

## Food Art: Is It Collectible?

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Have you ever wondered whether to collect Food Art and how does one go about it? Does it make sense for a collector or a museum to buy an artwork that can melt, rot or stink? What is the “value” of an artwork that can organically deteriorate? What kind of art historical due diligence and conservational treatments can be conducted on such a work?

Art made of ephemeral material is nothing new. For the past century, artists have been experimenting with non-traditional media in art as a way of expressing their modernity: in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Picasso added bits of paper, string, rope and tickets to his paintings, Duchamp exhibited his Readymades, and Gabo worked with early synthetics such as plastic. As the century moved on, there was an explosion of uses of industrial materials from plastic to steel, as well as “poor” materials like coal, felt straw, tree branches, found objects, installations and performances with things found in nature. With the advent of Fluxus, Arte povera and Pop art, anything at all became fair game for making artworks.

Among these experimental media was Food Art. In some cases, this medium became appreciated for its performance value and for the symbolic meaning of the food chosen by the artist. For example, Marcel Broodthaers’ signature materials, cracked eggshells and mussels, were intended as allusions to the difference between Belgian and French cultures and cuisines. Sometimes, as with Piero Manzoni’s boiled eggs in his performance *Consumazione dell’arte dinamica del pubblico divorare l’arte* (1960) or Felix-González-Torres’ candy installations, the food was presented to be eaten by viewers in a form of symbolic participation in the creation of the artwork. While for Manzoni, the artwork disappeared and the viewer “became” the artwork by eating the egg, for González-Torres, the mountains of candy eaten by the viewers were to be endlessly replenished.

Some Food Art was not meant to be consumed. Rather, it was used to stimulate public thinking through the particular way in which it was presented. In 2000, Jan Fabre covered the Aula Academica’s pillars at the University of Ghent with 600 kgs. of slices of cured ham, then wrapped them in cellophane. Fabre’s stated goal was a critique of academics, and the ham intended to “skin the legs of the house of reason.” But the food caused controversy and problems. The works began to rot under the plastic, creating a horrible odour and mould and leading to a health risk. Protests about food waste, from animal rights groups as well as local authorities led to its removal.

As can be imagined, Food Art was initially not considered to be a collectible commodity or asset, since in many cases the artist’s intention was for the work to degrade, disintegrate and ultimately disappear. Ephemeral food-based art often was seen by artists as a strategy to avoid the commercial mechanisms of the art market and institutions, subverting the notion of the object’s lasting value.

In the 1960s, however, Food Art became a collectible, entering museums and private collections. Along with this new approach came the difficult question of how to preserve such unstable and fragile art. Food Art presented an ethical dilemma as well, for often it has not been made clear whether a work that was meant by the artist to fall apart should be conserved at all. If decomposition itself is part of the concept, then is preservation acceptable? Or does it go against the artist’s intentions by modifying the work? If a restorer kills the bugs infesting a Rubens panel, this seems fine, but if she disinfects the insects eating away at Food Art, does this act of preservation deny the very process of decay that the work hopes to represent?

The situation is complicated by the fact that sometimes the artist did not care that the work be preserved, in other cases the artist wanted to preserve the work somehow, while in still others, the artist's intentions changed over time. Joseph Beuys' works such as *Butter and Beeswax* (1975) were meant to perform decay, but over the span of his lifetime, the artist changed his statements from work to work about whether they should be preserved. He saw food as a symbol of energy and transformation. It has been unclear whether stopping the process of transformation would be against his ideas.

Over the years, some artists have striven to preserve their Food Art by having them treated with chemicals. For *Bag of Donuts* (1989), Robert Gober fried his donuts, and then sent them to be treated in Germany to preserve them: they were carefully degreased in acetone baths, refilled with acrylic resin, and finally coated with cinnamon for aroma and appearance. So lifelike were these preserved "donuts" that in 2013 a visitor to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art stole one of them from the bag, perhaps believing they were still edible.

Some artists give instructions to replace the edible parts. In Giovanni Anselmo's *Senza titolo. Scultura che mangia l'insalata* (1968), the artist directs that the lettuce must be replaced each time it withers. Even more involved is Sarah Lucas's *Two fried eggs and a kebab* (1992): the artist gives precise indications to galleries and museums who exhibit it on exactly how to fry her eggs and make the kebabs freshly every day, as was recently done by staff at an exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In this case, the artist wishes to be involved in selecting the precise kind of egg and kebab to be used each time, and this is part of the "creation" of the artwork for exhibition.

Many artists further insist on maintaining the source of the edible. The fragile eggshells used by Broodthaers were obtained from one particular Brussels cook, as he liked the way she cracked them. But what will happen to the selection process when the artist is no longer alive? Or what if, as in the case of González-Torres, the candy factory he preferred no longer exists? When the materials become obsolete, how can the "authenticity" and "integrity" of these works be maintained, keeping to the artist's original intention?

Finally, there is the particularly complex case of Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1990–1997), made at the height of the AIDS crisis and meant to reflect on this in the title ("fruit" is English slang for homosexual). Leonard used three hundred fruit skins—bananas, oranges, grapefruits, and lemons—consumed, then stitched back together by the artist with brightly coloured thread and wire. For the artist, the process of "mending the fruit" was a way to deal with the trauma of losing so many friends to AIDS, both a private act of mourning and a way to pay homage. Her stated intentions were for the work to gradually decompose organically in the public eye.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired Leonard's work in 1998, promising to preserve its ephemeral nature, but then decided to remove the work from view. When Leonard's dealer, Paula Cooper, suggested the fruit skins be preserved, the artist, together with conservator Christian Scheidemann, searched for a way to stop the decay. After much trial and error, Scheidemann, known as "the art doctor", finally found a solution: the pieces were shock-frozen and soaked with material to keep them under vacuum. However, when Leonard saw the results, she changed her mind again and decided that she wanted to go back to the idea of the work degrading before the viewer's eyes. After a long negotiation with the museum, it was agreed with the artist that the works would be documented via photography, like a diary, and the photos could be exhibited after the works themselves became too ruined to be exhibited.

In sum, Food Art has opened up a new world of dialogue and collaboration between artists and their collectors. Additionally, it has given much room for reflection for conservators and art historians. While the artist is alive, active collaboration in the preservation (or not) of his/her work is vital. In fact, it is artists' ongoing participation in conservation that has made their works collectible at all.

\*An excellent analysis of Food Art and conservation is given in Julie Gilman, "The role of science in contemporary art conservation : a study into the conservation and presentation of food-based art," PhD Dissertation. University of Ghent, 2015. Accessible online: <https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/6863823>.

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