

Exhibition June 21 – September 20, 2024

Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre, Space D

Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

On the Table

Semiotics of Foodstuffs



Fake Christmas dinner held at the home of José Pérez Ocaña, published in the Sunday supplement *El periódico*, 1982. Colección Archivo Lafuente. Museo Reina Sofía.

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Foodstuffs set a rhythm, a pace. To be consumed, they have first to go through different cycles, like the germination of a seed, fermentation, or the preparation of a festive dish. In recent decades, however, those cycles have been affected by consumerist immediacy. This imposes an acceleration of the alimentary system, which places the accumulation of earnings above the well-being of all forms of life. The result is a productive scheme that prioritizes the exploitation of the earth and living beings, subordinating technological development to the capitalist system without considering the equitable distribution of what is produced or its environmental impact.

The starting point for *On the Table. Semiotics of Foodstuffs* is the video performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) by Martha Rosler, a work that forms part of the Collection of the Museo Reina Sofia. It is a parody of the cookery shows televised in the United States during the 1960s. Here the artist presents a variety of kitchen objects in alphabetical order, using exaggerated gestures to turn them into weapons denouncing the role socially assigned to woman in the domestic environment. This exercise in semiotics reflects upon social structures and gender roles.

This exhibition draws attention to an element that is essential in the kitchen but is not made visible in Rosler's video performance: food. Following the artist's narrative structure, the show presents a series of materials organized in an alphabetical glossary that brings together concepts and experiences inscribed within a broad timeline stretching from the 1930s to the present day, with the focus on the contexts of Europe and America. *On the Table. Semiotics of Foodstuffs* proposes a critical reading of capitalist cycles to highlight the tensions orbiting around foodstuffs and



Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, film still, 1975. Museo Reina Sofía.
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York (<http://www.eai.org>)

call for a greater eco-social conscience in their production, distribution, and consumption. At the same time, it aims to reveal the roots of foodstuffs in human relations, their sentimental dimension, and their ability to gather people, evoke memories, and create new histories around them.

Drawing from the collections of the Library and Documentation Centre of the Museo Reina Sofía, the exhibition includes a selection of visual and textual materials such as photographs, books, poems, postcards, recipe books, and objects. This constellation of materials explores the cultural, social, and political dimensions of foodstuffs to look more closely at our complex relationship with food through the different terms making up this alimentary lexicon, which starts with *Agua* (Water), *Banana*

and *Carne* (Meat). The three terms are described below to exemplify the semiotic exercise used in all the words that make up the glossary, revealing the different ways in which foodstuffs are linked with history, politics, art, and culture.

Agua (Water). In her book *Another Water* (2000), Roni Horn explores the aesthetics, identity, and ecological dimensions of this vital element through photographs and poetic texts centered on the River Thames. In the meantime, *Agua S.O.S.* (1990), a work by the Grupo Escombros, records a joint action with Greenpeace during which they visited an abandoned factory in the city of Avellanedo, Argentina, and bottled contaminated water from the Riachuelo River, turning each bottle into an object of conscience. Both pieces invite reflection on water and the political and social concerns that emerge around it.

Banana. The book *Banana Gold* (1932) by the American journalist Carleton Beals narrates his search for General Augusto C. Sandino during the so-called Banana Wars (1898-1934). At that time, Sandino led the resistance of the Nicaraguan people against the United States with the aim of improving working conditions on the banana plantations. In the meantime, *Banana with an Idea* (2022), by the artist Joris Baudoin, traces a genealogy on conceptual art. Also presented is “Cruzar el mar para ser devorado” [“Crossing the sea to be devoured”], a text from the book *Todo lo que se mueve* [All That Moves, 2023] by Valeria Mata. It narrates the project executed by two Icelandic designers, Johanna Seelemann and Björn Steinar Blumenstein, who traced the journey of a banana from its origin in Ecuador to its final destination in Iceland. Among other aspects, the work permits reflection on the complexity of the process of commercialization of foodstuffs on a global level. Together,



Esta agua contaminada, extraída del Riachuelo, fue fraccionada y envasada en una fábrica en ruinas de Avellaneda (calles Ugarte y Bosch). Con este proceso se intentó recuperar el trabajo abandonado el día que cerró la fábrica. Las botellas fueron compradas a cartoneros que viven en los restos de una calera dinamitada en Ringuet.

