

SURFACE

ART

Will Work With Food

As long as art has been made, artists have found in food an endlessly elastic metaphor. There are really good reasons why.

BY KEVIN WEST

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The cold seas off the Isle of Skye, along the west coast of Scotland, surround nearly 409,000 craggy acres of moors, mist, and myth. From the mainland, Skye is a stepping-stone to the wild Outer Hebrides and into a storied Celtic past. Tourists flock to the locale for its scenery, history, peat-flavored whisky, and celebrated salmon. Like a bison burger eaten at the gateway to Yellowstone National Park, salmon from local waters gives tourists a real taste of a mythic place. Foodie slang would dub the ingredient “local,” a word of virtuous associations. Which is precisely why artists Alon Schwabe and Daniel Fernández Pascual, who collaborate under the name Cooking Sections, created an installation on Skye in the form of an oyster farm, part of their multiyear, multicontinent project “CLIMAVORE,” in 2015.

“There is a huge farmed-salmon industry in Skye, which has pretty much killed off the wild salmon population,” says Schwabe, a bearded 33-year old Israeli, via Skype from London. “Yet hundreds of thousands of tourists a year are going out there wanting to eat Scottish food. What is Scottish food today? ‘Scottish’ salmon on Skye is mostly owned by Norwegian multinational corporations. It is a very complex global network of species, ingredients, and technologies that are assembled all over the world and finished in Skye in the shape of a fish.”

An oyster, by contrast, is assembled and finished in the sea, and a farm requires only very basic infrastructure. Whereas farmed salmon eat manufactured fish chow and foul the water with waste—pollution at the end of a global supply chain—oysters actually improve local environmental conditions. They are bivalve water purifiers. Such facts in hand, Cooking Sections declared Skye oysters a better “climavore” option: the right choice of how to eat as the climate changes. Schwabe and Pascual turned “local” inside out and found oysters more Scottish than Skye salmon. Ten island restaurants agreed to swap fish for mollusks on their menus, and the oysters themselves taste no less delicious when you consider them artworks on the half-shell—the edible outcome of the artists’ social practice.

From da Vinci’s late-15th-century “Last Supper” to Gordon Matta-Clark’s 1970s happening as restaurant, Food, to **Dana Sherwood’s** contemporary videos of cakes being devoured by baboons, the tradition of food in art remains vibrant—and endlessly flexible. In some instances, the artists who use food in their practice are pushing against the boundaries of the discipline. (A skeptical Skye tourist might enjoy her “climavore” oyster and still dismiss the idea that she’s swallowing “art.”) But, then, their claims about the place of food art in society (and art history) are not simple. They depart from the foodie generation’s squishy idea that food can be considered art simply because a chef composes a plate with flair or a diner cleverly frames her Instagram post. Instead, the artists and curators I talked to gently insisted that food, for all its artistry, is not art in its more rigorous sense. By rejecting the simpler claim, they open up the more nuanced question of how artists use food in their art, and why.

No single generalization can blanket the art world’s current engagement with food across a broad range of media, from oil on canvas to fermented cabbage, or the variety of actions undertaken—from bronze sculpture to computer coding. As for the why, the artists themselves have many responses. Most simply: Food looks, tastes, and smells good. Beyond that: We interact with food intimately, consume it, ingest it, digest it—and internalize it in multiple senses—and with multiple senses. Food defines ordinary life and special occasions alike. It can create pleasure and provoke shame. A vehicle for stories, it prompts nostalgia and inspires utopian dreams. It embodies generosity, community, culture. It causes pollution and contributes to climate change. It’s in the kitchen, at the drive-through, on TV, filling up Instagram. It is fast and slow, super and junk, street and Michelin-starred. As long as art has been made, artists have found in food an endlessly elastic metaphor, and today’s artists use it for varied investigations of the body, identity, gender, community, the domestic, the sacramental, economics, politics, and the environment.

