

**INTRODUCTION** · Catherine Flood and  
May Rosenthal Sloan · 6,383 WORDS ·  
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In 2015 Dutch Design student Mathilde Nakken presented a manifesto project, *Make Food, Not Chairs*, at a furniture fair in Milan, in which she subverted the classic project of the industrial designer by baking 100 iconic chair designs in bread. She described the exercise as a protest 'in the belly of the beast' against designers who are still reinventing the chair:

**I imagined the current design world as an organism. What does it eat? What does it excrete? Well, I see it shitting chairs ... Is there still a large need for our societies to find out how to sit? ... Do we need more chairs and what do we need to design instead?'**

Working in the edible, sensory and unpredictable material of dough was a poetic refusal to create more stuff simply to serve the market and feed a wasteful culture of consumption. The provocation to *Make Food, Not Chairs* challenged designers to shift their attention from projects that produce stylistic novelty to ones that grapple with meaningful forms of social change. A focus on food, Nakken proposed - approached from a perspective bigger than what's on the plate - offers inspiration and scope to do just that. *Make Food, Not Chairs* implicated both food and design as subjects ripe for rethinking.

Today the future of food is a topic of intense debate. Around the world, desire is growing for a food system that is more sustainable, fair - and delicious - than the one we are currently cultivating. Questions of how we eat are bound up with some of the biggest challenges we face globally, from climate change and ecological damage to the infringement of cultural sovereignty and workers' rights, public health and the gross inequalities of global distribution. At the same time food is entering a period of radical technological reinvention that some predict will be as world-changing as the agricultural and industrial revolutions. The potential for technology to disrupt how we grow, distribute and experience food is catalysing global conversations about the needs, values and aspirations embedded in our food systems.



↔ An edible critique of modern design.

*Make Food, Not Chairs*,  
Mathilde Nakken, 2015

In recent years a groundswell of artists and designers has joined these debates and become involved in germinating ideas for alternative food futures. In turn, working with food is fuelling new experimental and collaborative creative practices. Artists and designers are working alongside scientists, chefs, farmers and local communities, and are even exploring 'more-than-human' forms of collaboration with the animals we farm and the microbes that populate our digestive systems. The aim of this book and the exhibition it accompanies is to bring together some of the most exciting examples of this work to consider the transformative ways in which food, politics and creative practices are converging. Our intention is not to codify a discipline of 'food design' or 'food art', but rather to recognize how food is providing a nexus for creative experiments - and to explore how the practices emerging can contribute to rethinking the way we eat and the ways in which we shape the world through food.



Reflecting the complexity and scope of food politics today, the projects presented here represent many different priorities, points of view and visions for the future. They act at different points throughout the food chain, from re-purposing waste to re-choreographing the rituals of the table, and they intervene through a diverse range of political and aesthetic strategies. What unites them is a critical and provocative approach to questioning what kind of food system we want – and who gets to decide. High-level discussions about how to feed the planet into the future mostly rehearse the existing industrial logic of increasing production and efficiency, ignoring biodiversity and resilience and the many forms of flourishing that relate to food. Experimental practitioners working outside or on the edges of the food industry can play a vital role in pushing our imaginations beyond the search for new fixes that deliver more of the same.

Eating is an intimate part of our biological and social being, but most people in industrial countries experience a predominantly passive relationship with food as consumers (or workers within the food industries). It is all too easy to feel that the future of food will be decided for us, remotely, by corporations and politicians. By bringing food debates into the realms of culture and everyday life, creating new spaces for discussion and activity, and refusing to separate the politics and pleasures

↑ An event addressing the relationship between humans and the animals we farm, *Dinner with Cows*, Kultivator, 2005

of food, artists, designers and their collaborators can begin to challenge this sense of alienation, build bridges between different kinds of knowledge and invite all of us to rethink ourselves as actors within the food system.

