

COOKING AND EATING LONDON: AN ALI&CIA URBANOPHAGY CEREMONY COMMISSIONED BY L.I.F.T.

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On Saturday, 28 April 2007, tourists passing through Trafalgar Square around lunchtime certainly got more than they bargained for. They were greeted by a spectacle of unusual proportions: the city of London being served up for lunch.

From Hyde Park to Tower Bridge and Oxford Street to Elephant and Castle, central London was familiar yet strangely different. Nothing was missing; all the towers, squares, parks and office blocks were present and to scale. There were buses crossing the bridges and the HMS *Belfast* securely moored on the Thames. But London had never looked quite so loved and cared for. The hand-made toasted wholemeal cucumber sandwich Houses of Parliament and bagel BT Tower appeared domesticated and playful. The sun glinted merrily off the toffee-apple façade of the Royal Court Theatre and made the choppy Thames of Perrier-water cans sparkle gaily. This edible London spread out on tables beneath Nelson's Column and covering an area of sixty square metres, cried out to be explored and rediscovered, surveyed and most certainly sampled. Tourists and Londoners alike delighted in and drooled over an Indian-sweet Buckingham Palace with sticky sweet *jellabis* gates, a London Eye of pizzas with red pepper pods suspended by cheese and an Imperial War Museum of Vietnamese spring and summer rolls.

This was *Eat London*. Presented by Lift (London International Festival of Theatre) it was the work of Ali&Cia, the Spanish food art collective I head with the architect Bárbara Ortiz, and fourteen

different community groups from east and south-east London. The edible model was composed of fourteen tables, each two metres square and each generously cooked and constructed by one of the groups for the public's delectation. The groups were asked to draw on their culinary traditions and idiosyncrasy, not to mention ingenuity, to recreate their section of the map. Among the groups participating were organisations for refugees and immigrants, associations promoting the social integration of people with disabilities, and other groups providing educational and social opportunities. Together there were around two hundred people of a wide range of ethnicities, abilities and ages. The resulting map was an eclectic landscape of cultural diversity, a reflection of the social makeup of the city and a utopian vision of social integration and shared protagonism.

After its presentation, the groups pulled apart the gastronomic patchwork and in a choreographed procession paraded their tables around the square's fountains to their gazebos where the crowds lined up, eager to take a bite out of the city. It is estimated that between two and three thousand people indulged in a collective catharsis in which we unleashed our latent desire to eat our surroundings and satiate our sensory curiosity.

Bárbara Ortiz and I first developed the idea in 2003 in response to a commission by Melbourne City Council to create a work involving food and communities to celebrate the inauguration of Federation Square, the city's new public space and icon. As Ali&Cia we had already developed a variety of edible representations in which reality is reinterpreted through food and devoured collectively. But the Urbanophagy Ceremony is our most participatory and thus most transformative project, and also that which best exemplifies and promotes our vision of the expressive and communicative nature of food.

Urbanophagy is an ambitious project, a work that could be described as public performance art or interactive community theatre, involving a veritable army of amateur chefs, facilitators



Eat London. Photograph by Simon Coben.

and production staff working over a period of several months as well as the direct participation of the thousands that attend. Like certain works of community theatre, it is a performance created in collaboration with the actors, who draw upon their identities, histories and experiences to then relate these to the public. The process of creation, *cooking* London, is as much a part of the art work as the final performance of *eating* London. We at Ali&Cia have observed how this project empowers citizens with a creative enthusiasm to become, in most cases for the first time, publicized artists and protagonists on the public stage. For many participants, confidence is gained and they are extremely proud to be able to demonstrate their artistic nature to the rest of their fellow citizens and make this generous offering. By eating London, and thus accepting this gift, all those that took part became performers too, participating in a collective catharsis that connected them both to their surroundings and to those with whom they share them.

Beyond simply representing the integration of the city's different social groups, *Eat London* enacted this integration and claimed the city for all of its citizens. It's a project which highlighted the potential of art to not only speak of our experiences but actually create experiences that are constructive, even empowering.

