

Food as an Emerging Diplomatic Tool in Contemporary Public Art

Carly Schmitt

Abstract: Cooking projects and *Food Art* are an increasingly reoccurring theme in contemporary public art. This article highlights artists that are using food as a way of conducting both national and international forms of cultural diplomacy. Examining these projects in relation to larger sociological and historical context demonstrates the strength in using food as a tool for cultural diplomacy, and defines a new way artists are involving themselves in this international dialog.

Keywords: Art, Public Art, Contemporary Art, Cultural Diplomacy, Food, Cooking, Domestic Diplomacy

Food is one of the oldest forms of exchange. Our dependence on food is often cited as the most basic elements that connects people all over the world. Moreover, the various different processes of cooking and preparing things to eat is also seen as an easily identifiable characteristic that sets us apart (Cox 1993). Many of the different conflicts and challenges we are currently facing on both local and international levels also play themselves out on a gastronomical level. In the late 1990's the simple act of bringing people together began to be recognized as an art form. Since then artists all over the world have begun working with food, as an artistic medium, because of the inherent abilities it has to bring people together. Contemporary artists are developing the ritual of sharing a meal into the a basis for an artwork. These projects use food as a foundation for intercultural exchange, and as an approachable way to encourage a conversation about larger more challenging topics.

In this paper I will describe the current trends in contemporary public art to use food as an artistic medium that encourages intercultural exchange. I will provide references to a range of projects going on within Europe and the United States that deal specifically with the idea of food as tool for encouraging both local and international diplomacy. I will provide detailed information about a variety of projects in order to illustrate the various forms these projects take on, as well as the variety of missions they are attempting to fulfill. Through the examination of these various artistic interventions I hope to more clearly document the way in which this artistic trend is appearing in the contemporary art world, and how these art projects are helping to challenge and re-define the way in which artists interact with society.

In order to understand how food as a form of cultural diplomacy was able to enter into a conversation regarding contemporary art practice, let us first touch briefly on how the simple act of bringing people together has now been transformed into an act worthy of artistic merit (Kester 2004). This powerful trend in contemporary public art was termed “relational aesthetics” in the 1996 landmark text *Esthétique relationnelle* (Relational Aesthetics) by Nicolas Bourriaud. In this landmark text relational aesthetics is describe as art that focuses on the social interactions between people as the genesis for an artwork. Bringing people together and creating a conversation, or interaction, are the main artistic objectives in this style of artistic practice. (Bourriaud 1998). He identifies this artistic trend as as a product of a society that is overburdened with material possessions, and although better networked, still more isolated than ever before.

The most classic examples of an artist working with both relational aesthetics and food is Rirkrit Tiravanija. Tiravanija is a New York-based artist of Thai decent, that grew up in Argentina, Thailand, Canada and Ethiopia. He is best known for his work that involves installation as a way of creating a specific environment within which he cooks various types of food for visitors as a sort of performance. In 1992 work *Untitled (Still)* presented at 303 Gallery, New York, Tiravanija moved everything within the gallery storeroom into the exhibition space. In the empty space of a storeroom he created a makeshift kitchen and cooked Thai curries for gallery visitors. The goal of this work was

to directly involve the viewer in the art process and establish a different sort of relationship between artist and audience (Saltz 1996). In his performances, Tiravanija usually cooks Thai food, or some hybrid variation of it, and uses food to gather people together, inspires conversations, acts as a symbol of home, and connect the audience to his personal history and culture (Tiravanija 1999).

Tiravanija's way of working with food is very introspective and personal, and is conceived strongly as a way of challenging the conventional forms of displaying artwork in a gallery setting. Over the past 15 years a new generation of artist have taken up the the ground work laid by relational artist like Tiravanija, and have begun working with food to create art that is more contextual and directly diplomatic in nature. These artist have adapted Bourriaud's ideas and are no longer striving to create "ultimate utopias," but are rather working to develop more manageable "micro-utopias" in, and outside, the gallery space (Bourriaud 1998). Similar concepts can be found in the life and work of Joseph Beuys, who through his work coined the term 'social sculpture', a mixture of creative action that can lead to a potential social transformation (Borer 1996). These artists are constructing their own concrete spaces and choreographing interactions with the hope that these gestures will activate the social imaginary or our communities and help us learn how to inhabit the world in a better way (Hannula 2006).

