



FIRST PERSON

first person ^{NO. 5} magazine

“RADICAL FOODS”

autumn / winter 2011-12

BEN KINMONT

INTERVIEW WITH LEIF HEDENDAL

Ben Kinmont is an artist who helped to form the Social Practice MFA program at California College of Art (CCA) in San Francisco and has been working with food as a means of engagement outside of art institutions for over two decades.

Was food important to your family?

My mom wrote the first health food cookbook for backpackers, which is now in its third edition, for the Sierra Club. We grew up around a lot of mountain climbers, so they wanted to figure out foods to eat when at high altitudes. People, in general, when in the back country, were eating a lot of freeze-dried food without a lot of nutritional value in the Sixties so my mom and her friend, Claudia, wrote a cookbook using healthy ingredients, even though the foods were heavier to carry. They tested a lot of the recipes out on us. My mom had also lived in France for quite a few years and her family was originally from the South where the family meal was very important, so I would say she brought the interest in food into our family life.

Your father was a conceptual artist. Did he influence your choice to become an artist?

Sure, but I was convinced that I would *not* be an artist. Like most boys, I wanted to do something different than my father. But that's how it happened. I was always making art because that's what my family did - my grandmother, my aunt, my

mother, but especially my father. There was always a studio around, so it was easy to think about art all the time. I never majored in art and don't have an art degree, but I did receive a fellowship to go to Europe and research contemporary German art. After that I moved to New York in 1987, made art regularly and then started showing.

What was the first art piece that you did that concerned food? Was it early on?

My interest was never in food per se, but more in domestic life and personal space. It had more to do with maintenance. I did a piece in 1991 where people came to my house for a waffle breakfast [*Waffles for an Opening*, at White Columns, NY]. It was intended to be about trust as sculpture. Complete strangers would come in to my home and eat. Did I want my young family there? Who would come? The use of food in an intimate space, outside of an institution opened up new possibilities and yet was also manageable: the waffle breakfast was clearly defined with a clear beginning and end point for a participant. They could have an idea of how long they would be in my home.

What did you get out of doing the waffle project?

All of my projects are based on questions. With the waffles, I was interested to see who would come and was surprised at how many of my friends didn't come. In New York, people are pretty cautious about going into strangers' homes. The definition of home space is very different than here. It's your place to get away from the public. But with the waffle project I began to realize that there's a co-authorship with the

participant. As their participation was helping to determine the meaning of the project, and meaning is connected to authorship, I began to see the participant as co-author of the project. In light of this, and the fact that the participants wanted to take something home, I decided that we could both sign the paper plate from the waffle breakfast [which was the invitation to Kinmont's home distributed at White Columns]. Then, if they wanted, they could keep it as a document from the exchange. Shortly afterwards, I began referring to these pieces of ephemera that were given away during the projects as "the gift-sculpture object."

What about your projects about cleaning up?

It was the same thing with the dishwashing project in the early 90's. It wasn't necessarily about the dishes. It was more about giving the participants the ability to control how long I was in their home. One person had a party and asked me to come the next day and do the dishes; this lasted for three to four hours. Another person invited me to wash just a few dishes. The reason for me coming into their home to do the dishes had again to do with the issue of trust; I saw it as a sort of flip-side to the waffles project: I was going into a stranger's home.

In another project [*Sometimes*], I walked across from the museum to the restaurant, Le Petit Diable, where after eating, people would bring their dishes to me, sign my body then sign the walls where they ate. Then, I signed the wall. I think those signatures are still there.

Your work involves a lot of collaboration.