Food is a basic human necessity. Art exists far down the continuum of biological need. Yet both serve to define *Homo sapiens* as a species. Humans are the only animals that cook and the only ones to create symbolic representations of reality. These two acts—the essential and the essentializing—have repeatedly converged in human history. From the beginning, in fact.

Since the creation of the cave paintings at Lascaux, food's visual form has presented a challenge to virtuosity, inviting artists to the game of mimesis, the imitation of reality. A still life doesn't move (the French term translates it as "dead nature"), so food gives the artist a chance to get it right. More philosophically, food brings to the table the enduring themes of desire and transience: The still life freezes a moment in lifelike detail—life, stilled. Caravaggio surely had this in mind with his monumental "Basket of Fruit" (c. 1596), Renaissance food porn as lovingly depicted as his ripe boys. But a spotty apple reminds us that time will ruin beauty. The work is dazzling to look at and heartbreaking to contemplate. Similar reactions hold true across four centuries of art history. As in Robert Gober's torso-sized stick of butter, naked and vulnerable as a corpse laid out on the gallery floor, artists use food to remind us we'll die.

Until then, food is a sensual consolation, and sometimes a boast, thought Valery Jung Estabrook in 2013 as she scrolled through the food pics on her Instagram feed. Her mind turned to Dutch still-life paintings of jewel-feather pheasants, silver-scaled salmon, and pearly oysters: humblebrag tableaux of very conspicuous consumption. Estabrook wondered why her friends, another food-crazy population, overshared their meals, and she began a photorealistic series of Insta-ready still lifes.

"Food is an important aspect of how we document ourselves and our lives, even though it is very mundane," says Estabrook, who grew up on an orchard in southwest Virginia and now lives in Taos, New Mexico. "It's something I do, too. It's not just a critique of other people but an introspective act. What do I find interesting about this that I'm about to put in my mouth?"

Here's a hint: Estabrook calls the series "Food Porn," a distant echo of Caravaggio's sexy figs. She painted fast food and cheap Chinese takeout, perhaps to suggest that dinner sauced with symbolism is not just for burghers. The hotdog, as every middle-school boy knows, is suggestive; Estabrook's is more like a racy proposition. Lubed with ketchup, its tip slides out of a pout-lipped bun and pokes you in the face. It's a Weiner shot, and it poses the sad—if timely—question of why otherwise reasonable grownups would share visual evidence of their most intimate acts. Is desire that unbridled? If so, then desire looks pretty pathetic stripped of its nobler trappings—all that's left is a two-dollar sidewalk hotdog.

Desire and death also haunt the work of Montreal-born sculptor and painter Chloe Wise, but things get complicated, and fast. "Food interests me for the same reason artists through history have focused on it," says Wise. "Transience, mutability, rot, decay: because it will be eaten, it will become poop. It's a morbid reminder of the state of our body."

Her sculptures check off the Old Master shopping list of bourgeois prosperity: oysters, figs and melons, cheese, silver serving dishes. But something is off in her careful arrangements. They drip with what appears to be cream, although a banana pointed at two pert lemons in "Inceste de Citron" (2017) suggests male bodily fluid instead. As your mind registers that possibility, your reaction flips. Maybe your stomach does as well. A drop of cream on a peach is wholesomeness carelessly spilled. A peach with cum on it is defiled. "Food is unctuous and decadent, but simultaneously there's a disgusting quality that food has in its short career," Wise notes. The same could be said of sex.