ARRIVING AT URBANOPHAGY

At Ali&Cia we often create edible representations, models or images made of food, to celebrate rites of passage, events where food often already plays an important role. On the one hand, inviting people to eat is an act that brings people together and binds them in ties of hospitality like a kind of social contract, engendering goodwill. In addition, feasts are common in rites of passage celebrating incorporation, such as coming of age ceremonies, as eating together represents union and integration.¹ Furthermore, when the food is afforded symbolic meaning, eating becomes the integration of an idea or concept, physically assimilated by the body. What we at Ali&Cia do is extend the symbolic function of food, creating specific rituals or performances that further reflect the identity of the community or association in question. To give an example, my first work of food art was for my wedding in 1971 to the late Francisco Garcia de Paredes. There the guests dined on a savoury Francisco and a sweet Alicia, modelled from all sorts of foods and dishes. While sharing this meal was a way for the guests to participate in our celebration, they also symbolically enacted our union through the imagined act of anthropophagy. Since then, Ali&Cia has created many edible mosaics for inaugurations or anniversaries where those gathered dined on edible representations of their collective identity.

Commissioned by the City of Melbourne to create a work involving food and communities Bárbara and I came up with the idea of having the communities themselves create the map of their city in three dimensions. Inviting others to represent themselves through their cooking was an obvious decision. Perhaps only dance

and music can compete with food as a universal cultural instrument of communication. In addition, as an everyday domestic activity, cooking is a popular cultural expression, a way for us all to be artists. Natasha Polyviou from *Time Out* identified urbanophagy as ‘an ingenious way of making art more egalitarian’, recognising that ‘The familiarity of the medium opens up art as a possibility to people who wouldn’t necessarily see themselves as artistic.’²

In addition, far from being a new concept, urbanophagy has deep roots in the collective unconscious as a hidden desire that Freud and Jung curiously overlooked; our desire to eat our surroundings. From the gingerbread house in the Grimm Brothers’ fairytale *Hansel and Gretel* to the garden made of sweets in Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, the idea of edible environs is a recurring fantasy. It can be traced back to the popular medieval tale of the *Land of Cockaigne*, an earthly Eden where houses have walls of pies and pasties and the shingles are cakes, there are rivers of oil, milk, honey and wine and mountains of cheese. In Cockaigne, roast pigs walk about with knives in their backs for carving and perfectly cooked geese fly out of the sky straight into open mouths. Called *Luilekkerland* (Lazy Luscious Land) in Holland and *Schlaraffenland* (Land of Milk and Honey, a reference to the biblical Promised Land) in Germany, the same land of plenty was described across Europe with regional variations that reflected local tastes. It functioned as an escape from the harsh conditions of peasant life and has even been described as ‘the most pervasive collective dream of medieval times.’³

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the land of Cockaigne lived on in Renaissance Italy, being represented in edible festival sculptures called ‘macchina della coccagna.’⁴ In eighteenth-century Naples it was also the inspiration for *Cuccagna* arches, structures made of food supplied by the King that were built by the public to later be destroyed and devoured.⁵ The American folk song *Big Rock Candy Mountain* is often described as a modern version of the tale. In it a hobo describes his ideal world where not only does

it never rain and the jails are made of tin but the hens lay soft-boiled eggs and there are lakes of stew and whiskey too.

However, unlike the examples of the urbanophagic instinct above, our edible landscapes are faithful recreations of existing locations that facilitate sensory exploration and self-expression. In the Ceremony of Urbanophagy luxurious materials are not necessary and neither is verisimilitude the most important factor. Ali&Cia encourages participants to draw on the foods that are significant to them, and thus reflect their cultural identity and influences, to represent the sensory and narrative content of their urban environment.

As a result, the roads in Melbourne were paved with Vegemite, a yeast extract spread popular there, and in London with gingerbread. In downtown Madrid towers of Spanish tortilla stood next to towers of sushi and in London the misti Buckingham Palace was rich and sweet in honour of the Queen. In Gran Canariaphagy there was soil of gofio, a toasted flour eaten by the locals for hundreds of years, and couscous beaches, a reference to the boats of immigrants that arrive there from Morocco. Our urbanophagy projects thus result in rigorous edible meditations to be explored, tasted, savoured and contemplated.

Maps are always personalised visions reflecting specific subject positions and their accompanying interests. Like the Gall-Peters projection or the upside-down map with the Antipodes on top of the world, our map offers a revised view of reality to challenge traditional perceptions. The humanised, democratised and multi-sensorial view of our surroundings afforded by urbanophagy is as innovative and inspiring as were the first views looking back down over Paris from the first hot air balloon or the first views back to earth from space. You're treated to a similar experience of estrangement, familiarity and wonder.

