part by bestselling food writers, relies on a nostalgic vision of a somewhat mythologized agricultural past.  

One piece of this sustainable movement is the prominent organization, Slow Food. Founded in Italy by Carlo Petrini in 1989, Slow Food has grown into an international organization with over 80,000 members in over 100 countries. Indeed, Slow Food is quickly becoming the most recognizable arm of the food movement in the U.S. The prominence of some of the organization’s representatives – Alice Waters, Eric Schlosser, and Michael Pollan – along with the success of Slow Food Nation (2008), the organization’s largest U.S. gathering, are evidence of their growing popularity.  

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58 One of the most significant examples of farmworker exploitation is that of the bracero worker. The bracero program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico that lasted from 1942 to 1964. The program brought workers from Mexico into the U.S. for agricultural labor. Bracero workers were paid lowly wages (only $.75, increasing to $1.25 after twenty years). See Walker, *Conquest of Bread*.

59 While public figures, from Michelle Obama to celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, have been very vocal about the dangers of cheap fast- and processed-foods and the resulting epidemic in America, there are a growing number of scholars who refute such claims as overly simple and ignorant of larger social, political and cultural factors. See, for example, Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

60 The speed at which animals are processed (i.e., slaughtered and broken down) results in conditions that are often unsanitary, not to mention dangerous for workers. Manure from the hides and feet of cattle can end up in the processed meat. For more on current conditions in U.S. food processing plants see Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Harper Perennial, 2002); Steve Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of American’s Favorite Food*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2005).

61 See Black, “As Food Becomes a Cause, which implicitly links Slow Food and the organic food movement with “the new mainstream”.

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part to Slow Food’s large-scale recognition and media visibility, their approach to food politics has become one of the loudest voices of the movement.

Slow Food has developed criteria to define “quality” in food that goes beyond basic concerns with food safety and, as in the case of US organic standards, quantifying and limiting chemical inputs. Petrini’s idea is that food be “good, clean, and fair.” “Good” refers to the local-ness of the food as well as an attention to taste, or what Petrini calls “sensoriality… an aesthetics of eating and drinking” (97). The second criterion, “clean” refers to a food’s ecological sustainability. Petrini writes, “Clean is sustainable, it does not pollute, it does nothing to put the earth in a condition of ecological deficit” (128). The third criterion, “fair” refers to a kind of social sustainability, which, as Petrini explains, “promotes quality of life through dignified jobs that guarantee sustenance and fair remuneration.” It is the first criterion, “good,” that most characterizes Slow Food. For Petrini, “re-educating the senses” through eating “good” food becomes the “principle gastronomic act.” He writes:

“What is good in gastronomy is good if two conditions hold: first, that a product can be linked with a certain naturalness which respects the product’s original characteristics as much as possible; secondly, that it produces recognizable (and pleasant) sensations which enable one to judge it at a particular moment, in a particular place and within a particular culture.”

Thus, for Petrini, eating “good” food means taking pleasure in food, a pleasure that is aware of a food’s history, its connection to the land it was grown on as well as the culture from which it draws.

Petrini’s philosophy echoes Wendell Berry’s emphasis on a pleasure in eating that includes a politics of food. In Berry’s essay, ”The Pleasures of Eating” – in which he famously declared eating to be an “agricultural act” – Berry critiqued the way people have become alienated from nature, and specifically the farms that grow their food. He argues that all people are connected to the land through the act of eating, and that the land and the environment are impacted by people’s eating choices. Berry writes,

The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy and remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater… A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. The pleasure of eating, then, may be the best available standard of our health. And this pleasure, I think, is pretty

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63 Ibid., 96-97.
64 Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” in What are People For? (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990),145.
fully available to the urban consumer who will make the necessary effort.\textsuperscript{65}

Petrini and Berry’s emphasis on an aware pleasure asks consumers to cultivate a heightened awareness of the sensory experience of eating. Yet, this aware pleasure also includes knowledge of the ecological and (to an arguably lesser extent) human processes of food production.

Petrini advocates cultivating this awareness through a “principle of slowness.” This principle is meant as both a political strategy and a means of re-engaging the senses. Petrini offers slowness as a strategic mode of eating and living that sits in contrast to the speeding up of social and economic processes characteristic of globalization – e.g., increased speed of travel, communication, commodity exchange and consumption. In part, the “slow” mode of eating is a response to the ways in which, in the West, food and dining have become a mode of entertainment.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, it is against this commodification of food that activists like Petrini and Berry are reacting. Thus, in many ways the food movement is about reconnecting eaters with what is pleasurable and nourishing in food, in an extensive, holistic sense. In other words, one food movement goal is to work against the alienation of the eater from the production process of her/his food.

There are, however, those who argue that engagement with the concerns of food’s production from the position of aware consumer doesn’t go far enough. Petrini’s call for “dignified jobs” suggests an awareness of the lives and working conditions of farm and factory workers under industrial food production. Yet many criticize Petrini and Slow Food for not following through on the potential of their own terms. Critics argue that key issues – in particular, those related to race and class dynamics – have been largely ignored by the food mainstream food movement.\textsuperscript{67} For example, in many poor

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 151-152.

\textsuperscript{66} See Mara Miele and Jonathan Murdoch, “The Practical Aesthetics of Traditional Cuisines: Slow Food in Tuscany,” \textit{Sociologia Ruralis}, Vol 42, No. 4 (October 2002), 312-328 on the aestheticization of food and differences between an “aesthetic of entertainment” and a “gastronomic aesthetic of food.”

\textsuperscript{67} It is important to point out that there are a growing number of scholars and organizations responding to the racist and sexist exclusionary practices and spaces within the food movement. See, for example, Julie Guthman, “‘If Only They Knew:’ Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions,” \textit{The Professional Geographer} (2008). Several food organizations endeavor to provide sustainably grown foods that are geographically and economically accessible. For example, People’s Grocery of West Oakland, CA develops cooperatively owned healthy grocery stores in areas with community with limited access to healthy and fresh foods, high rates of joblessness and chronic disease. City Slicker Farms also seeks to provide healthy foods to the low income neighborhood, through a strategy of urban farming: “The mission of City Slicker Farms is to empower West Oakland community members to meet the immediate and basic need for healthy organic food for themselves and their families by creating high-yield urban farms and backyard gardens.” See http://www.peoplesgrocery.org/ and http://www.cityslickerfarms.org/. Furthermore, the food justice movement acts in many ways as a “political bridge between existing work on sustainable agriculture, food insecurity, and environmental justice.” Food justice efforts foreground antiracism, they are not engaged simply in the promotion of small, local farmers. The movement seeks to “connect environmental issues to the lived experiences of low-income people and people of color.” See Alison Hope Alkon and
communities, and especially in communities of color, a lack of access to healthy, affordable foods results in high rates of illness, namely diabetes. Slow Food in particular has been criticized for its lack of economic and racial diversity, its failure to address labor issues in a meaningful way, and its lack of attention to the issue of food access.68

Scholars argue that by not going far enough to bring attention to the social and economic conditions under which food is produced, distributed and consumed, the food movement reproduces some of the very processes it purports to challenge.69 Julie Guthman, for example, argues that the mainstream food movement fosters an individualized mode of politics that reproduces neoliberal rationality, despite its language about social sustainability.70 Some feel that a food politics emphasis on concerns such as sustainability and mutually beneficial relationships between people and the earth is in conflict with the neoliberal idea that social, economic and political life should be organized around the free market.71 Guthman concedes that this kind of individualized politics is “partially explained by food’s intimacy, a commodity both purchased and ingested. The fleshy commingling between human body and plant/animal at a time of heightened anxiety about the constitution of foods underlies much of this new politics of consumption.”72 Indeed, it is the very intimacy of food that makes it such a powerful lure for consumers. Nevertheless, consumption as a political act can be easily absorbed back into the individuated politics of neoliberal capitalism.

Increasing numbers of food scholars have made pointed critiques of a consumer-based food politics that overemphasizes the local and advocates a “vote with your fork” approach to changing food systems.73 This approach, they argue, does nothing to change larger social structures and capitalist institutions, nor to create more equitable and sustainable food systems. The sustainable food movement’s reliance on ethical consumption as its primary mode of intervention into food systems, rather than organized political action, can be readily taken up by corporations with interests other than the health and well-being of the earth and its inhabitants. Slavov Zizek cites the example of a Starbucks’ fair trade coffee campaign (“It’s not just what you’re buying. It’s what you’re


68 Even Eric Schlosser, author of Fast Food Nation and Slow Food USA Advisory Board member, has argued that Slow Food does not adequately address issues of labor. Schlosser writes, with regards to the event, Slow Food Nation, “Largely missing [are] the workers who harvest, process and serve the food we eat.” Eric Schlosser, “Slow Food for Thought,” The Nation, September 22, 2008.


72 Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California,” 1175.

buying into”) when he argues that so-called ethical consumption allows you to feel that you are buying into “care of the environment, social responsibility towards the consumers, plus a place where you yourself can participate in communal life.”74 Ethical consumption makes us feel like better human beings. The problem with this kind of ethical consumption is that, rather than having any impact on the larger structural issue of global capitalism that has created the very inequities that ethical consumption seeks to address, it reinforces those inequities by making consumers feel that they have addressed the problem, thereby relieving them of taking any further collective action.

This dissertation tests the problem and potential of consumption as a social and aesthetic strategy. Consumption is a powerful lure with the potential for political efficacy – i.e., the potential to connect intimate encounters with larger structural issues. Yet, consumption as a mode of strategic intervention can inadvertently reinforce an individualized politics that bolsters the very structures it seeks to undermine. Socially engaged performance and food politics must reckon with these ambivalent aspects of consumption as a mode of engagement.

Artists and activists take up the challenge of consumption in different, yet parallel, ways. The theme of pleasure, for example, resonates across the discourses. Slow Food seeks to cultivate an aware pleasure, one that asks eaters to become more aware of the sensory experience of eating as well as the conditions under which their food was raised. Socially engaged performance takes advantage of a shared pleasure in eating, finding food to be an ideal way to encourage a sense of communitas among audience members. In both cases, the pleasure to be found in eating is sometimes successfully linked to systemic and/or social processes.

In both cases, however, the mobilization of pleasure as a political mode of engagement is not without its critiques. For some, turning to a mode of pleasure as engagement negates the possibility of substantive political change. In case of community-based theater, as we saw in the example of Touchstone’s Steelbound, pleasure in the form of community celebration is critiqued for not being radical enough. Brady argued that Steelbound did not put pressure on the race and class issues present in the de-industrialized town of Bethlehem, PA. Instead, the project sought to celebrate the town’s cultural heritage and provide a space of renewed community. In the example of Slow Food, critics argue that the organization doesn’t follow through on its rhetoric of social sustainability. Many feel that the organization’s emphasis on pleasure – Brady uses the word “celebration” – overshadows critical attention to the structural issues of labor and food access.

Yet, it could be argued that pleasure in Petrini’s Slow Food movement is used to resist the fast-paced living of the alienated subject. His emphasis on slowness asks consumers to experience their food in a more critical, aware manner. Thus, for Petrini, pleasure is the means to resist a kind of Marxist alienation. For the field of socially engaged performance, the term alienation has radically different implications. We might think instead of alienation in the Brechtian sense, where asking audiences to see the mundane act of eating as suddenly strange is the impetus for social action. Importantly, in an arts context, rather than turning to pleasure as a means of asking consumers to look again at their food, artists sometimes locate aesthetic alienation in the more threatening, discomfiting aspects of food to impel the consumer/spectator to act or think critically.

74 Slavov Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 53-54.
Despite, or perhaps because of, the similarities and differences in the way pleasure and alienation are animated by the food movement and socially engaged performance, we can see why a theater scholar and practitioner like Cohen-Cruz would turn to the words of Berry in an effort to define grassroots, community-based performance. Berry’s eating-as-agricultural-act is a kind of scale-jumping performance that feels very much in line with the goals and vocabulary of community based theater and social practice art. However, “lifting the veil” on industrial food production by tracing food back to its source can be only part of the solution. I want to suggest that food-based performance politics goes beyond this limited politics of defetishization. It has the potential to provoke audiences into seeing themselves in interrelation with the social and natural world, thus laying the foundation for a more interconnected, dialogical, and democratic way of being in the world.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

Early in my process, as I began to gather information on performances in dialogue with food politics, I was pleasantly surprised to discover the sheer number of artists who felt inspired to create art about the matter. I discovered numerous theatrical adaptations of Michael Pollan’s work, such as an adaptation of *Botany of Desire* into a musical theater piece by Alex Harvey and John Gromada; Georgetown University’s adaptation of *Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Natsu Onoda Power; as well as *Fencerow to Fencerow* by Matthew McCray, also inspired by Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*. There are many farm and garden projects, including: *Common Green/Common Ground*, a community-based theater piece produced by Jan Cohen-Cruz and Sabrina Peck; Amy Franceschini’s *Future Farmers* and *Victory Gardens*; Fritz Haeg’s *Edible Estates*; and numerous urban farm and foraging projects, like Asiya Wadud’s *Forage Oakland* and Ted Purves and Susanne Cockrell’s *Temescal Amity Works*. Projects like Lara Lepionka’s *Edible Links* and April Bank’s *Free Chocolate* deal with the subject of globalization and food. I had to make hard decisions about which performances to focus on and which performances fell outside the scope of the project. In choosing my case studies I sought to demonstrate the geographical spread of both the food movement and performance examples. In doing so I hoped to show that this is not simply a Northern California phenomenon, though a larger number of the performances I identified have taken place here. I wanted to examine the breadth of performance modes (from community-based to installation art in galleries), along with the ways these each speak to different aspects of socially engaged performance and food politics. Ultimately, I chose projects that each avow their relationship to food politics discourse and help reveal a unique element of the social and aesthetic ramifications of using food in/as performance.

Clearly, performances taking up food politics as a means of engagement are working at the junction of a complex set of debates and histories within both socially engaged performance and food politics discourse. Each of my case studies “succeeds” according to some criteria of these debates and “fails” according to others. Performances that fall on the “good” side of one scholar’s criteria for socially engaged work, may fall on the “bad” side of a certain food politics’ evaluative framework. One person’s successfully efficacious performance might be another’s overly instrumental performance, which might in turn be another person’s example of food movement.
exclusivity. At the same time, there might be moments when the aesthetic choices of a performance project complicate the food politics discourse it engages. The scholarly project of this dissertation is as much about identifying the distinct qualities of representing food politics in performance as it is about pointing to the inter-relation of the aesthetic and the social elements of the work.

In an effort to build a project that relies both on the knowledge of relevant genealogies and on the live events of food performance, I have combined historical research with field research. I read broadly, on socially engaged performance, on the history of food in performance, and on the current food movement in order to provide readers with a sense of the larger context of which my research subjects are a part. Field research has involved interviewing artists and attending performances and food events. The dissertation is grounded in three case studies I have participated in or observed. Of all of these performances I ask what goals they set for themselves and their work; how and whether they evaluate the efficacy of their work; what artistic techniques they use and/or develop that are unique to working with food; how their work is or is not informed by a “food movement”; and whether they position themselves within or outside of that movement.

Chapter two provides a genealogy, focusing on 20th and 21st century contemporary performances that use food as material and/or metaphor. It situates my project in relation to other theater and performance studies work on food-based performance. It also situates the contemporary performances focused on in this project in relation to earlier food performance. This excavation provides the opportunity to develop a vocabulary for the social and aesthetic pursuits of food-based performances. I structure the chapter around three key terms: performative consumption, dissociated consumption, and convivial consumption. These terms, adapted from previous scholars but also derived from my own writing of these artistic histories, allow me to think through the larger variations of ethics, alienation and pleasure introduced above.

In a sense, all of the projects examined in this dissertation are examples of performative consumption. I use the term to refer to the use of food as a mode of personal and political (embodied) transformation; the way the act of eating works to produce certain kinds of subjects. Dissociative consumption refers to performances that detach the act of eating from nourishment. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, food dissociated from nourishment and used as an artistic medium can have radical social and aesthetic effects. As a potentially threatening substance, food used in a dissociative mode can operate much like alienation – in both a food politics and Brechtian sense – pointing to the ways eaters are removed from the production of food as well as prompting critical thought. Convivial consumption refers to the use of food as a means of building communitas, the social, bringing-together aspect of sharing a meal. Due to food’s capacity to engender several modes of engagement, I will look at how each performance example – from the Futurists, to feminist performance artists, to late 20th century relational aesthetic practices – takes up dissociative and convivial consumption at different moments and with different social and aesthetic consequences. I end chapter two with an examination of food-centered performances that seek to engage with the means of production through their performance work. I pay particular attention to the

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75 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses.”
ways these performances deal with race and its impact on labor and the means of production.

Chapters three, four, and five each examine a different performance case study. Chapter three examines the interactive installations and performative banquets created collaboratively by artists Jerome Waag, Sam White, and Stacie Pierce under the name, OPENrestaurant. The collective produces performative dinners that examine both the social elements of a restaurant and the numerous political issues connected to food. In this chapter, I focus on two of their events, OPENsoil and OPENfuture, to examine their use of both dissociated and convivial consumption. When Waag says that he doesn’t want his participants to see themselves as “passive diners,” but rather as actors in the event, he echoes Wendell Berry’s remark that “eating is an agricultural act.” Yet how do we read this remark in relation to OPEN’s embrace of a Futurist dissociated mode of eating, which might appear on the surface to further “alienate” a diner from his/her food? Furthermore, OPEN draws from a visual art context and sees their work as sculpture and environment, rather than “theater.” How does their approach to engaged performance speak both to debates around the aesthetics and effects of socially engaged performance and to those surrounding food politics?

In the fourth chapter I examine Milk-n-Honey (New York, 2007-09), a collaboratively-created, multi-media play work by New York-based, ensemble theater group, LightBox. Milk-n-Honey was based on a series of interviews with people across the United States on their relationships to food, including farm workers, food scholars, diabetics, and “freegans.” The play addresses issues of production and food access, and in particular focuses on the impact of industrial eating on communities of color in the U.S. Through a close reading of the performance I examine Milk-n-Honey’s engagement with race, class and gender and the ways the performance’s aesthetic choices and its social effects are bound up in each other. I analyze how the play at times reproduces some of the blind spots of the food movement while at other times speaks back to those limitations through its formal-aesthetic choices.

Chapter five examines a community-based theater project, Of Farms and Fables, created by theater company Open Waters (no relation to OPEN, but the use of the same word is notable). The project, based in southern Maine, is a multi-year collaboration between artists and farmers in which, “Artists will learn practical farming skills from farmers. Farmers will develop performance skills, ultimately creating a production about their lives and their work.” The production was based on adaptations of traditional fables and the collected stories of project participants. This chapter focuses on Open Waters’ process of creation in an effort to highlight their community-based mode of performance that values process over product. I examine the artists’ physical labor on farms as a kind of performance research, and the ways in which their embodied research, in particular their experience of farm labor, is ultimately performed on stage.

Throughout, this dissertation engages with the key questions that have continued to haunt socially engaged performance and its scholarship. To what, exactly, are we referring when we speak of a performance’s social engagement? What does it do? Do the performance’s aesthetic choices represent or bring about social effects? How can the aesthetic be the social work of a performance? How can the social relations be artistic?

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material? I argue that food has something unique to offer in this regard. Performance artists and food activists alike argue that food sits at the locus of larger scales of production and distribution implicated by attendant power structures. Food performances ask the eater/spectator to connect the intimate, and sometimes delicious, act of eating with the more global realities of how the food was produced. The most successful of these performances expose interdependency, linking consumers to systemic modes of production. They identify the intimate act of eating as a point of entry but not the end, lest it devolve into privatized ethics.
CHAPTER TWO

Performative Consumption and Food Effects

*Ritual Meal*, as the title implies, was hardly an ordinary dinner party… Meat had to be cut with scalpels. Wine, served in test tubes, resembled blood or urine. … Raw food, such as eggs and chicken livers, that had to be cooked at the table were included in the dinner, along with plates of cottage cheese embedded with a small pepper resembling an organ. Although the food was actually quite good, the dining experience was intensely uncomfortable for the guests, who couldn’t put down their wine/test tubes and were sometimes forced to eat with their hands. 77

*Barbara Smith’s Ritual Meal*

The women sat around white cloth-covered tables and talked about their lives, their relationships, their hopes and fears. In the middle of the performance the audience was invited onto the beach to listen close at hand. Performers finally left the beaches, inviting the audience to take their places around the tables. Carefully yet jubilantly the performers wound their way back up to the top of the cliff. 78

*Suzanne Lacy’s Whisper, The Waves, The Wind*

When the participants of Barbara Smith’s performance piece, *Ritual Meal* (1969), entered the performance space, they were greeted with the sound of a beating heart as films of open-heart surgery were projected on the walls and ceilings. Guests were made to don surgical scrubs and their eating utensils were surgical tools. As Jennie Klein’s description above indicates, their food had visceral associations. Smith was interested in creating art that would affect the spectator/consumer internally. 79 The artist also sought to reject the comforting aspects of food – in particular food’s association with women as nurturers – and highlight food’s capacity to threaten. Smith was less interested in the meal as a source of nourishment and comfort and more interested in performing an abject relationship between art/artist and audience.

Where Smith resisted a nurturing relationship between female artist and audience, Suzanne Lacy sought to cultivate a feeling of nurturance through performances modeled on potlucks and dinner parties. Lacy created several performance works that, like *Whisper, The Waves, The Wind* (1984) were “abstracted from the dinner party form.” 80 Inspired by traditionally female organizing models, the quilting party for example, Lacy used both the literal and metaphoric dinner party and potluck model as a “feminist

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organizing vehicle.”81 Similarly, Lacy’s earlier project, *River Meeting: Lives of Women in the Delta* (1980) orchestrated multisited potlucks.82 *River Meeting* was a durational performance that lasted several weeks leading up to the Women’s Caucus for Art (WAC), being held in New Orleans. It took the form of a series of dinners with the intention of building connections between women, across difference.83 Lacy writes, “Eight women began by hosting dinners for their friends. A ‘chain letter’ series of such dinners (each guest hosted her own subsequent dinner with new people) created word-of-mouth and person-to-person organizing for the coming conference and its political agenda.”84 Lacy hoped that these dinners would help to build “a sense of personal and collective herstory as the precursor to gender identification in local women” and would encourage women to identify “common experience across race and class.”85

Unlike the contemporary food-based performances that are my case studies in this dissertation, Smith’s *Ritual Meal* and Lacy’s *Whisper, The Wind, The Waves* do not possess an investment in food politics as we understand it today. One of the reasons I begin this chapter with Smith and Lacy’s performances is to signal that contemporary food politics performances are not the first to gather people to share a meal as part of an artistic practice. In this chapter, I want to demonstrate how this dissertation’s case studies, focused as they are on contemporary issues of food politics, are nonetheless part of a much larger narrative of food performance practices — what Lori Waxman has referred to as an “aesthetic-gastronomic narrative.”86 I write a gastro-aesthetic genealogy that examines food-centered performances of the twentieth century, situating the performance sites of this dissertation within a larger narrative.

A second reason for beginning this chapter with the examples of *Ritual Meal* and *Whisper, The Wind, The Waves* is because the performances clearly demonstrate food effects that, I will argue, are characteristic of 20th and 21st century food performance. *Ritual Meal* resists while *Whisper* embraces comfort and nurturance as a mode of engagement. *Ritual Meal* alienates its participants, prompting a reexamination of food substances that they might otherwise encounter as nourishing, while *Whisper* seems to contain no such critical edge. Placed side by side in this way, it is tempting to situate these works in binary opposition, as two poles on a gastro-aesthetic spectrum that moves from alienation to conviviality. Yet both performances simultaneously mobilize multiple food effects, albeit in different context and with different stakes.

