



Ruth Borgenicht

COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE



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*Tea in the Shade*, found bricks, ceramic glaze, embedded in patio, 2015

Are common points of reference  
dwindling? Has the personal  
niche supplanted the public  
square?

- Frank Bruni

6	Introduction
7	Tea in the Shade
9	Essay: Territorial Engagement
20	Living Room
24	Communal Marshmallow
26	Symposium
28	Immovable Feast
32	Cushioned Floor
35	Eat Where You Walk/Walk Where You Eat
40	Stone Soup
46	Share Fare
51	Mud Oven
55	Interview with Eryn Foster
60	Bio
62	Marshmallow recipe
65	Acknowledgments

## INTRODUCTION

Collective knowledge and territorial identity are diminished when food production is no longer central to community life. In addition, growth in the experience economy and agritourism reflects a desire to reconnect to the physical world and to one's food sources. My participatory projects build on this by generating a sense of place and community. Participants are invited to make something happen collectively; to eat, forage, harvest, or engage in other communal activities.

The projects utilize local resources and encourage environmental mindfulness. Rocks, plants, food, construction surplus and secondary markets are used to generate a connection amongst people to a locale and to each other. A locale such as a walkway contains inset hollowed bricks with bread baked into them, to find and enjoy. Scattered along a path, ceramic rocks with cavities are discovered and used for drinking. Thrift shop plates fused to floor tiles connect architecture to eating. Secondhand plates are repurposed as souvenirs. A giant-sized marshmallow stands on sticks, and is shared. These projects create a social space for connecting, sharing, discovering and trusting.



## TERRITORIAL ENGAGEMENT

The ability of digital technology to track, collect, analyze and anticipate our every move, has individualized references as evidenced in advertising, political messages and social media. The overabundance of information and ready access to worlds via digital space has undermined the collective knowledge that is tied to a particular place and territorial identity that integrates people with a specific region, a distinct history, and a sense of self and future. This individualization is a component of supermodernity



*Family Portrait*

characterized by an excess of time, space and the individual according to anthropologist Marc Auge. Instant communications allow for real time unfolding of events, flooding us with an overabundance of information, jamming our ability to distinguish between meaningless and meaningful moments. Ironically, the more access to information people have, the more individualized the members of a society become. Ian Buchanan, an Australian cultural theorist sums it up, "...the irony of contemporary life is that just when we are in reach of a true global society, everyone seems to be in a retreat from collective life."

The collective life that existed for millennia to sustain food production in a community is disappearing. The current global food system, while highly efficient in production, has produced many undesirable social and environmental impacts. Large agribusiness organizations, with global networks of production, processing, and distribution now dominate the food industry.

Concurrently social policy, economics and environmental groups have developed to address some of the negative side-affects of changes in our food system. Recently at St. John the Divine in NYC, the exhibition "The Value of Food: Sustaining a Green Planet" filled the Cathedral and smaller chapels with installations, artworks and information addressing food related concerns with supply, access and economics, as well as matters of survival and the growing and feeding of humanity.



Alison Knowles, *Red Beans All Day*

One of the many events that took place there, in conjunction with the exhibition, was the performance *Red Beans all Day* by Fluxus artist Alison Knowles. Visitors were asked to bring something red to be placed on a prepared grid on the floor of the Cathedral in exchange for a bowl of red beans cooked by the artist. I had the privilege of assisting at the event, serving red beans, which generated many conversations with visitors to the Cathedral. The grid expanded as more objects were contributed. The exchange of food and red objects is in keeping with the Fluxus idea that the process is primary rather than product. This public exchange dovetails with the cathedral's social outreach mission and weaves in a connection of food with art.

Knowles (b. 1933), is one the founders of the Fluxus movement in NYC and known for her projects that fuse art and daily life. She has served food and created eating events in numerous places including at ICA London in 1962 with the piece *Make a Salad* and more recently on the High Line in New York City in 2012. The



performance included amplified rhythmic sounds of vegetables being chopped followed by the tossing of the components on a large tarp before being distributed to the gathered crowd.