### Opening the can: expanding practices of art and design

During the twentieth century avant-garde artists worked with the material of food as a form of anti-art to disrupt cultural hierarchies. In the 1960s and 1970s food figured in post-studio practices as part of the project of bringing art closer to life. The influential artist Joseph Beuys (to pick just one example) pursued the activities of farming, cooking and eating as part of his theory of 'social sculpture' – the idea that every aspect of life can be approached creatively, and that everyone is thus potentially an artist. Building on this history, the politics of food has emerged in recent years as one of the most visible threads in a resurgence of art in the social sphere, and as a subject for creative collaborations that involve contemporary art more actively with the world.<sup>2</sup>

While the edible has entered provocatively in to the art world, design has a more integral relationship with food. The modern food system and the profession of design share their origins in the processes of industrialization and forging of mass societies in the nineteenth century. As the global food economy expanded and lengthening supply chains restructured the relationship between cities and the countryside, designers addressed a host of new requirements for transporting, preserving, selling and storing food. Design became fundamental to a modern way of producing, consuming and knowing about food – and continues to define every aspect of food as a commodity. Take the packaging of food products. Sealing the messy substances of food in geometric form rendered them more mobile (easier to handle and slower to decompose) and created a radical new form of presentation. In place of a shopkeeper portioning out the product, a printed package allowed a food company to speak to the consumer directly – a shift that gave birth to branding, paved the way for the bright aisles of the self-service supermarket, and set in train a corporate enclosure of food knowledge and economic value.

➤ Manifesto calling for a more democratic idea of art by likening it to food, *Bread and Puppet Theater*, Vermont, 1984

During the twentieth century avant-garde artists worked with the material of food as a form of anti-art to disrupt cultural hierarchies. In the 1960s and 1970s food

## the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto

**PEOPLE** have been **THINKING** too long that **ART** is a **PRIVILEGE** of the **MUSEUMS** & the **RICH**. **ART IS NOT BUSINESS!** It does not belong to banks & fancy investors **ART IS FOOD**. You cant **EAT** it **BUT** it **FEEDS** you. **ART** has to be **CHEAP** & available to **EVERYBODY**. It needs to be **EVERYWHERE** because it is the **INSIDE** of the **WORLD**.

**ART SOOTHES PAIN!**  
Art wakes up sleepers!  
**ART FIGHTS AGAINST WAR & STUPIDITY!**  
**ART SINGS HALLELUJA!**  
ART IS FOR KITCHENS!  
**ART IS LIKE GOOD BREAD!**  
**Art is like green trees!**  
Art is like white clouds in blue sky!

**ART IS CHEAP!**  
**HURRAH**  
Bread & Puppet Glover, Vermont, 1984

As the global food economy expanded and lengthening supply chains restructured the relationship between cities and the countryside, designers addressed a host of new requirements for transporting, preserving, selling and storing food. Design became fundamental to a modern way of producing, consuming and knowing about food – and continues to define every aspect of food as a commodity. Take the packaging of food products. Sealing the messy substances of food in geometric form rendered them more mobile (easier to handle and slower to decompose) and created a radical new form of presentation. In place of a shopkeeper portioning out the product, a printed package allowed a food company to speak to the consumer directly – a shift that gave birth to branding, paved the way for the bright aisles of the self-service supermarket, and set in train a corporate enclosure of food knowledge and economic value.

On a symbolic level, processed and packaged foods embodied an ideology of modernity. They were standardized, hygienic and abstract. Nature reshaped according to human design. A promotional film for the American Can Company, *The Miracle of the Can*, made around 1956, visualized this idea in a sequence that showed peach trees blossoming, producing peaches and then morphing into a hermetically sealed tin can (still hanging on the tree): living fruit transformed into the perfect artefact. Over 40 minutes the film tells a story of heroic designers and manufacturers creating a whole new way of life by perfecting the processes of mechanical canning. The can is presented as a shining beacon of economic growth based on technological progress and the extraction of limitless natural resources, resulting in ever-increasing production. 'Much we have today', sums up the voice over at the end, 'and our promise of the future is ever more and more...'.<sup>3</sup>

→ Early posters by artists and advertising agents using striking imagery to market processed and branded foods, France, 1894 and Britain, 1905

The productionism celebrated so fulsomely in *The Miracle of the Can* still prevails. But in an era of mounting ecological and neoliberal economic crisis, people are calling for new paradigms that account for the social and ecological impacts of how we eat, and that zoom out to frame food as something more than an end product.<sup>4</sup> As chef Dan Barber argues, what we've lost within the miracles of industrialization is 'an understanding that food is a process, a web of relationships, not an individual ingredient or commodity'.<sup>5</sup>

