

IN CONVERSION

Gut instinct

The art of consumption

Elizabeth Willing and Carody Culver

For artist Elizabeth Willing, food has long been a source of fascination as well as a tool of her trade. It's both material and subject, connecting her work across forms as diverse as wallpaper prints, cookbook collages, edible sculptures and live dining events. Just as food can provoke a strange cornucopia of responses in us, from disgust to desire, Willing's creations prompt us to confront the complexity of our relationship with what we consume and why it so often ends up on our minds as well as our plates.

CARODY CULVER: The art you create is always linked to the act of consumption. Can you tell me what drew you to food as both artistic subject and source material?

ELIZABETH WILLING: When I began using food materials at university, I was also regularly baking in my spare time. Having just moved out of home, I was enjoying developing cooking skills. Once I began introducing these materials and processes into the studio and gallery, I realised they had more potential than just their convenience and malleability – their sensory qualities and ability to provoke participation shaped my creative process. I have always held strong views about the ethics of consumption – I was vegetarian for much of my teens and twenties. I also grew up in a household with some complex relationships to food that I was sensitive to. I think I came away with a strong sense that eating was deeply linked to psychology and mental health. It might be that my constant return to food is a way to make sense of all that – but I've also discovered a deep love of researching food and dining.

CC: You've described your interest in food as being 'through the mother, chef and machine' – can you tell me about these three elements and how they interact with one another in your practice?

EW: I have varied approaches to research and material explorations, and these can be most clearly explained as coming from three styles of 'kitchen'. The home kitchen is historically dominated by the mother, who cooks as a labour of love – a type of hospitality linked to obligation and service. This leads me to explore the relationship that develops with food from birth and that mostly takes place around the family dining table. Unlike the mother, the contemporary chef produces food from another space that often has no emotional relationship to the diner. Instead, there is a focus on the audience being nourished with entertainment, novelty and creativity. I've long been inspired by chef practices and would describe myself as a food tourist. Finally, the machine: increasingly the most important and horrifying lens through which I consider food, which allows me to explore highly processed food production. In the studio I celebrate the malleability and long-term stability of processed foods – as a sculptor this benefits me greatly but as a consumer it makes me question our hospitality towards this indigestible matter.

The mother, chef and machine are also each linked in contemporary society. For example, the machine produces food for both domestic and high-end kitchens. The chef and mother have also become interchangeable now, and these crossovers make for fascinating sites of social and political exploration.

CC: One of the things I find especially compelling about your work is how you capture the ways that food can repel us as much as it can appeal to us – at an exhibition of yours at Metro Arts in Brisbane several years ago, you'd hand-smear liquorice onto one of the gallery windows, transforming a sweet treat into something grotesque yet mesmerising. How do you approach that transformation process – turning food from something we crave or feel deep nostalgia for into something we may no longer even recognise?

EW: Each new food material I work with needs to be dealt with in a different way – a new logic needs to be discovered. I want to create experiences that impact people's relationship to food – like the way a deeply joyful or traumatic experience with a particular food might forever change the way you experience it. Food poisoning can do that – for example, I feel a gut-wrenching,

abject horror when I imagine eating seafood extender. To reach that deeply into someone's psyche you need to make a radical transformation of the material while retaining something integral, such as smell. I don't pretend to be able to make powerful new connections all the time, but I do aim to recontextualise food in diverse ways and to bring to the fore how extraordinary and intimate the relationships are that we share with something so commonplace.

CC: You often work with mass-produced snack foods (Kinder chocolates, Cheetos), and viewers can sometimes eat these foods as part of their interaction with the artworks. What do these creations of yours suggest about our relationship with food as an industrialised, processed product that bears little resemblance to its natural origins?

EW: Using identical, machine-made food items accentuates the traces of consumption. In works where participation is open to the audience as co-creators, I have found there's not just one way to consume: people play with their food before eating it, they hesitate, they become greedy, or they abandon their efforts mid-consumption. The sameness of the processed food items therefore becomes a blank canvas for the impressions of these varied approaches to consumption.

Mechanised food production offers me many ideas, and one I keep returning to is extrusion. In a sculptural sense extrusion is fascinating: pushing materials continuously through a moulded nozzle creates uniformity. If you watch any YouTube clip of mechanised food production, you will undoubtedly find at least one, if not many, types of extrusion involved for a single product. Mechanical extrusion makes it easy to control form, volume and speed. But it also reflects our digestive process: the way we mulch food in our mouths, break it down to smaller parts in our guts and then extrude it through and out of our body. When I think of it like this it seems so absurd to digest food twice – once by the machine and once by the body. The scatological therefore becomes an essential reference point in many of my works, including the liquorice piece you mentioned earlier.

CC: You've hosted a number of participatory dining events in collaboration with chef Josh Lopez. How do you design these events, and what kind of sensory culinary experiences do they offer attendees?

EW: I initially began creating these performances because I had so many ideas for 'eating objects' that were just too intimate for the gallery space. I was also watching closely what was happening overseas with food design and felt I could contribute something to that conversation from a visual-arts perspective.

I see the table as the stage for the performance: they are multi-course degustations featuring sculptures or complex multi-sensory experiences. My first three dining performances I undertook solo, or with partial collaborators, but when I was offered the chance to work with Josh Lopez at QAGOMA [Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art], this changed the performances dramatically: he was able to match my artworks with his own conceptual approach to cuisine. Countless decisions were made to develop the stage/setting for these events, each with the aim of subtly influencing the participants' perception of value, intimacy, smell and taste. The events are also about breaking down what it is to 'host' and the nuances of hospitality.