PLANNING *EAT LONDON*

Organising a Ceremony of Urbanophagy is an ambitious endeavour,

requiring the coordination of hundreds of people, considerable research and investigation and countless logistical solutions. Although we at Ali&Cia have established the working process and the various stages of the project, urbanophagy is a concept that can only be developed in collaboration with a local producer, not only for logistical but also for social reasons. While it's a project that can travel to any location on earth, in order to reflect the specific socio-geographic profile of the host city it's necessary to find the appropriate people or organisations with local knowledge and contacts.

In the case of London, Lift was an ideal partner. Apart from organising one of the world's leading arts festivals, it is a progressive and highly innovative arts organisation with a special focus on collaboration and community participation. Its objective is to schedule and commission works that reflect the identity and issues, both local and global, that concern its audiences and furthermore provide opportunities for the public to discuss and debate these works and the issues they raise. They see the arts not simply as a form of entertainment but as a catalyst for personal development and social engagement. They are currently working on the construction of a new, multi-purpose, mobile performing arts centre which they call the Lift New Parliament that will enable them to reach a wider public around the world. But coupled with their global vision is a firm commitment to the local community they form a part of and they began the process of designing their new structure and determining its purpose by consulting with the people in their area. They have close links with different organisations and associations in the local community and are always looking at ways to collaborate and involve them in their work.

Urbanophagy Ceremonies provide a unique opportunity to effect the social integration of a variety of disparate community groups, granting them greater visibility and toasting their rich cultural contribution in a creative engagement that connects

the city and all its citizens. In both Melbourne and London the groups involved have been a mix of ethnic-based associations that celebrate their cultural identity and traditions, and other social initiatives that provide educational and social opportunities such as soup kitchens, women's refuges, after school clubs and associations for people with various disabilities.

As Urbanophagy Ceremonies are reflections on a city's identity and social geography each ceremony is unique and gains meaning from its location and participants. In order to appreciate the nature and significance of each project Ali&Cia studies the identity of the city, of the area to be recreated and of the participating groups. This research is necessary in order to create an appropriate ceremony, influencing the choice of location and the procession design. We require a profile of the community groups that includes information about the nature of their organization, their objectives and their relation to the wider community. In the case of ethnic based associations we study the communities they belong to, their size, their history, their integration- both geographical, cultural, political, and economic- and their cultural profile- artistic, festive, ceremonial, and gastronomic.

The following brief descriptions of the groups that participated in *Eat London* have been taken from profiles Lift composed in conversation with the groups themselves.

BOWBONS FROM BROMLEY BY BOW CENTRE

Bowbons is a mixed group of all ages and abilities drawn together from a number of projects including Art East, Community Care and Public Art HNC to take part in *Eat London*. They are based at the Bromley by Bow Centre, which provides services for the local and wider London community around health, learning, enterprise and employment.

EASTWARDS TRUST – SAATHI CENTRE

Part of the Eastwards Trust, the Saathi Resource

Centre organizes social events along with health and educational activities for people over the age of 50. They do day trips and take part in various events run in the community.

GREENWICH VIETNAM WOMEN'S GROUP

The Greenwich Vietnam Women's Group is a charity serving the needs of the Vietnamese and Chinese communities living in Greenwich. The group meet at Woolwich Common and provide ongoing recreational classes, as well as holding celebrations for special festivals or events.

YEAR 10 FOOD TECHNOLOGY AT MULBERRY SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

Mulberry School for Girls is a vibrant, high achieving community school, close to Whitechapel and in the heart of the Bangladeshi community. The food technology course there combines nutrition with practical food preparation, and encourages students to take a hands-on approach to experimenting and creating with food.

NU-LIFE

Nu-Life provides valuable services to individuals with learning disabilities across the borough of Newham. They enable people to have meaningful social contact, to try out new activities and develop skills and knowledge to achieve specific goals in their life.

ORGANIC CAFÉ AT CITY AND ISLINGTON COLLEGE

The Organic Café is a three-year catering course run by City and Islington College for students with learning disabilities. The course provides a full practical introduction to the sector and real-world situations such as working in the café as well as outside functions.

PROJECT PHAKAMA UK

Project Phakama UK is a group of young emerging artists originally from Africa. Their group is part of Project Phakama, an independent international youth arts organisation initiated by Lift in 1996 with partners in South Africa, India and South America. Phakama uses the arts as a tool for social engagement and cultural exchange.