This desire to see food as 'less of a thing and more of a relationship'<sup>6</sup> is mirrored by expanding ideas about what design is and what it can do in a post-industrial world of outsourced and immaterial labour, in which design is increasingly decoupled from industry. Contemporary designers are shifting their attention from objects as the heart of the design process to the complex systems in which they operate. Hybrid creative practices are blurring disciplinary boundaries and designers are seeking out collaborators from other fields of expertise in order to tackle complex 'wicked' problems that defy solitary solutions.<sup>7</sup> As learning expert Stephen Heppell writes, creative practice has shifted from being 'discipline-based' to 'issue-or project-based'. Or as designer Tony Dunne puts it, 'People don't fit neat categories; they're a mixture of artists, engineers, designers, thinkers'.<sup>8</sup>



In this context, food as an essentially 'undisciplined' material that spills over boundaries between science and culture, ecology and economy, technology and the body, human and non-human, professional knowledge and everyday experience, is lending itself to expanded ways of working. Whereas designers have traditionally approached food as something to contain and sell, a new generation of creative practitioners is embracing its complexity, connectivity and messiness.

On some levels a focus on systems and networked things relates to the capitalist science of logistics, in which the goal is to find more efficient ways to extract value.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, an emphasis is emerging on design as an activity and a way of thinking that can be used to explore ideas, conduct critical research and catalyse new social situations.

As a subject that extends so far and in so many directions, artists and designers are discovering food as a powerful tool through which to engage critically with the systems that govern our lives. Food unfolds ways of seeing the world, but also of identifying our agency in it. We live in an era of digital networks, but by ingesting food we become materially entangled and implicated in a host of relationships. When we use food to think through the world, we can never do it entirely as outsiders looking in, and this makes food a close and affective way to work with social and ecological ideas. As Elspeth Probyn writes, 'the question of how to live today can best be seen at gut level'.<sup>10</sup>

## Recipes for change

**When intelligent creativity meets the act of eating we can expect a powerful generator of positive changes for the future.<sup>11</sup>**  
**Marije Vogelzang**

Agribusiness and food industries possess a wealth of knowledge and experience of the logistics of food distribution and the mechanisms of consumers' behaviours and desires. Their vast reach means that changes they enact have the potential to impact the lives of billions and significantly reshape our world. The mainstream food industries, however, have little incentive to foster innovations that aim for tangible shifts in the structures and systems from which they profit. And while the leveraging of new technology to cause creative disruption in the food sector can appear game-changing, it is important to look beyond the hype and consider what is actually changing.



**Charting the journey of a banana from production to consumption**, *Banana Passport*, Björn Steinar Blumenstein and Johanna Seelemann, Iceland, 2017

A huge amount of research and investment is currently focused on the development of sophisticated meat substitutes that are promoted as 'victimless', and more sustainable than 'real' meat, while apparently indistinguishable by flavour and texture. Plant-based burgers that bleed seem radical indeed. But as designer Thomas Pausz points out, their rationale is based on a substitution that doesn't require any great cultural or behavioural change: 'isn't meat production a symptom of a wider malaise in society? If this symptom disappears, what happens to the roots of the problem?'<sup>12</sup> In terms of production, high-tech, plant-based meat substitutes may simply reinforce the current paradigm of food standardization, fungible ingredients and lack of transparency. They still require us to buy in to a system about which we know almost nothing.

The idea that by 'voting' through our purchasing choices we can remake the system in line with our views is seductive. But food initiatives that promote change primarily as a matter of consumer choice limit the issues

to the individual and behavioural, ignoring the systemic. Placing the onus on the consumer obscures the responsibility of corporations and governments and can play into a problematic kind of personal 'purity politics'.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, the creative projects brought together in this book prioritize debate, advocacy and participation in the interests of collectively

rethinking the way we eat and what we can do with food. It might feel tempting to dismiss them as speculative gestures and small-scale forms of production. However, by creating cultural spaces for experimentation outside the interests of the industry, and producing new knowledge through unconventional forms of research and collaboration, they begin to challenge the very nature of the existing food system, allowing more options and possibilities to develop.

