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## UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN MEALS

*Food Art, Gastropolitics and the Anthropocene*<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The exploration of alternative foodscapes is a clear attempt at re-localizing food in contrast with agro-industrial globalization and its environmental, economic and social unsustainability. Art has dramatically contributed with speculations on what has been called “survival food”. This paper analyzes three case studies: *The Next Menu*, a gastronomical art project designed to imagine a future supper and explore new or overlooked sources of nutrition to respond to climate change constraints; the *De-Extinction Dinner* by the Center for the Genomic Gastronomy, an experiment in cross-pollination of amateur science with multimedia art; Dana Sherwood’s work involving decadent cakes to feed non-human animals with the purpose to understand interspecies relations.

**KEYWORDS:** Food Art, Anthropocene, Gastropolitics, Extinction, Alternative Food.

“*Lu cuntu nun metti tempu*”, time takes no time in a story. This is a Sicilian storytellers’ formula that Italo Calvino reports in the second of his much-cited *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the Norton series lectures that he was supposed to deliver at Harvard University in 1985-86. Unfortunately, almost at the end of his endeavor and shortly before leaving for the United States, he died of a stroke. His second Memo – arguably the most poignant – is devoted to “quickness” and to its magic:

I don’t mean to say that quickness has value in itself. Narrative time can also be delaying, cyclic, or static. In any case, a story is an operation on duration, an enchantment that affects the flow of time, contracting it or expanding it. (Calvino 2016, 41)

Calvino explains that folktales (*li cunti*) are especially effective examples of quickness as they imply the ability of a writer to both control the speed of a story – its rhythms and silences, its patterns and formulas – and to foster its diffusion, make it travel among other written words. Quickness, however, is

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not speed. By praising the idea of conciseness, Calvino also implies its opposite: “the pleasures of delay” (55), namely the ability of contracting time that he recognizes either in repetition – a feature of oral tradition and fairytales – or in digression – a temporary deviation from a central theme or subject. Lingering, he argues, is a rewarding strategy of slowing down the course of time and putting off the inevitable ending: “Death,” he reminds us by quoting Italian writer Carlo Levi “is hidden in clocks” (42). This concurrence of haste and slowness can be seen as one of the several paradoxes of most Western societies, one that Calvino brilliantly illustrates with the motto *Festina lente*, the old Latin tag that he uses for his conclusion: hurry slowly (43).

The search for such a challenging harmony between quickness and slowness has also been a feature of food stories and a constant goal of our contemporary food systems. Food, in fact, is a rich site through which to think about a number of different things: subjectivity, culture, class, ethnicity, species, environment, among others, while the new-found enchantment with food clearly demonstrates how pivotal food and eating practices are in negotiating and eventually defining individual, family, and community roles, rituals and traditions. But if the question “What is food?” finds Roland Barthes’ reply, then you know that food is “[...] a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior [...] it signifies” (2008: 24). For Lévi-Strauss (1958) food constitutes a language that reflects social structures and cultural systems, while Mary Douglas (1972) argues that the act of eating is a way to incorporate a series of nutritional codes through which individuals can define their place and participation within a sociocultural collectivity. What is crucial for every society, then, is to manage a set of common meanings to make sense of things and allow for communication and comprehension among individuals; in other words, to acquire what Massimo Montanari calls “the grammar of food” (2006).

The application of the concept of *slow* to eating practices particularly reflects the recent growing interest of individuals to explore and discover new territories and their relative rooted hi/stories. To be a “culinary tourist” (or a “foodie”), for instance, is generally tantamount to meeting and getting to know the communities who inhabit those regions, appreciating their culture and getting acquainted with their multiple expressions. Although food has always been one of the major assets of a touristic destination, the new combination of slow food and slow tourism has attracted more people who are willing to be involved in a material and symbolic experience where food, place, and identity are part of an inextricable whole of local resources, historical specificity, and presumably “authentic” traditions.<sup>2</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>2</sup> Enogastronomic tourism has rapidly expanded from a small market niche to a model of

similarly to any other telling, also food stories require urgency and conciseness. This holds particularly true when we are faced with the multiple riddles imposed by the Anthropocene: how can we cope with the quick worsening of environmental conundrums and the slowness of people's reaction to an increasing sense of unease over contemporary foodscapes? How can we combine the quick evolution of population density and food disparity on one side, and the slowness of political action on the other? How can we narrate the quick-formed entanglements of the non-human world with us and our slow awareness process that in the wake of acceleration would hopefully cancel "human exceptionalism"?

