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Food Matters | When Eating and Art Became One
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May 10, 2013



Richard Landry, courtesy of the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London
Tina Girouard, Carol Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark outside FOOD, before its opening in 1971.

A few months before the artists Carol Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark opened their restaurant-slash-art installation, FOOD, on the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets in New York City in the fall of 1971, they roasted a pig beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Alanna Heiss, who would soon found P.S.1, installed work by Matta-Clark, Carl Andre, Sol Le Witt and Keith Sonnier in a raw, junk-filled space. On nearby Pier 14, Philip Glass performed and the year-old avant-garde theater company Mabou Mines staged a Samuel Beckett play. The artist Tina Girouard, who would cook at FOOD during its nearly three-year run, helped out with the hog. The pig burnt on the outside, she recalled, and raw on the inside.

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Even so, the notion of eating fresh food communally” as both an artistic and gastronomic statement” struck a chord. SoHo needed a good restaurant. Artists needed a place to gather. And Goodden was sick of spending all her money on dinner parties. In 1971, you didn’t have to be Keith McNally to open a restaurant downtown. We were all doing it, recalled Girouard, then well known in downtown circles for her Chatham Square loft parties, because we wanted to. FOOD was fueled by artists’ desires.

From the Dutch master Abraham Van Beyeren’s louché, luminous lobster (circa 1650) to the Pop artist Claes Oldenburg’s sculptural plate of French fries and ketchup (1963), there has always been a link between art and food. But the notion of calling soup performance and bread installation and considering that butter might be a significant component of a total work of art? Or the idea that bones from dinner could be made into accessories and passed along as parting gifts after dessert (which Matta-Clark did)? That kind of thinking felt fresh, and anchored an idea that is still playing out in the art world and in buzz-worthy restaurants that seem to open practically every week.



John Berens/FriezeA tribute to FOOD at this year’s Frieze New York.

Rirkrit Tiravanija began his career in 1990 by cooking pad thai for gallery-goers at Paula Allen Gallery, and his work has continued to feature large helpings of tom ka soup and Thai green curry ever since. In 2011, Phoebe Washburn built a wood-and-plastic fort called “Nunderwater Nort Lab,” set it up at Zach Feuer and served lunch. Last year at Frieze, Gavin Brown (Tiravanija’s gallerist) and Mark Ruffalo served up sausages to protest fracking. Meanwhile, in the restaurant world, every new establishment seems to be angling to become somebody’s clubhouse” a for-profit hangout for a targeted clientele where everything and everyone is served with intention. On occasion, that clientele still includes artists, though not in SoHo. But a few

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years back, before Roberta's became Roberta's, the only people there were Bushwick artists who wanted to take a break from their studios across the street to eat pizza with like-minded company. They needed the restaurant. The restaurant needed them. For a minute, Roberta's was FOOD.

The continuing relevance of this generation-old idea is the reason this year's Frieze Art Fair is paying homage to FOOD with a four-day reincarnation of the establishment. (A Roberta's pop-up is nearby.) Goodden and Girouard are both cooking. Goodden is making some of the restaurant's famous soups (cauliflower and watercress, and Spanish-style carrot). Girouard is taking another stab at that pig roast. The artists Matthew Day Jackson, who was born in 1974, and Jonathan Horowitz, who was 5 when FOOD opened, are cooking as well. I was interested to see what it would mean to bring FOOD back in 2013 and see what happens when food and art intertwine, said Cecillia Alemani, the curator of the Frieze Projects program, which includes FOOD. Many contemporary artists look at food with the same eyes Gordon Matta-Clark did, as malleable, simple ingredients that, in the right hands, can be magically transformed into something completely different. Which in the end is what art does.