It's important for me to reference other people, to works that came before, and to open up the project to others involvement. The first full meal I ever prepared was intended as a group show called, "An Exhibition in your mouth." It took place in Montpelier in 2002 and I was trying to give a glimpse into the history of artists working with food, the various precedents that are out there. This wasn't a new idea. Of course there had been Fluxus festivals and Futurist events involving artists and food and Rirkrit [Tiravanija] and I knew each other. So, I thought it would be nice to curate a group show of recipes showing what other artists had done, in this case including the Futurists, Marcel Duchamp, Louise Bourgeois, Geoff Hendricks, Dali, and Phil Corner from the Fluxus movement, and Gordon Matta-Clark and his 'Food' restaurant project. The show included artists over an eighty-year period. As a break in the nine-course meal, I had two recipes from the first monograph on ice cream. For those, I worked with a *glacier* in Montpellier and we made a black truffle ice cream and a grilled orange flower ice cream. I cooked that sit-down dinner for forty-five people. A really good butcher, who hand chopped beef two hours beforehand, helped to prepare the steak tartare. Since I considered the dinner as a group show of artists recipes, and the only way to enjoy it was in your mouth, I called it "An Exhibition in your mouth."

You've recreated that a few times now?

I recreated it only once and that was recently for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. I collaborated with restaurant As, a great place that I like in very much. You can eat outside at slab tables with benches on a dirt floor or inside in a big round room. Their kitchen is outdoors under a fairly permanent tent

structure and they have pigs that they give their scraps and compost to daily. They also have a great wood oven and grill. Out here, in California, such a restaurant is not so unusual. But for Europe, it's hard to find. The owners are very relaxed. When I recreated the project there, we couldn't get the grilled orange flowers, so we did a *gratinée* with gooseberry flowers, also from the Emy cookbook from 1768. It was fantastic and in this case, the ice creams were prepared there at the restaurant.

You also did a project in Paris that involved food recently?

The curator at the Pompidou, Bernard Blistene, had heard about a project I was planning called "On becoming something else." The Pompidou asked if I would do it as a hundred-person exclusive dinner, but I am not a caterer. But I also couldn't make it for everyone coming into the museum as they get tens of thousands of visitors each day. So I worked with chefs in restaurants in and around Paris. On the one hand the project was about artists who have chosen to leave the art world and on the other hand it was about recipes and representation and the history of the *pièce montée*.

Can you explain the *pièce montée*?

Pièces montées are dishes that can be understood as sculpture. They are always edible and they often represent something from the past. It can be a monument, a garden, a person, or even an event. In this sense, the chef becomes a maker of an edible history. It was also a way of showing off as a chef.

For the project I had written seven biographical paragraphs about artists who left the art world. These weren't people who had gotten sick of the art world and said, "fuck it, I'm outta here." Instead, they were artists who through pursuing their practice, they suddenly found themselves somewhere else, somewhere outside of the art discourse. I then worked with seven different chefs to interpret these artists paragraphs I'd written and represent them in a recipe. The project was about the possibilities and impossibilities of recipes and representation.

The chefs were all already familiar with the history of early menus and the *pièce montée*. The way it worked was that the Pompidou became the place where people would pick up the broadside-menu about the project and then they could go to the restaurants to eat the representations of the artist's paragraphs. All the chefs responded differently. One came from a farming background, and that caused him to select the paragraph about the artist who became a farmer. There was a star chef who wasn't that engaged and that was a bit disappointing. Most, though, responded with very interesting recipes that revealed their thoughts about the artists and their practices.

What was the feedback like for the Pompidou project?

Thousands of broadside menus were taken from the museum, so perhaps hundreds ate at the restaurants. Anyone coming into the restaurant could order the recipe without even knowing that it was part of an art project. The dish was on the regular restaurant menu for 1-2 months. In this way, the project also

disappeared into another value structure. Each restaurant had a poster up, but there was nothing on the menu specifying that it was part of an art project; at Chateaubriand the broadside was facing the toilet so it was easy to read.

What is the difference, between a broadside and a poster?

A broadside is like a poster but it is not a commercial advertisement. The broadsides on my wall [Kinmont walks over to his wall covered with framed works] were issued by the French government in the 17th and 18th century and tell people how to make and sell bread. This one is a broadside on prices of bread and what you're allowed to charge. The poor depended upon bread, so the government was very strict about regulating it.