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81 Ibid., 73.
82 Lacy’s works, modeled on dinner parties and potlucks, were inspired by Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, which I examine later in this chapter. In a 1981 interview with Linda Montano in *High Performance*, Lacy said, “Lately I’ve been using food, partly as a result of Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* on a mass scale. I have brought together women for massive potlucks probably because it’s a metaphor for nurturing each other.” Montano, “Food and Art Interviews,” 49.
83 There was controversy over the conference being held in a state that, in 1980, had not yet ratified the Equal Rights Amendment. Lacy was asked to “plan a media event that might somehow mitigate the problem and legitimize a women’s conference in New Orleans.” Suzanne Lacy, “Battle of New Orleans,” *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics, 1974-2007* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 126.
84 Ibid., 131.
85 Ibid.
Both *Ritual Meal* and *Whisper* had roots in feminist art practice, but each was created in a different historical and political context and had different aesthetic and political stakes. As such, the alienated and convivial effects of food are mobilized in drastically different ways. *Ritual Meal* overtly rejects the construction of the meal as a nurturing encounter, in particular it rejects the connection between women as providers with food as their primary vehicle of offering comfort. Yet, it is possible that *Ritual Meal* couldn’t quite escape the powerful effects of commensality, the experience of being joined in fellowship at the table. It seems likely that the event created a temporary community out of its participants, bonded as they might have been through their experience of the ordeal meal. One could argue, furthermore, that the experience of camaraderie actually enhanced *Ritual Meal*’s capacity for efficacious engagement.

*Whisper, The Waves, The Wind*, along with Lacy’s other dinner party-inspired performance events, intentionally and strategically embraced commensality as its primary means of engagement. Yet the convivial encounter was not without a critical edge. Lacy used food as a “bridge between private rituals and social issues.”87 Her embrace of commensality empowered women through their shared contributions and their “offerings” of food and political voice. She was able to access women’s political power through her performance works by transforming private acts into public enactments of power. Deborah R. Geis writes, “In all of these pieces, though there may of course be additional onlookers, it is crucial that Lacy blurs the boundaries between performers and spectators by having most of those present be participants; as a result, the spectators themselves perform rather than subjecting ‘othered’ actors to their consuming gaze.”88 Reframed as it was within an art context, Lacy used the convivial encounter as a means of connecting smaller scale interactions with larger social issues.

Because of its capacities to nurture and threaten, to produce conviviality and alienation, to critique privatized experience and to show the systemic embeddedness of the intimate, it seems important to develop a vocabulary for food’s varied effects. I have developed a terminology of my own and will explore the convivial and alienation effects of performative consumption. However, as much as convivial consumption and alienated consumption are terms to delineate effects, it is important to note that multiple effects can operate in a single performance. They are often experienced in concert with one another, though the goals of particular projects mean that one set of effects is sometimes mobilized as the dominant mode over another. Each term signifies differently depending on their context, be it the artist’s disciplinary affiliation, or the viewer’s disciplinary vantage point or socio-cultural identification.

Playing off of the saying “you are what you eat,” the performances I examine in this chapter call upon and expose the way that food can produce the consumer. Through performance, food is revealed to be a constituting act of self-formation. Food performances can prompt a literal, biological transformation of the body and, at other moments, perform a symbolic transformation of the body. Performances that call attention to the pre-existing performative nature of food and those that endeavor to bring about embodied transformation through eating, enact what I refer to as performative

consumption. Akin to J.L. Austin’s performative speech act, wherein utterance the doing of the action, this mode of consumption is not merely constative; it does not merely reproduce the body by meeting its biological, nutritional needs. \(^{89}\) Rather, an act of performative consumption seeks to transform/re-write the body. We can identify performative consumption in the example of eating “disorders” like anorexia wherein the consumer seeks to transform her/his body through the act of withholding food, or other more socially acceptable health regimes where the eater seeks to transform her/his body and life through eating “better.” We might also look to religious ritual like eating the blood and body of Christ, in the form of wine and the communion wafer as kind of spiritual transformation through eating.

However, taking up Judith Butler’s articulation of performativity extends this understanding of how food performances make use of performative consumption. \(^{90}\) Butler argues that the subject is produced through the utterance; there is no agentic subject who precedes the utterance. The subject is constructed through the very language that s/he uses. Indeed, Butler argues, performativity is not a singular, deliberative act (as Austin would have it) but a reiterative and citational practice. That is to say, eating is always already a continual act of self-formation. Thus, taking up Butler’s sense of performativity reminds us that subject constitution occurs even in the most seemingly mundane acts of eating. Whether a bowl of cereal or a bowl of rice in the morning, we can locate a kind of performative subject constitution that occurs over time, through reiteration and citation of a whole field of habits, laws and other socially constructed practices. Taking our connection of Butler’s performativity with food performances further, the idea of performative consumption becomes even more significant for socially engaged food aesthetics when we recall that Butler locates the possibility for transformation in the gaps in the citational chain. That is to say, there is transformative potential is doing food differently.

Conviviality is one aspect of performative consumption. What many food performances make clear (and, indeed, what Butler makes clear in regards to her theory of performativity) is that the consuming subject is not singular; s/he is always situated in relation to other bodies. It is to this relational aspect of food that convivial consumption refers. Often, food is used by artists to create a spirit of community among audience members and between audience and artist. For example, Iball discusses the use of food in drama as a tool for making or showing social exchange on stage. She writes, “In drama, dining scenes proliferate, bringing communities of characters together in convincing opportunities for social interchange… As a ritualized event, the meal-time is a significant resource for the theatre-maker.” \(^{91}\) Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points to the ways some theater groups, such as Bread and Puppet, serve food at their performances to create a sense of


\(^{91}\) Iball, “Melting Moments,” 72.
community. The food in these performances, she writes, is “the basis for transforming an audience into a community, by breaking bread and eating together.”

In addition to creating a feeling of community, convivial consumption refers to the act of eating together in a way that fosters a sense of interdependency. For example, this kind of convivial consumption might occur when consumers are made aware of their connection to and reliance on the bodies that produced the food they eat. Convivial is often used in reference to a kind of jovial, festive spirit accompanying a banquet. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *convivial* as, “1. Of or belonging to a feast or banquet; characterized by feasting or jovial companionship; such as befits a feast, festive; and “2. Fond of feasting and good company, disposed to enjoy festive society; festive, jovial.”

Yet the term comes not only from the Latin term *convivalis*, which means pertaining to a feast, but also from the term *convivere*, which means to live together. I take advantage of this resonance, using convivial to refer not only to a kind of merry festivity, but also to the ways in which eaters are connected to one another, as well as to larger systems and the people who support them.

As we have seen, within food’s capacity for community-building also lies its capacity for alienation. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. As we see in Kristeva’s example of the child rejecting the parents’ proffered milk, food holds the capacity for interrelationality, self-constitution, and abjection. Hence, I use the term alienated consumption to refer to the way in which some artists take food out of context, divorcing food from its nourishing elements to de-naturalize traditional associations. When food is separated through its use as artistic material from its social context as nourishing substance, spectators/consumers become aware of food and its attendant rituals in new and often critical ways. Sometimes this rupture occurs, as in Kristeva’s example, through an act of self-preservation, warding off the offending food item as a means of protecting the body from the threat of contaminating penetration. Sometimes artists use alienation as a kind of breach that looks much like a Brechtian mode of defamiliarization, prompting critical thought by making the everyday act of eating seem suddenly, provocatively strange.

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94 Many of the artists on whom Grant Kester and other social practice art critics focus use food to facilitate a social encounter, though their use of food sometimes goes unacknowledged. An important example of the significance of food to socially engaged art can be found in Kester’s book, *Conversation Pieces*, which is dedicated to the examination of what Kester refers to as dialogical aesthetics, practices that take interrelational exchange as their primary subject and material. The cover of Kester’s book features a trio of chairs gathered around a table laden with food. The fact that this photo provides the entry to the subject of dialogical art is notable. Many of the works examined in Kester’s book, including WochenKlausur, Suzanne Lacy, and others, use food as an important means of fostering a sense of camaraderie among participants.

95 It should be noted that alienation effects of food in an aesthetic context look very different than the alienation effects of food in a social context. Indeed, contemporary food politics argue that consumers’ alienation from the source of their food, their ignorance as to the process of its production, distribution and/or preparation is precisely the problem with industrialized eating.
Though the performances I examine in this chapter are not engaged in food politics as some understand it today, they demonstrate how the use of food has marked important turns in contemporary performance. Artists have used food to destabilize the art object, validate the everyday as art, and embrace social interaction as art practice. This gastro-aesthetic genealogy includes such work as the experimental banquets of the Futurists; Allan Kaprow’s Happenings; Gordon Matta-Clark’s artist-run restaurant, FOOD; Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party; Karen Finley’s performance art; and, more recently, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Thai cooking, which has come to represent a contemporary trend towards relational art practice.

Artists have used food in performance as both medium and metaphor. Like Smith they use food as a way of destabilizing artist-spectator relationships, at times testing its ability to bring people together into a (temporary) community and at times making use of its threatening permeability. Some of these artists seek to destabilize the very idea of a fixed art object; the turn to eating is, thus, part of a larger turn to performance as a more ephemeral mode of art making. Often, in order to complete the work of art, the food has to be eaten, leaving behind no stable art object to be sold or collected. This destabilization of the art object holds an implicit critique of the commodification of art, even if it can also be re-absorbed by new kinds of commodifying structures. Furthermore, the use of food and eating explores the quotidian as a valid subject of artistic exploration, and sometimes as art in and of itself. Throughout these art practices, audience interaction or exchange is an important component.

In what follows I provide historical and theoretical context for key ideas that will emerge in this dissertation. While I focus on American contemporary performance, my genealogy has an international awareness to help locate its sites within a broader context of art and performance. It is not a comprehensive survey of contemporary performance, nor of all the instances in which food has been used in art and performance, but, rather, an examination of significant turns in contemporary performance in which food has been used as a means of socio-political engagement.

**Futurist Banquets**

Through their blurring of multiple artistic genres and their experimentation with transforming social and political life through art practice, the Italian Futurists inspired many avant-garde movements – including Russian Futurists, Dada, and the Surrealists. Marjorie Perloff identifies the Futurist moment as “the moment when the integrity of the medium, of genre, of categories such as ‘prose’ and ‘verse,’ and, most important, of ‘art’ and ‘life’ were questioned.” 96 Blurring the mediums of performance, painting, sculpture, architecture, advertising, and music, the Futurists brought both “high” and “low” forms of art into conversation with each other to create a “total art.” Indeed, this blurring of genres and artistic media led the Futurists to explore one of the most quotidian of daily activities, cooking, as art-life practice. Their development of a new cuisine sets up a paradigm for food performance in the 20th century. With a focus on experience and not object, the Futurists’ work preceded a later move to disrupt the transformation of art into a product of the capitalist marketplace.

The Futurists created a cuisine which was “in itself a whole universe including a manifesto, a cookbook, a special language (thus a dictionary), recipes,.. chefs, banquets, doctors, and critics…” The cuisine was part of second wave Futurism, but drew on the original ideas of the Futurists. Their vision for social change was huge, and total; they wanted to reach all aspects of Italians’ lives. The Futurists sought to radically alter life via art through culinary performances that dissociated nourishment from food.

The Italian Futurists published approximately thirty manifestos between 1909 and 1912 that detailed ideas for artistic innovation. Rooted as they were in an “economically backward country… experiencing rapid industrialization,” the Futurists embraced what they saw as the possibility inherent in this new era. They sought to “bombard the senses” in all the mediums they worked within, from their collage paintings and sculptures to their innovative use of language in sound poems to their performances. The first Futurist Manifesto, The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism, published in 1909 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared:

We want to sing about the love of danger, about the use of energy and recklessness as common, daily practice…
We intend to glorify aggressive action, a restive wakefulness, life at the double, the slap and the punching fist.
We believe that this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed… There is no longer any beauty except the struggle. Any work of art that lacks a sense of aggression can never be a masterpiece…
[W]e are founding ‘Futurism’ because we wish to free our country from the stinking canker of its professors, archaeologists, tour guides and antiquarians…
We want to free our country from the endless number of museums that everywhere cover her like countless graveyards.

This incendiary document laid out the group’s key ideas, calling for complete revolution in thinking and action, the dismantling of the institutional domination of museums and libraries, and a radical conflation of art and life.

The historical moment in which they wrote this document, and in which they created later work, was part of a “brief utopian phase,” as Perloff writes, “when artists felt themselves to be on the verge of a new age that would be more exciting, more promising, more inspiring than any preceding one.” This excitement is reflected in their glorification of and fascination with new technologies, the accompanying sense of speed those technologies afforded, and war. They felt that the “true transformation of art into life could only be achieved through entering the public arena in a direct and combative manner.”

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97 Cecilia Novero, Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3.
98 Perloff, The Futurist Moment, 36.
99 Ibid., 54-64.
101 Perloff, The Futurist Moment, 36.
102 Ibid, xix.
they literally commanded artists to “go out into the street, launch assaults from theaters and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle.”

Their fascination with war and their aesthetic of aggression carried over into the realm of the gustatory:

We the Futurists are convinced that in the likely even of future wars, it will be the most lithe, agile people who will be victorious… We are establishing a diet in keeping with an increasingly airborne, faster pace of life.

Above all, we believe it is necessary:

a) to be rid of pasta, that idiotic gastronomic fetish of the Italians…

b) The abolition of volume and weight in the way we understand and evaluate nutrition.

c) Abolition of all the traditional recipes in order to try out all the new, seemingly ridiculous combinations recommended by…Futurist chefs.

d) Abolition of the routine daily insipidities from the pleasures of the palate.

The Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine advocated the complete transformation of the Italian body, through diet, with the goal of creating a body more suited for the modern world, and for war.

The Futurists brought their manifesto to life in the form of elaborate banquets. In the interest of “bombarding the senses,” they held performative dinners that encouraged their guests to become aware of the various sensory experiences that accompany eating: touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. Though their “Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine” and subsequent cookbook weren’t published until after the war, the Futurists experimented with performative meals early in their existence. Günter Berghaus suggests that Futurists always saw a close connection between food and performance. For example, an early performance event, in January 1910, ended with a banquet which featured a many-coursed meal served in reverse order, from coffee to aperitif. The dishes in this meal were given evocative titles, similar to those that would later become a hallmark of Futurist cuisine: “Archeological salad,” “Goulash of the past,” “Explosive peas served with the sauce of history.”

The first of three Futurist nightclubs, Caffé Concerto, opened its doors in 1909 and the third, Cabaret Diavolo, in 1922. These were meant to be “Total Works of Art,” where each element, from the architecture to the performers to the food, was intended to influence the spectator-participant in a particular way. Günter Berghaus writes,

A careful balance of heterogeneous parts contributed to a vibrant and dynamic whole: from the dynamic interplay of colours, lines, and forms which the eye perceives to the noise, sounds or music the ear takes in; from the taste of the cocktails and food to the olfactory sensations of the smells pervading the room, the spectators were immersed in multiple, synaesthetic sensations and exposed to a bombardment of sensual stimuli.

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106 Ibid., 6.
Futurist banquets and dinners were total experiences that engaged all five senses: they challenged expected combinations of flavors and ingredients, played up tactile sensations by eliminating cutlery, added aural elements with poetry recitation and music specifically paired with a meal’s course, and added to the olfactory sensations of the meal by spraying the diners with perfumes.  

These events performed a kind of dissociated consumption wherein the ideas of nutrition and the value of nourishment were completely separated from the food. This had multiple effects. Among them was the transformation of eating into an aesthetic act with social implications. For example, a recipe titled “White and Black” is described in the *Futurist Cookbook* as, “A one-man show on the internal walls of the Stomach consisting of free-form arabesques of whipped cream sprinkled with lime-tree charcoal. Contra the blackest indigestion. Pro the whitest teeth.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interprets this meal as using the stomach as a canvas, upon which the foods are painted. “White and Black” disrupts the traditional viewing relationship to the work of art, wherein a canvas is framed and hung on a wall at a discreet distance from the viewer. Here the canvas is inside the body, on the walls of the stomach. The spectator cannot situate her/himself in relation to the work of art; they become not only the co-creators of the art, but also the work of art itself. 

Furthermore, the Futurists denaturalized associations of food with Italian culinary tradition to create a new cuisine, fit for new bodies, ushering in an era of modernity. This new cuisine, they acknowledged, might “be judged by all as madness” for its impracticality and the way it flouted the accepted nutritional science of the time. Yet, the Futurist cuisine’s impracticality as a biologically nourishing practice bolstered its attack on traditional Italian cooking. Cecelia Novero writes that, “Unlike Artuse [the 19th author of the most well-known Italian cookbook], whose selection of foods was rooted not only in bourgeois tradition but also in the seasonal cycles, thus displaying affection for nature, the Futurists insisted on artifice, art, and science as aids in liberating the body from its limits and needs.” They attacked foods like pasta, which they considered typical of Italian cuisine for inducing “sluggishness, depression, inertia brought on by nostalgia.” By removing food from the practical concerns of sustaining the body and reproducing tradition, they were able to associate a new set of properties with their cuisine.

The Futurists’ approach to eating caused the diner to see the familiar act of eating as strange. But the Futurists sought an even further level of transformation: the literal re-making of bodies through a mode of consumption that would create beings more appropriate to a modern industrial, urban, mechanical age. As Berghaus writes, food was “to be more than a means of nourishment, of satisfying demands of the body. It was to

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111 Marinetti, “Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine,” 394.
113 Marinetti, “Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine,” 396.
become a way of heightening the sensibility, exciting fantasies, and stimulating imagination… [Futurist food] was to create an optimistic, playful, dynamic state of mind in the diners and lift their spirits to prepare them for the tasks of the modern era.”

Perhaps most importantly, the Futurists worked to denormalize the sensory experience of eating. Their food performances allowed the diner to see (feel/hear/taste/smell) their food in a new way, making way for a new bodily experience of the world. A prime example of this is the dish titled *Aerofood*. The dish consisted of four parts: 1) food/taste elements – “a slice of fennel, an olive and a kumquat”; 2) tactile elements – the diner was intended to stroke the fingers of his/her left hand over a series of textiles as s/he at each item of food: “a swatch of red damask, a little square or black velvet, and a tiny piece of sandpaper; 3) aural elements – Wagnerian opera played from a hidden source; and 4) olfactory elements – “the nimblest and most graceful of the waiters sprays the air with perfume.” One critic attending the meal stated that the food was “too poetic to be appreciated by the needs of the stomach.” As Novero describes it, “This dish, more than others, suggests that Futurist food is not about satisfying hunger or filling a void. It is about composing new sensorial texts for the body called into action in all its senses.” Indeed, it is this notion of “composing new sensorial texts for the body” through the denaturalization of what the body knows to be nourishing that is the most significant element of the Futurists’ cuisine. By separating out the sensory elements, the Futurists highlighted individual senses while also externalizing them from the act of eating.

The banquets were a “total art” experience that involved taste, touch, smell and sound in the form of music and poetry recitation, but they were also convivial encounters meant to create a sense of community. Not only did the food transform the insides of the diner, the total social experience of the meal and the restaurant as performance transformed the diner from the outside in. The banquets were festive occasions for gathering, eating and reciting poetry, and the Futurist restaurant was a key site of exchange between artist and audience. The Futurist mode of alienated consumption worked in concert with the convivial encounter of the banquet.

Moreover, the alienation effects produced through their performative meals prompted an awareness of the senses that recalls the work of contemporary Italian socio-aesthetic movement: Slow Food. Certainly, the Futurists’ emphasis on speed, war and dissociated eating seems in opposition to Slow Food’s temporality and their ethos of interconnectedness and conviviality; however, both movements seek to radically alter life through food. In many ways, the importance of speed to the Futurists seems to inform how we understand the stakes of slowness for Petrini’s Slow Food movement. Both movements seek to intervene in habituated behaviors around eating, both seeking to transform how people interact with food, but more broadly to enact a totally transformation of daily life. Both call attention to the senses, albeit through different means and with different goals.

115 Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, 77 and 84.  
The conceptual and body artists of the 1960s further explored the artistic engagement with the everyday that the Futurists began. In an attempt to move away from the commodification of the art object, many visual artists moved towards process art and performance. Artists like Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow, Yves Klein, and Carolee Schneemann were interested in “revealing the process of art, to demystify pictorial sensitivity and to prevent their art from becoming relics in galleries or museums.”

Some of these artists turned to food as a means of reaching those goals. For example, in an early work of Allan Kaprow’s, *The Apple Shrine* (1960), viewers traveled through a maze of passageways to reach an altar-like structure to which were fastened a mix of “real” apples and plastic replicas of apples. This choice posed a particular challenge to the viewer: he or she could either take home a “Kaprow original” or eat a real one. But, as Jeff Kelley writes, “to collect in this case meant to preserve a fake, whereas to eat a real apple meant destroying (or transforming?) the subject and object matter of art.”

To complete the work of art, the food had to be eaten, leaving behind no stable art object to be sold or collected. This destabilization of the art object held an implicit critique of the commodification of art.

Extending the use of food and everyday activities as art practice, Gordon Matta-Clark established the artist-run restaurant, FOOD, in New York’s SoHo neighborhood in 1971. The restaurant offered jobs with good pay and flexibility (ideal for artists who often had to leave town for exhibits), and provided a space for artists to gather, socialize, and eat, away from the art world institution. For example, Ben Schaafsma describes how FOOD’s existence “allowed Richard Peck and other members of the Philip Glass Ensemble to be inspired by the sounds from washing dishes, provided money and time to produce their work, and a social space to meet artists, dancers and other collaborators.”

Lori Waxman describes the physical space of the restaurant in theatrical terms:

> [T]he space was organized as a kind of stage, from its open kitchen to its long bank of windows, through which one could watch the action from Wooster Street, especially when the restaurant was lit up at night. Open kitchens were not common in American restaurants of the era… and the restaurant’s open-plan design even allowed dessert-making to be seen from Prince Street, as from the front tables. A rotating roster of chefs – Mabou Mines one night, Philip Glass’s ensemble another, vegetarian dancers on a third – performed at their centrally located stove and prep tables for an audience of diners.

FOOD allowed the boundaries between art and life to be blurred even further than Kaprow’s *Apple Shrine*. It was a space that conceived of itself as an art project even as it struggled to survive as a business enterprise. It provided a location for artists to work and be financially supported; to be nourished by the food; and to network socially with other New York artists. Its blurry status as an art/business endeavor put pressure on the

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118 Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 147.
importance of the art object; instead, FOOD located the art event in the durational practice of running a restaurant, and the convivial act of eating there.

FOOD produced a space of community among artists and others who gathered to eat and create meals together. The art-restaurant offered an important nourishing space for artists frustrated with the commercial art world. But in addition to offering a space of community, FOOD offered a critique of the art world. By placing the restaurant/business in an art context, FOOD also called attention to the art world as a space of commercial exchange. In a sense, FOOD defamiliarized patterns of consumption, removing food from its context as nourishing substance and recontextualizing it as art material/practice.

Feminist performance art drew from the artistic innovation of the primarily male and decidedly masculinist work of 1960s conceptual artists, while also critiquing patriarchal structures of representation within the art world. For instance, although FOOD explored the use of a substance traditionally feminized and therefore devalued, its critical reception and historicization have undermined the significant contribution of female artists collaborating on the project. Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard rarely receive credit for their part in the creation and maintenance of FOOD. Goodden fronted most of the money for the project and was responsible for the realities of its day-to-day operations, yet it is Matta-Clark who receives credit for the project.¹²²

As sole creator, performer, and director, female performance artists, on the other hand, had ultimate say in their own representation and had greater control over their work. These artists chose food as a feminized and thereby devalued substance, engaging in its multiple significances for women as food producers. Performance art was heterogeneous in its form and content, yet food was a common theme throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s. Feminist performance artists exposed the gender politics of male conceptual artists’ use of food and household labor as supposedly neutral “everyday” tasks. For example, Alison Knowles, the only female member of the original Fluxus group in the early 1960s, created Make a Salad (1962). As Knowles explains, “Make a Salad was first done in Denmark for 300 people. It turned out to be a very rebellious piece because it was performed at a concert funded by the music conservatory… It was the first one of mine that the Fluxus group performed and it has been done many times since then in turned over kettle drums, with acoustic mikes at musical concerts.”¹²³ Feminist artists exposed women’s complex relationships to food as nurturer as well as the diverse relationships between food, the body, and female representation in the art world. Some used performance as a means of community building, while others took up abjection as a performative mode in their engagement with the audience through food.