ROJ WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

The Roj Women's Association is a group of Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking women from Haringey and Hackney. Most of them are between 20 and 40 years old and have young children. They meet to talk about the different issues that affect them in their lives.

SHOREDITCH CRAVINGS

Meeting at Training for Life's Community Kitchen, all the members of Shoreditch Cravings have taken part in various other activities in their local community such as Shoreditch Spa workshops, Café Caliente, Shoreditch audiences and Friends of Shoreditch Festival.

SPITALFIELDS CITY FARM: THE CORIANDER CLUB

Based at Spitalfields City Farm in Tower Hamlets, the Coriander Club was established to give local Bengali women the opportunity to garden and grow their own vegetables – an important part of Bengali culture. The gardening and cooking classes offered are important in helping members feel less isolated.

SUBCO

A day-care centre for Asian elders in Newham, SubCo aims to nurture the empowerment of its participants through their involvement with a supportive, intergenerational group and a diverse programme of activities and events.

THE FACTORY

The Factory Out of School Project offers quality childcare to families, providing a safe play environment for children and a range of play opportunities designed to help them discover and explore hidden skills and develop a greater understanding of their local community.

THE SPICY SOUTH

The Spicy South is a group for local people with learning disabilities based in East Dulwich which provides activities from gardening to cooking and offers members the opportunity to get out and about and gain recognition as valuable members of the community.

TOWER HAMLETS SUMMER UNIVERSITY

Working in partnership with various schools and organisations, THSU provides a range of free innovative learning opportunities for young people from 11-25 in the borough of Tower Hamlets and throughout London.

In order to choose the area of a city to be represented we identify the iconic buildings, monuments and spaces and consider their geographic distribution in relation to the identity of the groups participating, their number and the ideal scale of the edible model. For *Eat London* it was decided that that the map would focus on the downtown area and thus constitute the response of these groups from east and south-east London to the city centre. Bárbara then took to designing the map, a laborious job of strategic simplification so that the structures and spaces are clearly defined and can be divided up more or less cleanly. All manner of maps and aerial photographs are employed to obtain the necessary information about the terrain, including the heights of all the buildings and monuments so that everything is perfectly to scale.

Thanks to Lift's vision and persistence we were able to stage the

event in Trafalgar Square – not only the symbolic heart of London but also site of the original Charing Cross, from which all distances are measured and, since its beginnings, a favoured site for political demonstrations and cultural activism. It has become, especially of late, the city’s stage and no more appropriate space exists to put the city centre-stage.

Once all the basic variables are determined – the protagonists, the area to be represented, the location of the event and the time and budget available – then all the parties involved advance on this challenge together, directing, supporting and creating, their full immersion in this collective endeavour guaranteed by their role as co-authors.

As a collaborative work the project is about presenting the concept clearly to the participants, eliciting their enthusiasm and commitment, providing them with the necessary support and then handing the reins over to them.

In this vein, an important addition to our working process in London was Lift’s introduction of the role of facilitators who worked closely with the community groups and acted as intermediaries for Ali&Cia and the producers. The facilitators were all artists or chefs, or both, chosen for their experience working on creative community projects. Having themselves captured the essence of the project and been briefed on technical methods they directed the workshop series with the community groups, each facilitator being responsible for two or three groups. While Bárbara and I were present for at least one of each group’s workshops, the facilitators provided continuous support and direction and allowed for effective communication between all those involved, including the sharing of ideas between groups.

In the workshops the community members are called on to put all their culinary knowledge to the task, knowledge which in many ways is a blueprint of their cultural influences and identity. They get in tune with their culinary wisdom, experiences, memories and nostalgia, thinking of the foods they eat everyday and those they eat

to celebrate, the foods they grew up with and the foods they cook, bearing in mind their emotional and cultural values, accumulated over generations. At the same time, they start to perceive their urban environment as if for the first time, in terms of its sensory, textural, olfactory, haptic counterpart. Buildings, parks and vehicles become textures, tastes, colours, forms and feelings: rough, satin, smooth, cold, crunchy, warm, savoury, sweet, bitter, blue, hot, red, yellow, brown, piquant and poignant.