These creative projects occupy a range of platforms from marketplace to gallery and laboratory to community kitchen - with many moving fluidly between institutional and 'real-world' contexts. Some involve a design intervention in the form of an object, food product or technical application that prompts new behaviours and cycles. Innovative products and materials

are emerging out of dynamic cultures of production, from start-ups and social enterprises to open-source collectives and grassroots situations. Toast Ale, for example, brews beer from bread that would otherwise go to waste. It acts like a plaster placed on a wound, addressing the problem (the fact that 44 per cent of bread is wasted in the UK) while simultaneously drawing attention to it. Toast Ale states that its ultimate intention is to put itself out of business.<sup>14</sup>

Other projects operate poetically through exhibitions and events, leveraging the ability of art to make the familiar unfamiliar or the hidden visible in order to document aspects of the food system, hold them up to scrutiny and introduce new points of view. In the *Banana Passport* designers Björn Steinar Blumenstein and Johanna Seelemann chart the 14-day journey of a banana from Ecuador to Iceland to highlight how products appear in front of us bearing no traces of the number of hands they pass through (33 in the case of this banana), the places they visit or the miles they travel. Sonja Stummerer and Martin Hablesreiter, meanwhile, demonstrate how performance can be used to theatrically up-end our expectations around the table and question existing behaviours, throwing open the liberating possibility that things could be otherwise (see p.138).

To step forward from there and imagine different food futures, we need new narratives, and some artists and designers are developing roles as story-tellers for the food system. One particularly palpable strategy for doing this is described as 'speculative gastronomy': serving foods that allow participants to actually taste and digest alternative culinary scenarios (the foods of the future plated in the present).<sup>15</sup> This kind of work, exemplified by the Center for Genomic Gastronomy (see p.128), can (literally) give flesh to the debates and situate the audience within them as active participants.

Collaborations between creative practitioners and scientists that combine artistic and scientific forms of experimentation are pushing the boundaries of research beyond commercial outcomes in food-related fields. Artists and designers working directly with the emerging tools of biotechnology have become interlocutors with both the scientific community and the general public. In questioning the role these technologies might play in reinventing agriculture and cuisine, they are interrogating the increasingly blurry lines between cultivated living organisms and manufactured products within the food chain.

In the early 2000s the 'Tissue Culture and Art Project', led by artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, became one of the leading research teams working on lab-grown meat, and the first to culture, cook and serve it - which they did in public in an art gallery. By bringing the products of laboratory work into public consideration through exhibitions and demonstrations, bio-artists and designers are carving out a critical space between the tech-hype of agribusiness and the agendas of the artisan food movement.

Beyond exhibition halls, bio-hack labs and workshops are opening the tools and processes of biotechnology to amateurs and non-affiliated researchers. These spaces challenge the corporate control of biotechnology and are



creating a vibrant interplay between the laboratory and the ethos of sharing and creative permission that we often think of as characterizing the kitchen.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, from hacker spaces to more formal art-science collaborations, and DIY fermentation workshops to culinary research initiatives, creative collaborations are developing wilder and more democratic configurations of biology and cooking, research and flavour.

Outside of these spaces, the issues surrounding food are being addressed through creative social practices embedded in communities, which are putting alternative models of production and consumption to work. Projects such as a bottom-up strategy for urban farming or a community drinks company (see p.54) can reorganize elements of a local situation and activate communal resources to test out, in the here and now, the potential for different social relations, economies and topologies involving food.

