



STIR

Yak E
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Seni
2017



Sharing a pleasant experience over a bowl of soup...

'A meal is not a proper meal without a bowl of soup'. In Chinese culture the importance of eating together as a family is emphasised, soup is at the heart of any such gathering. Soup may also be made for those who are recovering from illness and therefore represents a way of showing compassion and caring.

In *Stir*, the exhibition space featured three important parts: the kitchen design, the dining table and the slide projection of images taken from our personal photo albums of family and friends sharing convivial moments. In the space of seven days, we prepared and served thirteen different soups. On each day people had a choice of two different soups. As they sat and ate their food, the table became the focus for friendly discussion, like a sewing tool, weaving together friends, acquaintances and strangers.

The work was open to circumstance and interpretation. Perhaps, it was also an opportunity to ponder the nature of contemporary art practice, the notion of art and life and, the act of giving and receiving. John Cage once said, 'We are not saying something. We are simpleminded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it.'

Smoked Mackerel & Tomato Soup

Mushroom, Chicken & Sweetcorn Soup

Miso Soup

Seafood Soup

Green Peas & Mint Soup

Lotus Root, Spare Rib & Peanut Soup

Dall Soup

Beef & White Radish Soup

Mixed Vegetable Rice Soup

Chicken, Ginger & Rice Wine Soup

Three Mushrooms Soup

Chicken & Herbs Soup

Seaweed & Egg Soup



Is there such a thing as a free lunch?

Chong Boon Pok and Yak Beow Seah have turned Unit 2 into a venue for serving free soup. On entering the gallery from Whitechapel High Street you are confronted with a simple white minimalist counter made from chipboard. On each day of the week long project, a choice of two soups are on offer, prepared by the artists from fresh ingredients.

Taking the soup, I make my way to the long functional 24-foot table that has been constructed for the event and take a seat on the simple benches that the artists have made. Instead of the quiet contemplation of objects or processes, there is lively banter, ranging from the quality of the soup to the nature of current art practice. The gallery has been transformed into a dialogical-kitchen.

In between mouthfuls of miso soup, one discussion offers up some definitions of art, from art as mimesis (an early definition first introduced by Plato) to art as mental entities, a view advocated by Joseph Kosuth who wished to clear art of all aesthetic baggage in favour of propositional statements. Plato viewing art as twice removed from reality, being an imitation of an imitation could see no place for art in the education of the young or in the just State.

However, Pok and Seah's practice engages very directly with everyday life and the life of the State. The institutional context and commodity culture within which art circulates are brought into question. Pok and Seah view art as a gift, given without obligation, in the spirit of relational aesthetics. Their aim is to 'shorten the distance between art and life and to engage the viewer in the making and function of the artwork'. It's a simple but nonetheless radical premise upon which notable issues are raised. Can artworks escape commodification? Does the 'gift' imply the notion of reciprocity?

Art as ideology is a Marxist approach which views art as being to a large extent socially and economically determined, it is perhaps within

this broad definition and, particularly in relation to its formulation by Louis Althusser that Pok and Seah's work can be situated. The artwork is no longer viewed as a representation or reflection of society but as a means of contributing to its production. In post-industrial society production takes the form of services and 'experiences' that often take the place of goods and products.

Consequently, Pok and Seah's art is conceived as a service or an operational structure, moving art from a concern with the meaning of signs to the production of relationships. Like the work of John Cage in the 60's the openness of this art, its desire to live alongside the quotidian, to appropriate and be appropriated by non-art situations gives rise to an art that ostensibly engages with 'the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space'.¹

Sitting here in the gallery/kitchen I have the opportunity to engage in discussion, to meet others, to discuss how art might move from reflection to action, 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way'² and to play with the idea of a number of 'microtopias'.

However, what is the nature of the experience that is offered? What are the qualities of the relationships that are brought into existence? What do I take away from this encounter? I think its time for another bowl of soup. We are always told that there is no such thing as a free lunch, perhaps there is, or maybe I should offer to wash up.

Ian Robertson

1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Reel, Dijon, France, 2002, english version.