More ambiguous still, Wise's finely rendered paintings run headlong into the thicket of moral judgments provoked by food and the female body. Both can be sweet or nasty, pure or spoiled, healthy or sinful, wholesome or abject. The value judgment lies in the eye of the beholder, perhaps, but Wise cautions that the viewer/eater also exists within today's fraught media miasma. She worries, for instance, that two defining aspects of our cultural moment, information overload and radical subjectivity, make it impossible to reach sound moral decisions. The public discourse on food—with its barrage of marketing slogans, quasi-scientific claims about "superfoods," and blog posts on the 20 foods that are ruining your health—is a prime offender. Dairy products again illustrate the point. For Wise, milk evokes maternity, purity, and the fresh mountain air of Heidi's Swiss village. And it makes the lactose-intolerant sick, though the abject squalor of the dairy industry, carefully hidden by nostalgic marketing campaigns, would make anyone sick. In Wise's painting "Gluten Freedom" (2017), part of her recent show at the Almine Rech Gallery in Paris, a beautiful young woman poses against an abstract bucolic landscape of pastures and fields. She wears a virginal dress, open at the chest. A half-gallon of Lactaid lactose-free milk is cradled against her breast, and she grasps a cellophane-wrapped wheat sheaf, symbolic of the lilies of a van Eyck virgin. The subject's other hand holds a split papaya, full of seed, over her womb. Is it an allegory of as-yet-untapped virginal incipience, or a lewd invitation? Your call. Wise puts the visual language of art history through the visual search engine of late capitalism and finds multiple "truths," all of them suspect.

Compared to the long history of portraying food in art, the use of food as a primary material for making art is largely a 20th-century innovation. (The counterargument: medieval nobility impressed dinner guests with spun-sugar allegories, known in English as "subtleties." Kara Walker returned the archaic word to usage with her monumental 2014 sugarcoated sculpture "A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby"). Subtleties aside, using food as an artistic medium opened new doors for the artist, not least because it can become an organic, visceral analogue for the body in ways that bronze or marble never could. In 1963, Joseph Beuys piled a wedge of fat on a chair, in the approximate vicinity of a sitter's own abdominal fat and internal functions. The work's German name, Stuhl mit Fett ("Chair with Fat") puns on a polite euphemism for shit ("stool"), another product of caloric ingestion. In doing so, he inverted the "frozen moment" function of traditional food still life. The

sculpture's organic material immediately began to decay: Instead of "stilling" time, Beuys initiated a process to mark its passage, a self-undoing gesture that leaves its residue in the viewer's imagination. The same self-sacrifice might describe the life of Beuys himself, or of any human. Felix Gonzalez-Torres engages the viewer even more intimately with his famous 1991 piece "Untitled" (a portrait of Ross in L.A.). He piled a corner with 175 pounds of wrapped candies—his late partner's weight before the onset of AIDS—and each gallery visitor eats one, absorbing "Ross" into his or her own body. The piece is tender, beautiful, sacramental, and—because the candy comes in an endless supply—the sweet body it represents is immortalized. And yet, bitterly, the endless candies also count the number of bodies ravaged by AIDS. Gonzalez-Torres's abstract paradox—endless life, endless death—becomes intimately present when we eat it.

Miami artist Jennifer Rubell takes the edible one step further in her interactive installations. She began working with food not as a young artist but as a young cook. She attended the Culinary Institute of America and later interned at the Food Network, where she met Mario Batali, who further guided her food education. At some point, recalls Rubell, the daughter of collectors Mera and Donald Rubell, she realized it would be coy to not to acknowledge the conceptual burden she had begun to place on her cooking. Without a plan, Rubell cooked herself into an art practice. Her installations are rooted in art history—she points to Beuys and Gonzalez-Torres as touchstones—but also bring to bear a chef's practical kitchen know-how.

"A lot of people are working with food," Rubell says on a phone call from her studio, "but in ways that are less about the food than the way I work. I would not do my work without my understanding of food as a delicious thing you eat. The logistics of food, my practical knowledge, is not in any way incidental."