For example, at one of my dinners you may eat from a shared tipping plate that angles away from you if you have eaten more than your partner, or you may use custom cutlery that releases smell or sound to influence your flavour perception. You may also be asked to wear and destroy an enormous serviette, or your bowl may burn away while you are eating your meal. I have created countless experiences for these meals, each with a different aim and outcome but, as a whole, a performance will hopefully leave each participant with a unique set of embodied memories.

CC: Food culture has shifted particularly rapidly in the last decade – trends come and go with dizzying speed, and platforms such as Instagram seem to have strongly influenced how we visualise and stylise food and the rituals of consumption. How do you see these changes reflected in your practice?

EW: I am fascinated by what becomes popular in food and how these trends shape the food system. I imagine agricultural industries reeling as they try to create the crops and infrastructure to manage the demand for superfoods, native foods, ancient grains, medicinal plants and whatever else. It is exciting and fickle.

Through my lens as a non-Indigenous Australian, I see the local receptivity to new food influence as a fertile platform, a blank slate upon which I develop a conversation with so many diverse materials and ideas. But I also

believe that lacking strong roots in a food culture leads to a lack of appreciation for ritual, logical nutrition, connection to land and sustainability.

I don't think my work taps into the revolving door of food trends in a direct way, but I most certainly try to harness the humour or absurdity of it as a tool in certain works. For example, my current research is attempting to capture the effect of new food technologies as pollution in the body.

CC: Comparing the food aesthetics of my mother's generation – I'm thinking specifically of those classic *Women's Weekly* paperbacks and their neon-hued double-page spreads of dishes such as prawn cocktail, duck à l'orange and jelly trifle – with those of today, do you think we're still driven by the same tendency to eat with our eyes instead of our mouths? Do we neglect our other senses?

EW: I think those squeezezy sachets of kids' yoghurt are intriguing in this sense: we can purchase and eat food like this without ever laying eyes on the actual product, just squeezing it straight into our mouths. Similarly, food packaging of fruit and vegetables is excessive: tomatoes are wrapped, avocados and lettuce are bagged. We have so many tools in our repertoire to disengage from a visual or tactile engagement with food: gloves, cutlery, tongs, mixing spoons, even food delivery. But it's vital in an evolutionary sense that we try to gather this visual and tactile information about what we are going to eat: what is it, is it ripe, is it rancid, is it damaged? Without visual information we're in danger of poisoning or polluting the body. So these highly artificial images of food in advertising, and the highly seductive images in cookbooks, remind us that the food we eat is safe and delicious – even if what we are seeing and what we are eating are two different things.

I worry that we neglect the feelings we have after we eat, the sensations of food hitting our stomach and the way it feeds our brain. Our minds are easily hoodwinked by packaging, colour, texture, but our gut might tell the truth.

CC: You've created a number of collages using vintage cookbooks – how do you source these texts, and what kinds of images are you drawn to for your collages?

EW: The cookbooks I use for collage are collected from op shops and second-hand bookstores. I also bring them back from overseas trips. I have honed

my taste over the past decade and can now fairly quickly decipher a book's usefulness just from the spine.

I tend to stick with cookbooks from the 1970s or earlier for the photography style. Contemporary cookbooks regularly use shallow depth of field, which makes them almost impossible to use in collage. Vintage cookbooks have a particular colour or tone that often sparks nostalgia in audiences. I also enjoy how vintage cookbooks allow for slippage into revulsion, horror or the abject, which is a potent space to consider in relation to food.

I find it particularly valuable when a cookbook catalogues one thing – like all the cheeses of Australia, or flower sugar-craft techniques, or award-winning meat platters. It brings out the nuances and peculiarities of that field.

CC: The collage series you've created for this edition of *Griffith Review* is a little different to your other collages – it's smaller in scale, and the individual elements are set apart rather than overlapping. Can you tell me about the process of crafting these images and how the display medium (a print journal rather than a gallery wall) influenced the aesthetic?

EW: The collage material came from a fairly specific set of books: the various annual editions of *KochKunst in Bildern*. These books catalogue an annual international culinary competition, like a food Olympics. The food created in this context has a very specific aesthetic: it's colourful, moulded, sculpted, garnished and terrine-heavy. I am trying to harness the ambiguity created when I take these food products out of their plated/printed context.

I liked that these publications were somewhat academic in their rigour, as if the quality of the food were peer reviewed. It seemed relevant to this publication that comes out of a university.

Normally my collage works are vast, using larger cut material and creating sprawling images sometimes metres wide. *Griffith Review* is a much smaller format, and I try when possible to retain some truth to materials, in this case keeping their delicacy. It's like a re-plating of the dishes, reimagining food photography. The compositions may be reminiscent of bacteria, mould or yeast growths on a slide or petri dish. They become like tiny jewels or otherworldly beetles or caterpillars.

The faces are works I have been creating for almost a decade. This has become a huge body of work that's quite fun to make, and the humour luckily translates in exhibition contexts. The material for the faces is drawn from

books from a similar era to those I use for my other collages, but I'm looking for something different, something that speaks to the carnal and the messy or abject body. The various textures in the collage do most of the hard work for me in both cases – my job is to select the material carefully and make sure the collections and placement are as close to perfect as possible to communicate something intangible, sensory, curious and humorous. Something you feel in your gut.

Elizabeth Willing is a Brisbane based visual artist. In 2014–15 she was the recipient of the Australia Council Künstlerhaus Bethanien one-year residency, and has also undertaken residencies at Helsinki International Art Program, New England Regional Art Museum Armidale, Museum of Brisbane, and a one-year residency at Metro Arts Brisbane. Her exhibitions and concept meals have been held in Australia and overseas at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne, Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Trapholt Museum of Art and Design in Denmark, Tinguely Museum in Basel, and Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.