

AFTER DINNER – A LOOK AT FAST FOOD WASTE AND FAST FOOD PACKAGING WASTE

Susan Nunn

INTRODUCTION

Food is a resource that needs to be protected and repurposed just like any other recyclable, with its waste managed responsibly. The promotion of ethical and sustainable practices will help minimise the high energy consumption, environmental and public health risks and human concerns that make food waste much more than a financial issue.

My work can be seen as a critical questioning of the status quo surrounding the wastage of edible food for no good reason. We must see food as a seriously valued part of our lives – how we market it, use it and recycle it should all be considered before we waste it.



Figure 1. *Unswept Floor*, Sosos of Pergamon, 2nd Century BCE, Vatican Museum, Rome.

Food is essential to our very existence. There is an increased awareness of how food politics reflects power policies within global economies that include issues like genetic modification, overproduction and aesthetic selectivity, which can all lead to food waste.

We might find that the representation of food is given context in the history of art. It has been represented in ancient cave paintings, in Egyptian, Greek and Roman times, regaining popularity in the Renaissance, and the classical still life and pop art eras. Food is a major contributor to contemporary films, installations and performances, including those that have been created using real food as a parody of a serious subject. In this century, foodstuffs – including rice, meat, pollens, fresh fruit, vegetables and salt – have become ingredients in the creation of art, often as a political statement in Western countries, where food is accessible, available and affordable.

Food has been used in performance art from the time of the renowned French chef Antonin Carême¹ to the Futurists² of the early twentieth century and contemporary artists.

The problem with food as a subject is its domestic familiarity. We face food several times each day; recognising the social role, but also the utter commonness of food in every person's everyday life, makes it unexceptional and mundane.

FOOD: AN ART HISTORY

Some of the ongoing influences in my work include the archaeological discovery of a second-century mosaic pavement known as the *Unswept Floor*. This was made to stimulate the appetite and amuse guests. The disregard of table manners and the comfort and ease that enabled the dropping of half-eaten food suggest the arrogance and excess associated with empire and an indifference to conventional behaviour.

Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo was, perhaps, the first artist to use painted food to create a composite image. His vegetable and fruit portraits are whimsical, with a surreal quality; he created them long before the advent of the Surrealist art movement. Given the Renaissance fascination with riddles, puzzles and the bizarre, Arcimboldo catered to the tastes of his time – his paintings were quirky, rather than the product of a deranged mind.

Later, with a focus on meditation, transience and mortality, the long-established still life genre increased in popularity – witness Caravaggio's famous *Basket of Fruit*,³ in which the teasing lusciousness of the fruit is tempered by signs of decay.

Dutch seventeenth-century paintings of less than perfect, half-eaten food, portrayed as an interrupted meal, projected an element of *vanitas*. The lavish settings depict animals destined for the table, silver and glassware, which all speak of wealth, pleasure and their inevitable demise. These specialist artists addressed the early capitalist taste for moral edification combined with conspicuous display.

The pop art of the 1960s gave the conception of an artwork more importance than the means of its production. Consumerism became a big part of the production of art. Claes Oldenburg's fascination with simple, everyday objects often led him to take food as a subject, as with the soft-sculptured *Floor Cake*.⁴ He developed his trademark art of parody and humour by enlarging the scale and changing the materiality and proportions of familiar objects. In such works, he was beginning to play with the idea of commodity and art. His oversized, soft textile sculptures have been the inspiration for my own previous work.



Figure 2. *Summer*, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1573, Louvre, Paris.

Some contemporary artists have used real food as a product in art, myself included. Carl Warner uses fruits, vegetables and meat to make up the layers of his landscapes.⁵ Other contemporary artists have used food to create works that are controversial, making the viewer uncomfortable. For example, in 1982, Linder Sterling created the first *Meat Dress*,⁶ which was recreated in 2010 for Lady Gaga. Raw meat tends to horrify, making the artwork abject, while using fruit and vegetables elicits laughter.

I am looking at table settings associated with forgotten or interrupted meals. Again, there is an element of *vanitas* here because of the abandoned food covering the detritus or remains of a meal. Works portraying this theme include Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*,⁷ Ken and Julia Yonetani's *The Last Supper*⁸ and Michelle Dixon's *Colony Collapse Disorder*.⁹ The artworks I found that resonated most for my current work are Ricky Swallow's *Killing Time*¹⁰ and Marije Vogelzang's *White Funeral Meal* and *Connection Dinner*.¹¹

Daniel Spoerri's *Lunch under the Grass*,¹² a 1980s performance art meal recently rediscovered after being buried



Figure 3. *Colony Collapse Disorder*, Michelle Dixon, 2010. Collection of the artist, photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 4. *White Funeral Meal*, Marije Vogelzang, 1999, image courtesy of the artist.

for 30 years, includes a table setting, food and flowers (which have disintegrated) and china, plastic, metal and glass artefacts that are still intact – shades of our future landfill contents. Spoerri's work has become a record of everyday objects, a defining moment in time.