My piece, *Stone Soup*, invites participants collectively to prepare, forage and eat together in a woodland installation. The name *Stone Soup* refers to an old folk story about making a meal significant by accumulating lots of little donations. The story has appeared in various forms throughout the centuries. Like Knowles, my projects are predicated on an interactive shared activity.

The low light in the *Stone Soup* installation requires participants to rely on flashlights and their sense of touch to forage for edibles underfoot. Integral to my work are sensory experiences combined with a social activity, which creates a physical connection with a place. While Alison Knowles's food pieces often incorporate sound in their execution, mine harness the sense of touch.



*Stone Soup*

Almost 30 years after Knowles first served salad in a gallery, Rikrit Tiravanija prepared, cooked then served pad thai in a gallery in 1990, which became his best known series. The 1990s was a time when Relational Aesthetics was emerging. The relational way in which artists were interacting with their audiences was described by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who defined the approach as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." (Nicolas Bourriaud, p.113 of *Relational Aesthetics*). The settings for Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* series are primarily art venues, and bring people together. It is the interaction and exchange between people that comprises the artwork.

Michael Rakowitz brings people together in a different way. Known for his social and political artwork that engage a wider audience, his projects exist primarily in non-art spaces. He utilizes food to touch upon issues of identity, politics and community. In 2004, Rakowitz, in conjunction with Creative Time, a NYC based



Michael Rakowitz, *RETURN*



organization that commissions public art projects, initiated *RETURN*. The project consisted of reopening a shop on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn that his grandfather had established after his family was exiled from Iraq in the 1940's. Rakowitz's shop operated as an import/export company called Davison's and Co. and sold dates imported from Iraq.

Rakowitz wrote on his daily blog about the challenges of trying to import dates, how they "became a surrogate, traveling the same path as many refugees". As a store it was both a place for commercial exchange and a gathering place of people with a shared history. Dates are ubiquitous in Iraq with over 600 varieties,



*Eat Where You Walk/Walk Where You Eat*

so Rakowitz's chosen food to import is particularly symbolic and emotional for a people that fled or were exiled to a new country.

I've used specific foods in my events to contribute towards manifesting community. The reverse is true as well: in other works of mine I manifest food through communal contribution. In *Eat Where You Walk/Walk Where You Eat*,

participants meander along a brick path with glazed circles. On the circles are uncommon and imported edibles. These designated spots are not really plates, which would conjure up traditional ideas of eating etiquette, utensils, or a table with chairs. Without standard eating utensils and crockery, participants adapt to the circumstances they're given and discover on their own a new way to interact with food. By spacing the white circles at a distance from each other, participants move from one 'dish' to the next. This spaces out the meal in both a temporal and a physical dimension; thus the act of eating is not an isolated activity - it also has a spatial context. The collective knowledge of the participants, from a variety of backgrounds, assists the group in figuring out what the unfamiliar foods are. Examples of the kinds of unfamiliar foods presented are: tamarind and carob (lumpy bean pods), and mulberry and goji (dried berries).

The installation fuses eating and architecture, and touches upon environmental concerns by utilizing secondary markets and products. This generates an awareness of distinct aspects of a particular location and the network of systems that come together to sustain it.

Another meal event I designed, *Immovable Feast*, includes colorfully glazed floor tiles with white serving dishes attached to their surface. The installation is integrated into its location by being installed in situ - on the floor. The dishes

are filled with white and neutrally colored foods to touch upon issues of hygiene. Maneuvering around and among the dishes, creates a social space for participants in which to interact. The ceramic elements are sourced from secondary consumer economies; the floor tiles are construction surplus and the varied white plates are purchased from thrift stores.



*Immovable Feast*

Canadian artist Eryn Foster organizes walking tours that utilize specific locales. In 2012, Foster organized a walking tour to collect local wild yeasts in North Adams, MA as part of MASS MoCA's *Oh, Canada* show in 2012. Her project, *North Adams Sourdough: A Gift of Cultured Culture* resulted in a unique sourdough culture that was used to make baked goods. In conjunction with the creation of the sourdough culture, the artist built a community oven on common town land, as a usable public sculpture. For the duration of the exhibition the culture was given away to visitors with directions on how to bake with it.