Some recent practices and discourses surrounding the interweaving of food, art and environment may offer some suggestions. In this article, I will concentrate on three case studies that also mirror counter-gastropolitics, where the term gastropolitics is here intended in Appadurai's meaning: "[...] conflict or completion over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food" (1981, 495). Political gastronomy is quite an old concept since it dates back to 1825, when Jean Anthèlme Brillat-Savarin published his classic text, *The Physiology of Taste*, where he explains that the table

[...] establishes a kind of tie between the two parties to a bargain; after a meal a man is more apt to receive certain impressions, to yield to certain influences: and this is the origin of political gastronomy. Meals have become a means of government, and the fate of nations has been sealed at many a banquet. (2002 [1825], 37)

Food, then, can be used for persuasive power by both hosts and guests who share a whole variety of etiquette rules to cajole the other, while the table is recognized as a set for public drama. In a sense, the three artistic projects here analyzed, concur in the dramatization of the table, each with very different environmental concerns and representation strategies. *The Next Menu*, a gastronomical art project designed by New York based writer Alexandra Kleeman and experimental food artist Jen Monroe, imagines an ideal supper in the year 2047 and explores new or overlooked sources of nutrition to respond to climate change constraints; The Center for the Genomic Gastronomy (CGG), founded in 2010 by polymaths Cat Kremer and Zack Denfeld, is an experiment in cross-pollination of "amateur science with multimedia art" and an example of "green Avant-Garde" (Carruth 2014) that in 2018 offered a *De-Extinction Dinner*; Dana Sherwood's work involves

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territorial development, while culinary tourists choose touristic destinations that offer good food and good wine not to merely meet "a purely hedonistic aspiration" but rather as "a more complex cultural approach to knowledge, in which food, geography, place and identity are intertwined in a symbolic perspective". Cfr. P. Corvo and R. Maticena, 2017.

“decadent cakes, sculpted gelatin molds, and rare meats”<sup>3</sup> to feed non-human animals with the purpose to understand interspecies relations. While theorizing about the Anthropocene and promoting special consideration on the intersectionality of food, art, and the environment, these projects also encourage participatory performances and grassroots activism. Rather than being a mere subject, then, food is here considered as a medium for art, while chefs and artists offer multi-sensory, provocative *cuisine* experiences – inextricably ecological and technological – that require a great degree of trust and creative imagination. Food can have different functions in food-based art, which, unlike “the beautiful and mouth-watering dishes that appear in ubiquitous food-porn images and advertisements” does not rely on the pleasure and plenty of eating to trigger desires and prompt consumption (Bottinelli and D’Ayala Valva 2018, 1). According to art critic Nicolas Bourriaud and his *relational aesthetics*, when we come to talk about the socializing dimension of a shared meal – which of course may be a very ephemeral form of art when performed in a museum, a gallery, or in any other artistic space – we should not forget that in “the age of Man [...] the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (2002, 13). The culinary preparation of the dishes is not so relevant in these projects, where food is used as a medium that conveys much more than just a flavor. For Bourriaud, the most significant aspect of relational art lies in the ability to gather people and engage them in an aesthetic practice loaded with ethical concerns.

### The Next Menu

When in 2015 Alexandra Kleeman published her debut novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, it was quite evident that her ways of dealing with our contemporary obsessions with food and bodies were irreverent, unorthodox, and surreal. In her novel, for instance, the stringent anorexic behavioral patterns of the two main characters collide with their binge-watching habits – mainly TV commercials of junk food – to create a dystopian and increasingly preposterous narrative on eating routines and denials. Hence, Kleeman’s event *The Next Menu*, conceptualized together with chef and food artist Jen Monroe, came with no surprise. This speculative dinner, “a dystopian ocean-themed dinner party with no fish,” (Ewbak 2017) was presented by the

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<sup>3</sup> From Dana Sherwood’s webpage: <https://danasherwoodstudio.com/about> (last accessed August 24, 2019).