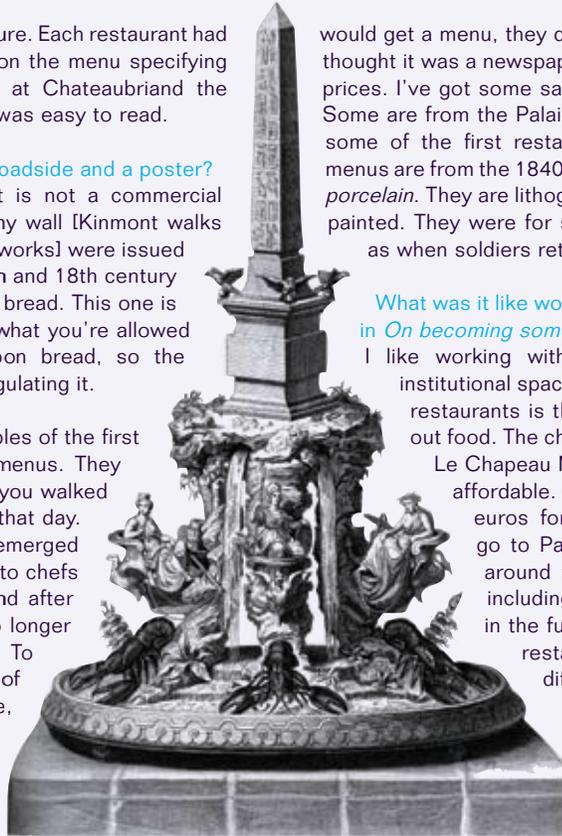
These other framed works are examples of the first menus. People didn't always have menus. They just had these roadside taverns and you walked in and they gave you what they had that day. The modern sense of the restaurant emerged in the 1780's and 90's in France due to chefs finding themselves jobless during and after the French Revolution; they were no longer working within noble households. To understand how radical the idea of the restaurant menu was at that time, you can look to the travelogues of English tourists in the beginning of the 19th century. In the 1820's and 30's, when these visitors to Paris

would get a menu, they didn't even know how to read it. They thought it was a newspaper. Suddenly, they've got choice and prices. I've got some samples of these early 19th c. menus. Some are from the Palais Royal area near the Louvre, where some of the first restaurants still exist. Over here, these menus are from the 1840's -60's and they are printed on *papier porcelain*. They are lithographs in iridescent ink and then hand painted. They were for special occasions or banquets, such as when soldiers returned home or for weddings.

What was it like working with those different restaurants in *On becoming something else*?

I like working with value structures independent of institutional spaces. The nice thing about working with restaurants is that they already understand costing-out food. The chefs can charge what they need to. At Le Chapeau Melon in Belleville, the dish was very affordable. Olivier Camus only charged like forty euros for a four-course meal. Or you could go to Passard [L'Arpège] where lunch costs around two hundred and twenty euros, not including alcohol. If you wanted to participate in the full project, you had to go to all seven restaurants as each restaurant had a different paragraph.

The project was also an homage to these artists that left the art world. What happens to artists that leave the art world is



A *pièce montée* from
Dubois' *Cuisine Artistique*.
Paris: 1872-74 ↗

that they normally don't get documented or included in the discourse. But they often leave for very good reasons, reasons that also tell us very much about what is left within the art discourse. The question to myself was, "How do I bring this to the attention of the art world?" I could do a book, a movie, or a curated show in an art space, but the nice thing about these menus and meals is their ephemerality, and somehow this seemed more appropriate to talking about these artists and their departures. Dinner and a moment around the table with friends seemed a nice way to give a structure to the project and learn these stories.

How do you choose the restaurants you work with?

I try and look at the whole picture. If I connect with the chef or restaurant owner and have a sense of where they're coming from then I'll do it. I have to be okay with their ethics, basically. I had to again be clear that I'm not a caterer to the art world. I am not a chef or a restaurateur. I don't do it for the money, but I work with food to participate in something else. I like things on a local, smaller level and that affects which restaurants I work with. It's no different when you work with your printer or anyone else. I just like having a sense of what's going on, I like to be involved and be in a situation where I can also learn from their expertise, their reasons for doing what they do, even though it is outside of my discourse. I do believe that art institutions also have a role to play; it's just that I've never been interested in that space as a place of my primary interaction. It's just not characteristic of my work.