For her project "Icons," at the Brooklyn Museum's 2010 gala, she "took things that happen in a museum but outside the traditional curatorial purview"—such as galas—"and co-opted them for the purposes of making work." Each installation reacted to a seminal piece by a certain artist in her personal pantheon. One evoked Vito Acconci's "Seedbed," a 1972 performance in which he lay beneath a ramp in a gallery and masturbated while uttering fantasies about visitors. Rubell ramped the floor in Brooklyn and cut a hole in the shape of Acconci's body. Carrots grew in it; visitors pulled them, rinsed them in a nearby basin, and ingested something provocative from Acconci's body of work. Guests dined later that night on Rubell's rabbit main course—a reference to Beuys's "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (1965)—and took baseball bats to a 20-foot piñata of Andy Warhol's head: Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and Ho-Hos spilled out. Rubell turned her metaphorical engagement with iconic artworks into the viewer's physical interaction with them.

It also bears noting that our multisensory engagement with food challenges another rigid hierarchy within the so-called "visual" arts. A nose is wasted at the Louvre, never mind a tongue. Yet the tongue's sense of taste works alongside sight, sound, touch, and smell to convert raw experience into the intellectual faculty known as taste. If an artist wants to provoke emotion, to really get you in the guts, the most direct path is probably not through the eyes, says Hammer Museum curator Anne Ellegood. She recalls Nayland Blake's human-scale gingerbread house, "Feeder 2" (1998), installed there in 2014. Visitors passed through its Christmas-y scent shadow on the way to "Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology," a cerebral exhibition organized around the paired themes of appropriation and institutional critique.

"It was a highly political, conceptual show, but I didn't want to get away from sensuality," says Ellegood of the gingerbread house's placement in the museum lobby. Passing by it, "people were aware of their bodies. It created hunger." Unlike many opaque metaphors used in curatorial discourse, this one explains itself.

Once food had been established as a medium for interactive objects, artists began to understand its potential as a medium for transformative experience. The insight opened the way for innovative food-based performance art, although food's special status as a liminal substance was hardly new. What was the Last Supper if not the ritual transformation of everyday edibles into an indelible mystical experience? Bread and wine, passed hand-to-hand as tokens of an impalpable belief system, reaffirmed social ties and solidified cultural identity. A more direct precedent for present-day performance work with food is Allan Kaprow's "Eat," from 1964. Staged in a cavelike space, the happening allowed visitors to pick fruit dangled from the ceiling, harvest carbs from bread-stuffed logs, and receive boiled potatoes from a man who repeated, "Get 'em." That same year, Carol-ee Schneemann filmed eight semi-nude performers as they rolled together with raw chicken and sausage in fits of Dionysian ecstasy, in "Meat Joy." In food performance, elements of the artwork physically interact with the participant through multiple senses. An added ingredient is time, which also allows other participants or the artist herself to shape the group experience.

Nigerian-born, Brooklyn-based Zina Saro-Wiwa accepts the proposition that food signifies personal and cultural identity (you are what you eat, and all that). Her father, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was an environmental activist who was executed by Nigeria's military dictatorship in 1995 after he protested environmental damage done by foreign petroleum companies in the Niger Delta. For her video series "Table Manners" (2014–16), Saro-Wiwa served traditional local dishes to residents of the area, filming them as they ate for the camera. The point of the work, Saro-Wiwa explained on the phone from London, was the land and the people's relationship to it: Food in the Niger Delta, as elsewhere, is imbued with a traditional, intimate, and profound sense of place. Another performance piece called "The Mangrove Banquet," staged at Houston, Texas's Blaffer Art Museum

in 2015, reinterpreted the cuisine of the Niger Delta to symbolically counteract the violent, hypermasculinized turn taken by Nigeria's environmental protestors following her father's death. Saro-Wiwa offered the feast to demonstrate that farming and cooking—traditional women's work—are what root people and their culture most deeply in the region. "I'm organizing food in a particular way and feeding it to people," says Saro-Wiwa. "They are ingesting an experience. They are ingesting stories. And that will go into your cellular structure. Food becomes your body, you know? Food becomes your actual self."