Food is an area where expanded practices of art and design bleed into everyday forms of creativity and expression. In looking at the modern food system the iceberg image used by J.K. Gibson-Graham to describe the economy comes to mind. When we talk about 'the economy', they argue, we have been trained to only see the tip of the iceberg (wage labour, market exchange of commodities, capitalist enterprise), ignoring the vast range of 'hidden economies' (from gift giving and care work to lending, etc.) that make up the full range of human economic activities.<sup>17</sup>

↓ Experiments in  
flavour, preservation

and fermentation, Nordic Food Lab, Copenhagen, 2011 We can apply the same logic to the food system, which comprises a wide spectrum of informal activities beyond the



→ A residency art project  
with HOLA mapping the  
location of fruit trees  
in the public spaces of  
Los Angeles, Fallen Fruit  
(David Allen Burns and  
Austin Young), 2014  
(see recipe on p.161)



superstructures of the food industries. Undoubtedly part of the process of reimagining this system involves paying attention to these already existing informal activities and common forms of knowledge, and their potential to feed broader visions of change. This 'latent commons' of food represents a rich area for co-research (action research) between communities, academics, activists and artists.

**Food in the gallery:  
instruction or inquiry?**

If what we have described represents a critical mass of creative practice centered on food that engages in desire for systemic change and greater food democracy, then what role can museums play? Food, both in galleries and museum cafés, can help to attract and include wider audiences, provoke and inform public debate and, at its best, serve as a means of democratizing public cultural spaces (though like food systems more broadly, museums can only be as democratic as their own internal structures and systems will allow). Can bringing these projects into the galleries act as a prompt for museums to engage in different ways with food, and interrogate their role as inclusive public spaces?

The V&A is an interesting place to ask these questions because along with its forerunner, the South Kensington Museum, it is a cultural edifice that has always had at its core an engaged, and at times visionary, relationship



with food, from an early food museum to the world's first museum café. This project seeks to disrupt the idea of object containment and institutional instruction, and rethinks relationships between collections and caterers, for so long seen as distinct, instead engaging with the messiness of food, both materially and systemically.

In the final essay Honey & Bunny describe a performance using food at the V&A being met

by audience interaction that in its zealotry bordered on violence (pp.142-3). There is something disarming about the presence of food in gallery spaces, particularly in historic buildings filled with precious artefacts, and especially when it is shown, performed and interacted with in ways that are not contained and airtight. But beyond the very real possibility of contamination, there is something quietly radical about introducing such intimate spaces and practices as the kitchen, the dinner table and the process of cooking and eating, into grand museums. This is in part because these buildings were often designed to dominate the bodies and inspire awe in the minds of their visitors. Richard Pell, another of our authors, describes elsewhere the institutional use of awe and wonder:

↑ A performance at the V&A challenging audiences to question their habits and rituals around the table, Honey & Bunny, photograph by Ulrike Koeb, 2016

**Following the necessary injection of funds from the mega-wealthy industrialists of the late 19th century, museum[s] ... acquired the monumental architecture of cathedrals and temples. The Great Hall in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC with its colossal taxidermy elephant and adjoining halls of knowledge inspires nothing if not wonder. It is a truly incredible space. But perhaps in the effort to impress the public with how much they know, they created a space that makes it harder to ask 'Why?' ... When was the last time you visited a science museum and were shown something so new and incredible that science was at a loss for words to describe it? And yet, isn't this the experience that we want to have? To arrive at the bleeding edge of what is knowable and gaze over the edge into the unknown and ask a question without feeling dumb.<sup>18</sup>**

The South Kensington Museum squarely fit Pell's description of the temple of wonder. In fact it included a dedicated food collection, but this was very much counter to the messy, provocative, playful work of Honey & Bunny a century and a half later. The Animal Product and Food Collection built on the museum's improvement remit, emphasizing physical as well as moral and social improvement. A prominent display outlined the chemical compositions of various foods in relation to the physical need of the human body, suggesting a hierarchy based on nutritional efficiency.<sup>19</sup>

As nineteenth-century visitors were instructed in the tasteful consumption of designed objects, they were also given training on how to eat 'properly'.

Visitors were encouraged to understand the new science of nutrition in order to better fuel themselves as efficient cogs in the powerful machine of industrial

Britain. Even a celebratory display of so-called Chinese food was framed by a narrative of British superiority, the guide stating that: 'Rice can only be the substantive article of diet of an indolent and feeble people.'<sup>20</sup> This was top-down instruction on industrial and scientific progress, with neatly sealed foods to be looked at but not touched, smelled or tasted. In what was very probably the first attempt by the British government to communicate to a [rapidly urbanizing] public about how to eat, via one of its grand new cultural institutions, food was rationalized as museum object, contained, labelled and displayed in a manner that prefigured industrial food processes.