2. *ibid.*



A short site oriented play for those who enjoy Relational Aesthetics

Scenario one

Nicolas Bourriaud, Alex Farquharson and Grant Kester are curators, critics and teachers. The artist Krzysztof Wodiczko is also present. They are participating in a fictional symposium at an undisclosed location. They are quoting from texts they have prepared previously. They have memorised these and their quotes are identical to the excerpts from the publications they appeared in. During the interval the artist Liam Gillick is busily assembling one of his trademark platforms which he expects the audience to stand on to complete the work. No one does. As the conference resumes, listeners are only able to pick up bits of the speeches, since it is common knowledge that only a small percentage of any given lecture is retained. Curiously, when listening to several

speakers in succession, the audience may also attribute the few retained statements to the wrong speakers.

Scenario two

Yak Beow Seah and Chong Boon Pok are preparing and serving soup in a gallery in the East End of London. The space is divided into a kitchen area with a serving counter, and an eating zone. The customers are sitting at a single long table eating and chatting.

*'All works of art, especially good ones, are open systems that the recipient reformulates in his or her own way at the point of reception.'*¹

A: Which soup have you got?

B: I think it's the one with crab.

A: Mine's mushroom.

B: Any good?

A: Yeah, it's free.

'Participatory practice is described as 'that which breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, artwork and audience – a relationship that allows the viewer to 'speak back' to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself.'²

B: Do you think they'll let me have some more?

A: You still hungry?

B: Yeah, and I'm wondering what the other soup's like.

A: Maybe that's not part of the concept.

B: What concept?

'At the beginning of the 1990s, a number of artists showed very clearly what society was heading towards. today, now that they are surrounded by the tide whose rise they predicted, can we still see their works in the same way?'³

A: The concept of their work, of course.

B: What's that to do with being hungry?

'An artist invents a new way of swimming, he or she does not spend time sitting on the shore deconstructing the wakes of the boats, as if it were somehow possible to step outside human society.'⁴

*A: It's like this: Bourriaud likes aquatic metaphors, he says so. He says it's an important metaphor because postmodern society is fluid, flexible and enveloping. Those who claim to describe it from the outside are taking themselves for God.'*⁵

B: It reminds me of another other Frenchman who talked about seagulls following trawlers.

A: Oh right, Eric the footballing philosopher.

B: That's him, he also took himself for God.

A: But I don't think he meant postmodern society?

'The downside, as I see it, is that the curators interested in dealing self-reflexively with the structures of mediation inevitably end up privileging and creating an artificial demand for art practices engaged in those same questions.'⁶

A short while later, at the counter.

B: Can I have some more?

Y: Which one, mushroom or crab?

B: Mushroom.

(Back at the table)

B: The mushroom's really good!

A: You were right not to worry about the concept.

B: I'll come back tomorrow. They've got different flavours.

A: Like what?

B: Daal and ginger, I think.

A: Do you think that will change the work?

'I try to contribute to the process of transformation of the fearful silence of the invisible and unheard city residents (the participants) and of the deaf ear of those who are visible and heard (the public) into agonistic discourse of 'fearless speaking and listening.' My artistic method has consisted of creating a socio-aesthetic situation that allows, inspires, and protects a process where others may become (if only briefly) artists themselves.'⁷ (The audience claps, the panellists leave the stage, people get up and file past the vacated stage and Gillick's still empty platform.)

Nicolas de Oliveira

1. Alex Farquharson, *Curator and Artist*, Art Monthly, October 2003, p.16.
2. Grant Kester, *Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art*, Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy Conference, Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dublin, 1998.
3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics*, Berlin Biennale, Berlin Biennale fuer Zeitgenoessische Kunst E.V., 2001.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*, op.cit.
6. Alex Farquharson *ibid.*
7. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Interview with C.Ondine Chavoya, The Interventionists*, Mass MoCA and MIT, 2004, p.28.

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sharing a pleasant experience
over a bowl of soup
Yak Beow Seah & Chong Boon Pok
3–11 June 2004

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AV Support

David Wilkinson
Remy Lamont

Acknowledgements

Ian Robertson
Mick Williamson

Volunteers

Nuha Razik
Donna Knights
Young Soon Dusart

Photography © Leon Cole/
the artists, 2005

Text © the authors, 2005

Design

Fraser Muggerridge studio

Published by Unit 2, 2005
ISBN: 1 899764 44 5

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