A good example of this is artist Michael Rakowitz, in 2007 he used food to create a critical dialog in the United States around the war in Iraq with his project titled *Enemy Kitchen*. In this project Rakowitz invited groups of students, and adults, to cook together and share a meal made from the recipes of his Jewish-Iraqi mother. Run like a workshop, Rakowitz used the time spent cooking together in the kitchen to talk about contemporary political issues. He did this with the intention of opening up an new dialog around this conflict by using food as a mediating mechanism. Rakowitz has said that the practice of cooking and eating together, "is a public act that enlists and audience as vital collaborators in the production of meaning." In holding cooking workshops like these in the context of the USA, and by using his mother's recipes, he hopes to evoke "the poetry inscribed in the notion of consuming the enemy" (Winn 2007).

Much scholarship has been done around the topic of how food acts as a defining marker of cultural identity as well as a gateway to understanding cultural difference (Douglas 1966, Blumer 1966 Levi-Strauss 1969). In the global market place, food has become one of the most accessible ways of gaining access to other cultures. Through food we can have the experience of encountering other cultures, and often times with the convenience of staying in our own country. Through food, and this ritual of sharing a meal, one is suddenly extended an invitation into another culture (James 1996). The consumer can feel knowledgeable, worldly and perhaps even included in another cultural community, if only for the 45 minutes before the check arrives. Projects like *Enemy Kitchen* and the similar project *Conflict Kitchen* rely heavily on the feelings of cultural inclusion and understanding that such diplomatic food actions can provoke.

Conflict Kitchen is an ongoing food-as-cultural-diplomacy project in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. This take-out restaurant only serves food from countries that the United States is currently in conflict with. Every six months the menu, and store-front design, change to represent a new country and culture. In addition to serving food; the *Conflict Kitchen* also hosts events, performances, and discussion about the culture, politics and issues at stake with regard to each country that the project focuses on. The food comes in a specially designed wrapper that features interviews with representatives from the "conflict country" living both in the United States and back home. Thus far the *Conflict Kitchen* has served food from Iran, Afghanistan and Venezuela, with Cuba and North-Korea to be featured within the next year. This project uses food to open up a conversation in the United States about foreign cultures and the issues of geopolitics (*Conflict Kitchen* 2012).

It is important to note that the *Conflict Kitchen* acts, and operates, exactly like a fast-food restaurant.

Participant pay for the privilege of being able to sample food from these unfamiliar cultures. Provoking the larger question, does a monetary exchange change the interaction and character of the diplomacy going on in this project? Much scholarship has been done regarding the inherent tradition of giving that often accompanies food (Mauss 1967, Hyde 1982). When this tradition is broken, and food is sold rather than gifted, one could argue that the monetary exchange challenges that authenticity of the action, thus turning this form of cultural exchange into a spectacle (Cox 1997). In the book *Cross Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, an article by Allison James goes into great depth talking about the way people are able to buy into or literally consume a culture as a way of measuring individual status or prestige (James 1996). This phenomena can be seen all around the world. When McDonald's opened their first restaurant in China in 1992 people stood outside in lines for hours, tripping over each other in their eagerness to taste "real American food" (Gracie 1992). I do not consider McDonalds to be an excellent example of "Authentic American cuisine," in fact, in terms of America's culinary reputation world wide, they have done much more damage than they have good. Moreover, it is important to recognize that in this example the chance at having an "real American experience" was in some respects even more important than the quality of the food. In this example of consuming American culture this food exchange has clearly become a cultural spectacle and a way for customers to enrich, or confirming, their personal identities as opposed to engaging in a more authentic cultural exchange.

The American Reputation Aid Society (ARAS), is a ongoing art project that deals directly with this question of cultural consumption and authenticity. Frustrated by the the very unauthentic way American culture is represented around the world through fast-food restaurants and Hollywood movies, this project hoped to develop a platform where people could come together and discuss international politics on a more interpersonal level. Described as "a not-for-profit, alternative model for providing foreign aid," this project is firmly based around the economic model of a gift economy and seeks to find a more co-beneficial relationship between the countries giving and receiving said aid. This project is an experimental place designed to improve, discuss, and develop better ways to be an environmentally and ethically responsible member of the global community. Operating since 2010 this project has appeared in both Germany and the United States staging "aid action" performances in farmers markets and operating out of the ARAS Aid Wagon and mobile kitchen, which is a structure created from found materials and fashioned after an old-world pastry cart. A typical ARAS Aid Action (performance) consists of an aid worker wheeling her wagon into the local community farmers market, buying local produce, and using the modest mobile kitchen to create excellent examples of home-cooked American food. Cooking up some of her favorite family recipes, or recipes submitted through the website, uses food as an invitation for conversation and a chance at having a truly authentic American experience overseas. ARAS does not charge for this food, and makes all of their recipes available on-site and on-line, so that a large portion of their aid mission is connected to education (The American Reputation Aid Society 2010).