Bellwether creative collective on September 15, 2017 with the purpose to conjure a futuristic meal thirty years in the future.



Fig. 1. *Egg Restaurant* (Ph. S. Acres)



Fig. 2. *The Next Menu* (Ph. S. Acres)

The food, served to the 45 participants gathered in *Egg*, a restaurant in Brooklyn, could be considered both “survival” and “surviving”: it was supposed to be, in fact, the only food still available despite acidification, habitat destruction, pollution, over-exploitation, shoreline erosion and climate change. Although we now know enough to acknowledge that these phenomena are not mere threats, and despite a recent increase in interdisciplinary and transnational studies of the sea – whether they go under the labels of “oceanic studies” (Blum 2014), “blue cultural studies” (Mentz 2009), or “new thalassology” (Horden and Purcell 2006) – our understanding of how planetary forces affect our liquid environment may paradoxically be more effective when oceanic life forms are re-presented as vanishing food more than vanishing living creatures. If the extinction of our sea kins curtails our own pleasures at the table – and only eventually our own existence – we might be more prone to “pay better attention to overlaid arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces” (Tsing et al. 2017, G1). And even more so, perhaps, when vanishing food is the material of specific literary or artistic projects. As Kathryn Yusoff suggests, the aesthetic can “provide a possible site and mode of sensibility for engaging with the temporal and material contractions of the Anthropocene,” because of “a mode of experimentation with, and a concentrated sensation of” the radically incommensurate scale of geological time (Yusoff, qtd. in Vermeulen 2017, 183). On the other hand, however, *The Next Menu* is also a commentary on how certain species actually benefit from the changing climate and how they might affect our contemporary (failing) food chain by becoming the only culinary option.

The people invited to participate in *The Next Menu* had no clue of what kind of meal they were to consume, but they certainly knew that they were in no rush; one of the recommendations was to eat slowly: there is no hurry in a

post-apocalyptic world. The meal opened with a cocktail “made with mezcal, pineapple juice, smoked salt, and spirulina frozen into ice cubes” (Tiffany 2017). Spirulina, as the participants learned from a menu booklet, is a microalgae that is supposed to contain a number of nutrients, antioxidants and minerals and is being studied as a potential sustainable biofuel. When spirulina ice cubes started to melt, they also proved their lack of taste and their real function in the menu: they were used as reminders that the world and its resources are quickly disappearing.

The salad course was prepared with red cabbage mixed with seaweed, anchovies, mochi, toasted nori, and seabeans, a very fishy and salty concoction used to remind people of the different food alternatives and potential remedies. Seaweeds, in fact, can play a significant role in climate change mitigation and adaptation by absorbing more carbon dioxide than it releases. Also, it can reduce methane emissions from agriculture (when substituting synthetic fertilizers) and farms (when included in cattle feed). The seaweed and red cabbage together are Kleeman’s and Monroe’s idea of “an optimistic blueprint” salad for the future (Tiffany 2017). A soup made of mussels, blue oyster mushrooms, wakame seaweed, and a salty brown broth was the main course and it was served with a slice of bread that participants were meant to stir into a salty broth. As a matter of fact, salt was “the meal’s theme” (ibid.). According to Monroe: “The food and the centerpieces and the experience had to be about salt. The way your skin feels after a whole day at the beach. It’s an ongoing reminder of the ocean as a food source and location [...]” (ibid.).