➤ The Food and Animal Products Collection at the South Kensington Museum, *The Leisure Hour*, 1859

Indeed, in recent times the museum exhibition has been critiqued as a cultural supermarket - a site for the passive 'mass consumption of standardized forms'.<sup>21</sup> But the subject of food can challenge assumptions and rules about museum spaces and critical inquiry. Storytelling is important to these ends, with visitors playing the central role by considering their individual and bodily experience of food to make sense of larger systems and complex ideas. Elizabeth Williams, founder of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum, argues that 'Connecting the visitor with the object as opposed to presenting the object as an isolated subject of contemplation is a constant curatorial goal'.<sup>22</sup> This disrupts the traditional hierarchy of knowledge transmission, with visitors less provoked into awe than asked to consider themselves within curatorial narratives. Food fits naturally into this process. It shines a light onto social inequality and difference, while acting as the ultimate equalizer (we are all mammals, who eat and defecate). Exhibitions on food bring our very humanity, ourselves, our lives and our politics into focus - a shift from the industrial model, in which bodies are little more than machines, and museums are there to instruct. Recent notable examples include *Food Revolution 5.0* in Hamburg and *Our Global Kitchen: Food, Nature, Culture* in New York.

Embracing messiness, contradiction and active engagement, as a subject food needs to be approached in a spirit that seeks different view points. In so doing, this fundamentally challenges the notion that museums, curators and academics are necessarily right. Curator Nina Möllers asserts that

**the museum should become what has often been demanded of it but rarely realized: a forum for reflection, discussion, negotiation, and even controversy ... What museums and exhibitions can accomplish and should be called upon by the public to do is to create space - literally and figuratively - for free thinking, discussion, and visualization.<sup>23</sup>**

In the so-called 'post-truth' era, museums must not relinquish the responsibility for robust scholarship or detailed knowledge.<sup>24</sup> But in dealing with complexities and incorporating different perspectives, there should be attempts to engage in knowledge co-creation with our visitors. Meaningful interactivity, and sensorial engagement with food, can offer interesting means of doing just that.

## Eating in museums

The awe-inspiring, instructional nineteenth-century museum is so familiar, that it can be difficult to imagine this model representing a cultural shift. But in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century museums, which tended to be relatively small, scholarly and elite, sensorial engagement was encouraged. Visitors, fewer in number then, would have handled, smelled, perhaps even tasted objects. Cultural historian Constance Classen describes an eighteenth-century German visitor to Hans Sloane's collection 'us[ing] his sense of taste ... as an instrument of



investigation which supplements sight and touch' by sampling birds' nests in the collection.<sup>25</sup>

As museums and their audiences grew, methods of display became much more visual. At the same time the model of the museum café appeared. So while sensory engagement through smell, sound and taste was by no means abandoned, it was separated from galleries themselves, which prioritized visual instruction and ceased to be sites of bodily engagement.<sup>26</sup> The South Kensington Museum was a good example of this distinction of provision for body and mind. Curator Julius Bryant describes the experience of the visitor entering from Cromwell Road in 1868:

**Before taking the stairs, Victorian visitors would have passed another stage in the designed crescendo that began on Cromwell Road, one that still proves more tempting (for some) than the galleries upstairs. Coming in from the garden, visitors' eyes would have needed a moment to adjust to the darker vestibule. Then, to their astonishment, rather than some great museum hall of statues, or showcases filled with antiquities, they would have discovered, through glass screen-doors in the three arches opposite the entrance, a choice of a trio of refreshment rooms. The first glittering expanse of colourful ceramic, glass and enamel [was] filled with the sounds of happy gatherings and smells of dining ... The first message of the museum as its visitors entered was thus not education ... or an invitation to savour art, but rather food and drink.<sup>27</sup>**

In fact, there had already been catering facilities on site for a decade, making this the world's first museum restaurant [see recipes on p.160], Henry Cole and contemporaries having learned from the Great Exhibition how to attract (and extract money from) the groundswell of potential visitors in an urbanizing industrial Britain. However, while a museum café was considered a bold move, it was consistent with the theme of social and moral improvement, providing an alternative attraction to the capital's taverns and gin palaces.<sup>28</sup> But pleasure and education were distinct. The food collections were there to inform, the Refreshment Rooms to satiate and entertain, the two kept from informing one another. What, though, if these two functions could be more collaborative, respectively providing sensorial and intellectual context to each other, enriching the visitor's experience of both?