A different aspect of identity, its subjectivity, animates "Sour Cherry Pie" (2004–present), Elaine Tin Nyo's study of Americana. Once widely grown as "pie cherries," the fruit is now as rare as homemade pie—"a cult," says Tin Nyo. Every year during their brief midsummer season, she bakes pies daily and takes them to friends, sharing a slice with each one. Some days she eats nothing but pie. On the surface, the annual rite appears generous, if perhaps eccentric. Tin Nyo sees a deep-dish slice of "perversity."

Born in Burma, the artist came to America when she was a child and was fascinated by the "reverse exoticism" of folksy food. On TV she watched Julia Child, a feminist role model, and eventually went to work in restaurants. "In my earlier work," says Tin Nyo via Skype from the South of France, where she is working on a multiyear project to follow a pig from birth to ham, "there was a subversive feminist act in taking the language of the domestic at a moment when the generation before me was horrified with cooking because they had just burned their bras."

For an early performance, "Egg Curry" (1996), Tin Nyo prepared the traditional make-do staple of Burmese home cooking while projecting home movies of her stylish family at a sculling regatta in the 1960s. Dressed in traditional Burmese garb, they drank post-Colonial G&Ts and wore Ray-Bans. There is a crack, the artist seems to say, between who we are and who we aspire to be, and through it we can discern the unstable geology of the composite self.

Fast-forward to "Sour Cherry Pie," Tin Nyo's DIY holiday, a time to take stock and catch up. The pie is an excuse to visit friends and a sacrament to share, a double-crust serving of bygone small-town life. Except that the sweet nostalgia is as foreign in Tin Nyo's hands as the G&Ts gripped by her Burmese family. And she's delivering it on the New York City subway. "I'm not a nice Midwestern girl," says Tin Nyo. "It's reverse colonialism."



Dana Sherwood stretches food-based identity to its furthest limit—as the defining activity of the species *Homo sapiens*—and keeps going. Inspired by 19th-century illustrated cooking encyclopedias, 1960s Jell-O molds, and the writing of Claude Levi-Strauss, the New York-based artist creates feasts not intended for human consumption. Instead, Sherwood composes her outdoor banquets, turns on a nighttime infrared surveillance camera, and heads inside. Nature does the rest. Her black-and-white videos show raccoons, fox, mice, baboons, and an ocelot (in Brasilia) enacting scenes that feel like demented outtakes from *Alice in Wonderland*, as filmed by early French documentarian Jean Painlevé. Sherwood, an experienced dressage rider, works with animal species that live near human development, at the literal and figurative edge between nature and culture. As the artist, her role is to manage the aesthetics—to cook and set the table. The consumers' roles as collaborators is unpredictable.

"It really is up to nature to determine how the piece ends up," says Sherwood. "In the Anthropocene, there's no 'pure nature.' It's a fantasy, a nostalgia. Still, nature is going to behave the way



Top: Artist Dana Sherwood photographed in her kitchen in New York. (Photo: Emily Andrews)
Left: From Dana Sherwood's "Crossing the Wild Line" (2015) project (Photo: Courtesy the artist).
Right: One of Sherwood's feral cakes (Photo: Emily Andrews)

nature is going to behave. I love the poetics of that.”

Sherwood would seem to accept the premise that cooking separates us from the animals and constructs our human identity—“food as acculturation,” in the anthropologist’s gloss. The twist is that after she turns nature into culture, “funneling it through the gaze of the human,” she gives it back to nature. Her “Feral Cakes” (2017) was the necessary prologue to a shared intraspecies performance. Food becomes a common occasion, perhaps even a common language. Just as it does in human intercourse. “Food,” Sherwood says wryly, “is how you make friends.”