Early examples of feminist performance art dealt with gendered relationships to food in which women were often positioned in the role of one who nourishes, in the form of the production and provision of food and through the act of providing (sexual) pleasure. Several works used food to critique structures of viewing that allowed the female body to be consumed by the male desiring gaze. For example, through the

¹²² Lori Waxman writes in her recent article about the project, “The main locale for writings about FOOD are monographs and exhibition catalogues devoted to Matta-Clark, where the restaurant is treated as one among a résumé of ambitious projects completed in his short career.” Waxman, “The Banquet Years,” 31.
¹²³ Monanto, “Food and Art Interviews,” 46.
performative dinner, *Ritual Meal*, which introduced this chapter, Smith subverted the representation of woman as nurturer through her creation of a kind of ordeal meal.

Eleanor Antin has created works that take her own body as artistic material. One of her best known pieces, *Carving: a traditional sculpture* (1972), consists of a series of photographs of the artist taken over the course of one month, during which time the artist lost eight pounds. Using her body as the material for her sculpture, Antin explained that, “The work was done in traditional Greek mode” wherein “The form emerges from inside the flesh, just as a sculpture emerges from inside the marble, in a continuous layer across the entire surface.”

Here the artist uses her own body, “carving” it as sculpture in a way that calls to mind death and mortality as we watch the body eat itself and waste away. It calls to mind the eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, but it gives agency to the woman who chooses to withhold food. Furthermore, it calls attention to the female body as object, and in particular to the way the female body has been used as object for the male gaze in artistic representation.

In the works of Antin and Smith we can see examples of performative consumption that take up the issue of women’s bodies as objects of to be consumed, and women’s relationship to food consumption and production, as well as the body as the material for the art. Smith’s reclamation of her female body is implicitly linked to food and the acts of eating, feeding, and being fed, both literally and metaphorically. Smith’s work performs a different relationship to pleasure and nurturance than is traditionally associated with and assigned to women. In both artists’ work, the female body is consistently present. For example, in *Ritual Meal* Smith is consumed as food by the diners, recalling the Christian religious symbolism of eating the body and blood of Christ. Representations of women as nurturers, and the connections between female sexuality and food are examined in numerous examples of feminist performance art. Yet these works point to a tension that lies at the heart of feminist performance art and the use of food: the possibility of the reinscription of the female body as object to be consumed.

The work of artists Judy Chicago and Karen Finley demonstrates this tension and the broad spectrum within which feminists created performative food-centered performances. Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* was produced over a three-year period, in collaboration with approximately four hundred women and men. The piece was a tribute to “great women,” and consisted of three long banquet tables constructed in the shape of a triangle with thirteen women on each side. Each of the thirty-nine women is represented by a ceramic plate, most of which have the central image of a vagina or a vulvar

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125 A later work by Smith, *Feed Me* (1973), reversed the normative directionality of caretaking and nurturing. The event took place over the course of an entire night at Tom Marioni’s San Francisco Museum of Conceptual Art. Smith “sat in a room with a mattress, rug pillows, and a heater, surrounded by things with which she could be fed such as body oils, perfume, food wine, music, and marijuana… During the course of the evening, Smith received a backrub, smoked some marijuana, drank some wine, and had sexual intercourse with three men, among other things,” Klein, "Feeding the Body,” 30-31. Here, Smith positioned herself as the recipient of nourishment and pleasure.
126 See Linda Montano’s interviews with feminist performance artists about their use of food in art, including Alison Knowles, Barbara Smith, Suzanne Lacy, Bonnie Sherk, and Leslie Labowitz in Montano, “Food and Art Interviews.”
representation. Each plate is placed on a runner embroidered with the woman’s name. The triad of tables is set around/on a floor of white porcelain tiles containing the names of 999 women. The method of artistic creation that Chicago employed in this piece made use of artistic modes considered to be “women’s crafts” or “handiwork”, such as embroidery, ceramics, and china painting.

At the opening exhibition of Chicago’s The Dinner Party (1979), Finley held a counter performance. Finley’s event, titled Cocktail Party was held outside the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and, as Amelia Jones describes, “consisted of a group of invited participants carrying ‘prick plates’ (one plate, for example, featured a creative rendering of Abraham Lincoln’s penis) before the lines of visitors waiting to see The Dinner Party.”\(^\text{127}\) Through this counterperformance, Finley voiced her “disgust” at the way Chicago’s work “memorializ[ed] women’s achievements by sculpting their vaginas on plates.”\(^\text{128}\)

Finley and Chicago’s work represent two poles on a continuum of feminist performance practices that deal with the relationship between female representation/identity and consumption. The tensions at play in this story represent the pull between alienated and convivial modes of consumption in feminist performance art. Chicago is in many ways emblematic of 1970s feminist art, in part because she is known as the founder of the Feminist Art Program in Southern California and has inspired and supported the work of a generation of feminist artists, and in part because of her use of “female imagery” throughout her work. The plethora of praise and critique surrounding her project, The Dinner Party, makes it perhaps the best-known example of feminist art of the 70s. Finley, though she has been creating work since the late 1970s, is now best known as one of the “NEA four,” artists whose funding by the National Endowment of the Arts was revoked due to pressures by conservative senators because of the “controversial” nature of their work. Thus, Finley has come to represent controversial, sexually explicit performance work of the 1990s.

The Dinner Party generated critiques from all sides for the vulvar images used in the piece. Conservative critics called the work “obscene” because of explicit representation of vaginas, while some feminists felt that The Dinner Party’s use of vulvar imagery as an essential “female imagery” reduced women to their biology.\(^\text{129}\) It was also critiqued for its lack of racial representation. For example, Alice Walker’s critique of the project was not for its over-representation of the vagina as an essential “female image,” but for its lack of representation of black female sexuality.\(^\text{130}\) Yet, despite this

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\(^{130}\) On the only plate representing a black woman, Sojourner Truth, Chicago not represent her with a vagina, but with the image of three faces. Walker wrote, “It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go,” Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of The Dinner Party,” 101. This example demonstrates not only the exclusion of larger
controversy, *The Dinner Party* was widely popular. It toured for over a decade, with Chicago appearing in *People* magazine and receiving hundreds of fan letters from around the globe. Indeed, one of Chicago’s key goals in creating this work was to engage in “a reexamination of the relation of art and community, and a broadening of the definitions of who controls art.” The *Dinner Party* epitomizes conviviality in its use of vulvar images to create a sense of community among viewers through common identity. It relies on a metaphor of commensality in which viewers could envision themselves as part of an imagined community with other famous/accomplished women.

Karen Finley’s performance work shares little in common with Chicago’s, as exemplified by the above anecdote. Finley’s performances connect the sexual with the obscene and violent, she links pleasure with horror and disgust. In many of her performances Finley has used food as a way of performing with and against the image of woman as an object to be consumed. She has been derogatively called “the chocolate smears woman,” referencing a performance by Finley, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990), during which she did smear chocolate on her body. Carr describes: “What Finley actually did with the chocolate was use it ritualistically, smearing it on as she talked about the degradation of women – because women are treated like shit.”

In an early performance, *The Constant State of Desire* (1987), Finley performed a series of monologues in a “trance state,” punctuated by moments of direct interaction with the audience. During one of these moments of direct address, speaking “nonchalantly and extemporaneously,” Finley proceeded to smash unboiled eggs on her unclothed body, described here by Rebecca Schneider:

> Finley explains casually that she will smash everything together – which she does – smashing the bag and checking it to be sure the unboiled eggs inside have smeared all over the fake animal fur. When she’s sure the mixture is good and ready, like some kind of nightmare Betty Crocker, she takes out the dripping animals and uses them as applicators to paint her naked body with colored egg muck. She then sprinkles glitter and confetti on her body and wraps herself in paper garlands. She looks like a birthday present, or a boa-ed starlet gone amuck. A dreamgirl in a nightmare.

In this moment Finley resists the spectator’s ability to make her into a desirable object of consumption. Though on the one had she appears to an adorned object, she has “gone amuck.” She not only makes herself into a twisted/perverted commodi...
throughout her monologue to the objects the people consume, to fulfill that “constant state of desire” referred to in the title.

Finley associates her body with food items that are in turn associated with pleasure (chocolate). The items she perverts and mis/re/uses in ways that cause a feeling of disgust. C. Carr writes of Finley’s performance, “Desire attaches to disgust… The very boundaries of the body collapse. What’s inside and what’s out when the food is smeared on, not ingested? It’s a big bulimic landscape of consumption and expulsion out there. The constant fetishization of food makes Finley that monster of orality, the devouring woman.” Finley performs the object of consumption in revolt (indeed, it is revolting) she refuses to be contained by the act of consumption via the spectator’s gaze. In contrast to Chicago’s Dinner Party, which symbolically brings women together around the table to celebrate their accomplishments, Finley interrogates the act of consumption. In her performances, the woman eating offers a kind of performative consumption that is always already in tension with the woman eaten, the female body an object of consumption.

However, lest we adhere convivial consumption to the “bad,” “essentialist” feminism of Chicago and alienated consumption to the “good,” “radical” feminism of Finley, I want to turn to an example that allows us to destabilize this binary. Bobby Baker’s performance work demonstrates that radical political and aesthetic potential is not the sole purview of alienated consumption. Baker’s work holds within it the very tension found between Chicago and Finley’s performances. Through her performance work Baker manages to resist a kind of representation that would threaten to reduce her to the image of domesticity, even as she allows room for the joy she finds in the fraught role of nurturer.

Baker was trained as a painter, but she quickly moved into making sculpture and installation works. One of her earliest food works was Edible Family in a Mobile Home (1976). The piece, an entire family made of cake, was sited in Baker’s own home. She papered the walls with newspaper, gave each figure its own room, and covered the interior of the home with icing “The installation was open for a week, during which time viewers were invited to consume the sculpture while Baker watched its disappearance.” Baker says, of Edible Family, “I think of eating as ‘absorbing.’ With that specific piece I was thrilled at the prospect of the family disappearing; that the work would be lost and that it would be absorbed into other people’s bodies. I am fascinated with the object becoming part of a body and then being shat out… But in later pieces I’m more interested in the complex physical associations attached to eating and feeding and the way in which they fit into our society’s perceptions.” With her typically dark

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137 Adrian Heathfield writes of Baker’s use of food in her performance work, “Baker’s interest in food as an art material has underpinned all of her work. But as she states … this concern is only one part of a wider project of exploring the everyday logics of women’s practice, not simply to assert its unacknowledged creativity, but to mine its hidden sensuality and joy.” Adrian Heathfield, “Risk in Intimacy: An Interview with Bobby Baker,” Performance Research, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1999), 97.
139 Heathfield, “Risk in Intimacy,” 98.
humor, Baker describes the scene as one in which guests arrive to her house and begin stuffing the children into their mouths by the handful.\textsuperscript{140}

In the staged performance, \textit{Drawing on a Mother's Experience} (1988), Baker appears dressed in a somewhat matronly, white uniform. Her first performance after a nearly eight-year absence from the art world, the piece explores “her role as artist… complicated by the fact of her motherhood.”\textsuperscript{141} Baker applies cold roast beef, stout, chutney, biscuit crumbs and flour (among other things) as her artistic medium to the “canvas,” a “white cotton double sheet” laid out on the floor, as she tells the story of her experiences of motherhood from the gestation of her first child through to the birth of her second. Her persona, “reveals a particularly subtle and complex interweaving of mimicry and what might be called self-presentation,” a mother/housewife figure who is polite and self-effacing.\textsuperscript{142} When referring to a difficult pregnancy she says, “I got very ill. I got ‘women’s trouble.’ [Gestures vaguely to her crotch.] I won’t; you know, talk about it but… it was a kind of nightmare.”\textsuperscript{143}

Baker’s work is marked by its use of “excess and abjection.” Baldwyn writes, “The form, the structure, of Baker’s creations are powerfully disrupted by the subtle, provocative excesses of her performance. Her taboos collect around the visceral qualities of food: its proximity to the body and to emotions, and its ability to represent what we would rather forget.”\textsuperscript{144} In \textit{Edible Family}, as in the works of the Futurists and Smith’s \textit{Ritual Meal}, the food penetrates the boundaries of the viewer’s body, calling attention to the porosity of bodies and the vulnerability of a discrete subjectivity. Through the operation of abjection - as s/he ingests the art, absorbs it, and excretes it – the viewer/participant is always situated in (inter)relation to the art/ist. At the same time, the dissociated and the convivial are bound up in each other in Baker’s work. She cultivates a feeling of hospitality in even the most abject moments. For example, in an encounter like those encouraged in \textit{Edible Family}, a spectator/participant might find themselves welcomed into Baker’s home and offered a piece of cake; but the cake they ingest is sliced from a cake formed in the shape of a baby’s body. In these moments, Baker’s work produces both convivial and alienating effects.

\textbf{Relational Aesthetics}

One of the most notable contemporary artists to use food in the gallery in a convivial sense is Rirkrit Tiravanija. Indeed, it is in reaction to his work that the concept of “convivial” began to circulate in aesthetic discourse with such intensity. Claire Bishop writes that Tiravanija is “one of the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit, and his work has been crucial to … the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory.”\textsuperscript{145} Indeed, Tiravanija’s work has come to represent what

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{141} Baldwyn, “Blending In,” 42.
\bibitem{142} Ibid., 43.
\bibitem{144} Baldwyn, “Blending In,” 37.
\end{thebibliography}
French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud calls “relational aesthetics.” Bourriaud describes art practices of the 1990s that take interaction and inter-subjectivity as their medium. He characterizes relational aesthetics as “an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being together as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning.”

Tiravanija’s early works, recently resurrected in a retrospective of his work, make use of eating and sharing food as a way of creating social situations in the gallery space.

For Tiravanija’s 1992 installation, Untitled (Still), at 303 Gallery in New York, the artist relocated all of the items from the gallery office and storeroom into the main exhibition space, including the gallery director. When he was in the gallery he cooked curry, offering the food for free to anyone who dropped by. When he wasn’t there, the pots and pans, gas burner, cans of food, bags of rice, spices and cooking utensils stood as a documentation of the event. In Untitled (Tomorrow is Another Day) (1996) Tiravanija reconstructed his New York apartment as an installation in Cologne’s Kölnischer Kunstverein. The curator asserted that “this unique combination of art and life offered an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody.” The space was open to the public twenty-four hours a day, and welcomed visitors to make food in his kitchen, and wash, sleep, or chat as they saw fit in the rest of his apartment. Like much of Tiravanija’s work, Untitled holds a utopic vision of creating a temporary community.

Tiravanija’s work has been critiqued by some for its emphasis on conviviality. Critics like Bishop argue that conviviality prevents the work from having a necessary critical edge. Bishop asserts that “antagonism” is an essential part of successful socially engaged art practice. She argues that though some socially engaged practices offer up an ethical practice, they fail to produce aesthetically innovative work. Bishop points to other social practices that produce more “antagonistic” works.

“Some of the more powerful artistic projects of recent years have not taken a directly ameliorative approach to social participation. They produce situations of conflict and unease… These works don’t just concern themselves with process, but also with the (conceptual) product of these gestures… Importantly, this doesn’t mean that such works are unethical or pessimistic. They are just more indirect, using formats that require more imagination and generosity from the viewer…”

Others who disagree with Bishop’s critique, like artist Liam Gillick, have argued that Tiravanija’s work opens up the space of the art gallery as a place of interpersonal rather than commercial exchange, and highlights the gallery as a space of exclusion by making it inclusive. Gillick states, “On my visit, late at night, to Tiravanija’s exhibition, I came across [a] diverse group of local people… The work was used by locals as a venue, a place to hang out and somewhere to sleep.” Furthermore, by placing the moments of

147 Quoted from the exhibit catalog in Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 57.
convivial exchange in an art context, Tiravanija’s work has the potential to produce alienating effects, where the moment of commensality is defamiliarized in such away that participants become aware of acts of food exchange. Tiravanija’s use of food creates the space for dialogue between artist and audience and amongst audience members. The critical edge of the work lies in the production of art that is precisely about the process of exchange, rather than about the art object as product.\footnote{Tiravanija’s work does not, of course, avoid commodification entirely: you can buy the objects from the installations: tables, stools, woks, even leftover food.}

Offering yet another angle on Tiravanija’s work, Grant Kester has argued that Tiravanija produces an aesthetic universality that “ignores the specificity and complexity of local art and cultural production, as well as the political implications of the power differentials... through an appeal to art as ‘universal language’ that allows people to identify some common ground for interaction.”\footnote{Grant Kester, \textit{Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 104.} Kester gives the example of Tiravanija’s “Tomorrow is Another Day.” As Tiravanija was installing his piece in the Kölnischer Kunstverein,

Cologne police were in the process of breaking up and driving out a settlement of homeless people near the gallery, under pressure from a local business group called City Marketing that was concerned about the threat the homeless would pose to tourism and gentrification in the area. While Cologne’s liberal press lauded the show as a model of ‘intercultural exchange,’ a number of local artists and activists found the juxtaposition of Tiravanija’s magnanimous spatial gesture (albeit one in which admission was carefully monitored by a stern Hausmeister) and the brutality of (business motivated) police attacks on the homeless deeply problematic.\footnote{Ibid., 105.}

Tiravanija’s project suffers from both its aesthetic universality and a failure to the specificity of the local socio-political dynamic.

Kester asks of art practices that seek to have effects on the social, “Is it possible to develop a cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers?”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} How would Tiravanija change the dynamic in his work to make it look more like Kester’s vision for dialogical art, wherein, “the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view.”\footnote{Ibid., 10.} Is there something about food and the act of sitting down to share a meal that elides difference?

The aforementioned artists embraced food for a variety of reasons, but none of their projects address matters of food production. What happens when we bring the frame of production to bear on performances that are otherwise about consumption? If we look at Baker’s work through the frame of production, for example, we notice the ways she uses food to call attention to the invisible labor of women. In her staged performance of \textit{Mother’s Experience}, we are continually reminded of her laboring body, as artist and as mother.\footnote{Baldwyn, “Blending In,” 43.} We might read her performances as a celebration of women’s labor that
validates the skills involved in the production, preparation, and presentation of food. What happens when we bring performances that are otherwise positioned to be “about” consumption within a frame that also avows production?

Bringing the frame of production to bear on food-centered performances raises yet another set of provocative questions. What does it do to read artistic labor into the labor of food? What different forms does food labor take? What does it mean to read agricultural labor through the frame of artistic production? How does the staging of laboring bodies raise the stakes for embodiments of consumption? If we see consumption, convivial consumption in particular, as being at least partially about interdependency, then we must recognize the potential these performances hold to expose relationships (of power) among and between consumers and producers, between bodies who labor to produce food (grow, pick, process, prepare) and those who consume it.

The case studies I turn to in the next three chapters take up aspects of contemporary food politics. In many cases they embrace a politics that seeks to connect consumers with the production of food. In each example I remain attentive to the tension within performances that take up the consumer-based strategies of the food movement alongside aesthetic strategies that perform food effects that at times alienate participants and at times create a feeling of conviviality.
CHAPTER THREE

OPENrestaurant: A Gastro-Aesthetic Politics of the Sensory

A PLATE OF FOOD IS
A MAP OF THE WORLD

everything in it can be traced
back to the soil
back to the land
back to people

Be it
for pleasure or necessity, when we sit down to eat a plate of food, we discover the
flavor of an idea. Folded in a mushroom risotto or the wrapper of a hamburger,
what is being offered is a rendering of the world, a representation of political,
economic and social realities...

Imagine a restaurant where artists along with cooks, servers, farmers, activists,
community members and educators work together to unravel these threads.
Using the elements and activities of a ordinary restaurant as a medium, they
reveal, elaborate and challenge the relationships hidden in and around a plate of
food.

A sign over the entrance gives this restaurant its name: OPEN.156

-- from OPENrestaurant’s website

Part dining establishment, part art installation, part performance, OPENrestaurant
is a collective of artists and restaurant workers who create “conceptual temporary
restaurants.”157 They produce performative dinners that examine both the social elements
of a restaurant and the numerous political issues connected to food. The founding
members of the collective, Jerome Waag, Sam White, and Stacie Pierce, met while
working at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, CA. Chez Panisse is famous as one of the first
restaurants to serve sustainable, locally grown food, and all three artists share a
commitment to sustainable agriculture. OPEN events – dinners centered around a theme
related to food politics – are created through collaborations among artists, restaurant
workers, and food producers. Their first event in 2008, OPENsoil, sought to (re)connect
diners with the source of their food. Other dinners have focused on topics like urban
farming and water resources.158 In 2009, the OPEN collective was commissioned by the
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to create a dinner in honor of the100th anniversary
of the Futurist Manifesto. The collective responded to the commission with OPENfuture,
combining sustainable food politics with a Futurist aesthetic. Their supporters include
Alice Waters of Chez Panisse and they have been written up in the New York Times for
their playful subversion of dining conventions and their unique contribution to the San

157 Sam White, interview by author, September 19, 2008.
Francisco dining scene. Yet the OPEN artists insist that the collective is more interested in artistic experimentation than culinary excellence.

Indeed, with its four-letter, all-caps name and use of the restaurant as a site of both artistic and social experimentation, OPEN immediately calls to mind Gordon Matta-Clark’s restaurant/art project, FOOD. OPEN’s exploration of the gallery as a space of relational encounter also begs comparison to the relational aesthetics work of Rirkrit Tiravanija. Explaining his reasons for creating the work White said, “We see this whole thing as a dialogue. We want it to be an exchange.” Waag stated, “I’m interested in sculpting, not sculpting in the classic sense, but sculpting of our experience… That shaping is a social process you do with other people.” The very language that the OPEN artists use to describe their work seems in conversation with the practices of artists like Tiravanija and Matta-Clark, drawing from a discourse of relational aesthetics.

Unlike these other works, however, OPEN’s performative dinners are unique in their relationship to and investment in contemporary food politics. The import of OPEN’s work is not just that they were eating in the gallery, but what they were eating and where it came from. To position OPEN’s dinners as just another example of relational aesthetics would ignore their unique contributions to a gastro-aesthetic discourse. In this chapter I examine two of OPEN’s performances: OPENsoil (2008) and OPENfuture (2009). Through an analysis of these examples, I demonstrate that food does not merely provide the occasion for a convivial encounter (the means by which the encounter occurs). By turning to an examination of food itself, we uncover a set of relations embedded in the food object, for a more politicized relational encounter. OPENrestaurant seeks to reveal the relationships and processes that have been obscured by the industrialization of food production through various aesthetic modes of engagement. They use the social experience of dining in a restaurant to expose the relationships that occur in and through food’s production, distribution and consumption. OPEN’s aesthetic choices reveal an interrelation between consumption and the larger scale matter of production.

OPENsoil

OPENsoil took place in March 2008 at the New Langton Arts Center in San Francisco. Committed to supporting a range of contemporary art practices – including performance art, Conceptual art, video, and installation work – New Langton’s small gallery space provided an intimate setting for OPEN’s inaugural restaurant installation. Upon arriving at the event, guests encountered a tall, clear plexiglass box filled with kitchen scraps. The box served as a kind of “host’s stand” where attendees were greeting by one of the volunteer waitstaff before being led to their table. The box of scraps, destined for compost, served as the first allusion to the evening’s theme. The room itself had been transformed from a spare gallery space to a bustling restaurant. Along one side of the gallery, the artists set up a makeshift kitchen, with counter space constructed from sawhorses and plywood. Video projections of farmers Bob Cannard and Rick Knoll lit up

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160 Sam White, interview by author, September 19, 2008.