This project uses food as a form of cultural diplomacy and, like the two other previously mentioned projects, uses food as a way to make the process of globalization more approachable. The ARAS project is particularly noteworthy because the artistic actions are taking place in both Europe and the United States. Moreover, this project also represents a second subsection of art projects that use food as a way to address domestic issues or practice a form of "domestic diplomacy." Although not yet a completely developed concept one could argue that it is the lack of domestic diplomacy that has in some cases led to the strong polarization within our own countries. These polarizations are inarguably tied directly to geography, regionalism and xenophobia.

When the American Reputation Aid Society operates in the United States their focus shifts inward, and they stage diplomatic actions that focus more on local issues such as: the nation-wide obesity issue, how to cook healthy food on a small budget, the challenge of finding fresh produce in low-income areas, working toward defining new American eating rituals and traditions, talking about the way food

is grown and distributed within the United States, and how that ties Americans into a larger global challenge. When working in the United States this projects takes on a stronger “think global, and act local” approach. It is purposely designed to get people talking about these important issues, and how they intersect with the concept of a “national identity.”

Robert Farid Karimi is an interdisciplinary playwright/ poet and performance artist that is working in a similar way. In his project *The Cooking Show con Karimi & Comrades*, Karimi has created a live interactive cooking shows where he serves up culture with a side of political satire and a dash of music. These shows are presented in a variety of contexts and locations ranging from supermarket parking lot to the theatrical stage. His current show *Diabetes of Democracy* is working to promote cooking as a cultural movement that will combat the rising epidemic of Type Two Diabetes in the United States, which is predominately caused by obesity. In Arizona his shows focused mainly on changing the eating habits of young Latinos who's dietary choices are heavily influenced by both their cultural ancestry and the pressure to take on a more mainstream US-American diet. Karimi himself is of Iranian-Guatemalan ancestry, and uses his familiarity with the first-generation immigrant community in the United States to create programs that strives to increase awareness around the links between food, cultural identity and health (Diabetes of Democracy 2011).

Through these shows Karimi has found a creative way to use food, and food preparation, as an entry point into a larger conversation about domestic health issues and cultural identity. A group of international artist initiated a similar project in Leipzig Germany when they founded the *Neue Leipzige Kuche* (New Leipzig Kitchen) in 2009. Like Karimi, the Neue Leipzige Kuche also used their position as cultural outsiders to reach out to the new-immigrant communities living within Eastern Leipzig. This project brought people from Russia, Turkey, North-America, South-America, the Balkan Regions and Germany together to cook with one another. Out of this collective action came new ways of cooking and understanding each other, which the artist hoped would lead to creating a new Leipzig identity. The Neue Leipzige Kuche also focused on health issues by initiating international food tastings, and starting a conversation about nutrition as it relates to different eating traditions (Neue Leipziger Kuche 2009).

Food has achieved a mythical status in modern culture, and food has become the embodiment of our cultural differences. Often times people fail to recognize that food cultures are the resulting process of hundreds, if not thousand, of years of research and refinement (Cox 1993). History plays the predominant role in what, when and how we eat, and it is inaccurate to say that a specific style of eating is a product of nature or was simply born into a culture (Barthes 1986). These different styles of preparing and eating food are in fact the end result of years of cultural diplomacy and experimentation. The art projects featured in this article strive to expand upon the history of cultural food diplomacy and use that confusing divide between nature and culture as a catalyst for a conversation about health, justice and internationalism.

All of the projects I mentioned in this article use food as a platform for a critical dialog. In some cases that dialog is intended to showcase the story of globalization as it is told through food and culture on an international level. Other project work to make international issues visible by focusing their efforts on local concerns. This paper exemplifies a few artists that are working in a very contextual way to develop projects that challenge, and re-define, the way artists interact with society. These projects, take place outside of a typical gallery setting, and use food as a platform for conducting cultural diplomacy regarding both national and international issues. Is it possible that these small diplomatic actions will be able to encourage larger international results? Only time will tell, but if Oscar Wilde's optimistic words about the reconcilable power food carries are any indication, “After a good meal one can forgive anybody, even one's relatives”, then project like these have a good chance.

About the Author:

Carly Schmitt is a public artist, scholar, and artistic entrepreneur. Schmitt is the President, founder and CEO of Artist @ Large, a small art business under which she executes large scale public art projects and curates various community-based artistic initiatives. Schmitt is best known for work which blurs the boundaries between art and life through a variety of art projects and performances in public space. Her public artworks aim to span gaps, build bridges, and bring people together through a system of unexpected circumstances and extraordinary contexts. Schmitt's work can be encountered throughout Europe and the United States. More information about her work can be found at www.carlyschmitt.com

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