

Panem Et Circenses :: art practice on and about food

A genuine site-specific approach fused with an associative vocation are the founding elements of the research that underlies the aesthetic and formal choices of the art collective Panem Et Circenses' artistic practice.

Perfection in execution cannot be measured and defined in terms of execution; it implies those who perceive and enjoy the product that is executed. The cook prepares food for the consumer and the measure of the value of what is prepared is found in consumption. Mere perfection of execution, judged in its own terms in isolation, can probably be attained better by a machine than by human art. [...]

Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be "loving"; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised. [...] The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works."

These words were penned by American philosopher John Dewey in his 1936 essay *Art as Experience*. Since then, greater attention has been placed on the relational aspects in contemporary public art, leading to the creation of participatory art forms: the audience (receiver) is engaged in the creative process and transformed from spectator into participant and, with his or her physical interaction, contributes in determining the form and value of the work itself. The artist, in turn, perceives his artwork in a completely new way. He involves the sensitivity, feelings, dreams and needs of his own referents and participants, as if creating a *loving relationship* that goes beyond its aesthetic or formal features. He actively engages in the encounter, allowing himself to be transformed by it and assumes "the attitude of the perceiver" within the active process. In other words, he is both appreciator and curious participant who is intimately connected to the dynamics of the creative process.

The "participatory practices" in the works of PEC are a central focus of its research and the active medium it uses to investigate. The collective team operates within the dimension of contemporary art practice where the artwork is the interactions that emerge from the active participation of people. As mentioned before, the people involved are no longer simply *spectators*; they become the *agent* with the artist in an open-ended, negotiable and profoundly contingent outcome. Artists like PEC who choose to follow this path, first ask themselves: *what is required?* They then use the tools that answer this question within the communities where they operate and proceed to envision hypotheses, poetic solutions and action devices capable of engaging and stimulating the participation of people in the artistic process.

With this framework in mind and as the art collective's name clearly indicates, PEC's works choose to focus attention on **food** as a place of significance and language, and as a fundamental relational device that considers the utility of shared analysis on ideas such as nutrition, enjoyment, resources, the earth, authenticity and imitation.

PEC's role mirrors that of the cook described by Dewey who measures the precision of its execution in terms of the quality of engagement with art and the quality of interaction generated by the experience. Defined as the *value of social relations*, it constitutes a *third paradigm* that complements *utilitarian value* and the *value of exchange* - based on traditional economic theory, providing alternative analyses of the strengths and normative foundations of human society. The French sociologist and economist, Alain Caillé elaborates this concept starting with a review of Marcel Mauss' famous study on the "gift"¹. The gift, understood as a foundational cohesive practice and proposed as an alternative dynamic to economic models based on strictly utilitarian values and exchange of goods, produces relations that are reciprocated over time, allowing true exchange to

¹ The essay on the gift was written by the French ethnologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss in 1923. MAUSS, or *Mouvement, Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales*, takes inspiration from his seminal work. Its primary exponent is Alain Caillé who theorized a "third paradigm", *The Third Paradigm. Anthropology of the Gift* (1998).

take place, an exchange that is free and voluntary, yet coherent and shared.

Food, articulated within the context of this paradigm as a relational device, is often associated to reflections on the theme of *the gift* in PEC's work. PEC compellingly binds comprehensive ethical considerations with the aesthetic qualities of its work: food is the gift. The subjects at both ends of the exchange are *what we consider natural* and *what we consider human* (or, better yet, cultural or social). In this sense, food functions as a medium by which allegiances are rebuilt – a theme underscored in all of PEC's participatory events.

To reclaim a bond with authenticity is not an invitation to a rhetorical revival of originality. On the contrary, it means searching for a significant relationship with nature in the present, with the aspects of nature which we are capable of accessing, understanding and including the conceptual perspectives and production dynamics we have concerning food.