161 Jerome Waag, interview by author, October 6, 2008.
the wall above the cooks’ heads. The two farmers, who provided all of the produce for the OPENsoil meal, recounted their philosophies of farming and their relationship with the soil. Below the projections, volunteer cooks used portable burners to prepare the evening’s meal. A pig had been slow-roasting throughout the day – cooked on a spit on the sidewalk outside of the gallery – but the cooks prepared most of the food in the gallery, putting finishing touches on plated dishes before servers brought them out to seated diners.

The dining tables, which were constructed specifically for the event by Waag and White, surrounded the kitchen. Guests sat at tables arranged in a U-shape along the other three sides of the gallery, leaning across each other to chat with people seated at other tables. The small room was teeming with a mix of diners and volunteer workers. The OPEN artists moved from kitchen to dining area. Waag and Pierce, both chefs at Chez Panisse, oversaw much of the work in the kitchen, while White, server and host at Chez Panisse, kept the dining area running smoothly. Attendees, those that paid the fifty dollar prix fixe price for the meal, as well as those who arrived just to watch, mixed freely with artists and volunteer workers. Many of those in attendance were affiliated with Chez Panisse restaurant – which has an extensive “family” of supporters and former employees – including chef Waters and farmers Cannard and Knoll and their families. Behind one row of dining tables, the artists set up a raised seating area where attendees, especially those not paying full price for the meal, could sit and watch the evening unfold.

The meal began with a “soil tasting.” Instead of a flight of wine, diners were presented with flights of soil. Each glass contained soil from one of the two different farms that provided the food for that evening’s meal [Image 1]. Each looked radically different, one light and clay colored, the other darker in color. Contributing artist, Laura Parker, led guests through the “tasting.” She poured water into each glass and prompted each person to swirl the glass to release the aroma, just as one would a glass of wine. To further highlight the theme of soil, a bed of earth from Knoll Farm, still offering a home to growing plants, occupied the center of the gallery [Image 2]. It served as a key focal point for the event. As part of the meal, cooks harvested lettuce and carrots from the dirt centerpiece, which they served directly to the tables.

As guests sniffed, compared notes, and even tasted the soil, a plate of simple vegetables arrived at the table. Diners were encouraged to detect the terroir of the carrots and the arugula and compare them to the smell of the different soil. The three-course meal, prepared with sustainably grown, locally sourced ingredients, included ricotta panzotti (large ravioli) with favas and fava greens; pork and polenta; and crepes and strawberries for dessert.

Due perhaps to the food’s skillful preparation, reviewers, more often food writers than art critics, have tended to read OPEN as an extension of the Bay Area restaurant scene. A New York Times journalist wrote about OPENrestaurant: “[They] draw from a talent pool that includes some of the San Francisco food industry’s best and brightest.”163 Playing up the collective’s relationship to Chez Panisse and focusing more on the quality of the food than the art, another reviewer wrote, “As would be expected from a team of

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162 See Laura Parker’s website; http://www.lauraparkerstudio.com/tasteofplace/.
163 Battilana, “Bay Area Producers and Food Lovers Come Together Over Dinners.”
chefs with a Chez Panisse pedigree, each bite was delicious." And yet, although OPEN has clear connections to the food and restaurant scene in the Bay Area, the collective is just as rooted in an art historical genealogy.

OPEN’s work is influenced as much by Minimalist sculpture and relational aesthetics as by chef Waters. For example, the soil that was the centerpiece of the OPENsoil event evoked Felix González-Torres’s candy spills, e.g. Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991). Akin to González-Torres’s removable installation pieces, when servers at OPENsoil removed carrots and lettuces from the square of earth they facilitated the art event but they also worked to destroy the object. The act of removal/decomposition was echoed by the compost bin sculpture. Like other artists seeking to critique art institutions, OPENsoil offered an implicit critique of the gallery and the art institution: by greeting gallery-goers with garbage and placing the soil in the gallery, the artists literally and metaphorically sullied a usually pristine space designated for the sole purpose of viewing art. Furthermore, OPENsoil’s compost sculpture seems to quote Haake’s Condensation Cube (1963), recalling Haake’s use of his systems work as part of his institutional critique.

OPEN’s aesthetic strategy of engagement – fostering dialogue over a meal – especially connects their work to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s relational aesthetics. Tiravanija’s gallery installations offer a convivial experience in place of an art object. For OPEN, as for Tiravanija, the art lies in the interaction between artist and audience, and food is a crucial component in that interaction. The food acts as the catalyst for a participatory art where there is no art object, per se. And yet, though food is used as a kind of lubricant for the social encounter, Tiravanija ignores the social relations embedded in the food itself. Relational aesthetics artists have been critiqued for failing to address the larger socio-political context of their utopic spaces of dialogue. But even an overtly political project like WochenKlausur’s Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate (2000) – which staged a series of dialogues “between adversaries in public debates over homosexual marriage, the deportation of asylum seekers, homelessness, environmental regulations, and other issues” – failed to acknowledge the socio-political conditions that produced the food they use to promote a feeling of goodwill among participants.

Unlike these other projects, OPEN is unique in the way the collective turns a relational aesthetics mode towards a different social-aesthetic goal. The collective seeks to reveal the relationships and processes that have been obscured by the industrialization of food production through the use of a relational aesthetic mode of engagement. As the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter indicates, OPEN is equally committed to investigating the kinds of conversations and relationships that occur over the plate of food as they are to revealing the complex relationships – both human and ecological – embedded within the plate of food.

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165 See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," ARTFORUM, 44 (1): 278-283. Fraser writes, “Like his Condensation Cube, 1963-65… the gallery and museum figure less as objects of critique themselves than as containers in which the largely abstract and invisible forces and relations that traverse particular social spaces can be made visible.”
166 Kester, Conversation Pieces, 156.
At the same time, OPENrestaurant shares with Tiravanija a similar utopic vision about the possibilities of a convivial encounter in the gallery. When asked why they use food as a means of engagement, OPEN artists often cited food’s ability to bring people together, emphasizing its qualities of comfort and nurturance. The artists hoped that the convivial relationship produced in the gallery would encourage participants to encounter each other, their relationship to food, and the environment differently as a result of their experiences. OPEN’s embrace of the convivial effects of food echoes not only Tiravanija’s work, but also Slow Food’s philosophy.

Early in their planning stages, the artists envisioned their project as a temporary, 24-hour restaurant to debut during “Slow Food Nation”, the largest North American gathering of Slow Food that took place in San Francisco in 2008. OPEN wanted to host conversations and collaborations among the consumers and producers that would be visiting the Bay Area for the Slow Food event. Though the Slow Food-inspired 24-hour restaurant never came to fruition, the title of OPEN’s collective reflects the initial desire to have a restaurant open to the public for several consecutive days that would foster dialogue amongst a community of people connected to issues of food production, distribution and consumption. OPEN’s goals and means are similar to those of Slow Food, who cite “counteract[ing] fast food and fast life” and re-connecting eaters with their food sources as their primary objectives.\(^{167}\)

OPEN, Tiravanija and Slow Food all embrace the convivial effects of food as a key mode of engagement. Indeed, the term convivial has circulated most recently in the discourse of social art practice to describe the work of relational artists. The term has traction in food politics as well. Slow Food’s local chapters, which are organized around the creation of temporary communities among paying participants, often through a shared meal, are called “convivia.” But where the term has parallel usage in both fields, it is also met with parallel critiques.

Food scholars as well as art critics have argued that such reliance on convivial exchange in social and/or aesthetic engagement reflects harmful universalist assumptions. The language of conviviality positions food as that which comforts and brings together. Food scholar Julie Guthman argues that this trope of universality can be exclusionary and has had major consequences for the movement. Through a study of the spaces that most represent the sustainable food movement, farmers market and community supported agriculture, Guthman argues that the food movement continues to be led and defined by a small group of primarily white activists.\(^ {168}\) The food movement doesn’t bring people together across difference but, rather, ignores difference all together. She argues, furthermore, that the rhetoric of inclusivity and commonality that defines the spaces of the food movement has had the result of actually excluding people – namely poor people and people of color – from the conversation about the future of food.

A parallel critique has been aimed at relational art practices. Grant Kester argues that Tiravanija’s work, in particular, treats art as “‘universal language’ that allows people from radically different cultures and backgrounds… to identify some common ground for interaction.” Kester (informed by the work and ideas of artist Jay Koh) argues that meaningful exchange must “begin with a frank acknowledgement of existing


differences.” In taking up a Slow Food notion of eating as commonality, and a relational aesthetic mode of utopic convivial exchange in the gallery, OPEN likewise takes up their universalizing tendencies. Relying on notions of food as inherently convivial obscures systems of repression and inequality within the food systems. Indeed, it masks important ways in which certain kinds of food and spaces can be alienating.

These are important concerns, to be sure. However, mapping OPENrestaurant too closely onto either Slow Food or relational aesthetic models threatens to miss the collective’s key intervention. While OPEN is undoubtedly heir to many of the problems of both of these social and aesthetic movements, I want to suggest that the collective intervenes in both movements. OPEN’s intervention arises from the way their aesthetic choices are entwined with their food politics. More importantly, the collective’s dialogue with both food politics and multiple artistic genealogies actually opens the possibility of a discursive intervention into both food politics and relational aesthetics.

We see in OPENsoil the ways in which the collective’s aesthetic choices re-frame food politics in a uniquely social-aesthetic mode. For example, the soil and compost sculptures evoke some of the central tenets of the organic farming movement. They are reminders of the cyclical nature of organic farming, and markers of organic farming as a temporal mode that resists “fast life.” At the same time, the sculptures not only offered commentary the resistant temporality of alternative agriculture, but they performed a temporality that comments on and, possibly, resists the insistent now-ness and here-ness of the gallery encounter. The sculptures elicited a sense of duration that exceeded the singular encounter with the spectator. Furthermore, the artists performatively diminished the space between the production and consumption of food by literally bringing the farm into the gallery. As servers harvested the still growing vegetables from the patch of earth in the center of the gallery during the meal, diners and spectators could actually watch the food move from “farm” to table. Further connecting consumers with producers, the farmers, Rick Knoll and Bob Canard, were doubly present in the room – eating the meal and projected on the walls of the gallery. OPENsoil offered a metaphor of food politics, but by placing food politics within a representational frame, they both reproduced it and modified it.

The artists’ choice to focus on soil is, on one level, a commonsensical choice. It is a primary element of food production and one which consumers know little about. Soil is also an apt metaphor for what is unseen and ignored in the food system. We can see and appreciate the plants that grow out of the soil, but we ignore the very substance that supports the growth of the plant. OPENsoil was, in part, about bringing diners’ attention to the context and specifics of soil – the flavor and nutrients the soil contributes to the food, and the conditions that keep the soil itself healthy. But, I want to suggest that OPENsoil also revealed elements of food production that are just as, if not more so, invisible as the soil, the health and conditions of a different kind of support. The artist’s use of soil offered an extended metaphor for the parts of the food system that are most often ignored: the laborers who plant, prepare and serve the food.

Critics argue that mainstream food politics fail to attend to issues of labor and food access. Indeed, on the surface, it would appear that OPEN, like Slow Food, fails to offer any systemic critique of prevailing labor relations. Though they distinguish

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169 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 104.
themselves from other relational aesthetics projects through their attention to food production, OPEN does not seem to grapple in any comprehensive way with the issues surrounding labor and the laboring body. However, the collective’s choice to focus on soil in their first OPENrestaurant event signals a deep investment in revealing the elements that support food systems. In OPENsoil’s meal, diners watched as the farmers’ labor was mediated by cooks and servers. The labor contained in the food on their plates was both figuratively and literally present.

OPENsoil is only OPEN’s first project to engage issues of labor and food production through aesthetic means and extended metaphor. In a later project, OPENwater (2010), the collective took water as both their object of inquiry and their means for revealing the supports of restaurants and food systems. OPENwater featured a plumbing system/sculpture, titled Kitchen Water System (2010), created for the event. The system fed “and drain[ed] the handwashing and dishwashing stations for the restaurant, creating an onsite greywater pond. The system design refer[red] to the paths of water diversion on the Mokelumne River [a nearby river] for urban and agricultural uses.”170 Not only did their creation of a grey water system speak to the need for alternative water solutions, the system made visible one of the more invisible restaurant jobs: the unseen dishwashers who are often the lowest paid workers and yet ensure the smooth and continuous functioning of the restaurant.

Furthermore, unlike Tiravanija’s project Untitled 1992 (Free), which centered around a single artist’s presence in the gallery, all of OPEN’s events are deeply collaborative projects. Each OPEN event has brought in more volunteers and artistic collaborators than the last. OPENsoil collaborated with artist Laura Parker, who led the soil tasting, and all of the cooks and servers were volunteers. Their OPENfuture event involved over one hundred volunteers, and they collaborated with more than twenty artists and food producers. Samin Nosrat, a former Chez Panisse cook and participating member of OPEN, was impressed by the number of volunteer laborers, “[A]ll of these people came and many for more than just one day. Many came for two, some for three days. They cooked and they cleaned and they served.”171 OPEN collaborators see all of the participating artists, farmers, cooks, and servers as part of their collective. As the name implies, they view theirs as an open artistic process that relies on the artistic, artisanal, and bodily labor of a large and ever changing crew.

If a close reading of OPENsoil reveals something about the labor of food, the question of accessibility still remains. Like the public space of farmer’s markets in Guthman’s study, museums and galleries are often felt to be racially and economically exclusive. Nosrat commented on the difficulty that OPENrestaurant has had in speaking to communities of people not already identified with the Bay Area food scene. She posed the question, “Are we really reaching anybody new when we’re in these situations?”172 Indeed, the cost of OPEN events – which usually fall in the $50-$70 range – tends to

170 Kitchen Water System was created by Hyphae Design Lab with Marisha Farnsworth and Jerome Waag. See OPENrestaurant’s website, http://openrestaurant.org/field-guide-to-openwater/
172 Ibid.
dictate who is able to attend. OPEN’s location in a gallery or museum further limits the accessibility of their events.\textsuperscript{173}

Given the convivial nature of OPEN’s meals and the relatively high cost of the meal, we can critique OPEN for reproducing the restaurant as a luxury and a space of exclusion. OPEN’s use of raised seating could be seen as both supporting and undermining that reading. On the one hand, we could read OPEN’s use of risers as reinforcing the notion of restaurants as entertainment and a luxury. Certainly, dining out has become an entertainment activity for those privileged enough to afford it. The OPENsoil dinner itself acted as a kind of entertainment for both the diners and the spectators in the seating area.

On the other hand, the risers also position the restaurant as a site under investigation via the spectator’s critical gaze. Spectators in the raised seating area observed the interactions at the tables. This spectatorial relationship calls attention to restaurants’ function as entertainment, but the use of bleachers stages a kind of critique of eating as entertainment. Furthermore, because many of those seated in the bleachers were those who opted not to pay the cost of the meal, the segregation of the seating areas in the gallery set up an interesting power dynamic, where the privileged eaters were subject to the critical gaze of the spectators in the bleachers. One might say that the diners were consumed by the spectators in the bleachers. Using the bleacher seating to frame the restaurant as performance, spectators and diners become aware of the systems and people that support the functioning of a restaurant.

Beyond performing the restaurant for what it is – a space of pleasure and entertainment – OPEN also performs the restaurant as they would like it to be: a site of education, activism and, above all, experimentation. OPENsoil made the restaurant visible as a site and/or vehicle of social engagement – where the social encounter was a metaphor for the growing process as much as the growing process was a metaphor for social interdependency. In addition to their exploration of this extended metaphor, OPENsoil acts as a reminder that the convivial needn’t be placed in binary opposition to the structural. In fact, it reminds us that projects like Slow Food hope to connect sensual awareness with structural awareness. Indeed, in many of OPEN’s events, the convivial effects are inflected by the alienating elements of food. For example, in OPENsoil, the artists used aesthetic alienation to denormalize the food and the restaurant. The process of “soil tasting” and comparing the food to the soil helped to denormalize eaters’ relationship to the source of their food. The use of aesthetic alienation countered consumers’ alienation, in a Marxist sense, from their food. In their SF MoMA-commissioned event, OPENfuture, the collective once again took up a mode of aesthetic alienation to call attention to consumers’ dissociation from their food and the people and systems that produce their food. OPENfuture brought together a politics of Slow Food with a Futurist embrace of speed, technology, and industry.

\textsuperscript{173} As museum studies research has demonstrated, museums and galleries are not spaces felt to be accessible to all. See Richard Sandell, ed., \textit{Museums, Society, Inequality} (London: Routledge, 2002) and Steven Lavine, \textit{Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display} (Smithsonian Books, 1991).
**OPENfuture**

“We believe that this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed…”\(^\text{174}\) -- from the Futurist Manifesto

“We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods…”\(^\text{175}\) – from The Slow Food Manifesto

The above quotes represent two very different aesthetic engagements with food and eating. The first articulates a Futurist aesthetic, which embraced the potential of a new industrial era and celebrated speed and technology. The Futurists proposed new artistic modes that they hoped would influence everyday life, including a new cuisine that denounced pasta in favor of recipes that dissociated food from nourishment. The second quote represents a Slow Food perspective that speaks back to the consequences the industrial era has inflicted on the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Slow Food seeks to counter the sense of speed and globalization that technologies have made possible. Yet OPENrestaurant brought them into conversation in the context of the performative dinner event, OPENfuture. What effect did bringing these seemingly opposed approaches to food have? What does bringing these modes together reveal about food politics and food aesthetics?

Commissioned by the SFMoMa, OPENfuture was one of several banquets celebrating the centennial of the Futurist Manifesto staged in cities around the globe. Many of these events sought to recreate the elaborate Futurist banquets thrown by Marinetti and his cohort. For example, a Futurist banquet, hosted by RoseLee Goldberg’s 2009 Performa biennial, was held in New York City. All of the dishes served at the banquet were replicas of recipes from the Futurist Cookbook, like “Milk in Green Light,” “Futurist Pheasant” and “Alcoholic Joust.” A banquet held in London’s British Library also reproduced a number of Futurist recipes, including a replica of the Futurist’s “Sculpted Meat.”\(^\text{176}\) Unlike these other banquets, however, OPEN intentionally eschewed any attempt to simply recreate Futurist Cookbook recipes as some kind of historical reenactment or an opportunity to glorify technological innovation in contemporary cuisine. Whereas these other Futurist banquets turned to experiments with molecular gastronomy as a way of commemorating the Futurists, OPEN turned to a philosophy of sustainability and a critique of industrial agriculture. They brought the Slow Food movement and the Futurists into an unlikely conversation that has significant ramifications for the contemporary discourse of food politics.

OPENfuture was held in the atrium of the museum. Upon entering, guests were confronted with a giant butchering table. On the left and right walls of the museum lobby, hung giant projection screens. At times, video artist Chris Sollars projected black and white images of industrial agriculture and spinning wheels, or cows being led to


slaughter. At other moments, Sollars projected live video feed from the event. Audience members were plied with alcohol and caffeine, presumably to encourage the sense of exuberant intoxication with speed that fueled the Futurist Manifesto: single origin espresso from a local roastery and numerous cocktails, including one made with avocado and brandy, were on hand. Servers passed hors d’oeuvres with names that sounded like they could have come straight from the Futurist Cookbook, like “Our Beeting Heart” and “Saving Flavor Tomatoes,” but made direct commentary on food issues. The latter was a tomato stuffed with halibut crudo, a play off of agribusiness giant Monsanto’s “Flavr Savr” tomato, the infamous crossing of genetic material of a fish and a tomato. All of these elements contributed to the collective’s successful creation of what they had hoped would be a “jarring, overwhelming experience that involved all the senses” and stayed true to the spirit of the Futurist Manifesto while bringing in the ethics of Slow Food.177

The arrival of OPEN’s “Meat Sculpture” – a play off of the Futurist’s “Sculpted Meat” – further heightened the experience of sensory overload. Speeding in a circular track around the atrium, a fleet of bicyclists heralded its arrival. Guests suddenly found themselves surrounded and corralled into the center of the space – the cyclists circling, video portraying the images and sounds of vehicular crashes. The steer was brought in, covered in a shimmering tapestry created from woven aluminum strips by artist Leslie Terzian Markoff. The huge, 650 pound animal had been spit-roasted overnight at one of the city’s only urban farms, Alemany Farm. It was transported nearly seven miles on a tricycle refurbished for the occasion, and escorted through the streets of San Francisco by the bicycle cavalcade. Upon arrival, the cooked steer was forcibly removed from its spit amidst the recorded sounds of cows’ groans. [Image 3]

A phalanx of cooks – all women – dressed in white coats appeared at the foot of the lobby’s main stairs, knives in hand. After making their way through the crowd to the steer, the women raised their knives in unison and together they quickly set about dismantling it. Attendee Charles Shere described the way the “smell of burning flesh and fennel galvanized the crowd, immediately summoning instinctual responses.”178 Restaurant blogger-cum-critic Marcia Gagliardi of Tablehopper wrote, “The crowd of people surrounding the table pressed close, buzzing in a combination of excitement and discomfort… It was noisy, exhilarating, and strange… It was like a barbaric surgery, a bit shocking in its carnality.”179 While the chefs carved the steer, the video screens showed alternating images of cows and live video of the carving in process, while the amplified sounds of lowing animals intensified.

As the chefs cut meat from the animal, they placed it onto a conveyor belt. [Image 4]. The conveyor belt connected the steer carving to another area where food preparation took place. The industrial, mechanized element of the conveyor belt was a reminder of the Futurists’ love of the machine, as it also referenced contemporary industrial food processing plants. The mechanization of the conveyor belt stood in contrast to the organic, visceral presence of the steer’s body and the live bodies dismantling it. The

juxtaposition of steer and conveyor belt also highlighted the difference between the way this steer had been raised and the conditions on factory farms.

The meat was then taken and prepared in two different ways. At one station, a chef hand-ground the meat and then scooped it into a corn-based cone [Image 5]. These “Beef Cones” referenced the idea that the majority of beef in the U.S. is corn fed. In a reversal of the idea of corn-fed beef, the artists “fed” beef into corn. Servers passed the cones to the sounds of lowing cattle, as the chefs continued to break down the steer. The rest of the meat was served as part of the main course to the entire hall of attendees. The dish, titled, “The True Cost of Beef Sandwich,” was an open-faced sandwich topped with mole and bean foam. These elements represented oil and methane, respectively, which are two substances associated with industrial meat production. As guests ate this main course dish, a miniature plane flew overhead, spraying the gathered audience with orange blossom water [Image 6]. The surprised gasps and cheerful pointing fingers were a stark contrast to the fact that the plane was a model of a Piper Pawnee, the plane often used by factory farms to spray chemicals on crops. The orange water was made from trees planted by the inventor of Agent Orange.

To complete the meal, guests were offered “steer heart grappa,” a distillation of the roasted tongue, heart and tail of the steer. The evening ended with over one hundred tiny parachutes being dropped from the third floor balcony of the museum into the atrium. Each parachute held a dessert in the form of panforte wrapped in edible rice paper, upon which had been printed the text of the Futurist Manifesto. As the parachutes fell, the video projections showed planes dropping bombs and people fleeing market squares. Air raid sirens sounded as OPENfuture participants ran excitedly to grab their dessert.