Fig. 3. *Salt* (Ph. S. Acres)



Fig. 4. *Five futures* (Ph. S. Acres)

The last course of the meal contemplated a dessert called “Five futures” as it was actually composed of five (numbered) tiny samples. Number 1, for example, was a jellyfish sorbet, made with a technique invented by artist and NYU professor Marina Zurkow. The recipe included ingredients such as finely

chopped jellyfish – already amply used in many Asian cuisines – mixed with buttermilk and here proposed to imagine how new flavors might become ordinary in the near future. Number 3, “His ‘n’ hers,” was made of gels and supplements, another interesting hint at a current obsession that may become soon a need and, at the same time, a strong rebuke to gender marketing. The jelly squares, in fact, were divided into two colored sections: the “his” part was blue, bacon flavored and filled with omega-3 to stimulate brain activity, while the “hers” section was pink, had a strawberry flavor and contained biotin, a coenzyme and B vitamin, mostly used for brittle nails, hair loss, and depression. Playing with gender clichés – the colors, the (male) muscular strength vs the (female) emotional and psychological weaknesses – “His ‘n’ hers” also worked as a cautionary tale by evoking familiar disparities and gender roles as related to food production, preparation, and consumption. Finally, the numbered “futures” also appeared as lab experiments rather than cuisine products to remind that taste, the pleasure of eating, and the joy of sharing is getting as rare as some foods.

*The Next Menu* was not a promise of deliciousness or even edibility. Nature and artifice were intermingled to confuse the consumers: form was separated from content, food from its main function, and what people ate was a real challenge since the meal was mainly meant to be a take-home reminder of our impending death. The whole atmosphere was, of course, fairly macabre and resounded with Anna Tsing’s words on anthropogenic landscapes (or, in this case, foodscapes):

The winds of the Anthropocene carry ghosts – the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present [...]. These are winds that blow over arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces, which we call “landscapes” [...]. Our ghosts are the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade. (Tsing et al. 2017, G1)

And if “death is hidden in clocks”, as Italo Calvino reminds us, *The Next Menu* was a boisterous incentive not only to finally admit that we, humans, are responsible for the multiplication of the ghosts around us, but especially for giving an urgent response to that fastidious ticking that we tend to ignore: “This time,” Elizabeth Kolbert argues talking about extinction, “we are the asteroids” (Dreifus 2014)<sup>4</sup>. Then, in the new stories that we are going to write, we will need to

share space with the ghostly contours of a stone, the radioactivity of a fingerprint, the eggs of a horseshoe crab, a wild bat pollinator, an absent wildflower in a meadow, a

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. E. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Co, New York 2014.

lichen on a tombstone, a tomato growing in an abandoned car tire. It is these shared spaces, or what we call haunted landscapes, that relentlessly trouble the narratives of Progress, and urge us to radically imagine worlds that are possible because they are already here. (Tsing et al., G12)

These are spaces of inter-action that belong to the normality of our everyday life, to an “everyday Anthropocene,” to say it with Stephanie LeMenager, an expression that refers to both a mood and to “the economic and sociological injuries that underwrite it” (2017, 225). Eventually, *The Next Menu*, appeared not just as a rehearsal of coping with future extinction, but rather as a collective project, similar to what LeMenager defines “making home of a broken world” (226, emphasis in the original).

### The De-Extinction Dinner and The Center for the Genomic Gastronomy (CGG)

If *The Next Menu* offered a dystopian culinary glimpse of a near future, the *De-Extinction Dinner* could be considered as an eating experience that combined utopian speculations and serious ethical quandaries. The experiment was held at the Science Gallery in Dublin, on April 13, 2018, in collaboration with Chef Andrew Kelly and is listed among the multifold activities of The Center for the Genomic Gastronomy (CGG).