The process enacts a metamorphosis in the interaction between communities and urban spaces and the impact of this interaction, as they confront the new sensory eloquence of the town, releases such a powerful synergy of *vis creativa* (creative energy) and *vis productiva* (productive energy) that it provokes in their hearts and minds an upsurging inspirational drive to decipher the town in its freshly grasped edible codes. The inhabitants now perceive themselves as artists and cooks and the town as a powerful sensory stimulus. From now on, they can't stop wanting to cook the urban elements as they have started to appear to their eyes in appealing textural, tasty and aromatic architectural cues.

Evelyn Downing, an MA student from Goldsmiths' College, conducted interviews with all the community groups and in the comments she recorded, as well as others that were made to the press or posted on the Lift website, the participants disclose what the experience of *Eat London* meant for them. From initial doubts or confusion, passing through discovery and enthusiasm to full immersion, they describe the project's challenges and rewards. Karen Bush, leader of Nu Life, a group with learning disabilities from Newham, describes how, despite some initial difficulty and the group's limitations, the members adopted the role of food artists and made the project their own:

From the confusion to start with of what it was actually about, because it's very difficult to explain a concept [to them], people have been really eager to go every week... They're doing some icing for the King's Road on biscuits



Cooking London. 'Peel the plantain, boil it in plain water and when it cooks leave it to cool and then shape it into houses.' Angela Austin from Shoreditch Cravings.⁶

Photograph by Tim Mitchell.

and they're going to do them in wacky colours to reflect that, and that's ideas that have come from people [in the group], which is really good.⁷

Fienga De Masi from Project Phakama UK explains how the project has inspired her to think differently about food:

It makes you think food isn't just something to eat; you can actually do a lot [with it]. It brings people together, that's one of the main things. It gives you energy so you can survive and live. It can also be art, and at the same time be food. So it's got many aspects of it, you just need to look at different angles.⁸

Below, a member of the Saathi Centre, a group of Asian over-50s, expresses her enthusiasm for the newly discovered medium:

We'd never have thought that we are going to do the

buildings with barfis and pakoras... We never thought that with barfi we could make bricks or with cheese we can make mortar. It's really interesting and exciting!⁹

The following quote from one of the members of Bowbons from Bromley by Bow Centre suggests her full immersion in the project and how it has led her to start perceiving her surroundings in an entirely different manner.

What I find, especially when I'm out with children, driving them, I often say... 'What do you think that building's made out of?' We've all got onto it now...you look at the buildings differently. You think, 'Oh, it looks like a chocolate cake!'¹⁰

Her testimony also suggests the empowering nature of this perspective. The urban environment often looms large in the subconscious, its dominating presence towering over us. Through urbanophagy we begin to see the buildings that surround us not in terms of their displays of power and permanence but as sensory experiences there for our enjoyment, to be sized up and savoured. By viewing our surroundings as the raw materials of our self-expression and subjecting them to our artistic vision, we not only humanise them but also change the way we see our place in the world.

Embracing the urbanophagic perspective can also lead to inspirational observations. For example, in Melbourne an Italian woman came to the following discovery:

For us the city of Melbourne is like a minestrone where we are all represented. The Greeks are the olive oil, the Turks are the lamb, the Chinese are the rice, the Italians are the basil, the Spanish are the saffron, the Indians are the water and so on and so on... we all form an equally essential part of it and feel represented by such a dish that, at the same time, it's the building element for constructing the Queen Elizabeth Market. That's why it is so delightful and we all enjoy it and are nourished by it!

Drawing on her culinary traditions and their history, this participant identifies minestrone, a product of supply and circumstance and fruit of intercultural relations and trade, not only as a means to represent the colourful Queen Elizabeth Market and multicultural Melbourne as a whole but as an alternative model to the ‘melting pot’ analogy of social integration. As one member of the Roj Women’s Association stated: ‘Our view gets much wider now we are looking through the food.’¹¹

The process of cooking the city poses various challenges for participants as well as offering the opportunity to discover new skills and creativity. For some groups, such as the year 10 Food Technology class from Mulberry School for Girls or the Organic Training Café at City and Islington College, the project was an opportunity to extend their studies into healthy eating, cooking and the hospitality industry. Shirley Roach, course tutor of the Organic Training Café, a catering course for people with learning disabilities, explains how the event provided significant professional experience:

This has been a fantastic project for our students to get involved with. It has meant a great deal of planning and given the opportunity for our students to work on a really big event. Students served members of the public and answered questions about the Organic Café.¹²