In many ways OPENfuture felt like a departure from OPEN’s earlier events. The first and most obvious way it was different from OPENsoil, for example, was the sheer size of the event. OPENsoil was much more intimate, and aspired to cultivate a convivial spirit in the gallery. The diners conversed over a meal – with each other, the artists, the farmers. The event focused on connecting consumers to the foods’ supports – the soil, the labor. OPENfuture, on the other hand, was not a sit-down meal, the space was larger, and there were more people participating in and working the event. Where the convivial feeling of OPENsoil’s dinner felt much like a Slow Food convivium meal, OPENfuture had a very different atmosphere. With the spectacle of the steer carving at its center, at times OPENfuture felt more off-putting than pleasurable. If in their past events, like OPENsoil, the artists focused more on the convivial elements of both Slow Food and relational aesthetics, in OPENfuture, they began to explore an approach akin to the Futurists’ dissociated mode of consumption, all the while retaining food production concerns.

Certainly, OPENfuture shares with OPENsoil a concern with labor and the laboring body, although the juxtaposition of different tempos and qualities of movement in OPENfuture throws the laboring body into greater relief. For example, we might read the work of food preparation in OPENfuture as a durational performance. The slow cooking of the steer, the bodies that struggled to remove the steer from its spit, and those that carved the giant animal, breaking its body down into manageable pieces were positioned in contrast to the machinery of the conveyor belt. The conveyor belt, a device associated with the speed and efficiency of industrialized food production, linked one
station of meat processing with another. Indeed, from the moment the steer entered the building, the event began to feel more like a performance of a meat processing plant than that of a restaurant. From the long process of cooking to the steer, to its transportation and final carving, OPENfuture highlighted the relationship between the laboring bodies and the products of their labor, as well as relationships between laboring bodies and time.

The presence of an all female carving crew offered a gendered critique of the labor relations of a restaurant. In OPENfuture, all of the female cooks had at one time been affiliated with the Chez Panisse kitchen and included former chefs and current line cooks. Alice Waters, executive chef of Chez Panisse, is one of the few female chefs to receive the highest honors in her field. Indeed, Chez Panisse is one of the few restaurants that continuously values and supports female cooks. The female cooks’ presence at OPENfuture highlights the gendered division of food labor in restaurant kitchens. Whereas home cooking is feminized, linked to women’s labor, and therefore devalued, cooking in high-end restaurant kitchens is more often associated with a male chef. The artists sought to speak back to the misogyny of the Futurist Manifesto by asking the group of women to take on the traditionally masculine labor of meat carving.

It is tempting to divide the elements of OPENfuture into two categories: the fast and the slow. The fast representing a Futurist perspective and the slow representing a Slow Food perspective. On the slow side of the ledger we might locate the bikes, organic farming, human labor, and slow cooking. On the fast side we could place the plane, industrial farming, machines and factories. We might then decide that that the slow side is the “good” side and the fast is the “bad” side. Certainly, The “True Cost of Beef” course and the model crop duster called attention both to the Futurists’ love of war and to the ways that the technologies of war that the Futurists so revered have since been converted for use in food production. Militarization, industrialization, and factory food production have operated hand in hand. For example, the rise in the use of chemical fertilizers was due, in part, to a post-World War II surplus of ammonium nitrate. Used during the war to make explosives, ammonium nitrate is also a rich source of nitrogen for plants. Pesticide use, key to increased production in a monoculture system, is another wartime byproduct. They were originally used as nerve gas in World War I and during World War II they were used to kill mosquitoes in the tropical areas where American soldiers were deployed. Use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture have had devastating consequences on the environment and human health.

And yet, the event did not completely allow such neat divisions. Where Petrini asserts that there is pleasure to be found in knowing where one’s food comes from, diners at OPENfuture often experienced repulsion. Eating while watching the giant steer being carved, smelling the smoke, wild fennel, and funky aroma of the meat, and hearing the loud soundscape of lowing cattle followed by the engines of planes flying overhead, was an experience of complete sensory overload. The experience was at times intensely unpleasant and unappetizing. One felt a Kristevian sense of abjection – repulsion and rejection – due to the threatening permeability of the smells and sounds of the meat. In this sense, OPEN captured the Futurist total art aesthetic. OPEN, like the Futurists,

highlighted and externalized sensory elements of eating. In doing so, they caused diners to reexamine the familiar act of eating in a manner akin to Brechtian alienation.

Furthermore, the diners’ participation in the events of the evening had the effect of implicating them in the “bad” side of the slow/fast ledger, as much as they might have liked to be able to locate themselves on the “good” side. Diners felt culpable in the death of the animal. The steer’s death was the evening’s entertainment. Diners were also implicated in the military-industrial complex as they ran gleefully to catch their dessert, as air raid sirens sounded and video screens showed images of people fleeing from a bomb attack. This sense of complicity left diners unable to completely identify themselves with the “good,” slow side of the slow-fast dichotomy.

As the SF MoMA promised, OPENfuture seemed to, on one level, be “realign[ing] the [Futurist] movement’s arguably fascist palate with a more sustainable approach to life.” The industrialization of food is in many ways the inevitable result of the Futurists’ beloved speed, technology, and war. Whereas the Futurists embraced the potential of this new industrial era, Slow Food approaches it with the benefit of hindsight, speaking back to the consequences that the same industrialization has inflicted on the production, distribution and consumption of food. On the other hand, to “realign” the Futurist movement implies a kind of finger-wagging disciplinarian approach to making the Futurists fit a politically correct mold. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that OPEN aligned the Futurists with the Slow Food movement in such a way that they ended up inflecting each other.

To be sure, at times the OPEN artists tried to revise elements of the Futurist Manifesto. Their efforts to speak back against the misogyny of the Futurists was evident in the very visible honor given to the group of female cooks. They sought to show the relationship between war and the industrial production of food. But possibly more interesting is the way in which aligning these two movement reveals a potential that is missing from Slow Food. OPENfuture allows us to see how Slow Food’s “politics of pleasure” might be better framed as a politics of the sensory.

As we’ve seen, sustainable food advocates like Petrini and Berry advocate an approach to eating that emphasizes pleasure, an aware pleasure. This emphasis on pleasure has been critiqued as an elitist, hedonistic mode that is oblivious to the systemic and structural realities of eating in America. And, certainly, those critiques of a politics of pleasure are not without merit. However, as OPEN makes clear in bringing Slow Food and Futurism together, it is through a sensory awareness that we might be better connected with overlooked issues of food’s production.

However, attention to the sensory is not always pleasure-filled, and this is the point that Slow Food misses. What they get right is that the senses are a powerful entry into a greater understanding of the social political world that surrounds us. But a rhetoric of pleasure – even if they are trying to re-orient the term towards awareness – too readily misses the point. Attention to the sensual and all that includes – from pleasure to disgust and everything in between – demonstrates the powerful effects food can have. Key to OPEN is the way that their work elicits both convivial and dissociated effects, sometimes within the same moment. OPENfuture attempted to expose something about the future of food. OPENfuture, like the Futurists, enacted a kind of future subject through

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performative consumption. I would argue that their ideal future subject does not fit the image of Slow Food’s gastronome whose experience of food is primarily through pleasure. OPEN’s ideal subject is, however, characterized by their sensory awareness. And it is, indeed, through that awareness that the OPEN consumer becomes aware, within the frame of representation, of the structural issues of food’s production.

I’ve shown how OPENrestaurant’s attention to food production intervenes in relational aesthetic by bringing awareness of structural issues to a convivial encounter. OPEN’s events make clear that the convivial encounter need not preclude the structural. I want to also suggest that OPEN’s use of aesthetic alienation, as well as their use of extended metaphors for human and ecological supports, is bolstered by the convivial effects of their events. Moreover, their work intervenes in food politics discourse precisely because of the ways they mobilize both convivial and alienation food effects. OPENfuture, like OPENsoil, examined the supporting structures of food production, but they heightened the sense of alienation and made use of a Futurist “total art” aesthetics as a means of calling attention to participants’ sensory experience. Indeed, the project revealed that Slow Food and Futurists have more in common that we might have imagined.
CHAPTER FOUR

A Post-Brechtian “Culinary” Theater: LightBox’s Milk-n-Honey

“As for the content of this opera, its content is pleasure. Fun, in other words, not only as form but as subject-matter. At least, enjoyment was meant to be the object of the inquiry even if the inquiry was intended to be an object of enjoyment. Enjoyment here appears in its current historical role: as merchandise.”

-- Bertolt Brecht on the culinary nature of Mahogonny.

In Brecht’s The Threepenny Opera, Macheath sings, “Food is the first thing. Morals follow on.” In The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogonny, a man named Jakob stuffs himself to death as others go hungry. In each, Brecht uses food (or, more specifically, its lack) to induce audience recognition of the characters’ social circumstances. Macheath prompts the audience to consider the social situations that lead to the characters’ behavior – e.g. failure to access basic human needs like food – rather than sit in judgment of their actions. He asks, who are the real criminals, the poor who steal to eat or the capitalists who steal from the workers? Jakob’s gluttony in Mahogonny – an instance of pleasure distorted and exaggerated – asks the audience to see what is not shown: all those who go hungry while one man eats. Regarding the glutton, Brecht writes, “His pleasure provokes, because it implies so much.” Despite the provocations of food in these and other instances, however, food’s pleasures also offer Brecht a compelling metaphor for the failings of commercial theater. Brecht uses the term “culinary” to derogatorily refer to theater as a means of pleasure. Culinary theater serves up a hedonistic experience, rather than one of critical contemplation.

For Brecht, food and eating occasions, on the one hand, a gestus that references social relations, and on the other hand, a theater of sensuous pleasures to be avoided at all cost. This recurring tension between pleasure and alienation is a dilemma that lies at the heart of much of Brecht’s work. We have seen in the previous two chapters how the challenge and the potential of using food in socially engaged performance lies in the tension between indulging the pleasures of food – sensuous pleasure as well as the pleasure of commensality – and allowing that experience of pleasure to jumpstart an interrogation of social relations. Food performances often negotiate dissociation and conviviality, an opposition that echoes a Brechtian tension – albeit it in a context with different stakes.

New York-based theater company, LightBox, creates work that sits at the intersection of this tension. LightBox seeks to create “bold, kinetic plays that speak to

187 See Ibid.
issues of our time.” Their theatrical techniques foreground the body and emphasize collaboration within their production process as well as between audience and performers. They employ these techniques to address contemporary political issues. In 2007, the company created a piece titled Milk-n-Honey, a “multimedia play about the politics and pleasures of eating.” Five writers, C. Andrew Bauer, Shawn Fagan, Madeleine George, Bray Poor, and director Ellen Beckerman, created the play collaboratively. The playwrights based the script on interviews conducted by company members with farmers, flavor chemists, waiters, and others. Milk-n-Honey traced the storylines of five main characters: Jesus, a migrant farm worker; supermarket workers Audrey and Ambrose; Renee, a woman diagnosed with diabetes; and Fred, a flavor chemist. The play wove four primary plotlines and a chorus of testimonials together into a network of interrelated narratives, the full significance of each only revealed in their moments of overlap and juxtaposition.

In this chapter, I examine the ways Milk-n-Honey defamiliarized audiences’ perception of food. The play allowed audiences to experience food’s pleasures and at the same time attend to the sinister side of food’s production as a means of recognizing the systems that produce the food we eat. I argue that Milk-n-Honey is an example of post-Brechtian culinary theater that takes the pleasures of food as both its object and means of inquiry. The play shows us how this kind of “culinary theater,” might offer an important intervention into food politics.

Of course, Brecht was not referring to the sort of food performances I examine in this dissertation in his discussion of “culinary” theater. Why then, aside from its felicitous coincidence with Milk-n-Honey’s engagement with food, take up Brecht’s “culinary” metaphor? On the one hand, Brecht held up the “culinary” theater as the sort of theater he hoped to work against. For Brecht, the culinary referred to what was pleasurable and hedonistic about theater. As entertainment, the culinary held a greater possibility for commodification. Brecht wrote, “Ultimately it is all the same to the waiter who he serves, so long as he serves the food.” He accused musicians, writers, and critics of being unwittingly interpolated into a “public entertainment machine.” Like the waiter, these artists’ output then becomes a matter of delivering the goods. The “goods,” like the food the waiter serves, are just another commodity, a pleasurable one at that, but a commodity nonetheless. Art became “so much merchandise… governed by the normal laws of mercantile trade.” The culinary, or pleasurable, elements of the theater made it easier to commodify; the pleasure of conventional theater heightened its unreality and allowed audiences to be swept away, to remain uncritical spectators.

There is yet hope for the culinary aspects of theater, however, and at times Brecht seems reluctant to jettison the pleasurable entirely. He wrote, for instance, of his efforts to “develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction.” Brecht suggested that we

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191 Ibid., 34.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid., 35
might investigate those moments of pleasure, such that pleasure itself might be not only the form of the theater, but its content, its subject-matter. Thus, he used the theater to call attention to enjoyment as merchandise. As in the example of the glutton in *Mahagonny*, Brecht shows not only the pleasure, but also what the pleasure is not, what it disallows.

Brecht’s theory of the “not, but,” is key to my analysis of *Milk-n-Honey*. As demonstrated in the example from *Mahagonny* above, the “not, but” is an approach that Brecht suggested would allow the actor to show what s/he is not doing, “that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible.” This “not, but” allows the audience to see the choice embedded in the characters action. In *Milk-n-Honey*, LightBox seems to engage with food as a way to “develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction.” They point to food systems through an examination of food, along the way embracing what is pleasurable about food and eating. They make use of Brecht’s “not, but” as they showed the flip side of food’s pleasure.

In this chapter I employ a post-Brechian analysis as Hans-Thies Lehmann defines the term, an analysis “which knows that it is affected by the demands and questions for theater that are sedimented in Brecht’s work but can no longer accept Brecht’s answers.” Accordingly, I take up Brecht’s key ideas for an epic theater as well as some of what is at stake in his use of the “culinary” to describe theater – i.e. his struggle with the pleasurable in theater alongside theater’s capacity to occasion engaged spectatorship. I engage these ideas while reading them in relation to our contemporary moment.

If Brecht sought to expose the material supports of and in his theatrical work, how might post-Brechian theatrical works represent the supports in a way that better reflects our contemporary moment? I adopt Shannon Jackson’s concerns with “how twenty-first century humans imagine their relation to larger systems of support, labor, and human welfare,” as she considers “the role of the theatrical medium in a so-called age of globalization.” As Jackson reminds us, “a globalizing world of digital connection seems to have done away with terrestrial systems of labor and support. Rather than the undermounted ‘base’ of industrial labor imagined in vertical Marxist visions of social organization, humans are now connected wirelessly in laterally networked relationships.” Indeed, the very foods we eat are a product of global interconnection. And while food production, distribution and consumption continue to be supported by material, human labor – often with very real, material consequences on laboring bodies – food systems are increasingly supported by the immaterial, affective labor of the service and entertainment industries. In addition to the fact that most of the foods we eat are the product of global exchange – e.g. spices, coffee, tea, fish, rice – groups like Slow...

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197 Ibid.
198 One need only think about food tourism, chef stardom, and the numerous television cooking shows to realize the ways the immaterial labor of the entertainment industry fits within food systems.
Food have pointed out the ways in which our current food habits have been impacted by the speeding up that accompanies globalization.

*Milk-n-Honey* revealed the material supports of both the theater itself, and the play’s subject, food, in a Brechtian manner. In this chapter I examine the ways LightBox used a juxtapositive and layered aesthetic in addition to more explicitly Brechtian techniques. I demonstrate how their food politics rhetoric, post-Brechtian aesthetic decisions, and use of new media, have the potential to make audiences critically aware of their embodied position within the contemporary, interrelational social world.

*Milk-n-Honey*

The opening moments of the November 2007 performance of *Milk-n-Honey* at the 3LD Art and Technology Center in downtown New York City set the stage for a Brechtian mode of spectatorship. A lone actor entered the performance space. He crossed to the far corner of the stage where a table was elaborately set for one – a vase with flowers, a napkin decoratively folded in one wine glass, breadsticks fanned out in another. When he reached the table, the actor turned and faced the audience. The stage was flanked on two sides by long tables laid with tablecloths, at which the assembled audience was seated. The actor’s gaze panned from right to left, as though trying to make eye contact with each audience member. Finally, he sat, settled into his chair and reached for his napkin, which he shook out with a flourish before placing it in his lap. He picked up his fork and, looking out at the audience again, reached for his salad, spearing a leaf of lettuce and bringing it to his mouth. As he placed the food into his mouth, the lights shifted – the house lights went down, and video images projected on the walls behind the Eater depicted, at first abstract and then more literal, food-related imagery. [Image 1]

In these moments, *Milk-n-Honey* asked its audiences to think about the social, political and environmental relations contained in the act of eating. The Eater stopped the action with a Brechtian “gest of showing.” His gaze acted as a kind of direct address to the audience. Thus, wordlessly commenting on his own action, the Eater prompted the audience to defamiliarize eating and in so doing question the system that brought the food to the Eater’s plate. The *gestus* of eating prompted a reaching backwards in time and space, linking the Eater to a food system that brought the piece of lettuce to his mouth. Yet, the Eater’s first bite also sets into motion the action of the play, activating everything that came afterwards, propelling the action forward. The Eater (Jake Manabat) remained on stage for the rest of the performance, eating and watching as the play unfolded.

Moments after the Eater took his first bite of food, the rest of the ensemble emerged from behind the audience, bearing bowls of candy. The actors stopped at each table, smiling and chatting and handing out candy, until every audience member was offered a piece of candy; some audience members accepted the candy, others did not. This act of offering candy asked the audience to make a choice about whether and how they would participate. Furthermore, the interaction with the candy offered both pleasure and danger – the pleasure of a sweet treat and a moment of interaction with the performer, as well as the danger and threat of contamination that is wrapped up in the act.

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taking candy from a stranger. They used the food to make contact with the audience, breaking down the conventional barrier between performer and spectator.

After the first moments of the play set up some of the unusual conventions of the performance, *Milk-n-Honey* introduced its primary characters through a series of monologues. Significantly, the first two characters introduced were Jesus (Vaneik Echeverría), a migrant farmworker from Mexico, and Audrey (Aysan Çelik), a young, white grocery store clerk. In introducing these characters first, the play sets up a focus on the human labor responsible for producing and distributing the food we eat. Jesus and Audrey represent two very different experiences of race and class privilege (or lack of) in the United States. They reveal some of the ramifications of race and class identity on relationships surrounding food systems.

Over the course of the play, we watch as Jesus arrives in the U.S. from Oaxaca, Mexico, meets up with his cousin who helps him find work, and endures the back-breaking work of picking tomatoes. The fact that Jesus is the first of the main characters to be introduced is significant for the way it focuses attention on the seldom-addressed story of migrant farm workers in the U.S. His character highlights the relationship between race and the negative consequences of American food policy. The food movement is often critiqued for its failure to address the issues of those who labor to produce the food we eat, yet *Milk-n-Honey* begins with Jesus’s monologue. He describes what can only be his arrival to the U.S.:

> “Al viajar en un autobus no puede pararse, pero si veias algunas cosas raras. Tu nada mas ves a través de la ventana, y vez las escenas, ves esto que pasa, ves aquello, y no te puedes parar. Ya, vas, y ya se quedó hasta alla...¿no? Nosotros simplemente pasamos...pasamos, pasamos, pasamos. Ni puede uno sacar la cabeza a voltear. Tu no puedes saber que paso con esa persona, que paso con ese animal, simplemente, ok...vamos, seguimos, no se puede parar.”

What is he headed towards? What is he leaving behind? Jesus’s story begins as one accompanied by the dangers of the unknown. His foreboding monologue sets the tone for his character’s narrative arc, as well as the audience’s positioning in relation to his story. The audience sits watching, much like Jesus in the bus. We can only watch “las escenas,” we can’t stop the action and intervene. Here again, the audience is asked to attend to their own spectatorial position, their relationship to what unfolds on the stage.

Audrey is the next character we meet. Compared with Jesus, her story is one of privilege. Possessing a somewhat grating naivete, she tells us:

> All people want to be free... It’s not really true... All people want to look like they’re free, but know deep down inside that they’re restrained. It doesn’t matter by who, a parent or an abusive boyfriend or the government, whoever... To be free is to be alone. Freedom is loneliness. That's why people put themselves

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200 “When you ride on a bus, you can't get off. But we saw strange things. You can only watch through the window, watching the scenes. You see this thing, you see this other thing, and you can't stop the bus. You're going and the scene just...is back there. You know? We just keep going, going, going...going. You can' even stick your head out the window. You can't find out what happened with this person, or that animal...it's just- ok, let's keep going. You can't stop.” C. Andrew Bauer, Ellen Beckerman, Shawn Fagan, Madeleine George, and Bray Poor, “Milk-n-Honey” (unpublished manuscript, 2007), 2.
under other people’s control. They want to feel held. Even by a total asshole. Oppression is just a really tight hug.\textsuperscript{201}

Audrey goes on to explain that people are “enslaved” by their attachment to certain foods, their need to have the comfort of selecting the “exact salad dressing they want.”\textsuperscript{202} Later in the play, Audrey meets and becomes infatuated with Ambrose (Adam Rhacek), a fellow supermarket employee. Ambrose is a Freegan who only eats what he is able to find or forage in the city, for free – from dumpsters and city parks. Audrey is drawn to Ambrose’s passion. In turn, he pushes her to think about all the “people and animals who gave their lives” so that we can feed and clothe ourselves.\textsuperscript{203}

The next characters introduced are Renee (Signe V. Harriday), an African American “paralegal with a sweet tooth,” and Fred (Shawn Fagan), a chemist working for a company that manufactures flavor for foods like potato chips and jellybeans.\textsuperscript{204} Renee’s introductory monologue recounts her love of “Honey Buns,” a cellophane-wrapped pastry that calls up childhood memories.

“I’ve been eating these things since like the first grade. Huh. I remember, as a kid, skipping across the street, on my way to school - my dad holding my hand, my mom walking a little ahead. When we get across the street mom ducks into the corner store and comes out with one of these - a Honey Bun. She kneels down, gives it to me – “Honey Bun for my Honeybun,” she says, and kisses me and goes off to work. Dad walks me the rest of the way, and I eat and skip, eat and skip. I can still hear my mom laughing.”\textsuperscript{205}

Later, Renee is diagnosed with diabetes. Her struggles to eat healthfully are met with protests from her father, who insists that by changing how she eats, she is rejecting her heritage and cultural traditions.

The final line of Renee’s opening monologue, “Tastes like love,” takes us to the next scene, where we meet Fred. Throughout the play, Fred struggles with a side project to capture the taste of light. Fred is in the business of constructing flavors like those that Renee experiences when she eats her Honey Bun. As he explains to the audience, “I once got a request for a lemonade that "Tastes Like The Lemonade From The Stand In My Hometown On My Block When I Was Ten Years Old And I Had A Big Crush On Rachel Herzkowitz."\textsuperscript{206} He says, “That is what I try to hunt down: the flavor of memory.”\textsuperscript{207}

\textit{Milk-n-Honey} indexes other theatrical experiments that seek to both have social effects and innovate theatrical form through the use of food in performance. For example, through his own performance work, Richard Gough has experimented with a mode of food performance that he refers to as “peripatetic dinners” – in one such performance he offered different courses in different rooms, asking audience members to physically travel from one space to another in order to experience the whole performance. In Gough’s performances, not only does the food exceed the bounds of a stage experience, but also the audience members become performers as they participate in the performance through eating.