PREVIOUS WORK

Over the last two years I have worked on aspects of the use of food in art, understood both literally and figuratively.

My *How to Make an Expressionist Frittata* recipe book has become a visual archive of natural dyeing recipes.¹³ Including dye recipes, dyed fabrics and images of the ingredients, the work is a parody of a regular cookery book. My oversized recipe book also engages humour by having only one food recipe that uses the strained dye-pot ingredients.



Figure 5. *Connection Dinner*, Marije Vogelzang, 2006, image courtesy of the artist.

The dyed fabrics in the book are very reminiscent of Expressionist paintings – hence the choice of that art movement in my appropriation of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*¹⁴ for the front cover ... and I could hardly resist using his anglicised surname in a 'cook book' ... munch.

The book also contains a critique of the use of specialist language, or jargon, used in relation to the culinary, fibre and traditional arts, and in discussing the parallels between these arts. I felt an irresistible urge to use humour to satirise culinary jargon, usually found on the back cover of recipe books, along with the language used by art critics.

A 3D felted frittata was the only survivor from my early explorations in this area (2015). It evolved into a segmented cake, then into a felted 'pie chart' analysing avoidable household food waste. Thus pie charts, graphs and food waste became intersecting areas for further investigation.

My work *Pie* features a combination of fabric vegetables with printed and felted pie charts showing the quantities and groups of the most wasted foods in our culture.¹⁵ The title *Pie* refers to the various layers that make up the work— the concept of sharing, the interplay with art, pie charts, domestic cookery, fetishism and the vegetable ingredients. The purpose of this work is to draw attention to the amount of food that is wasted annually in New Zealand households and the space it (and food packaging) takes up in landfills.

Inspired by the oversized soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, I realised that the piling, squashing and compacting of my oversized, soft-sculptured fruits and vegetables into a confined space was an excellent way to make a point about food waste, using humour. Where possible, my forms are made with recycled fabrics. The patterns were drafted from real produce, so that I can say, with hand on heart – *all models were consumed in the making of this project.*

FOOD WASTE

I like to think that my artworks use the humour in food to encourage debate around food waste. My research into pie charts and food waste combined to bring both Jonathan Bloom and Vance Packard to my attention. In his book,¹⁶ Bloom argues that because of a range of issues from overharvesting to aesthetic selectivity, the industrialised food chain creates hunger and environmental damage. It is estimated that one third of all the food produced in the world is never consumed, giving rise to the greatest paradox of the twenty-first century – while around 12 percent of the world's population suffers from starvation, over two billion adults are obese. Food waste is very much tied up with this paradox; and the social, economic and environmental impact of food distribution will affect the future development of the entire planet.¹⁷

In his 1960s book *The Waste Makers*,¹⁹ Vance Packard argued that big business was systematically attempting to make us wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently discontented individuals. This was a pioneering exposé of how the rapid growth of disposable consumer goods was degrading the environmental, financial and spiritual character of American society.



Figure 6. *Pie*, 2015, Installation view. Collection of the artist, photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 7. Love Food, Hate Waste Poster

Packard brought attention to the concept of planned obsolescence, whereby a 'death date' is built into products so that they wear out quickly and need replacing – in the case of food, this is a 'use by' date. By manipulating the public into mindless consumerism, Packard believed that businesses were making consumers "more wasteful, imprudent, and carefree in our consuming habits," practices which were using up the world's natural resources at an alarming rate. He also predicted the rise of American consumer culture. These were the main influences behind the concept of my felted pie chart.

My research has also explored the phenomenon of dumpster diving, an effective urban foraging technique aimed at reusing or repurposing resources destined for the landfill. The wastefulness of our consumer society and throw-away culture compels the rescue of edible items. Discarded food that might have slight imperfections, be near its expiry date, or that is simply being replaced is often tossed out despite being still edible. Many retailers are reluctant to sell this stock at reduced prices.

Fast food and its packaging waste is often seen abandoned in public areas such as food courts. As soon as our appetite is satisfied, we leave; we are not encouraged to linger or to take our leftovers away. The option to recycle food and packaging waste is often not available in food courts. Does this contribute to making people too lazy to recycle these items or even place them in a rubbish bin? Because contemporary society views fast food as an instant meal, it is acceptable to waste any uneaten items, reinforcing the acceptance of throwing away leftovers and their packaging.