Foster creates events that involve community interaction. Her projects explore the social side of movement such as group long distance walking pilgrimages and karaoke on stationery bikes. An interview with her is included in this monograph.

Socially engaged art practices have taken many forms traceable back to the avant garde. More recently, the social movements of the 1960s resulted in greater social engagement in the arts in the form of Happenings and Performance Art. Process and site specificity were key aspects and still influence today's socially engaged artists. The definition of a social art practice is still evolving and often includes words such as "collaborative", "community", "participatory", "political" and "interactive."

What ties my work to Knowles, Tiravanija and Foster is their participatory nature and the quotidian elements I use. The question of whether it is art or not is less important than whether the work has an impact on its audience and how it interacts with realms outside of the art world.

My piece *Share Fare*, in collaboration with chef Scott Fagan of Tip of the Tongue cafe in Brooklyn, consisted of a lively dinner that generated a dynamic environment around shared food. Diners were encouraged to work together to figure out the best ways to engage with the meal by using unconventional

eating vessels that were designed to be manipulated by more than one person. The dinner event and eating became a collaborative group activity of sharing, mutuality and community mindedness. The group orchestration required to use the hand-made vessels along with the cafe's physical space all contributed to connecting strangers and friends and manifesting a stimulating, communally interdependent, eating event.



*Share Fare*

Playing a collaborative game, according to a recent study from McGill University, makes you more comfortable and empathetic with strangers. The more activities people do together, the more we care for each other. Does a purely digital interaction do the same? With society heading towards the direction of supermodernity, with increased individualization, my work continues to investigate and create experimental interactive situations at the intersection of art, everyday life and community.

## PROJECTS:





*Living Room*  
found furniture  
rug  
thrift-shop cups fused to 6" square surplus tile  
fruit and tea  
daily paper  
2015





Double ceramic bowl embedded in concrete with fruit

Ceramic cast form fused to ceramic tile, fruit







*Communal Marshmallow*  
marshmallow  
sticks  
string  
glue  
people  
10" x 10" x 18"  
2015  
Recipe in the back







*Symposium*  
terra cotta  
scrap wood  
mixed media  
three people  
20" x 78" x 14"  
2015



*Immovable Feast*  
eleven construction surplus 18" square ceramic floor tiles  
thrift shop crockery fused together with ceramic glaze  
mostly white food  
people  
2015











*Cushioned Floor*  
14 tessellating cushions  
fabric  
upholstery foam  
elastic  
wooden buttons  
people  
2015

*Eat Where You Walk/Walk Where You Eat*  
glazed brick  
non-native food  
people  
configuration and length variable  
2016



Picking up carob



Reaching for goji berries





Sharing tamarind



*Stone Soup*

- bricks
- woodland debris
- construction surplus
- 30 ceramic stone-like cups
- 14 pieces of thrift shop crockery embedded in cement
- 7 hollow terra cotta bricks with baked bread
- soup
- beverages
- people
- flashlights
- dimensions variable
- 2015











44



Large and small stone-like ceramic vessels



45



*Share Fare: An Experiment in Communal Eating*  
In collaboration with curator Dr. Livia Alexander and Chef Scott Fagan of Tip of the Tongue Cafe  
March 25, 2016  
Brooklyn NY  
ceramic vessels and utensils for 3 courses  
food  
diners







Photos by Kasia Skorynkiewicz





*Mud Oven*  
scavenged construction surplus  
locally dug clay  
bottles  
sawdust  
lots of people  
2015





52



53

## A CONVERSATION WITH ERYN FOSTER

**Ruth Borgenicht: Being a socially engaged artist that has a mobile practice, and flourishes in new places with new people and landscape, how do you describe what you do to someone who is unfamiliar with your kind of work?**

*Eryn Foster: Good question. I have trouble with that. I usually just call myself an interdisciplinary artist unless someone presses me for more information. I always find it somewhat complicated to explain what I do, because in many ways, I really don't know myself. My work is pretty much always a reflection of what I am thinking about or talking about or doing in my real life.*

**How did you come to be a socially engaged artist?**

*From 2005-09 I was the director of Eyelevel gallery, an artist run centre in Halifax. I think it was while working there I really started to see how art can also be experience, not just an object. Or a thing. I guess during my MFA as well I was always throwing dinner parties and organizing field trips and at that point, started to think about ways that my practice could be more related to my actual life interests. I never really succeeded as an artist with a typical studio practice.*



Lewis Hyde writes in his book *The Gift*, "It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity.....that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art." This seems very relevant to your work. Can you talk about how gifting is an element in your practice?