Eating and drinking together in a gallery can encourage visitors into dialogue with one another, which in turn aids engagement with the work on show.<sup>29</sup> The cultivation of intimate settings allows visitors to be acutely aware of their own bodies, identities and beliefs. This, when done well, can lead to a more effective grappling with big, complex ideas. The act of eating and drinking can also physically slow the visitor down, encouraging discussion and debate within an exhibition. Practitioners like the Center for Genomic Gastronomy make outstanding use of gallery settings as sites of critical inquiry, with tastebuds used as tools of comprehension. Equally, museum restaurants are beginning to engage with collections, programming and curatorial narratives, creating menus that reflect institutional remits or play on exhibition themes.<sup>30</sup>

The Grill Room at the South Kensington Museum, John Watkins, 1976-81

There are major challenges to undertaking this kind of joined-up, intellectually rigorous work on food in an economic climate that has seen a significant commercialization of the museum sector. The sensory turn in museums should, and often does, benefit those wanting to take interesting and critical approaches to food, but when the need for financial returns is foregrounded, this can lead to risk-averse programming and institutional reluctance to engage in questions of systemic complexity, condemning the sensory to become mere spectacle.<sup>31</sup> Increasingly, though, there appears to be a willingness and enthusiasm for critical approaches to food programming, evident in a number of institutions of different sizes and scopes the world over, and including the V&A's decision to stage the current exhibition, *Food: Bigger than the Plate*.<sup>32</sup>

Commercialization of museums has erected a further barrier to complexity of inquiry about food (both in exhibitions and in museum catering facilities) via the need for high ticket prices for temporary exhibitions, and high prices for food on sale. There is a real danger of missing, through economic exclusion, the voices of those whose experiences of the food system would make them particularly valuable participants in the debates that we wish to facilitate. Institutions like the V&A must ask themselves how serious they are about being public spaces and seeking to attract audiences as wide-ranging as possible. If the answer is that they are, then food could play more of a role. The museum could do better in signalling public freedom to use the building, and the inclusion and signposting of more spaces to eat and drink without having to spend money would contribute to this message. It is appropriate that the incidence of a visitor being asked not to breastfeed by a member of staff just last year (and within spitting distance of many wonderful bare-breasted artworks) elicited the backlash it did. We should be moving squarely away from the nineteenth-century museum fear of bodily contamination, and welcoming as many bodies (replete with biological functions) to make use of the museum as we can, thus enriching the work that we do with their own experiences, reflections and responses.

### The pleasure and politics of food

The following sections of this book represent a journey through a food cycle from Composting ('waste' as the beginning of new life) to Farming, through Trading to Cooking and Eating. Curatorial texts and essays from a range of writers, artists and designers explore creative practices that are engaging imaginatively with each of these activities. In the final section, a number of our contributors have provided recipes relating to their work, demonstrating how ideas and flavours intermingle in creative research. The broad scope of the subject matter reflects the shift described above in favour of zooming out from what's on the plate to understand food as a system and a relationship. In setting the parameters of this book and exhibition it felt imperative to address the expansive and interconnected approach to food that is being adopted by artists and designers today.

What we present is a multifaceted snapshot rather than a comprehensive survey of the experimental practices that are focusing critically on food today. Many of the projects included transverse the local and the global, but

there is a bias towards western and urban experiences in terms of their geographical and cultural orientation. This partly reflects a bias in what kinds of creative work are understood within predominantly western professional traditions of art and design.<sup>33</sup> While many practitioners who identify themselves as artists and designers are working with food today, there remain many everyday creative interventions, technological experiments and traditional practices that happen in less culturally visible settings. As briefly alluded to above, the boundary between expanded forms of art and design and grassroots or everyday food practices is a rich area for future research.