Encorchada, etiquetada y lacrada es un "objeto de conciencia". El testigo de lo que debemos evitar: el triunfo de la muerte.

Lo recaudado con la venta de este objeto, fue donado al hogar para los chicos de la calle "Pelota de Trapo" de Avellaneda, síntesis de **la cultura del abandono.**

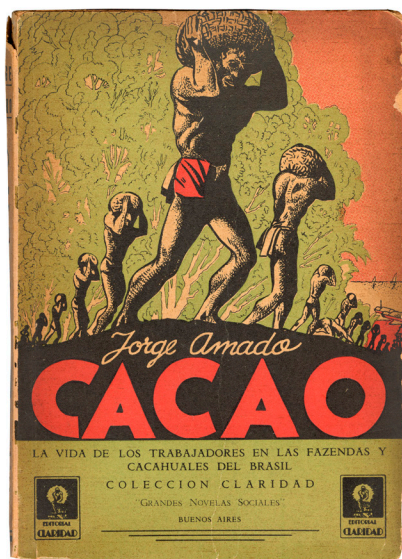
Grupo Escombros, *Agua S.O.S.* [Water S.O.S.], 1990.
 Colección Archivo Lafuente. Museo Reina Sofía



Boris Baudoin, *Banana with an Idea*, 2022. Library and Documentation Centre of the Museo Reina Sofía. Photo: Museo Reina Sofía, Joaquín Cortés / Román Lores

the pieces selected for the second word in the glossary reveal three different dimensions of a food that has been incorporated to the basic diet of many countries.

Carne (Meat). Presented here is a series of materials that approach meat as a body of politics and consumption. The politicization of the body is a concept examined by Marina Garcés in the chapter “Poner el cuerpo” [“Putting forth the body”] of the book *Un mundo común* [A Common World, 2013]. Here the philosopher presents the case of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian who set fire to himself when the fruit he sold at his street stall was confiscated by police, depriving him of his sole means of economic support. The event unleashed protests known as the Jasmine Revolution



Cover of *Cacao* (1933), by Jorge Amado. Museo Reina Sofía.
Colección Archivo Lafuente. Museo Reina Sofía

(2010-2011), which were violently repressed by the State and led to the start of the Arab Spring (2010-2012). Also presented in this section of the glossary is a report by the Provincial Council of Navarre that describes the requirements for pork farming infrastructures. The document sheds light on the problems of the meat and livestock industry, which are of crucial importance for current debates on animal welfare and environmental impact. Moreover, the work *Carne picada* [Minced meat, 1988], also by the Grupo Escombros, uses the image of people being crushed in a mincer to denounce the abuses perpetrated during the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). This piece is part of a series that seeks to bring visibility to the violence, torture, and forced disappearance inflicted on bodies under that regime.

These concepts, examples of the guiding theme of the exhibition together with the rest of the words in the glossary, also make reference to the way in which foodstuffs give rise to cultural encounter, gathering and linking various collectives at diverse times. From cultivation to cooking, it is also possible to trace the link between foods and popular traditions, exponents of non-standardized forms of eco-social knowledge. From harvest festivals to banquets, humanity has found a motive for common celebration in foodstuffs. Gratitude for what the earth gives us knows no borders, and those who migrate take the wisdom and flavors of their peoples with them, sharing and spreading them through all the places they go to. However, just as foods invite celebration and commemorate their sentimental role in human relationships, the table is also set with the resistances of those people who fight for a sustainable system of production and consumption. Food thus also offers an integral principle for revision of the traditional and current world structure around which we establish our relations.



Inside page of *Futuros mejores* [Better Futures] (2022), various authors.
Library and Documentation Centre of the Museo Reina Sofía

Organization

Exhibition produced by the group of students from the Curatorship itinerary of the university Master's degree in History of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture organized by the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, and the Museo Reina Sofía.

Curators

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