\textsuperscript{201} Bauer et al, “Milk-n-Honey,” 3.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., ii.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 6.
In the case of Milk-n-Honey, the audience does not switch roles with the performers, but the conventional divide between audience and stage is blurred in moments when audiences find themselves eating the same food that is being consumed onstage. This happens at two moments in Milk-n-Honey: at the start of the play, after the audience is given candy, the actors walk onto the stage, face the audience and eat the candy themselves, confirming the candy to be harmless and connecting themselves with the snacking audience. Later, audiences are offered popcorn, which they are encouraged share with each other. The popcorn is simultaneously referenced onstage via a recitation of corn-based products found in our everyday lives. The audience is implicated in a moment that is at once pleasurable and insidious; the popcorn carrying memories of childhood, the sharing of the food offering the pleasures of shared commensality, and the consumption of corn which, the audience is shown, is responsible for the decline in the American diet and the rise of health issues such as diabetes and obesity.

This blurring of the line between audience and performer also carries the potential for the creation of a sense of community, among the audience members and between the audience and artists. LightBox actively sought this kind of connection. Beckerman states, “We were playing with all kinds of audience configurations to try and create a dialogue… We definitely wanted…the audience relating to each other.” So they used food to create that connection: “I always would watch that popcorn moment and be so excited when people start passing the popcorn down.” As I have addressed in previous chapters, many artists and performers have embraced food’s ability to create community in performance. Bread and Puppet is one famous example. Welfare State International has also offered food at their large-scale spectacular events. WFI artist Sue Gill wrote, “We think of our audiences as guests so it is only natural to serve them with food as well as fireworks.” The food used in these performances is simple; it is not about the virtuousity of the cooks so much as about the creation of community through the shared act of eating that interests these artists.

Sometimes food is used by community-based and participatory theater practitioners as a way of cultivating community among their participants. Community artists offer meals as a way of fostering a sense of camaraderie amongst community members participating in their process. This has the effect of breaking down the artist/audience binary in a different way. Community member and artists are able to share space and conversation on a more equal level. For example, community artist, Shannon Flattery of Touchable Stories incorporates regular community dinners into her process of art-making. These dinners often include, but are not limited to participating artists, local leaders and activists, students and interns. Participants are invited to bring food to the dinners. Flattery believes that people are more likely to feel responsible and involved in the success of the event if they contribute. Thus, sharing food becomes part of the ritual of these events. These community dinners function both as means of community-building and as a performance in and of themselves. Participants meet, network, and share stories over food in a manner that weaves together an affective community within

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208 Ellen Beckerman, interview by author, November 18, 2008.
their larger geographical community. At the same time the ritual and formal elements of the dinner work to create a powerful performance in which the lines between actor and spectator are blurred.

Gough finds that audiences are willing to eat what is offered them in performance, in part because of “the pleasure of communally sharing the food together, whether it’s simply a loaf of bread broken into bits and put onto the table or whether it’s something more complex.” In each of these instances, artists use food in performance as a way of creating a sense of community, unsettling the idea that the artist should present an art object or event to be passively and figuratively consumed by the spectator. Instead, the act of consumption is literalized and audiences are asked to participate in the performance by eating.

Audiences connected to Milk-n-Honey through the act of sharing food with the actors and with each other, but they also connect through another kind of, perhaps more indirect, bodily engagement. In an analysis of a non-food-related sensory performance, Maya Roth finds that attention to the audience’s sensory awareness and bodily engagement, can lead to a more efficacious socially engaged performance. Roth argued that Sea of Forms by Omaha Magic Theatre, “sought to bring audiences to their bodies… as a way of heightening ecological conscience.” Creating a “sea of white styrofoam,” the performance sought to stimulate audience’s bodily engagement through tactile exploration before and after the performance. Furthermore, the artists hoped this mode of sensory engagement would encourage audience reflection on the performance’s focus on environmental issues. Roth suggested that the performance created “a rich sensory world where people felt connected” to the issue of environmental waste. Helen Iball’s term, “foodie gaze,” captures this sense of body awareness and engagement occasioned by the staging of food. Because food permeates the already blurry line between audience and stage/performer, through sight, smell and sometimes taste, it can occasion a moment of bodily experience in the spectator. Both Iball and Roth argue that sensory engagement encourages greater audience response and action.

LightBox’s use of food as a vehicle for audience interaction recalls participatory theater experiments like those listed above, many of which might be identified as “community-based” performance. Yet artistic director Beckerman resists affiliation with community-based theater. Instead, Beckerman cites physical ensemble-based work of Anne Bogart’s SITI Company as a primary inspiration. Yet LightBox’s use of interview transcripts combined with their expressionistic staging also recalls the documentary theater experiments of groups like the Tectonic Theater Project and the Civilians (also New York-based ensemble companies). In fact, Milk-n-Honey’s team of writers conducted interviews with a broad range of individuals with different perspectives on food in America. The play’s four primary narratives of the play were interspersed with

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214 Iball, “Melting Moments,” 74.
brief episodes, verbatim excerpts from interview transcripts that the script refers to as a “Chorus of Testimonials.”

The testimonials were performed by the same five actors who portrayed the primary characters. These mini-episodes, which included former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, a soup kitchen guest, and restaurant chef, complicated the story of American eating habits. Beckerman explained, “We talked to flavor chemists and advertising executives. We tried to talk to people in Big Food, but that didn’t go so well. We also talked to organic farmers and activists and hunger strikers, and we talked to people who only eat meat they’ve killed themselves, and dumpster divers and grocery clerks.”

In one scene a farmer relates a story of a friend who fed his hogs GMO corn: “He periodically had hogs who looked pregnant, the milk was coming and he would put them in the crates and three days later there would be no babies and the milk would dry up. It was pseudo pregnancy… The GMO corn was causing the hog to think it was pregnant.” Three short scenes later, in the next testimonial, Butz explains why, “We’ve got the most positive food policy we’ve had in forty years.” In yet another testimonial a resident of “the projects” describes how she would feed her neighbors when they were going hungry. A later testimonial features a young man describing his experience of going hungry when he was homeless. Together these stories further enriched the play’s primary narratives with individual voices and experiences derived from interviews conducted by the LightBox ensemble.

Like LightBox, both the Tectonic Theater Project and the Civilians marry the use of text and interviews with experimental staging techniques. The Civilians, whom co-writer Madeleine George cites as an influence on the Milk-n-Honey project, are similar in style to LightBox. They create “non-narrative, ensemble-devised theatre that uses music and verbatim texts culled from interviews conducted by cast members.” Likewise, Tectonic Theater Project’s brand of documentary theater experiments with theatrical techniques as a part of their efforts to address contemporary social issues. Tectonic Theater Project’s artistic director, Moises Kaufman, has stated that he is interested in exploring “theater [as] a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events.”

LightBox’s efforts at engagement did not end with these approaches to staging. In addition to their aesthetic techniques as social engagement – food as a means of audience participation and the use of interviews as research methodology – LightBox held what they called an “After Show Café,” immediately following each performance. The Café took the form of post-show discussions with local food activists where audience members could “eat free locally made food and participate in discussions, cooking demos, book signings and other activities led by LightBox partners, including Slow Food, Just Food,

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216 Beckerman interview, 2008.
218 Ibid., 25.
219 Madeleine George, interview with author, November 18, 2008.
LightBox clearly hoped this post-show engagement would act as a prompt for audience members to take action—in the form of letter-writing, petition-signing, and/or donating money to the sponsored food organization. To that end, the company “provided opportunities to fill out a postcard [in support of farmworkers] or write to [a] congressman about the farm bill.” Through their own data-collating efforts the company found that 90% of the audience stayed for the After Show Café, and 85% of the audience said “they would make different choices about the food they would eat and consider volunteering for a food organization or joining a CSA.”

LightBox’s use of food within the performance exceeded the bounds of the stage, blurring the line between audience and performance, such that the audience actually became the performers. The company made use of food as a generative metaphor that fulfilled their goal of connecting to current issues and allowed them to explore the multiple significations of food. In some ways, the company’s efforts to connect their audience to the social issue of food politics might seem to cohere in the After Show Café. The Café quite literally gave audience members the opportunity to connect with educators and activists working in the food movement. However, I want to suggest that rather than locating the socio-political efficacy of Milk-n-Honey in this post-show event, or even in the food movement rhetoric they employed, we instead find a degree of efficacy in the coupling of awareness of food systems with innovative staging techniques.

**Staging Techniques**

The performance received mixed reviews. Some reviewers felt, “[a]s an engaging exploration of Americans’ emotionally fraught relationship to food, “Milk ’n’ Honey” [was] a resounding triumph.” Others felt that the play tried to address too many issues, and suffered from having too many writers. Rachel Saltz of the New York Times, praised the strong performances in Milk-n-Honey. Yet Saltz found the play to be on the one hand a “too earnest primer about the politics of food,” and on the other hand, “blind to real misery and lack of freedom.”

While I agree that the play suffered at times from trying to do too much in one relatively short performance, I also identify in these reviews a struggle with how to write about a performance that attempts to both use innovative theatrical techniques and address a political issue. In particular, I read in Saltz’s review a tension not dissimilar to

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222 Sam Rudy, “LightBox and The Food Theater Project present the world premiere of new play about Americans, appetite and the food we eat: MILK ’N’ HONEY” (press release), October 2007, Sam Rudy Media Relations, New York, NY.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid.


that present in critiques of Brecht’s work. Saltz was uneasy with the performance’s “earnest” politics. Indeed, she likened the piece “in function if not form” to Brecht’s *lehrstücke*.  

At the same time, it seems she found the piece not political in the right ways: she critiqued the play for failing to attend fully to “genuine oppression.”  

Nowhere in the review did Saltz discuss the formal elements of the piece, except in her brief remark about how the form differed from Brecht’s learning plays and how it moved “beyond simple narrative drama.” Yet Saltz did not elaborate on how the form differed, nor on the possible social effects of Beckerman’s aesthetic choices. What if we consider the ways the aesthetic techniques of the work might actually reflect a complex politics? How might our view of the piece shift if we connect the play’s theatrical techniques with its politics? We might, for example, notice the way the performance’s breaking down of the audience-performer binary and the use of juxtapositive, body-centered staging technique reflect and enhance the politics of the play.

Many of the reviewers found the After Show Café to be one of the most successful elements of *Milk-n-Honey* for the way it went “beyond the stage.” Certainly, the Café offered a chance to engage with food issues beyond the bounds of the performance space by taking specific, quantifiable action: writing a letter, changing habits of consumption. Again, how might our reading of the performance shift if we look to find their efforts at engagement embedded within the performance itself, rather than to the more obvious moments of social engagement during the After Show Café? As Iball and Roth argue, sensory and embodied engagements within a theatrical frame can prompt audience action. Perhaps more than the After Show Café, LightBox’s use of food in performance connected the audience to the issue of food politics in an affective and embodied way.

Saltz critiqued the show for failing to address “real oppression.” Yet I find that *Milk-n-Honey* offered a rare articulation of the impacts American food policy and habits have had on poor people and people of color. As many food scholars have argued, the food movement rhetoric has failed to do justice to the ways race and class play out in our food systems. *Milk-n-Honey* articulates food system narratives that are often ignored. For example, after receiving a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, the writers got connected with numerous food justice workers. It was through those connections that they met and interviewed members of the Coalition of Immokalee workers from Florida, one of the most active and visible farmworker organizations, supporting the rights of tomato pickers. These interviews led to Jesus’s storyline. Renee’s character represents the ways racism shapes the health and eating habits of some low-income communities of color. Alison Hope Alkon and Kari Marie Norgaard describe this phenomenon:

> In addition to poverty, the contemporary racialized geographies... through which institutionalized racism shapes the physical landscape prevent many black and indigenous communities from purchasing the quality of food they once produced.  

Lack of geographic and economic access confines their choices to processed,

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228 Ibid.  
229 Ibid.  
230 Ibid.  
231 Ibid.  
232 See the Coalition of Immokalee Workers website for more information: http://www.ciw-online.org/101.html#photos.
fast, and commodity foods. Additionally, black and Native American communities suffer from elevated rates of diet-related illnesses such as diabetes.\(^{233}\)

Renee’s story arc brings home the complexities of the relationship between healthy food, race, class, and public health. These narratives are largely missing from the mainstream food movement, and when they are included, the solutions offered tend to miss the larger, structural issues at play. *Milk-n-Honey* offers an important corrective in not only its inclusion of these stories, but in the way the artist’s aesthetic engagement reflects the narratives’ social complexities.

It is quite possible that LightBox’s placement of food politics within an aesthetic context made it difficult for Saltz and others to see the way *Milk-n-Honey* does grapple with “real oppression.” Saltz faulted the production for its failure to attend to “real oppression,” but she also faulted it for having “earnest politics.” On the contrary, I believe *Milk-n-Honey*’s staging techniques prevented the play from being overly earnest. Furthermore, I locate in Beckerman’s aesthetic choices an intervention into the arguably problematic food politics rhetoric through its representation in an aesthetic frame.

LightBox’s staging technique made use of juxtaposition, a strategy that encourages an engaged process of meaning-making on the part of the audience. Tori Haring-Smith describes a similar approach in her discussion of staging non-realism: “[T]o engage with non-realism, spectators need to become active participants in meaning-making. Because non-realism focuses on the gaps between events and avoids explaining the motivations of its characters in rational terms, the spectators must consciously connect the dots.”\(^{234}\) Spectators must actively “read” the performance to make sense of the play’s various uses of juxtaposition.

Rather than reproducing the conventional blackout paired with change of scenery, *Milk-n-Honey* moves from scene to scene through a shift in lighting or use of video, with actors roll shelving units into new stage configurations, or simply walking off stage as other actors enter to take their place. The worlds of the performance’s different narratives overlap through the use of staging techniques that intentionally bring the different storylines into conversation with one another. Because the set is occupied by different stories and characters in the same space, we read them as interconnected and we read relationships between the different stories, just as we do with the performers playing multiple characters.

As the transitions from one scene to the next bleed into one another, and as the space is shared between the different worlds of the play, stories are connected in ways that the stories on their own do not make explicit. Narratives are connected through their spatial and temporal proximity as well as through textual/thematic coincidences. One of the most compelling juxtapositions in *Milk-n-Honey* is the relationship between the characters Renee, a diabetic, and Fred, a flavor chemist. The narratives seem (and are) distinct: their worlds do not overlap. But their staging suggests a relationship between the two and compels an active spectatorship that encourages a process of meaning-making.


The narratives of Renee and Fred are positioned in conversation with one another thematically, via the themes of food memory and food pleasure, and structurally, several times throughout the play. Their stories occur back to back and sometimes simultaneously. The Honey Bun in Renee’s monologue is figured as both a sign of motherly love and a symbol of an industrial food system that is to blame for Renee’s diabetes. As part of this food system, Fred has helped to make similar food commodities that tap into consumer’s deepest desires. It would be easy to figure Fred as the villain and Renee the victim of his chemical experiments. But Fred is figured more sympathetically as an artist, struggling to find a “pure” flavor, the flavor of light. In one of the most moving moments of the play, he is surrounded by performers vocalizing in harmony as a representation of the flavor he is trying to create. The notes come together in a stunning, multivocal crescendo as Fred finally creates the flavor of light.

In the same way that Fred’s character is not easily reducible, Renee is not figured simply as a victim. Renee is unapologetic about the pleasure she gets from eating an industrially produced product like the Honey Bun, even as she struggles with the difficulty of finding fresh produce at her neighborhood bodega and health professionals who lecture her on the tenets of “good eating.” Renee, excluded from cultures of healthy, “good” food due to her racial and geographic positioning, does not fall prey to what Guthman points to as the trope of knowledge in food politics – that is, this idea that “if they [i.e. the other] only knew” where their food came from they would change their consumption habits. This idea belies the universalist assumptions of a food movement in which “whites continue to define the rhetoric, spaces and broader projects of agro-food transformation.” These two characters exceed the stereotypes that food movement rhetoric promotes precisely because of the ways they are figured in relation to one another.

LightBox coupled their use of juxtaposition with staging choices that revealed the supports of both food systems and the theatrical event itself. These choices reflect what I have been referring to as the play’s post-Brechtian mode. The performance space was created through the use of shelving units on wheels. During the course of the play the performers moved the shelving to divide up the space in different ways – in rows as in a supermarket, or diagonally across the stage. [Image 2] Scenes on the nearly bare set were further described through the use of lights. Rows of light on the stage floor, running up and downstage or from left to right implied supermarket aisles or rows of tomatoes.

The shelving is a particularly interesting staging element for the way it reveals the material supports. At the start of the play, the shelves formed a wall that partially obstructed the audience’s view of the performance space. During the course of the play, the shelving was moved by performers to divide up the space in different ways – in rows, or diagonally across the stage, for example. The use of shelves to delineate the space, along with the actors’ efforts to move the shelves and create new playing spaces, worked, in true Brechtian fashion, to reveal the physical labor and the material objects that support the theatrical event.

Brecht’s epic theater sought to reveal the “apparatus”- meaning a system of production, distribution, and consumption. Brecht writes, “Art is merchandise, only to be manufactured by the means of production (apparati).” Brecht hoped to banish the

235 Guthman, “If Only They Knew,” 395.
236 Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 35.
magic from the theater that covered over this. He sought to lift a curtain and reveal the apparatus, historical materialism. But he literalizes this metaphor when he suggests, among other technical devises to produce an alienation effect, “making visible the sources of light.” Here he asserts “there is a point in showing the lighting apparatus openly, as it is one of the means of preventing an unwanted element of illusion.” Thus, both kinds of apparatus might be revealed in “making visible the sources of light.” The reveal of the lighting apparatus provides an alienation effect, sparking critical reflection in his audience as it metaphorically alludes to a systemic apparatus.

Beyond revealing the apparatus of the theater, the shelves in Milk-n-Honey acted as a material metaphor of food systems. The program notes stated, “Food is universal, personal, and unavoidable.” Echoing this rhetoric, the food in the shelves – all manner of processed food items such as canned beans, potato chips, cake mix, etc. – and the shelves themselves were “unavoidable” as the audience gazed onto the performance space. Repeatedly throughout the course of the performance, spectators had to look through the shelving stocked with groceries to see the action that occurs on the other side. The shelves, thus, stood as metaphor for the apparatus that supports a food system. The narratives that unfolded during the course of the performance were always viewed through or in relation to this shifting apparatus.

One example of the shelves as “unavoidable” material metaphor of food systems is their positioning during the each of the recurring “Chorus of Testimonials.” During each of these scenes, the shelving is positioned in such a way that the audience is forced to peer through them to the performer(s) positioned on the opposite side. In each case, the testimonials are delivered by a performer seated across the table from the Eater, who remains onstage, eating throughout the performance. Thus, as the farmer describes the effects of GMO corn on a friend’s pig farm, as the waiter recounts his experiences working in a New York restaurant, as Earl Butz extols the virtues of his food policy, the audience has no choice but to perceive their testimonials in relation to the structure that obstructs their vision.

What I find most compelling about LightBox’s use of shelving as the primary set piece was its mutability. As the actors maneuvered the shelves, they called attention to the set’s shifting nature. In part, the instability of the set highlighted the constructedness of the play itself. The shelves, as a shifting, unstable apparatus, also exemplified a contemporary understanding of labor and supports. Thus, Milk-n-Honey’s set represented a globalized world of rapidly changing, interconnected, material and immaterial modes of labor. Indeed, the ever changing positioning of the shelves corresponded with the spectators’ shifting vantage point, via the use of video in the performance.

In addition to the use of shelves to delineate the space, the performance employed a mediated scenescapes comprised of live-feed video and projected backdrops – e.g. grainy, black and white projections of corn stalks, a tomato field, supermarket aisles, the wheel of a shopping cart blown up to huge proportions – that represented different locations and/or moods for each scene. The projected backdrops encouraged a sense of interconnectedness between the live, onstage body of the actor and the elsewhere projected behind him or her. Spectators were asked to connect the performer onstage, the person with whom they were sharing time and space, to other places and times, e.g. a farm field or a supermarket aisle. This simultaneity offered a sense of the ways these spaces are systemically linked, recalling Neil Smith’s notion of scale jumping. The use of
mediated scenescape foregrounded “the systemic interdependence of intimate and global spheres.” Thus, the audience’s micro scale encounter with the performer/performance was connected to larger scale, interconnected structures of food systems through the use of projected backdrops.

The use of live-feed video throughout the performance contributed to this sense of scale-jumping, simultaneity and interconnectedness. Unlike the traditional theatrical viewing relationship between audience and stage, Milk-n-Honey provided audience members with multiple spectatorial vantage points. Rather than being limited to a single viewing position, the play offered up multiple points of view, which the viewer had access to all at once. The audience was able to see the live bodies on stage in front of them, but also, at the same time, in close-up or reverse angle. This move both destabilized a singular, privileged viewing position, and also gave the viewer greater access to the action onstage.

Together the physical set pieces and the mediated scenescape represented the material and immaterial elements of contemporary, globalized food systems. These elements were further reflected in the play’s four primary narratives. Together, they represented the material and immaterial modes of labor that comprise a twenty-first century food system. Jesus, Audrey and Ambrose represented aspects of the physical, material labor that continues to support our food systems. Fred represented the immaterial, affective labor of the food system. His labor as flavor chemist perpetuates the production of foods in a way that both draws on and artificially produces affective connections to food and eating. Central to Renee’s storyline was the nurse who informs her of her diabetes – the affective and material work of nurses a prime example of devalued twenty-first century labor – and the material consequences of eating the food borne out of our current global-industrial food system. All of these stories were interconnected through LightBox’s use of new media and their juxtapositive staging techniques.

Milk-n-Honey’s staging techniques challenged the spectator to be active in his or her consumption of the play. At the same time, the use of narrative juxtapositions expanded the universe of possibilities beyond the limited purview of food movement politics. In so doing, the play complicated a dominant food politics narrative. LightBox fostered engaged spectatorship through a staging technique that asked its audience to participate in a process of meaning-making much like what Elin Diamond describes in her proposal for a “gestic feminist criticism”: “The audience is invited to look beyond representation – beyond what is authoritatively put in view – to the possibilities of as yet unarticulated actions or judgments.” Similarly, Milk-n-Honey enables multiple readings, not one singularly reducible message. Spectators must actively “read” the performance to make sense of the play’s non-realistic staging techniques and its use of narrative juxtaposition. Through a set of aesthetic choices, Milk-n-Honey offers what Diamond describes as a “superfluity of signification that places meaning beyond capture within the coves of the play or the hours of performance.” And because of that “superfluity of meaning,” Milk-n-Honey complicates a universalist vision of food politics.

237 Jackson, Social Works, 35.
through a set of aesthetic choices that encourage audience to think across the gaps and juxtapositions in a process that, Diamond suggests, “continue[s] beyond play’s end, congealing into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre.”  

Indeed, we see this image of spectator as active consumer in the role of the Eater. The Eater, who continued to eat on stage throughout course of the play, watched the action but never interacted directly with the other performers. The Eater stands in for the audience, but also hails the spectator, implicating them in the action on stage. He is engaged in multiple kinds of consumption: he “consumes” the performance as he consumes the food. The Eater’s first bite makes visible what is encoded in the food, in the act of eating. It then becomes literally visible as projections flash video footage of related imagery on the walls behind him. Diamond describes Brecht’s *gestus*: “The gestic moment in a sense explains the play, but it also exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production.” The Eater’s first bite is such a moment. It explains the play, it launches the very action of the play, but it also exceeds the play, pointing to the structures that “inform its production” – “it” being not only the play, but the food on the Eater’s plate.

*Milk-n-Honey* ends with a return to the Eater. Light comes up on him as he looks up from his food, which he has been eating throughout the performance. The Eater looks out at the audience, still chewing. This look returns the audience’s attention to themselves. As Iball suggests, the act of eating onstage calls attention to spectator’s embodied experience as much as, if not more than, the performer’s. The Eater’s look is a call to spectators who have been passively consuming the performance.