While the themes of this book are future-facing, historicizing the present industrial food system (including the role of design in creating it) plays an important role in helping us to imagine how things could be otherwise. A number of the essays and projects included here reactivate hidden food histories or reveal the way in which aspects of how we eat today that now seem unquestionable were forged within processes of colonialization, industrialization and modernity over the past two hundred years. Attending to these historical contexts can challenge deep-rooted assumptions and narratives of progress from our 'flush and forget' approach to human waste, to the duality of urban and rural, to our division of the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture'.

A key thread that runs through the projects brought together here is the need to re-value and reposition food within our world. As architect and writer Carolyn Steel, author of *Hungry City*, writes:

**[E]very pre-industrial society has placed food at its social and spatial heart, while every post-industrial one has placed food at the periphery. Why is this? The short answer is that food represents power; a fact all too evident in pre-industrial societies, yet relatively obscure in ours. Lulled by the prospect of year-round, 'cheap food', we have allowed our most precious common resource to slip beyond our grasp.<sup>34</sup>**

Arguing for food to be granted greater importance might seem quite counterintuitive at a moment when food is more visible within contemporary culture than ever before, from celebrity chefs to social media. Certainly, food (or at least what's on the plate) has proved to be ideally suited to an experience economy in which photogenic Instagram-able moments are replacing material goods as a means of creating social capital. What Steel and many of the contributors to this book assert, however, is that food – something embedded in our lives at every level – offers not simply a means of representing ourselves to others, but a practical and conceptual tool for comprehending and shaping the world we live in – a form of 'planetary sculpture', to quote the Center for Genomic Gastronomy.<sup>35</sup>

This doesn't mean pitting the pleasures of food against the politics – far from it. To succeed, any vision for the future of food needs to account for deliciousness and pleasure (for all), both as a goal in its own right and because pleasure is a powerful motivational force for change. As food waste campaigner Tristram Stuart puts it, '[i]f you want to change the world,

you have to throw a better party than those destroying it'.<sup>36</sup> Pleasure is a principle at stake in the struggle for greater food democracy and against the increasing commercial colonization of everyday life. This is apparent in the link between diminishing biodiversity and the homogenization of flavour and the ways in which our tastes are channelled and exploited through advertising.<sup>37</sup> But it is also manifested in the potentially rich and satisfying forms of everyday attention, care, skill and creative labour that are lost when food culture is outsourced and our role within it becomes passive and alienated. In a more food-attuned world, Steel suggests,

**We can celebrate the changing seasons, the uniqueness of place, the pleasure of company, respect for others, the taste of good food the smell of earth, the joy of learning and teaching, of working with our hands, of appreciating, loving and sharing.**<sup>38</sup>

Food is full of urgency and potential as a site of politics, offering an intimate and at its best transformative approach to global issues. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that the politics of food is equally fraught with pitfalls and contradictions, and can slip easily into elitism. How do we explore the potential of cooking without mythologizing domesticity? Or consider the value of the local in a political landscape increasingly defined by protectionist forms of nationalism? In pursuing questions of food, we nearly always hit the wall of even bigger structural questions about the organization of society and economy (perhaps this is what makes thinking about food critically so valuable). How, for example, do we grapple with the inequalities of industrial food while acknowledging the democratic nature of cheapness and convenience? Can we talk about public health and obesity in ways that are not pejorative and deeply classist? How do we create genuine forms of solidarity between actors across different parts of the food cycle who inhabit vastly different realities?

Many of the projects represented in this book and the exhibition it accompanies throw open more questions than they answer. As Ruby Tandoh puts it, 'There is no single "right" way to eat, and you should be duly suspicious of anyone who tells you there is'.<sup>39</sup> Considering the future of food demands that we embrace complexity and a spirit of curiosity and experiment. What constitutes a more just and beautiful food system, and how we might achieve it, is something that needs to be negotiated and continuously revisited by as many stakeholders as possible – from multiple perspectives and voices around the table. This book is offered in that spirit.



**Photographs celebrating the simple pleasure of women eating what makes them feel good in defiance of a food press that is often elitist, judgemental and fatphobic.** Part of a series produced for *DOMK Zine*, London, and inspired by Ruby Tandoh's writing, Sana Badri, 2018