CGG is an independent research center, founded in 2010 by Cat Kremer and Zack Denfeld as “An artist-led think tank that examines the biotechnologies and biodiversity of human food systems,” and whose mission includes: 1) to map food controversies; 2) to prototype alternative culinary futures; 3) to imagine a more just, biodiverse & beautiful food system.<sup>5</sup> This international network of scientists, chefs, farmers and hackers working in three continents are involved in various activities that may be recognized as a translation process *sui generis*: their continuous confrontation with food systems, governmental politics, corporate interests and domestic gastropolitics are transformed into artistic events or food art products ranging from fluorescent sushi to smog meringues and radiation-bred sauces, i.e. experimental ways of eating where taste is not a priority and maybe not even a necessity, although it definitely matters. The idea first came from the urgency to raise questions on food biotechnology such as GMOs, to discuss

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<sup>5</sup> *The Center for Genomic Gastronomy*, “About”, <http://genomicgastronomy.com/about/> (last accessed August 24, 2019).



the different ways in which it interacts with our everyday lives and perceptions, and to imagine new forms of “Recombinatorial Cuisine”.<sup>6</sup>

The Center was created out of Zack Denfeld’s interest in biotechnology and it combines science with multimedia art, resulting in biohacking, i.e. “performative, often counterintuitive uses of biologically based technology to foster new public forums for social activism and experimentation” (Carruth 2014, 48). “Cyberagrarianism” is a synonym term used to invoke the agrarianism of US environmental writers like Wendell Berry, although, as Allison Carruth reminds us, it then displaces those writers’ typically pastoral investments in rural life with investments in the urban and high tech. When in 1989, Wendell Berry wrote in “The Pleasures of Eating” that “eating is an agricultural act” (2009 [1989], 227), the American writer, farmer and activist was confirming the direct link between the food that we eat and the agriculture that produces it. Fuddled by the passivity of American consumers who bought “what they have been persuaded to want,” Berry was one of the most attentive beholders of that alienation from food that many Americans were experiencing together with many other eating disorders. He thought that the “industrial eater” was a victim, somebody who was deprived of the skill to imagine the connections between eating and the land, in short somebody who suffered from what I call “cultural amnesia” in relation to food history (Fargione 2017). Today many food projects and start-ups are promising innovations that are supposed to lead to ecological, economic, and social sustainability in the food sector. And yet, many of these so-called innovations perpetuate the industrial approach to agriculture and food that got us into trouble in the first place. Commercial food innovation is often disconnected from variations in local eco-systems with their people and traditions, while the goal is still to make food production as efficient as possible instead of making food systems biodiverse.

The loss of biodiversity is at the base of the *De-Extinction Dinner* project whose aim is to call attention on how technology and synthetic biology are used, whether they may be misused, and to ponder on the economic, environmental, and social impacts of their applications. The eating experience postulate is the possibility to revive and eat extinct species.

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<sup>6</sup> “Recombinatorial Cuisine” is a research project that uses data to sort and recombine ingredients in new ways, with particular attention to attributes that are not included in commercial databases about food. Instead of creating algorithms and databases with the most universal and generic attributes, our work focuses on smaller and more particular datasets and audiences, using digital technology for culinary inspiration without losing the biological, geographic and ecologic specificity of gastronomy.” <http://genomicgastronomy.com/blog/recombinatorial-cuisine/> (last accessed August 26, 2019).



Fig. 5. DD Butcher paper



Fig. 6. DD Habitat



Fig. 7. DD Cells

The notion of “de-extinction” has been a *topos* and conjecture of science fiction, climate change fiction, and speculative fiction for quite some time. During the seventies it moved to the fringes of science to finally enter serious genetic engineer debates in the 1980s. After cloning became a reality and when CRISPR, gene-based medicine, offered a strategy to delete, replace or edit DNA, scientists started thinking about which animals might be brought back. Inevitably such a new study area elicits a whole set of special ethical considerations. In 2018, the idea of resurrecting extinct species from recovered fragments of their DNA was at the center of a lively debate within a group of researchers at the Center for Genomic Gastronomy who started wondering what were the emerging technologies, risks and outcomes of the growing movement to bring back extinct species. In an interview, Zack Denfeld offers quite an accurate view of the risks of “culinary eugenics” that he recognizes as impending in many parts of the world:

[...] Food politics are a strange parallel conversation to debates over human genetic engineering. Almost all the food we eat has been selectively-bred, domesticated, and increasingly may also involve mutagenesis, transgenesis, CRISPR and speed breeding techniques. But the resurgence of xenophobia and fascism thought in the U.S. and Europe has a bizarre culinary dimension. In the US you can see advertisements for open-pollinated seed varieties on conservative media. Reactionary “Blood and Soil” ideologies have often romanticized the rural and tried to define what is “authentically” local. It is unclear how concepts of re-localization, gastronomical preservation, food innovation and emerging biotechnology will all relate to each other in five years’ time. How will anti-corporate, ecologically minded food justice advocates relate to the more deeply reactionary foodies? Will we see racists (sic) ideologues advocating for the revival and consumption of “traditional” recipes and ingredients and the growing of “pure” non-hybrid cultivars? Things are getting very strange around the edges. (Cerpina 2017)

It is exactly this sort of “strangeness” that needs to be addressed quite promptly and with the due patience that creativity, productivity and resistance require. Hurry, slowly.

## Dana Sherwood

“What I do is very unscientific” (Kalamaras 2016). So states New York based artist Dana Sherwood in an interview that highlights the mutual influences of science and art, a feature of her multimedia work that promotes a dialogue among various approaches to respond to global environmental challenges. If science alone has proved insufficient in addressing most of our cogent environmental issues, Sherwood’s works confirm that what is needed is a reassessment of the arts and the humanities to offer innovative lines of inquiry and promote serious commitment to mapping common ground within global horizons of expression. The first step of this ambitious practice consists in the questioning of long-standing notions of conservative practices that have repeatedly led to human control and domination of natural resources. Many disciplines such as human and zoo-anthropology, ethnography, and animal studies have recently contributed to analyze interspecies relationships: “Species interdependence is a well-known fact,” claims Anna Tsing, “except when it comes to humans” (2011, 144). This supposed exceptionalism has sprung from the assumption that we are “autonomously self-maintaining” (ibid.), a conservative idea that has favored preservation rather than innovation, perpetuating a false dichotomy of nature and culture, and eventually nurturing an ideology of human imperialism over the planet.

Mostly with a subtle sense of humor, Sherwood plays with the concepts of interspecies relations and exhibits serious perplexities on the rigid separation of the domestic and the wild. Food is generally used as an inquiring tool. One example is given by the creation of picnic baskets for South African baboons living on the margins of civilization in *Picnic at Cape Point* (2012), one of her first projects, that relies on the volunteer and unaware participation of wild animals. The purported particularities of a non-human alimentary grammar are here interlinked with human modes of alimentary discourse, hospitality, and commensality.



Fig. 8. *Picnic at Cape Point*



Fig. 9. *Picnic with baboon*

If “Eating the Other” is one of the most reiterated tropes that informs the alimentary order of colonial and postcolonial narratives, Dana Sherwood expands it to encourage responsible and imaginative forms of connection with the Other in the world, in this case non-human animals. Both repelled by the systematized violence against millions of animals in Western developed countries and disconcerted by a multiplicity of traditionally excluded Others, the artist seems to be concerned by current identity discourses in relation with the accelerating environmental crisis. As Una Chaudhuri claims:

Once you start thinking of them as the ultimately othered Other, you realize how much has been riding on or produced by the mechanisms of Othering, and how it folds back on the other identity discourses. [Animal studies is] another way to go back and understand how sexism and racism have been in many ways underwritten by speciesism. (Livingstone 2013)

According to Sherwood, our mainly forced proximity with other species depends on the destruction of animal habitats and exploded development: “Every week I read in the paper of bear sightings in Florida, raccoon evictions in Brooklyn, baboons in Cape Town and leopards in Mumbai” (Kalamaras 2016). As Donna Haraway has declared, living together is an art that needs to be learned. Her trope of “companion species”<sup>7</sup> is compelling in its way of deconstructing the boundaries between humans and non-humans, of shedding light on their co-evolutionary relations and mutual signification that, far from being one-dimensional, open to very complex and asymmetrical dimensions.