Of course, as evidenced by the varied critical responses to the play, some found the play to be overly literal or “earnest” in the way it deals with the issue of food politics. Certainly, on one level *Milk-n-Honey* simply reveals the realities of food production. We might, rightly, critique the play for falling prey to one of the fallacies of the food movement: imagining that simply knowing where our food comes from will change our buying habits, thus resulting in larger scale change. On the other hand, the play was also critiqued as being not literal enough in the way it engages with “real oppression.” I want to suggest that this critique stemmed from the play’s use of expressionistic staging and an inability on the part of the reviewer to see how the play’s aesthetic choices might also be its political choices. Through what I am calling the play’s post-Brechtian culinary aesthetic, *Milk-n-Honey* offers up the potential to expose the interrelationship of both the systems of support and the social sphere.

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239 Ibid., 86.
240 Ibid., 90.
IMAGES

Image 1
CHAPTER FIVE

Performing Production

Just past dawn. A field of weeds and two workers – OMAR and RAMÓN.

They stretch.
They spritz themselves with bug repellant.
They pull on plastic gloves – snap!
OMAR puts in iPod earbuds.
The workers begin weeding.

They will weed for the entire play, whether they are speaking or not.241

- Opening stage directions for Farms and Fables, script by Cory Tamler

Three years in the making, community-based theater company Open Waters of Portland, Maine (no relation to OPENrestaurant), staged their original play, Farms and Fables, in October 2011. The play tells the story of the transfer of a farm, from one farmer whose family had been farming in Maine for generations, to a family that is new to farming and to Maine. In it, one farmer grapples with questions of how to sustain his family farm in the face of rising debt. His new neighbors struggle to adapt to a new way of life. Throughout, two farm workers represent the repetitive, enduring labor of a farm as well as some of the issues faced by migrant farm workers in Maine. The project “combine[d] the efforts of professional and non-professional artists by engaging artists in farm work and farm workers in storytelling and acting.”242 Open Waters’ lengthy process of embodied research culminated in the performance of playwright Cory Tamler’s original script, performed by professional actors, farmers, and farm workers.

Farms and Fables addresses issues relevant to small farmers in Maine. The play deals with farmers’ struggles to hold on to their land in the face of the powerful force of land developers, as well as their efforts to grow and harvest in the face of inevitable environmental conditions. The play also negotiates the tension between insider and outsider status. This tension reflects an anxiety held by many Mainers for whom “outsiders” have long been regarded as a threat. Today, Maine farmland is threatened by the influx of developers and “outsider” tourists, who nevertheless continue to contribute significantly to the state’s economy. Additionally, increasing numbers of migrant workers, and a growing immigrant population, especially within the city of Portland, have added a racial undertone to the local designation of “outsiders.” Farms and Fables negotiates this underlying tension in a way that makes the play a quintessentially “local” project, but also gestures to larger scale matters of state and national economics and global migration.

In a blog post written early in the company’s process, two years before the curtain went up on *Farms and Fables*, Open Waters’ artistic director, Jennie Hahn, described the experience of trying to explain the project to farmers while harvesting potatoes:

“I followed behind the shovel pulling hard red tubers out of loose soil and tried to explain this project. Farmers, actors, giant puppets. You know, community-based theater.”

This quote captures the spirit and the challenges that the community-based theater group faced as they embarked on their collaborative project. *Farms and Fables* is a very different project than those I have examined thus far. In previous chapters, I analyze projects that perform consumption, arguing that the small-scale act of eating, in both food politics and in food performances, has the potential to connect the consumer/spectator to larger scale food systems, even as it holds the danger of collapsing into individualism. By contrast, *Farms and Fables* engages not with the act of eating, but with the labor needed to produce the ingested food. From the embodied research process to the final production, the company’s attempts to understand food systems through the labor of the farm, rather than through the consumption of the food, make the project a unique contribution both to the field of food performance and to food politics. Open Waters’ unique approach focuses on farm labor as a micro-scale assemblage of gestures and relationships and, in the process, connects with macro-scale food systems and consuming publics. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, *Farms and Fables* shifts the focus away from individual acts of consumption towards collaborative production.

Hahn’s remark exemplifies the attention that Open Waters artists gave to their embodied experiences of farm labor. Hahn’s description of her labor as she tries to explain her project (“pulling hard red tubers out of loose soil”) reveals an artist’s attention to form and materials, and to the sensual experience of both materials and gesture. This level of attention is present throughout the Open Waters artists’ documentation of their participation on farms. Their documentation of the process reveals a unique, embodied conversation between artists and farmers, as well as a willing and committed attentiveness on the part of the artists to integrating different kinds of embodied knowledge.

In her writing of the play, Tamler drew from the company’s collective participation in farm labor and the story circles they facilitated in which farmers and farm workers discussed their experiences with and relationships to farming. Because *Farms and Fables* was focused on food production, as opposed to consumption, in this chapter I examine both the process of creating the theatrical production as well as the ways production was staged in the final performance. I read the artists’ and farmers’ labor as an essential part of the performance. I pay special attention to Open Waters’ embodied research process, their performance of farm labor, as well as the internal and external structures and regional context of the farms.

Finally, Hahn’s project required a degree of translation and, ultimately, willing collaboration on the part of the artists, farmers, and farm workers. Hahn’s attempts to explain the project (“Farmers, actors, giant puppets. You know, community-based theater”) on the one hand articulates an equation that would immediately resonate with

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someone familiar with the forms and methods of community-based theater. On the other hand, it reveals a sense that, in fact, the listener probably doesn’t “know” how farmers, actors, and puppets could possibly relate to one another, nor how they might come together to mean something. Hahn’s remark reveals a degree of self-awareness of her initial failure to articulate the project in terms that make sense to the community with which she hopes to collaborate. The project’s success required a willingness on the part of both the artists and the farmers to work towards mutual understanding. Participants must reach across difference to try to understand what community-based theater and farming might have to do with one another.

Regarding the collaborative process of community-based theater Cohen-Cruz writes, “The traditions, new ideas and interactions that generate systems of human meaning-making are like the particular soil, amount of rainfall and growing season that determine the particularities of plant life.” If, as Cohen-Cruz implies, community-based theater must be as committed to the peculiar ecology of place as a farmer, Farms and Fables, extends this metaphorical understanding. Like many community-based performance projects, the work of Open Waters is attentive to the reciprocal exchange between artists and the community with which they are engaged. Yet, attention to the seasonal and the ecological is as integral to this project as its attention to the community of Maine farmers and farm workers. In this project, I locate collaboration in the exchange of labor between artists and farmers; in the engagements between farmers and farm workers, as well as between farmers; and in the essential interrelationship between farmers and the environment. Furthermore, my close reading of Open Waters’ process asks readers/spectators to question their status/primary identities as consumers (of both food and of culture/theater). A consumption-based model does incorporate a limited understanding of how food is produced, but it assumes a consuming relationship to the food and theatre product. A production-based model, on the other hand, asks us to rethink our entire relationship to consumption. Indeed, working from the site of production forced the company to confront a set of challenges posed by staging labor in a way that working from the site of consumption does not.

**Farms and Fables**

The Farms and Fables project investigated the importance of the connections between Maine identity and its relationship to the land. Maine has the oldest organic farm association (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, MOFG, established in 1971) and a comparatively high number of family-owned farms. Nevertheless, land development poses a threat to Maine’s vibrant farming community. The project sought to provide a platform for farmers to share their stories and feel heard. Though the project seems to fit with a certain food politics rhetoric of connecting the consumer to the farmer, Hahn insisted that changing the way people eat was not the project’s ultimate goal. “We could certainly make this project about local food… There’s no question that we could write a play about eating locally in Maine, based on the experience we’ve had.” But,

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245 Jennie Hahn, interview by author, March 1, 2011.
while she hopes her project can inform that larger discussion, Hahn is more interested in
telling the stories of the specific group of farmers they have worked with and focusing on
how the farms impact the surrounding community and, she specifies, “how farms keep
our communities going and keep us tied to our land.” While OFAF resonates with a
certain discourse of food politics, in particular the food movement’s attention to localism,
it manages to both engage deeply with the local specificities of its Maine context, and to
attend to larger scale issues like global flows of labor.

Open Waters embarked on the Farms and Fables project in 2009, gathering funds
and developing contacts in the farming community. As a native of Maine, Hahn drew on
her personal contacts as she began to develop relationships with farmers. From these
initial contacts, Hahn identified interested farmers and community partners (organizations
like Cape Farm Alliance and Maine Farmland Trust). She chose three small, family-run
farms in the region surrounding Portland, Maine with whom to collaborate. Each farm
has a very different structure, culture, and product. Jordan Farm, run by Penny Jordan and
her siblings, is a well-known farm and vegetable stand in the wealthy Cape Elizabeth
area. Broadturn Farm is a smaller organic vegetable and flower farm with a CSA
program. Broadturn is operated by a young couple, Stacy and John Brenner, who are
newer to farming and not natives of Maine. Kay Ben Farm raises dairy cows, produces
milk for local dairy company, Oakhurst, and has a high-quality compost business,
providing compost to many of the farmers in the area, including the other two
participating farms.

In 2010 Hahn gathered a small team of collaborators — a company manager
(Claire Guyer), a professional actor (Keith Anctil), and a playwright (Tamler) — to spend
twelve weeks of the summer working on the three farms. The company approached their
work exchange with an awareness of the needs of the farms, and were thoughtful/careful
about the ways they fit themselves into the life the farm. Not wanting to overburden the
small farms with their added presence, the four artists alternated between each farm,
rather than work as a unit. They each spent two weeks on one farm, then rotated to work
on the next farm. This work exchange portion of the OFAF project is in many ways the
most significant and unique aspect of the project. Not only did the artists’ labor on the
farms inform their research and writing of the play, but it also fostered relationships
between the artists, farmers and farm workers; changed the artists’ knowledge of and
relationship to food; and, I argue, was in and of itself a performance text.

The play itself was shaped by the company members’ work on the farms, their
interviews and storycircles with farmers and farm workers, and the feedback they
received on the script from their community partners. Indeed, after the first reading of the
initial draft of Farms and Fables, Tamler and Hahn received feedback from their
community partners that led to a complete revision. Furthermore, to accommodate the

246 Ibid.
247 Here the “performance text” refers both to the work of farmers and farm workers on small
farms in Maine and to the embodied practices of the artists on the farm. I use “performance text”
in the way that a performance ethnographer might, in reference to the performance of everyday
life and/or ritual performances of a culture. However, it also refers to the multiple texts that make
up a whole performance. In that case, the “performance text” refers to the partial performance
texts that can include the playscript, the mise en scene of the staged performance, the gestural text
of the staged performance, and, in this case, the embodied research stage of development.
farmers’ schedules, the company set the final performance date in October 2011 to avoid overlap with the late summer harvest, a busy time for farmers. Initially planning to include both professional and non-professional actors, the final production of the play involved a majority of professional actors or performers with substantial acting experience and only a handful of community partner participants. This was due, in part, to the fact that many farm workers felt daunted by the prospect of working all day on the farm and then spending long hours in the rehearsal room. Open Waters’ process and the choices they made regarding the final production reflect the company’s attentiveness to the material realities of farm labor.

The Farms and Fables play script is structured around a growing season in Maine. The play opens at the start of the season, and we are introduced to the two families around whom the play is organized: the Dayfields, who have been farmers for generations and are struggling to sustain their family farm, and the Beiners, a young farming family facing their first growing season in Maine. Mitch, the patriarch of the Dayfields, is haunted by previous generations of Dayfield farmers, in the form of Uncle Ed, a ghost. Mitch’s teenaged daughter, Sidney, dreams of taking over the family farm, but Mitch resists the idea. Lily and Walker Beiner are struggling with managing the realities of the day-to-day maintenance of their new farm, including the toll it is taking on their relationship. Their teenaged son, Harry, resents having to move from New York City to a Maine farm.

The play is interspersed with gestural interludes during which the whole company participates in movement sequences that represent farm labor, including weeding, planting, and harvesting vegetables. Each vegetable (parsley, chard, strawberry, peas, peppers, beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, corn, carrot, and cauliflower) is harvested in a unique way and has its own unique movement sequence. The movement sequences capture some of the repetition and duration that is involved in farm labor, but they also bring an aesthetic lens to the labor, taking the gestures of the farm and turning them into a kind of dance.

In placing the labor of farms on stage, Farms and Fables draws from a tradition of farm worker theater, most notably developed in California in the mid-1960s by El Teatro Campesino — initially the cultural arm of the United Farm Workers. El Teatro Campesino addressed the repercussions of industrial farm labor long before it was a matter of public consciousness. In many ways, El Teatro Campesino has set a precedent for later performance works that attempt to perform production. The group exposed the race and class relationships of power that make the subjugation of farm workers possible, pointing to collectivity as a means of social and aesthetic transformation. The company was born out of UFW efforts to organize migrant laborers during the Delano Grape Strike, and secure union contracts with growers. The UFW is dedicated to collective organizing in an effort to end the exploitative and dangerous working conditions of farm workers. The conditions they seek to end include: “exploitation by growers, crew leaders and parasitic labor contractors; the widespread use of child labor; pesticide and herbicide poisoning; substandard housing; generally inhumane working and living conditions; and no health or other benefits.”

248 Neftali Rivera, interview by author, October 29, 2011.
El Teatro Campesino’s early actos – collaboratively created, improvised comedic performances – drew from the workers’ experiences in the fields and on the picket lines. In these early performances, founder Luis Valdez would call upon strikers to perform the events of the day, some playing farm workers, others playing scabs or the boss. An early acto, Las Dos Caras del Patroncito demonstrates some of the ways El Teatro Campesino staged representations of labor and the experience of striking workers. Performed on the picket line of the Delano Grape strike, Las Dos Caras was meant to show the “two faces of the boss.” The skit begins with the Farmworker laboring on stage pruning grape vines. His work is disrupted by the arrival of the Patroncito. Giving the boss, or patron, the diminutive form –cito is just the first step in performatively diminishing his power. The acto establishes the expected power dynamic immediately, as Patroncito forces the Farmworker to work, “Harder! Harder! Harder!” Yet, repeated physical comedy bits and jokes at the boss’s expense undermine his authority. The ultimate reversal in the power dynamic comes when Patroncito expresses how difficult his own life is and that he’d like to be a farmworker, so that he could “[feel] all that freedom.” The two swap roles and the Farmworker (now Patrón) turns the tables on the former-Patroncito, forcing him to endure the abuses faced by all farm workers: physical abuse, unsafe working and living conditions. The former Patroncito is finally hauled away by the strike guard.

Harry Elam writes that Las Dos Caras “contested conventional power relationships and the subordination of farmworkers within the agribusiness hierarchy.” The acto is an example of how El Teatro Campesino’s comedic performances offered workers moments of camaraderie and entertainment, as they unveiled uneven relations of power and demonstrated the necessity of collective organization. The bilingual performances and their use of a comedic style recognizable to Mexican and Chicano workers perpetuated a feeling of communitas among the spectators and validated their experience. Furthermore, the fact that several of the El Teatro Campesino performers were farm workers was significant for the way that it staged the laboring body, offering, through performance, an alternative embodiment of labor.

Drawing from this legacy of farm worker theater, Farms and Fables is framed by the stories of two Puerto Rican farm workers, Omar and Ramón. Their gestural representation of labor is repeated throughout the course of the play. It is significant that the character of Omar is performed by a man, Neftali Rivera, who works on local farms, and, like the character he plays, has migrated from Puerto Rico to Maine. The characters Omar and Ramón bookend the play and appear repeatedly throughout, but are not the main characters of the story. They introduce important themes of the play: the tension between insider and outsider, the performance of agricultural labor, and the problem and potential of collaboration. Omar and Ramón’s presence in the story is a reminder of the ways that farm workers are essential to the farms’ continued functioning and yet remain relatively under-acknowledged.

251 Ibid., 23.
Insider/Outsider Relationships

The primary relationships in *Farms and Fables* center around the idea of insider versus outsider. The Beiners are outsiders, new to farming and to Maine, and the Dayfields, as seventh generation Mainers, must negotiate their resentment over the loss of their previous neighbors – a long-time Mainer farming family – with their desire to help and support the relative newcomers. This storyline reflects the experience of the farmers with whom Open Waters’ collaborated – two of the farms were generations-old family farms and one was a family farm run by a young couple new to Maine and to farming. Moreover, the story reflects a sense, felt by many Mainers, of resistance towards any influx of newcomers.

Tensions between “insiders” and “outsiders” have troubled Maine for the last century. Often, Mainers have constructed their identity in relation to the perception of intruding forces of those “from away.” For example, there has always been a cultural and class divide between year-round Mainers and “summer people.” Summer tourism took off after World War II (tourism revenues rose by a third between 1944 and 1946), but wealthy “summer people” had been coming to Maine since the mid-nineteenth century. In his book *The Lobster Coast: Rebels, Rusticators, and the Struggle for a Forgotten Frontier*, Colin Woodard describes the condition that many year-rounders felt, that of feeling like “an alien in your own backyard.” Exemplifying this sentiment, Woodard quotes Maine writer Sanford Phippen, who spent the summers of his youth working for wealthy summer tourists, “You want so badly to fit in and be accepted by these people… And yet, you’re from Maine: it’s *your* world, they’re just here for two or three months. But you try to talk to them and they may be very nice to you on the surface, but there’s this awful thing that’s underneath there… they’re laughing at you the whole time.”

In the 1970s, people “from away” began to move to the state, not just in the summers but to live year round. Some of those who migrated to Maine were children of wealthy summer people, others were part of the “back-to-the-land” movement, many were searching for better quality of life and the mythic Maine experience that could counter their experience of urban and suburban areas of Boston, New York and Washington D.C. A series of studies by University of Maine sociologist Louis A. Ploch showed that many native Mainers resented the in-migration, and felt that the newcomers would change Maine for the worse. Despite local disapproval, the Tourism Bureau, with a dramatically increased budget, continued to promote Maine as “Vacationland.” In-migration and the increase in the tourist industry played a role in changing the face of many Maine towns. By the 1980s, many out of state real estate speculators began construction of huge condominium complexes along the waterfront.

Given these tensions, Hahn’s identity as a twelfth generation Mainer is an important distinction in a region where family longevity is a signal of one’s credibility, reliability, and belonging. For Hahn, the tension between outsider and insider and the strong regional identity of native Mainers has everything to do with these economic and

254 Ibid., 216-217.
255 Ibid., 219-221.
256 Ibid., 222.
demographic shifts. She says, “We don’t have the economic advantages that a lot of people have and so I think we very fiercely defend this as our identity.”

Though many of these more recent shifts have been occurring gradually in the state of Maine for the past century, they have been heightened due in large part to the state’s loss of industry and growing dependence on tourism revenue. Furthermore, in 1984, Maine lost much of its fishing rights to Canada, leading to massive job losses among fishermen and canny workers. Corresponding to a nationwide trend towards deindustrialization due to global competition, much of the industry that formerly allowed Maine a degree of economic independence has left the state.

Moreover, the increase in the power of out of state land developers has had huge ramifications for Maine farmers. While on the one hand there remains a relatively strong, longstanding culture of small and organic growing in the state of Maine, on the other hand the rapid transition of farmland to other types of land use in Maine poses a major threat to organic agriculture. Hahn explained in an interview that, in the last two decades, the paper companies that once owned more than 50% of the land in Maine have been shutting down. Land hadn’t changed hands for 150 years is now being sold to developers. Similarly, farmland is seen as more valuable as real estate to be developed for profit than as land to be farmed. In fact, Maine farmland has decreased by more than 60% in the last 60 years. These changes have shifted the culture of many rural towns in Maine and led to a feeling that Maine citizens’ sense of identity, deeply tied to the land, is under attack.

Yet resentment towards outsiders has not been reserved for wealthy developers or tourists. Long-time Maine residents who feel under attack as their economy is repeatedly undermined by forces “from away,” direct some of their frustration towards other groups that are “from away,” yet who have entered the state without economic and political power. Increasing numbers of Latino immigrants and Somali refugees, particularly in the Portland area, are contributing to a shifting Maine demographic where, until recently, people of color have comprise only 3.1 percent of the population.

A recent community-based theater project by Marty Pottenger addresses this very issue. Pottenger’s project showed how complicated identity in Maine is, and highlights the fact that Maine identity has, of course, never been homogenous. Pottenger’s theater piece, titled home land security (2005), was inspired by a 2004 Border Patrol raid on Latino and Somali businesses. David Carey writes that “Federal agents arrested ten people for inadequate documentation, but harassed many more, most of whom were U.S. citizens or documented immigrants.” The performance drew attention to a growing

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258 See Hahn and Woodard.
259 Hahn interview, May 27, 2010.
262 Carey, 113.
population of refugees and immigrants in the Portland area. It enabled people not traditionally seen as part of the community of Maine to articulate themselves as Mainers – from Native Americans whose people had been in Maine before the arrival of Europeans, to African Americans whose families had lived in Maine for ten generations, to newer refugee and immigrant groups.

The *Farms and Fables* story resonates in multiple ways with this theme of insider and outsider that so permeates the narrative of Mainer identity. In addition to the insider/outsider relation between farmers, the play is framed by the story of the two farm workers who have come “from away” and who are important contributors to the life and health of the farm. This storyline is significant for the work it does to try to address the complexities of the power dynamics and hierarchies within the farms themselves. Within each farm, and in particular among the laborers of each farm, there exist numerous factions and communities. On the three farms with which the Open Waters company worked, for example, farm labor includes family members of the farmers, high school and college students, as well as Puerto Rican migrant workers.

The divisions within the culture of each farm were highlighted during the artist’s story circles, wherein the artists hoped to learn about farming in Maine via the stories shared by farmers and farm workers. In addition to their embodied research on the farms, the artists held weekly story circles with the farmers and farm workers. “Story circles” are a technique used by many community-based theater artists, including Cornerstone Theater. Jan Cohen-Cruz describes them as “formal gatherings in which an artist/convener poses questions, and each person answers by recounting relevant personal experiences.” The *Farms and Fables* story circles were geared toward gathering information and stories about the farmers and farm life to use as material in developing a play script. At the farmers’ request Hahn scheduled these meetings during the lunch breaks and provided meals for the workers.

The artists soon discovered that there were many different factions among the groups working on the farm, and that while they were connected by the work that they did, they each had very different relationship to the labor and to the concept of farming itself. These subgroupings differed from farm to farm. On Jordan’s Farm, the seasonal farm workers include the farmers’ children and their friends, high school and college students, and a contingency of Puerto Rican men who do the bulk of the planting and harvesting. On Broadturn Farm, each summer the farmers take in a group of interns who live and work on the farm for free and, in exchange for their labor they receive room and board and the opportunity to learn firsthand about organic farming. The Open Waters artists found that many of the farm workers (particularly on the non-organic farm) had fairly ambivalent feelings about farming. It wasn’t an identity to which they felt deeply connected, it was simply something they did to make money.

On the farms with which Open Waters worked, there is not as strict and complete a division of labor as there is on some large industrial farms. Nevertheless, there is a real division between the experience of farmers and farm workers, not least of which has to do with a difference in the sense (and reality) of ownership over the labor and the product. Indeed, though the artists’ labor taught them something about the shared work experience on the farm, the story circles revealed more about the power dynamics and differing relationships to farming. While the company set up the project as an

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263 Cohen-Cruz *Engaging Performance*, 72.
investigation of farmers in Maine, in some ways they actually ended up aligning themselves more closely with the farm workers in their daily practice and in the story circles. Thus, it is not surprising, but nonetheless striking, that in a play about “the future of farming in Maine” – a state known for its passionate local identity – that the play script would be framed as it was by the story of two “outsiders.”

In a scene titled “Homesick,” Walker Beiner discusses with Omar and Ramón the question of where is “home” and their complicated relationships to farming. Walker confesses that he misses New York and Ramón explains that this work on the farm is a means to an end: “so I can fly back to Puerto Rico in September and teach my son to fish and eat bananas in the shade.” Walker and Ramón take turns extolling the virtues of their faraway homes. Yet, to Ramón’s great dismay, Omar stays in Maine year round.