Perhaps the most resonant food-based artwork of recent decades occurred at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets in New York. It couldn’t have been further from a Dutch still life, either in form or outcome, although it did extend, if radically, the 20th-century trajectory of food as a primary material for art and performance. In 1971, Carol Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark assumed the lease on a modest restaurant and relaunched it as Food. A fragmentary documentary shot by Robert Frank shows a chaotic but utopian establishment: dogs underfoot, joints in hand, sea bass and boiled corn on the table. The restaurant’s open kitchen brought down the fourth wall between chef and diner, artist and audience, and Food sustained the spirit of “happening” for three years, in the process becoming SoHo’s first “happening” restaurant. More enduringly, Food liberated the artist’s energies from the privileged confines of the gallery and applied them to the gossamer but extensive material of social interaction. As a business constrained by the limits of Goodden’s personal endurance, Food flickered out with her departure in 1974. (Matta-Clark had already lost interest.) As a case study in the catalytic potential of social practice, Food continues its influential run towards the half-century mark, a backdrop to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s pad thai series, begun in 1990. Much contemporary social practice bears a hallmark of concern about modern life’s disruptive effect on human communities and the environment. The work explores art’s capacity to heal those ruptures.

Leila Nadir and Cary Peppermint, a couple who teach at the University of Rochester in Upstate New York and collaborate under the name Eco Art Tech, utilize the ancient food-preservation technique of fermentation. Nadir, also a writer, explains that after they bought a 50-acre forest in Maine, the activities of their home life, which included making sauerkraut and other products with microbial cultures, led them to address what they call the “cultural memory disorder” of modernity, an “industrial amnesia.” Their project “Microbial Selfies” (2017) explores the metaphorical density of fermentation: the process is caused by the action of beneficial bacteria, a microecology, that enters the body and interacts with the internal human ecology of the gut microbiome. “As environmental artists who turned toward food, it was natural that we began with fermentation,” says Nadir. “The environment is not outside our bodies—it’s inside.”

Fermented food also exists at a midpoint between “fresh” and “rotten,” invoking larger ecological cycles of life and death. Peppermint, an early mover in the digital-art movement, created software that generated images based on environmental factors in each jar, such as pH and oxygen levels. Starting with chopped cabbage, Nadir and Peppermint end with “Microbial Selfies.” But the photographs themselves are mere documentary artifacts. The real artwork exists in the intangible social interactions of teaching, learning, and eating in community that occur during their “OS Fermentation” project, a multistage workshop on the topic. What participants take home, apart from their “cultured” vegetables, are the seeds of an artistic practice, “culture” in another sense. Eco Art Tech seeks to re-inoculate everyday life with art.

In New York, Mary Mattingly wanted to address the social problems of food access by planting the urban landscape with public vegetable gardens. Her vision was a no-go from the start, because the city makes illegal to grow or gather food in its 30,000 acres of parks. Then Mattingly discovered a legal loophole. Nothing said she couldn’t plant a garden on a barge. Earlier this year, “Swale” floated its way through the city, a distant ripple of Gordon Matta-Clark’s “Floating Island” (1970/2005). Water drawn and purified from the river irrigated a “food forest” of fruit trees, berry bushes, and perennial food crops. The public could pick what grew there.

“I like to say it’s a utopian proposal,” says Mattingly as she sat among the apple trees and wild mint earlier this year. “There’s a way with artwork—you can do things you can’t if you call it something else. People aren’t afraid. If we were an activist project, we might have companies like Monsanto saying we can’t do this. As art, it gets into our psyches.”

As does food. The conceptual thread between “Swale” and the earliest representations of food in art may be long, unspooled across the centuries, but it remains taut. For the artist, food is just another medium with which to create emotion and, through emotion, to convey ideas. Caravaggio’s painted figs and apples expressed a poignant truth about time’s corrosive effect on beauty. Schwabe and Pascual’s Scottish oysters embody a transdisciplinary investigation into the geopolitical forces that govern space and shape the environment. The outcomes of food-based art are irreconcilably different; the starting point is not.

“From an ingredient,” says Pascual, “you can jump into the whole problem.”