In order to entice interspecies encounters, Sherwood bakes elaborate layer cakes for her animals – baboons, but also raccoons, possums and stray cats – whose basic recipes come from a vintage Betty Crocker recipe book from the 1970s, and incorporates ingredients traditional to animal diets – seeds, grapes, chicken hearts – that she transforms into cake happenings upon sumptuous tables set at night and captured on video by infrared cameras. This is the case of *Banquets in the Dark Wildness* (2014) and *Feral Cakes* (2017).<sup>8</sup> Both works, which rely on the animals’ unpredictable responses, illustrate the strident opposition between abundance/excess/waste and hunger; as Sherwood reminds us, “animals eat the food not because it’s pretty but because they’re hungry” (Mishan 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. D. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003; *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Feral Cakes* was first exhibited at Kepler Art Conseil in Paris from September 26 to October 21, 2017 and was then brought to Untitled Miami Beach by Denny Gallery in December 2017.

Food, in this way, is finally restored to its original natural function with the further advantage that animals neither overeat nor leave waste behind them.



Fig. 10. *Feral Cakes* (2017)



Fig. 11. *Feral Cakes* (2017)

*Feral Cakes* is also a reflection on “ferality,” namely the condition of existing in between domestication and wildness (Garrard 2014, 248) or, rather, on “ferity” to use the terminology provided by animal studies scholar Philip Armstrong: “the state or quality of being feral to indicate those forms of wilderness that represent a reaction against modernity’s attempts at civilization, domestication, captivation or manipulation” (2008, 227). Dana Sherwood invites us to reconsider and re-configure the limits between the tamed and the untamed, the domestic and the wild, where domestication is seen as the earliest form of oppressive “biopower” (H. Dreyfus, P. Rabinow and M. Foucault 1983), which seeks to minimize or eliminate animal agency altogether: “Cooking and its relationship to domestication and the taming of the wild initiates our long history of manipulating the natural world to suit our desires [...]” (Sherwood 2019). But the allure of “taming nature by way of flour, sugar, and eggs into cake,” (ibid.) soon leads the way to a reflection on the ambivalence of treating animals as both companion species *and* food, which causes profound ethical dilemmas. And yet: raccoons and possums rarely make our tables. Their current increased “invasion” of urban spaces has generally met the response of extermination, while Dana Sherwood believes this is another sign of the Anthropocene crisis: “While I am working in the kitchen to make food for *all* the animals I feed,” she says, “we are surveying each other from a distance, wondering who is taming whom” (ibid. *Emphasis in the original*).

This is particularly evident in her drawings: whimsical watercolor illustrations of her nocturnal visitors and their banquets. They generally hang on one wall of the gallery where her works are exhibited and are framed with sausage links, which become markers of the violence that has been performed, both physically and discursively. The curious possum in

figure 13, for example, is sitting like a puppy, witnessing Dana's endeavor and possibly waiting for its share of ground meat.



Fig. 12. *Raccoon with Cake and Sausage* (2014) Fig. 13. *Meat Grinder with Raccoon* (2014)



Fig. 14. *Face to Face in the Palmettos* (2017)

Eventually, while engaging with this wild population embedded in human-claimed geographies, Sherwood fabricates a common ecosystem that she calls “Humanimaland,” a space that instantiates Nicolas Bourriaud’s “artwork as social interstice” (Bourriaud 2002, 14). The French critic claims that in this globalized society we have witnessed a growing urbanization of the artistic experiment, “an art form where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes ‘being together’ as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture [...]” (Ibid.). But again, Dana Sherwood extends this concept to involve non-human animals. By paraphrasing Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, Bourriaud would probably concede: “Here, then, is the time of the ‘dolce utopia’” (ibid.). By recognizing the absurdity of “the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project” and that “its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain,” Bourriaud evokes a “sweet utopia” that Dana Sherwood



epitomizes with her artistic meals: mainly, a perceptive and critical experiment in democratic participation that overcomes the individual, “private symbolic space” (ibid.) while calling attention to the possibility of human and non human interactions.

Working at the intersection of art, science, philosophy and technology, all these experimental representations of the Anthropocene redirect our focus to ethical issues and questions of power. Food, as we have seen, rather than being a mere subject of artistic speculation can function as a very effective tool to share aesthetic experiences, investigate on our future, and foster public participation and engagement.

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