One speaks in terms of *conceptual ideas* concerning food because *food* is clearly not a neutral subject-matter or an element that is simply transferred from the earth to our plates; it is a cultural *product* – an object constructed according to rules within a general economy on the basis of our relationship with reality, that is, with others, nature and the histories that originate in the past.

The actions of PEC constantly challenge the semantics of food, encouraging greater awareness and stimulating disclosure of the seductive dynamics associated with the incentive to consume food in the sphere of the market, as well as consciousness of the many levels of meaning, expectations and investments inherent in food – starting with our personal, direct experience of food – and, also in terms of disclosure, prompting retrieval and reception.

Invitations to greater awareness often rotate around the concept of *threshold* associated with the act of eating: eating as a moment of crossing the out/in *threshold*, allowing what is outside – in the world – to cross inside ourselves, crossing through our mouths and through expectations, cultural prejudices and thousands of filters that create a greater divide between us and nature.

The nature/culture dichotomy represents one side of the conceptual considerations underpinning the works of PEC. Culture – the artistic language, as well as the forms, rules and balances within it – faces the possibility of convening with nature once again, not as myth or normative ideal, but as a tangible place where the act of sinking our hands in the earth allows us to rediscover the rhythms and the abundant economy of nature.

Myth, however, is also ever-present in PEC's work; there is an emphasis on archaic themes that reverberates from the cultural (historical, poetic and legendary) matter inherent in food. By using the performance genre and placing dedicated care in the construction of situations (site-specific, time-specific and with established rules), PEC explores the world of ceremony, of magic ritual. These aspects are aesthetically meticulous and reflect a language that originates with the need to examine the issues surrounding relationships, bonds and intimacy.

Performative gestures are intrinsically magical (giving shape and form to the *things* of the imagination) – they attract attention, they engage us at an emotional level and they lift our spirits. A keen awareness of the expressive power of gesture and the power of evocation take their work beyond a forceful sense of revelation in sociological and political terms, to include metaphysical principles that are achieved through sensitivity, relations and intimacy.

The ability to feel empathy, as well as the capability to deeply perceive the sensitivities of others as a reflection of our own and the reciprocal trust that ensues, are fundamental aspects in PEC's work.

Understanding the sensitivities of the people for, about or with an artistic event, action or installation is created, is fundamental in determining the success as a relational device and as an activator, or catalyst, of a system of consciousness, collaboration and generative processes. PEC demonstrates the ability to sustain a heightened *sentimental tension* with the people and places where they execute their artwork. At the same time, they know how to manage the global nature of

their work using a refined, contemporary language that is aware of the existing discussion on themes they are highlighting within the broader context of the art system.

This balance of sensitivity, formal attention and aesthetic expression prevents PEC's work from falling into the pitfalls of being dubbed as populist or insincere (an explicit risk faced in public art, especially when the artwork avails itself of participatory practices to execute and articulate its form). Their relationship with the community in the place where their actions take place and the investigative considerations of their artwork involve a time-consuming process, with outcomes that are never taken for granted. This approach to the relational process is undoubtedly something that defines their work within the concept of *social utility of art* wherein the *artist serves* the community with his or her own talent and individual analytical abilities, and activates unexpected community resources, enthusiasms and reconnections that are highly valuable to the development and wellbeing of the people within that community.

In conclusion, the collective Panem Et Circenses analyses food as a cultural medium – a sign endowed with a symbolic apparatus, having varying inflections in form, and possessing histories related to these forms. It is a medium that has been constructed as a means to communicate, using comprehensive grammar that has been functioning over the centuries as a binder and a vital connector between us and the world throughout our evolutionary process. Therefore, in essence, it is a relational device to which PEC dedicates the creative deactivation and constant re-activation of their artistic efforts.

Magic and relational economy are entwined in an investigative parable that PEC enriches – artwork after artwork – with new perspectives and new situations for reflection, without losing sight of the explicitly *sentimental* goal of its approach to art: to engage others and to be engaged, to refine understanding, to improve as individuals and as members of a community.

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