For me, when working with food, it gets interesting, when

other values are involved. When I work with food I like it to be done carefully, thoughtfully, using proper ingredients and cost ratios, and yet fair for the chef *and* the one eating. I had to turn down a Biennale dinner project once because the guests would have simply been an elite selected group out of the thousands attending the opening. The institutions don't need me as an artist to reinforce what they're already doing. There are others who are very good at that. I'm not. I prefer to do things on the street, in public, and in homes. I prefer a feeling of openness and experimentation. It's very hard to really experiment within an institution or an organization.

In the Pompidou project you also issued a new publication?

A friend from Paris had introduced me to Rachel Stella, Frank Stella's daughter, and she told me about a text on the *pièce montée*, a history that she and I were both very interested in. The essay was by this anarchist, art historian, and literary editor named Félix Fénéon [1861-1944]. He wrote "La Plastique Culinare" discussing the history of the *pièce montée* in 1922, and at the end he makes an argument for ephemerality in art. "Wouldn't we love art more if it were impermanent?" Which was a really radical statement back then. So, Rachel translated the text for me (it was the first ever English translation) and I printed it in a bilingual edition as an Antinomian Press publication. We distributed the text at the Pompidou for free. I also made a bibliography of the works Fénéon mentioned in his essay and then borrowed them from the Bibliothèque Nationale to display in a vitrine also at the Pompidou.

Can you elaborate on the parallels between "project work"

and cultural anthropology?

They [cultural anthropologists] deal with values, representation and authorship, and the meaning of fieldwork outside of an institution. They consider the impact on the community and what responsibility they have on these communities after the project is over. Project art deals with people and values outside of an institution and these impact issues that should be considered by artists also. Artists need to think through the meaning of their projects and their ramifications.

Can you explain this broadside on project art and ethics that you will be presenting at Perfoma 11 and possibly adding to?

The text originally came out of a class I was teaching at CCA in 2005. I gave my students an assignment to present on the work of other artists and to consider that work in terms of ethics. They also conducted their own projects and we wrote this joint text about the ethical issues we came up with. Although the text has been rewritten and changed during the years, it is mainly from that first class. But I like things that are generative. So, it's been added to. Also, there's a social obligation in classrooms that is important to me. It's different than exhibiting in galleries.

I like that your process as an artist includes curating.

When I left my galleries in 1995, I wasn't happy about what was being talked about or how. So, I felt as artists we should do it ourselves and not wait. We're artists and it is important to clarify things for others and ourselves.

The first show I organized was called *The Materialization of life*

into alternative economies [1996]. I considered Lucy Lippard's premise that conceptual art is about a dematerialization of the art object and tried to propose that, perhaps for some of those artists, it was less about a dematerializing of art and more about a materializing of life. And I was also thinking about different notions of exchange and economy: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' maintenance economy, On Kawara's gift economy with his postcards, Gordon Matta-Clark wanting to establish his business, the restaurant Food, as an artwork (which he tried to sell through Leo Castelli); there was important performance art and good food being made there. Paula Hayes is a gardener and she was establishing a collaborative economy as a way to work with clients. Joseph Grigley deconstructs language and he looked at information economy and ways of exchange through his piece on the bulletin board at Printed Matter.

When did you learn how to be a book dealer?

I worked for ten years for another bookseller, Jonathan Hill, beginning in the late eighties.

Did he specialize in food?

No, he specialized in medicine and science. He had Galileo [Galilei], Tycho Brahe, [Nicolaus] Copernicus, all in first editions. It was just the two of us. I was his assistant and it was an amazing experience to work with old books. He very kindly, after seven years, said to me, "If you wanted to go on your own, I think you'd be good at it." I had never thought about it before. I was exhibiting my art in New York extensively at the time. But when I left my galleries in 1995, I started doing other things: curating, publishing about other artists, focusing

on the projects...the bookselling became important to survive. When I went out on my own, from the very beginning, I started the bookselling as an artist project titled, "Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family."