OMAR: This is my home
RAMÓN: Home is home.
OMAR: Exactly.
WALKER: How do you become a part of it? If not by birthright? How are you a part of it?
OMAR: I am not part of it.
WALKER: Then how can you stand it?

This exchange captures Walker’s feeling of outsider-ness, one he shares with the farm workers. Walker’s question, “How do you become a part of it? If not by birthright?” reflects his own ambivalence about farming, yet it also highlights the power difference between the men. In the play, Walker eventually does “become a part of it.” He adapts to his life on the farm and is accepted by other farmers. For Omar (Rivera) the question remains, how to come to terms with “not being a part of it.” Walker’s final question to Omar goes unanswered. Yet it resonates powerfully with some of the challenges the company faced in putting labor at the center of their play.

In the final production of the play, the above scene was modified and Omar’s lines were cut from the scene. In the scene, Omar’s liminal status was referenced, but he was not present. This cut was the result of accommodations that director Hahn felt she had to make due to Rivera’s initial reluctance to participate and the difficulty he professed to have learning his lines. Omar/Rivera’s absence in this scene is indicative of the challenges that he and Hahn faced in the staging of the play. Though Hahn had initially planned for the play to include a mix of professional actors and community members (farmers and farm workers), she had great difficulty recruiting farmers and farm workers to participate. In the end, of the eleven performers, only four were “community members,” and one of the four had extensive acting experience. The four “community members” included Penny Jordan, operator of Jordan Farm and leading organizer within Maine’s agricultural community; Emma Cooper, teenage daughter of the farmers running the participating Broadturn Farm, with acting experience; Flora Bliss, Emma’s five year old sister; and Neftali Rivera, six-year Maine resident, worker on

Jordan’s Farm, originally from Puerto Rico. For Rivera, then, the feeling of outsider-ness must have been pronounced. In an interview, Rivera revealed that he had initially wanted to quit the production, citing overwork as his primary concern. Yet it is easy to imagine that as only one of two people of color in the cast (actor Jae Rodriguez played the role of Ramón), a non-native English speaker, an ambivalent relationship with farming, and working alongside his boss, Rivera might have felt alienated from the process in more ways than one.

Rivera’s presence in the cast, his experience of outsider-ness within the production notwithstanding, highlights some of the opportunities and the limits of putting labor at the center of this project. Early in her process, Hahn expressed an interest in creating the project in a way that had a more balanced power dynamic than some other community-based theater projects. She felt that the artists’ participation in the labor of the farm would help to mitigate the uneven power dynamic sometimes found between artist and community participant. Indeed, in the Farms and Fables play script there are several gestures towards addressing complicated power dynamics within the community (of farmers and farm workers) and between artist and community. By including the farm workers’ storyline, and framing the rest of the play within it, the play valorizes the story of a group of people who tend to be undervalued and made to seem invisible. Furthermore, the play script indicated that many of the lines would be spoken in Spanish. Indeed, the script indicates that the very first lines of the play were to be Ramón speaking to Omar in Spanish. This opening had the potential to disrupt the audiences’ expectations of what the face of “farming in Maine” looked like.

However, the material realities of staging a play conspired against some of the potential of the script. Hahn was unable to recruit the level of community participation for which she had hoped. Rivera was initially an inconsistent presence at rehearsals and he conveyed that he was having difficulty learning his lines. Thus, Hahn chose to cut many of Rivera’s lines, opting for his, albeit limited, participation over his withdrawal from the production altogether. The result of these constrained choices was that Rivera’s appearance in the production felt marginal. Though the play script valorized the farm workers’ story, calling attention to the integral, though often unacknowledged, role on the farms, some of the staging choices worked to further efface the farm workers from the audience’s understanding.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of migrant farm labor in this play did the important work of putting pressure on the very idea of a “local food system.” As Braden Born and Mark Purcell have pointed out, many contemporary food scholars and activists fall into the “local trap,” which “assumes that a local-scale food system will be inherently more socially just than a national-scale or global-scale food system.” Born and Purcell stress the importance of acknowledging the ways in which all scales, including the local, are socially produced and relational. Taking up the work of geographers on spatial scale, they remind that the local scale always comes into being in and through its relation to larger scales. Furthermore, they emphasize that what is important for food systems theory is not asking whether a system is local, but rather, asking who is empowered by a local (or global) system, and by what means.

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265 Rivera, interview.
C. Clare Hinrichs also warns against the ways the local has taken on a talismanic quality, where the local scale seems to possess magical powers that imbue all of its products with desirable, progressive, socially just and environmentally sound attributes.\(^\text{267}\) Hinrichs suggests that strict localism can tend towards a defensiveness that resists external forces. She writes, “Defensive localization seeks to reduce the undue flow of resources away from the spatial local and also to protect local members from the depredations and demands of ‘outsiders.’”\(^\text{268}\) On the other hand, Hinrichs points out that localism can also be “diversity-receptive.” Such a localism “sees the local embedded within a larger national or world community, recognizing that the content and interests of ‘local’ are relational and open to change.”\(^\text{269}\) By incorporating migrant farm worker characters and working to account for the insider-outsider identity of workers like Rivera, Farms and Fables performed a “diversity-receptive” local food system. The play avowed its interrelationship with larger scale systems and acknowledged that any story about “the future of farms in Maine” had to include the future of farm workers.

The conflict of Farms and Fables centers around people trying to communicate across difference, across complex divisions of insider and outsider. In many ways the representation of this conflict reflects both the lived realities of farmers and farm workers, and the experience of Open Waters as they tried to stage some of the relationships that surround agricultural production. The complexities of these relationships, the power dynamics and miscommunications that accompany them, represent both the problems and potential embedded in staging production.

### Staging Labor

Placing production at the center of the play posed a series of challenges for Open Waters, not least of which were the realities of trying to work collaboratively with a diverse group of people brought together through their shared, though differently weighted, relationships to the labor of a farm. Through their research process and in their final production, the company sought to find ways to represent their experiences of farm labor. In this section I examine two different kinds of performance texts that the company produced: the documentation of their labor on the farm (on their public blog) and the representation of the physical labor of the farm in the final production.

The artist’s embodied engagement with the labor of the farm is significant, both to their research for the play, and to my reading of their project as a whole. They identified early on in the process that they learned more from the physical work they did on the farm than from the storycircles.\(^\text{270}\) The company’s approach to their research was similar to what performance scholar Dwight Conquergood advocates for embodied research, an approach “grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection.”\(^\text{271}\) By participating bodily in the practices of another culture or community,

\(^\text{268}\) Ibid., 37.
\(^\text{269}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{270}\) Hahn, interview, March 1, 2011.
Conquergood argues, one learns about those practices in a way one could not understand through less embodied modes of research.

On the farms the artists had the opportunity to “scrub water buckets, relocate hay bails, wean two new calves to buckets, feed the babies grain, rake out a heifer stall, watch vaccinations, observe an ultrasound, [and] brush cows clean.” They also planted seeds, weeded “endless rows of lettuce,” and harvested “beets, cucumbers, the first of the season’s peppers and cherry tomatoes, and … beans. Lots of beans. Flat beans, amarillo, and green, green beans.” Throughout their work exchange, the artists recorded their experiences on the farm as well as their reflections on the work and their process. Their project log, available to the public throughout their process, shifted the privileged site of performance away from the object of consumption (the food product as well as the theatrical product), to the process of production. Readers became audience members first to the company’s process and then to the final production, months later.

In many of their blog posts, the artists’ descriptions reflect an attention to the sensorial experience of the farm labor. Company manager Claire Guyer describes one experience during a day of work at Jordan’s farm that captures both the experience the artists had on the farm and some of the many ways that they processed their experiences:

The first order of business: scanning the ground for promising looking beet tops poking up out of the dusty soil…
They made a certain sort of ripping pop as they came out of the ground-announcing their presence in this new, bright world.
We brought them over to crates, sliced the greens off and tossed them in, trading notes on which are too little to make the cut, the thunderstorm we all expect this afternoon- all the things you talk about when you’ve got a day of picking veggies ahead of you and bright beet juice staining your fingers. Then we head out again, each going a different way to load up: search, pull, rip, pop!, repeat.

Guyer’s blog entry breaks the labor down into a series of repeatable gestures: scanning the ground, ripping beet tops out of the soil, bringing them over to crates, slicing off greens. Guyer’s description is remarkable for the way it works to validate the labor, to call attention to aspects of the labor that might go unnoticed by someone for whom the repetition was not an aesthetically interesting aspect of the work but a requirement of the job.

We see this attention to the micro-gestures of farm labor, as well as their aestheticization, in Farms and Fables’ “interludes.” The play script indicates several moments in the play that are dedicated to aspects of the labor of the farm: weeding, planting and harvesting. For the final production, Hahn choreographed a different

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movement sequence for each of these interludes that represented a unique aspect of the labor of the farm. For example, during the “Cauliflower Interlude,” nearly all of the adult cast members appeared on stage. Each performer repeated a series of stylized gestures, not in synchronization, but at various intervals. The movement sequence looked something like this: the actors enter the stage, at intervals each crouches down, clasps an invisible head of cauliflower with their left hand and makes the gesture of cutting the stem with their right hand – a kind of jagged, yet economical, cutting motion with an invisible knife. They stand, holding the invisible cauliflower in two hands, and raise it to the sky, following the movement of their hands with their head. Each performer repeats this gesture many times. At times the interludes felt like an homage to the vegetable. At times they felt more like they were meant to convey the repletion and endurance that the farm labor entailed. Like the labor of the farm, the gestures accumulated meaning (and value) as they were repeated.

These “interludes” reflect both the farmer’s labor, but also the artists’ process, their accumulation of knowledge of the labor of the farm through repetition and duration. Sometimes, the accumulated meaning for the actors lay in the experienced realities of hard physical labor. For example, actor Keith Anctil described his experience planting seeds: “Lettuce seeds are very small. I held one hand out flat and upturned with a small pile of seeds. The other hand carefully picked out two seeds at a time. After 20 minutes of this, my wrists were on fire.” Anctil later described the experience of weeding: “Hands and knees, bent over, crouching, squat thrusting, sitting, crawling, fingers ground in with the stained demise of thousands and thousands of weeds.” The artists felt in their bodies what it means to work for hours in the hot sun, repeating the same gesture over and over again, and the toll that takes on a body.

Many of the other artist’s entries throughout the company’s project log share a similar quality; their reflections are rich with descriptions of the smells, sights, and other bodily sensations that the work elicited. These reflections lead, in part, to the artists’ education about food that they formerly took for granted, as in Hahn’s discovery that cucumbers on the vine are in fact “prickly and sharp!” Or playwright Cory Tamler’s equally surprising, though more pleasant, discovery that the adage “cool as a cucumber” is true and that, somehow, cucumbers remain a cool snack, mid-field on a ninety degree day. Their work experience on the farm allowed them, and the audience of their work-in-progress, a fuller understanding of the food they eat.

Yet their labor on the farm was not just about a shift in awareness about food and its production, i.e. a kind of consumer education. The artist’s mediation of the labor, through their own experience and their documentation, produces a different mode of embodiment, one that is informed both by their experience of collaborative labor on the farms, and their artistic sensibilities. Hahn’s description of an experience on the farm, wherein she is shown how to harvest peas by farmer Penny Jordan, demonstrates the

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277 Anctil, “Cow butts.”


importance of Open Waters’ use of embodied research to their understanding of the work of a farmer and the new mode of embodiment her participation elicits:

She hands me a “flat pea”. She searches out a “bumpy pea”. She teaches me to know the difference by feel. She shows me how to flip the plant over, to access the ripe pods underneath. She tells me: “It’s visual and tactile. Visual and then tactile.” You look for the ripe pods, and if it looks ripe you feel it. If it feels right you take it. “Your brain is kind of thinking two ways, all the time”.

I begin to make my way down the row of pea plants, pondering each pod, feeling slow. I realize that I am over-thinking things. But how to stop? As I pick and ponder, ponder and pick, it occurs to me that I am not always a slow and inefficient decision-maker. When I am engaged in a creative process, choice comes naturally. It is a matter of confidence. It is a matter of active listening. So I say to myself: this is the ART of picking peas. Turn off the brain; listen to the plant. Trust yourself. And lo and behold, I do begin to pick up speed. I begin to have fun and to feel good about my work. Until I get stumped by a particularly in-between pea pod, or until I suddenly notice that I’m tired and it’s hot and there aren’t nearly as many peas in my bucket as there are in Miguel’s. And so for me, there is this truth: to be an effective harvester requires energy and focus. As is the case with every endeavor worth doing, there are no shortcuts. I remember the Tadashi Suzuki adage: you always have more energy, and I hunker down: listen, focus, pick peas.280

Neither Penny Jordan, the farmer, nor Hahn initially frame the process of harvesting as an artistic one, and yet at some point it becomes the “art of picking peas” for Hahn. In fact, this move of turning the embodiment of labor into an artistic engagement shifts the entire process for Hahn, turning the process into something that she is able to accomplish with ease. Jordan’s comment to Hahn, “The brain is kind of thinking in two ways, all the time,” reveals something about the farmer’s sensibilities. This encounter suggests that farmer’s concerns with the visual and the tactile might be mapped onto an artistic way of thinking about the visual and the tactile. Like the artist’s labor, the farmer’s labor involves a deep awareness of the sensory. The act of picking a pea involves a certain attention to material and form that we might otherwise only attribute to artists. The artist’s attention to material and form and the farmer’s attention to material and form are in conversation.

Throughout the company’s descriptions of their work on the farm, they repeatedly make connections between their farm labor, in which they are non-experts, and their experience of artistic and theatrical labor. To be a more effective pea-harvester, Hahn decides she must draw on her experience and skill as an artist. She turns to a way of thinking and moving that she understands and simultaneously recognizes the labor of the farmer as a creative activity: she recognizes the artfulness of picking peas. Again and again, in their online reflections, the artists drew connections between their labor as artists and their labor in the farm. For example, playwright Cory Tamler wrote, “Every play grows differently from the last. Some seeds need more care than others, some fall

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victim to doubt or indecision or self-censorship... some get all tangled up in weeds of too-much-complexity and overly-ambitious-concepts, and some are beautiful but fragile and can’t take root...”

When Tamler concludes that “Writing a play is farming,” she allows the knowledges of the farm to inform her work as writer.

Open Waters’ attempts to bring their artistic sensibilities in conversation with agricultural labor and a farmer’s sensibilities recall the work of artist Leslie Labowitz. Labowitz’s Sproutime (1980), which dealt with food, growth, life, and human-and-plant-relationships. Sproutime was both an art project and business. Growing sprouts as a business endeavor, Labowitz was attentive to the similarities between her roles as grower and artist, “The process takes a lot of quiet attention, color awareness, playing with seeds, and mixing seeds. I designed my greenhouse that I work in to be a functional, sculptural space.”

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, Labowitz’s project “links aesthetics (the beauty of the sprouts and the greenhouse) and politics (the larger system of food production and distribution, itself linked to war and global survival).” Importantly, however, Labowitz’s was a relatively solo performance, whereas Farms and Fables was a deeply collaborative project that involved the coordination of many individuals.

Hahn’s description of her experience learning how to harvest peas shows the necessity of an embodied engagement with the practice of farming, the importance of feeling the difference between a ripe, bumpy pea pod and a flat, unripe pod. The account also shows how Hahn negotiates the condition of being both insider and outsider, of gaining a certain kind of insight and knowledge about a community, while also recognizing her ignorance. Indeed, much of what the company members experienced on the farm was a sense of not knowing, not fully understanding. They engaged in a complex relationship between understanding the labor of the farmer, and feeling that their ignorance was accentuated.

Open Waters artists worked hard to participate in the labor of the farm in the humble, open manner that Conquergood advocates for scholars involved in performance ethnography (“placing oneself quietly, respectfully, humbly, in the space of others so that one could be surrounded and ‘impressed’ by [their] expressive meanings”). In bringing labor to the center of their project, the artists bring their unique knowledge and way of thinking into conversation with the unique knowledge and ways of thinking of the farmers and farm workers. In so doing, they produce an alternative embodiment that values collectivity and collaboration, even as they negotiate the attendant tensions and power struggles that accompany such collaboration.

In the previous chapters I examine the diverse ways and means in which artists use food as a performing object. Some of those projects expose the performative nature of everyday consumption by denaturalizing the sensorial experience of eating, while others use food to interrupt relations of exchange that would make art into a product of commodified consumption. Still others address, and at times disrupt, relations of power that cohere around food and eating. Yet they all engage primarily with issues and

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282 Montano, “Food and Art Interviews,” 54.
284 Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and radical research”, 373.
representations of consumption. Representing production on stage, on the other hand, has a unique set of political goals and ramifications. Performing production brings attention to bodies not just as consuming/consumed, but also as producing/produced. In turning the focus towards the laboring body, production performances turn the focus to the power relationships that are needed to perpetuate certain conditions of production.

Performances like *Farms and Fables*, and the work of El Teatro Campesino that came before, performatively produce an alternative embodiment of labor. Though Open Waters struggled with some of the challenges raised by the power dynamics inherent in relationships of production, the company sought to create an inclusive performance project that disrupted rather than reinforced those uneven power dynamics. In their efforts to foreground labor, they enacted an alternative mode of embodiment, one that put into conversation multiple modes of embodied knowing and enacted collaborative engagement through collective production.

We can see the company’s efforts towards interrelational embodiment in both the performance text of their representation of labor onstage, and the artists’ work on the farms. In an example from the artists’ farm labor, Hahn describes planting seedlings on Broadturn Farm:

> I follow behind with my bucket, scattering a little extra love into the neat grooves. It is early; we work quietly. Sam begins pulling trays of cabbage and dill seedlings out of the truck. She makes her way down the rows, carefully placing each plant atop my fertilizer in eighteen inch increments. Courtney follows Sam, standing the plants upright, mounding the earth around them. We make our way through the morning this way, each person preparing the way for the next. I love the feeling that this motion I am repeatedly making, swinging my right arm to release a handful of dust, is one part of a necessary chain of events. I love being part of this process, of carefully preparing the soil to support life.

Hahn’s repeated gesture (“swinging my right arm out to release a handful of dust”) is in dialogue with larger natural and economic systems (“is one part of a chain of events”). Her gestural act connects her to an ecological system of growth, to the actions and movements of her fellow coworkers, and to a larger system of production. The gestural movement sequences in the final performance similarly perform a series of gestures that represent the interconnectedness, through labor, of the farmer, farm workers, and the natural environment. The enactment is a different kind of jumping scale than we have see in examples of performances about consumption. The performance connects small-scale gestures or enactments with much larger structural and environmental spheres. It disrupts the “local trap” by grappling with the insider-outsider status of migrant labor within a “local” food system. Rather than relying on an idea of shifting consumer practices, *Farms and Fables* seems to propose a shift in our relational practices, an embodied way of knowing that relies on sometimes difficult encounters and engagements across difference.

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I have not spoken to one farmer who doesn’t understand the message of Occupy Wall Street...  

- Jim Gerritsen, potato farmer, Farmers March on Wall Street

Human action depends upon all sorts of supports – it is always supported action. But in the case of public assemblies, we see quite clearly not only that there is a struggle over what will be public space, but a struggle as well over those basic ways in which we are, as bodies, supported in the world – a struggle against disenfranchisement, effacement, and abandonment.

- Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”

What does it mean to bring food politics together with food performance? In this dissertation I make a turn in both of these domains together. On the one hand, a certain kind of food politics is about knowing your food, but has limits on the scales it considers in terms of that knowledge. I call attention to some of these blind spots within the contemporary food movement. On the other hand, food performance has most often been about affective connection and depoliticized community engagement. I show how food performances can mobilize both convivial and alienated effects. Furthermore, I articulate a vocabulary for food politics performance practices that accounts for both the formal/aesthetic choices and the social-political effects of a work. Moreover, I ask how we can think about the ways these happen together in and through performance contexts.

In many ways, the connections between food politics and food performance have been made clearer by the recent Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and the demonstrations and occupations of public space that have been occurring around the globe. The protests, which have brought mass numbers of people out into public spaces, have been motivated by a variety of political issues but, as Judith Butler observes, in all of the protests, “bodies congregate, they move and speak together, and they lay claim to a certain space as public space...” In the final months of writing this dissertation, as cities across the U.S. and the globe have found people occupying and sharing public space together, I could not help but think about the OWS movement’s relation to the desire to cook and eat together that has been so important to parts of the food movement. The OWS movement protests the effects of neoliberal governance while at the same time performing a radically democratic interrelationality. Thus, what is significant


287 Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” (lecture, organized by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Venice Biennale, Italy, September 7, 2011).

288 Ibid.
about these protests is not (or not only) their demands, but the form they take. As Butler explains regarding the occupations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, “Sleeping on that pavement was not only a way to lay claim to the public, to contest the legitimacy of the state, but also quite clearly, a way to put the body on the line in its insistence, obduracy and precarity, overcoming the distinction between public and private for the time of revolution.” Indeed, the formal elements of the occupations represent a kind of scale jumping, where the small scale act of the body in the larger scale space of the city square simultaneously calls attention to the material needs of the body and to the larger structural issues of governmental neglect of those bodily needs (in a U.S. context we might think about home foreclosures and an unjust food policy).

In some ways the performances I have examined in this dissertation reiterate a certain kind of food politics discourse that is increasingly critiqued by food scholars and food justice activists. It is critiqued for failing to deal with larger structural issues of inequality that play out through food systems (e.g. racism) and its failure to attend to who has access to sustainable (etc.) foods. Moreover, it is critiqued for the ways the rhetoric tends to adhere to a consumer-based politics where the primary strategy is to simply reveal to the ignorant the way their food is produced, with the assumption that they will then change their habits of eating. Some scholars have pointed out that changes in what and how we consume can only be part of the solution. A politics of food that emphasizes, or fetishizes, certain elements of a sustainable food system (such as localism) without simultaneously working to disentangle the now thoroughly entwined relationship between corporate and organic, for example, is not necessarily a just food system. Thus, both socially engaged performance and food politics must reckon with the ambivalent aspects of consumption as a mode of engagement.

The food politics performances in this dissertation have pointed to an important question raised by the popularity of American food politics, in particular the popularity of the Slow Food model. What is it about the current moment that has people wanting to eat and cook together? Can we think about the politics of pleasure model that Slow Food suggests in a way that does not succumb to the elitist, universalist rhetoric that some food scholars decry? The performance case studies in this dissertation are examples of the ways in which the pleasurable aspects of food, including its convivial effects, can be mobilized alongside more critical food effects. That is to say, we might recognize in these performance examples the ways in which food’s commensality need not efface, but rather may call attention to the consumer’s debt to and interconnectedness with larger structures. Many of these new food performances suggest alternative ways of being in the world, in connection and community with others.

These artists’ use of food does a different kind of work than that of, say, food activists, educators and policy makers. They ask audiences to see themselves in interrelation with systems of support, and with the social and natural world, through an embodied practice that is both represented and performatively enacted, and that continues even after they have left the performance event. The potential of food politics performance lies in its ability to bring together affective connection with pleasure and

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289 Ibid.
politics, making audiences critically aware of their embodied position within the contemporary, interrelational social world, through the interrelational experience of eating.

Taken together, I want to suggest that food politics and food performance might push us to rethink our politico-aesthetic engagements. They might push us to think about both a politics and an aesthetics that attends to the interrelationality of bodies as well as to the multiple modes of nourishing the body. Let us conceive of a politics and an aesthetics that attends both to the body’s pleasure and to the body’s alienation. Let us give sustained attention to the material realities of the reproduction of the body. But let us not forget that reproduction includes food that nourishes and gives pleasure, and connects the individual to a network of natural and social systems. Let us enact that reproduction in theaters, in galleries, and in public spaces, connecting our individual bodies to other bodies who labor and love and create and dissent.


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