Another problem facing us is that since the 1960s, portion and plate sizes have increased, further contributing to waste, overconsumption and obesity. The official health and safety guidelines for food businesses are also a contributing factor to waste. Asking for a 'doggy bag' for your uneaten food comes with a disclaimer about food poisoning at best, and sometimes an outright refusal.



Figure 8. Restaurant buffet, photograph: Susan Nunn.

Food prepared in bulk in restaurants, care facilities and hospitals is also subject to restrictive rules. Some food can be recycled by kitchen staff, but much cannot and staff are discouraged from taking prepared, uneaten food off the premises, meaning that its fate will be pig food or, more likely, landfill.

For all these reasons, the concept of food in art has combined with my interest in food waste to become the basis of my ongoing research.

PRESENT WORK

Historical events such as the Pompeii disaster; the mystery of the Mary Celeste and, more recently, the Christchurch earthquakes have all resulted in meals being interrupted and abandoned.

I have continued my focus on modern food waste, researching table settings and the interrupted, unfinished and wasted meal. My work *After Dinner* suggests the transformation that has taken place in our culture due to fast foods and food wastage: the death of the dinner table as an indicator of commensality – eating together slowly in community.



Figure 9. Buffet leftovers to be thrown out, photograph: Susan Nunn.

Colour has become an important element in this new work. We use colour to identify our food, to judge its freshness and, in the culinary arts, to create a colourful plate of food to enhance our eating pleasure. In *After Dinner*, the white dining suite, inclusive of crockery and cutlery, embedded under a white tablecloth, is enclosed in a white-walled area. A single bright white light illuminates the garishly coloured fast food and packaging waste on the tabletop, giving the illusion of a formal but intimate dining experience.

The white setting suggests a tableau of a moment frozen in time. The tablecloth becomes a shroud over the table for the demise of the meal. The coloured fast-food items scream out for attention; they have caused this culinary demise, while at the same time contributing to vast amounts of food waste and obesity in society. At a quick glance, the audience assumes that the table is covered with real fast foods before realising that everything is made from realistically well-crafted fabric.



Figure 10. Bakery in Merrivale, Christchurch, 2011, photograph: Susan Nunn

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I see the use of humour – including elements of parody, satire and appropriation – as an ongoing feature of my practice as I seek to communicate messages about our relationship with food through my artwork.

I finish with the immortal words of Pete Seeger: "If it can't be reduced, reused, repaired, rebuilt, refurbished, refinished, resold, recycled or composted, then it should be restricted, redesigned or removed from production."²⁰

It really is a question of survival.



Figure 11. *After Dinner*, 2016, installation view.
Collection of the artist, photograph: Susan Nunn.



Figure 12. *After Dinner* (detail).
Collection of the artist, photograph: E M Davidson.

Susan Nunn began her textile craft career as a young child learning knitting and sewing skills from her mother. She came to the Dunedin School of Art as a mature student to consolidate an artistic career with a consummate qualification, and completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree with Honours. She has presented and shown her work at the Auckland Arts Festival's White Night event, and at the International Food Design Conference in Dunedin, 2016.

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- 10 "Killing Time: Ricky Swallow," *Art Gallery of New South Wales*, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/125.2004/> (accessed 21 Nov 2016).
- 11 Marcus Fairs, "Food is 'The Most Important Material in the World' says Marije Vogelzang," *Dezeen*, 8 July 2014, <http://www.dezeen.com/2014/07/08/marije-voelzang-eating-designer-interview-food-course-design-academy-eindhoven/> (accessed 3 June 2016).
- 12 Samir Patel, "Digging a French Repast," *Archaeology*, 63:5 (Sept–Oct 2010), <http://archive.archaeology.org/1009/trenches/french-repast.html> (accessed 23 Oct 2016).
- 13 Susan Nunn, *How to Make an Expressionist Frittata* (2014), natural dyed fabrics, plastic card, thread, 60 x 50 x 15 cm. Collection of the artist, Dunedin.
- 14 Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1893), oil, tempera, pastel, crayon on cardboard, 91 cm x 74 cm. The National Gallery of Norway, Oslo.
- 15 Susan Nunn, *Pie* (2015), fabric, polyester, foam, lace (size variable). Collection of the artist, Dunedin.
- 16 Jonathan Bloom, *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of its Food (and What We Can Do about it)* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2011).
- 17 Jennifer Brookes, "Food Waste, Poverty and the 'Ugly Food Movement,'" *The Blue Review*, blog posted 14 April 2015, <http://thebluereview.org/food-waste-poverty-and-the-ugly-food-movement> (accessed 21 Nov 2016).
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