Why the focus on food?

The focus on gastronomy was strategic to me because I was the only one doing the early gastronomic material from the 15th century to the mid-19th. There were a few generalists who would have one or two early books, but the other American gastronomy specialists dealt in mid-19th to mid-20th century books only.

I also wanted to pick a subject I was stoked on because you can't be good at something if you're not interested in it. A lot of the early 16th century food books were written by doctors, so my background working at Jonathan Hill's was helpful. And, with gastronomy, gathering the reference library necessary was manageable. The research tools were in a nice balance for my budget.

Who is your clientele?

They range from institutions to private clients. With institutions it depends on their research demands and their endowments.

So is this a real business as well as an art project?

Yes, it is, and I wouldn't let myself present this project to the art world until it was a *viable* business. I've worked on curating shows about artists who work using different economic structures and usually they only do so in a symbolic way. It was

important to me that this was actually a functioning antiquarian bookselling business. I had been doing a lot of projects on the street, social sculptures with participants as passersby, and a reoccurring topic of discussion was always, how could one survive? How can we sustain ourselves? The bookselling business was going to be my means to support my family.

How do you place value on these books?

It depends upon their edition, condition, binding, provenance, place in history.

Like an artwork?

Well, books are usually not unique, so pricing and its history is a bit different.

How has all this knowledge gained from all these antiquarian food books affected your view on culture and food?

For food, there's this myth that today we have more tastes available to us because of the globalization of the market. We can get mangoes in January, etc. Which is true. It's there. However, if you look at 18th century French cookbooks there are recipes for thirty different kinds of birds that we would never consider eating today. Not because they don't exist today, but because we wouldn't think to use that bird, nor that flavor. Now, everything has to be a certain temperature, it has to be the same. The Alice Waters local, organic movement was the norm for centuries before the global market. For example, a lot of early cookbooks have menus based on the seasons and part of your cooking education was knowing what to buy and prepare when.

Yes, a lot of it has been lost. But it's cyclical.

It's a good thing of course. But what I've learned from these cookbooks is that the whole "snout to tail" thing is indebted to looking at older cookbooks.

Are there early examples of molecular gastronomy? You talk about the earlier books written by doctors and scientists.

The doctors were looking at food in relation to health. And then you've got pharmacists looking at food's healing properties. There are developments in ice cream from syrups and distillation made by pharmacists. Later, when we get into applied chemistry in the 19th century, food is discussed in terms of culinary chemistry. They discuss the chemistry of cooking and analyze what's happening structurally to the food, but I wouldn't say that they were making recipes in the way molecular cooking has developed in the past 10 years.

But more from health not taste?

Well, chemicals were experimented with but sometimes it had disastrous results, so there's quite a lot written in the 19th century about food adulteration and preservation.

What about food myths?

I have this 17th century book by a doctor named Graindorge. He writes about a bird called the *marcuse* which is a duck that lived in the delta regions and ate ocean fish. It's an example of a bird that no one today would eat because it tastes "too fishy." But in the 17th century the Catholic Church decided that the public could eat the duck on Fridays when meat was normally not allowed because the bird actually fed on fish. The

Marcuse became so popular that it became endangered and so this gentleman wrote a book about the duck's story. There was also a belief that the duck was born from barnacles, which he tried to prove wrong.

Do you not consider yourself one of those people that left the art world to do something else?

I'm at the edge of it, yes, in the sense that I have a very busy professional life as a bookseller and 95% of those people don't know that I'm an artist. And I have to be careful about that. The few, who have heard that I am, and that my business is an art project, find it harder to take the business seriously. As a consequence, they need reassurance that as they get involved in my bookselling activity (whether they do so as a colleague or client), they won't be taken advantage of. The reality is that this is a common concern in projects that cross over between two different value structures, and it is a fear that I would very much like to deal with and ultimately lessen. But it is something that we all have to work on, all of us who are at the cusp of becoming something else.

Can we look at some books?

Of course.

- kinmont.com
- benkinmont.com
- antinomianpress.org