While for other groups with years of cooking experience behind them, urbanophagy’s innovative approach to food provided a creative challenge. As Lutfun Hussain, leader of the group from the Spitalfields City Farm explains:

At first I didn’t see how we could take part in Eat London. We are experienced cooks, but we don’t know how to design buildings. We all thought it would be impossible – but we’ve learned and it has been fun.¹³

As a member of the public participating in the event on the day or

reading about it afterwards, it's perhaps easy to overlook the artistic and logistical challenges that a project of this scale supposes. The Ali&Cia team could at least draw on our experience of cooking Madrid, Melbourne and Gran Canaria. But for many, cooking London felt like achieving the seemingly impossible, a feeling that has a lasting effect, empowering people with new confidence and ambition. David Matchett, involved in kitchen operations and food safety, confessed that:

Occasionally, the work and practice of over 200 people following the dream of an artist felt overwhelming and humbling, especially in the kitchen on the cooking day... Professionally I've always believed that if someone has a dream that I feel and I can help them fulfil it then I should, though there have always been parameters to my involvement. These parameters have now been pushed a lot further out. I'm almost thinking that its only when attempting the impossible that anything can actually happen! I live for change and this event was one that has definitely changed me.¹⁴

In the transformation enacted by cooking the city the participants not only became food artists, but also ambassadors for their communities and the hosts of a collective feast offered to their fellow citizens. Urbanophagy promotes civic participation and visibility for communities that are perhaps rarely seen as protagonists in the public sphere. In both Melbourne and London some participants had never even visited their city's centre before going on a field trip to research their area. The project engages them in a transformative interaction with the city and their fellow citizens. For the ethnicity-based groups, the project is an opportunity for them to represent their culture and their ancestral traditions, connecting the past with the present. As one of the members of the Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking Roj Women's Association said:



The Factory. Photograph by Simon Coben.

I think it's an amazing idea. As a women's organisation and as a woman, making food or cooking is a responsibility of women and it's a good opportunity for our Roj women to represent their culture through this activity.¹⁵

As hosts, the community members share their vision of the city along with a new way of looking at their surroundings and of thinking about food. While on the one hand the event is about the groups coming together to work on a common project, the community members become themselves responsible for bringing together their fellow Londoners on the day and offering them a new experience, as Osman Bah from Project Phakama UK observes:

I think this is going to be another big experience for Londoners, to know that you can create things in the outdoors and make people feel happy, you know, bring Londoners together. I think food can do that.¹⁶

For David Matchett, watching the communities in action highlighted for him the same lesson that Osman outlines, a lesson he too feels that the city would do well to learn

Working within the constraints of government guidelines shows these to be ignorant and negating of the joy and importance of social food preparation and the communion of sharing food together at social gatherings. Some of the groups were so adept at working together it showed a part of their community and lifestyle that is becoming more difficult to find in mainstream culture. From the oldest to the youngest everyone had a specific role or dish that was their pride. In London we are so geared up to restaurant culture and celebrity-chef gods and their books that this basic human ritual of cooking and sharing food becomes just another commercial venture.¹⁷

Cooking London was an empowering experience that nourished participants socially, artistically, professionally and spiritually. Participation in the process of transformation – from ideas into reality, from cooks into food artists and from individuals into ambassadors and hosts – was a gratifying experience for all involved, community members and production team alike, as the following testimonies bear witness.

Thank you for letting me be involved in such an amazing 4 months. I have enjoyed more than I can say in words working with both of my groups, The Bowbons and The Factory, assisting them in being creative and then turning their ideas into actual buildings, and celebrating with them the fantastic high art that was 28 April 'Eat London.' ... From the first workshop to the event-day itself this project has rewarded me in more ways than I could have possibly imagined... I must thank you again for having this idea and enabling me to be part of something quite amazing.

*Lee Parvin, baker and facilitator*¹⁸

Here was a microcosm of London, people who may not usually mix or speak to each other all cooking together in the one kitchen... In all my experience of catering it truly was a sight to behold and for me was the most inspirational part of the process.

David Matchett¹⁹

Being part of it, it's just exciting

Noelle Mapianda from Project Phakama UK²⁰

EATING LONDON: THE DAY OF THE EVENT

This is a brilliant idea. I'll be there with knife and fork in hand!!

Charlie, 26 April 2007 Lift Website²¹

1:30pm, Saturday, April 28, Trafalgar Square

After the presentation of the united edible map and the speeches that followed, two drums began to call to each other across Trafalgar square. The beats and drummers came closer together until they met at the top of the stairs. Then, the drums suddenly silent, a young woman called out from up high on someone's shoulders. In the packed and normally bustling square, the woman's single, echoing voice stopped time and sent shivers up the spine. Joined by the drums and a few other women she began dancing. This evocative musical introduction was by Project Phakama UK, one of the participating groups whose members are young artists originally from Africa.

When it finished, other music filled the square. Upbeat and funky it was strangely and suggestively corporeal, composed of gulping, humming and what sounded like the sharpening of knives. While the music got our gastric juices flowing, the different community groups that created the model descended the stairs, took possession of their tables and paraded them around the fountains towards their gazebos, dancing their own choreography and showing their work off to the crowds. The procession of the



Photograph by Tim Mitchell.

tables relates to ancestral celebratory practices such as offerings, sacrifices, banquets and ceremonial processions. It connects the ceremony to a timeless, universal tradition in the history of humanity, leading us to explore its traces lying in the Jungian individual and collective subconscious.

What the groups presented was, in fact, an offering; an act of hospitality, of generosity, a gift to the city of London given with pride and enthusiasm and received in Trafalgar Square with wonder and gratitude. The different communities were sharing their creativity and the joy their vernacular culinary idiosyncrasies bring them. As one member of the public commented, 'Everyone involved must have derived enormous pleasure from making the map. That pleasure was conveyed to all the visitors.'²² As a result, people ate the food differently, realising as well that by eating and accepting this gift it made them a part of the event. Angharad Wynne-Jones, Lift's artistic director, noted, 'The ritual of sharing

food is so strong. It brings a bridging and connection that doesn't happen in other ways, especially in a big city.²³ Trafalgar Square became something of a fairground with thousands of people milling between the different gazebos and a pervading festive mood that not even the long queues could dampen. Even the weather collaborated, treating all of London to an unseasonably glorious sunny day. Sue Palmer observed that 'The atmosphere was joyous, social and available – participatory in the best sense of the word in relation to theatre... [*Eat London*] was an excellent demonstration of art inviting people to connect – a feast for the eyes, mouth and heart'.²⁴

The edible map was a remarkable reflection of London's multi-cultural identity, symbolising the coming together and integration of all the cultural energies that flow through the city, making it a vibrant centre. It simultaneously championed diversity and unity, difference and belonging. Some of the tables were heterogeneous magpie mixes of international culinary influences; pizza, quiche and bagels alongside cherry bakewells and cucumber sandwiches. Other tables such as those of the Turkish and Kurdish Roj Women's Association, the Greenwich Vietnam Women's Group or the Bengali Coriander Club were more specific in the geographical focus of their culinary offerings. *Eat London* offered a democratised vision of the city where all its different communities had an equal opportunity to project their imagination and cultural identity onto the map. Subjected to the affection of its citizens the city became playful and palatable, longing to be explored and assimilated.

The queues were long but the urbanophagic instinct prevailed and thousands participated in the grand collective catharsis, ingesting their urban environment. Some felt giddy at the prospect of destruction. *The London Paper* invited people to consider if they had 'Ever fantasised about becoming a Godzilla-sized monster, stomping around the city, devouring all before you?'²⁵ Sue Palmer had a taste for justice, or perhaps revenge, noting that 'The food appeared strangely resonant and exotic, as if imbued with a sense

of democracy; we were finally consuming the city rather than the city consuming us', and concluded that 'It's good to eat City Hall.'²⁶ Lyn Gardner discovered that 'Choosing which bit of the city you want to eat feels empowering, because by devouring it you can take control of it and make it yours.'²⁷ The community groups not only provided the public with an outlet for their urbanophagic desire, they armed them with our innovative and empowering way of apprehending reality. Sue Palmer confessed that faced with the work of the community groups 'I began imagining the places I know well made out of food, and eating them.'²⁸

AFTER EATING LONDON?

Like all celebrations and rites of passage, *Eat London* is ephemeral by nature. But even after the pigeons have polished off the last remaining crumbs of downtown London, the work lives on, having assumed other forms; mementos, memories and the ways in which it managed to touch thousands of people. These days, new technology allows people to share their experiences with an increasingly global community online. Thousands of photos of *Eat London* have been posted and shared on blogs and websites such as flickr.com, awakening urbanophagic visions and desires the world over.

NOTES

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