Definitely. I actually met Lewis Hyde at The Macdowell Colony in 1999, but had no idea at the time who he was or what *The Gift* was about. Upon leaving the residency, I checked my mail to find that Lewis had left me copy of *The Gift* in my mail box and on the inside cover he had scratched out The and put in an A with a lovely inscription that said keep working. The book sat on my shelf for a couple of years before I read it cover to cover, and when I did, I knew I had found something that had great meaning for me. In fact, I would say, out of everything I have ever read, *The Gift* has had the most impact on the way I think and make work. It didn't change my mind about anything but rather, Hyde's ideas resonated with me in a way where I realized I was not alone in the way I thought about art and creativity. That said, I think also being an artist in Canada, there is an inherent ethos of gift giving in the way that we have a pretty substantial infrastructure in support of artists and public art.

**It has been about 3 years since your project North Adams Sourdough: A Gift of Cultured Culture was part of MASSMoCA's OH, CANADA show, where you collected local wild yeast and developed a unique sourdough culture of the town. The product was shared with local residents which were then invited to participate in the baking of their breads in the community oven that you also were instrumental in building. Have you heard any follow-up?**

Yes, to my delight, the community bake oven continues to be used by my residents of the town and every so often I get messages from people who continue to use the sourdough starter that was originally made for the project.



**Did have expectations of this project and did any unexpected things occur while your were there?**

Oddly, the project turned out exactly how I had hoped. It is rare that happens. There were lots of unexpected interactions with people I met. I think what delighted me most about the project was that it really attracted people who had nothing to do with art or the museum. I remember meeting one man, a long term local resident of North Adams, who came to the bake oven every day, he was really involved and excited about the project. Yet interestingly, he had never set foot inside the gallery. To me, I felt it was important that this project could also serve as a bridge for people who may not be likely visitors of the museum. On opening day of the *Oh Canada* exhibition, this man who had never been to MASS MoCA, came in for the very first time and he really enjoyed himself. I think often people just need a bridge. Art can be elitist and alienating to people and I have always felt strongly that as artists, we don't need to dumb down our work, but offer invitations to people, who may not otherwise have access to what we do.

**Would you be willing to share your sourdough recipe?**

Oh sure, sharing and giving it away (the culture, recipes, etc) has always been an important part of the work. I would be happy to dig up the little instruction booklet that was given away during the *Oh Canada* exhibition and send it to you. I actually don't even have any North Adams Sourdough culture left myself, every time I need it for a show or project I put in a phone call to one of the various people I know who keep it alive in their fridge. I have been moving around so much I am actually kind of a bad sourdough mother.

**Many of your projects exist comfortably out in the world, in collaboration with other artists or participants in an existing landscape. How do you define your role?**

I discovered somewhat late in my practice the importance of collaboration. I don't really know how I ended up in art, I should have probably studied theatre or filmmaking, but that's ok. These days, pretty much all of my work is collaborative in some capacity. I have crossed more over in the past few years into filmmaking and I have really fallen in love with the medium. It makes a lot of sense to me. I've been working on a feature doc with my friend Sue Johnson, we talk a lot about how film is a kind of social practice in and of itself. We both can't stand the inherent hierarchy and the top down structure that exists within the film industry. It is all about patriarchy and running an efficient machine. I understand that in some ways, but I don't subscribe to that pro-

cess. Back to the question about my role. I have more recently become far more comfortable with my role being whatever it is. In whatever I do, my role is often varied, like when I worked as the director of an art gallery in Halifax, I also scrubbed toilets, and that was fine with me.

I consider myself an artist/curator hybrid. It gets tricky when I try and articulate that in grants and proposals because for some reason, it is hard to understand how one can be two. But there is such a long and rich history of artists as curators. I also have an inherent compulsion to organize things, people, ideas, so I can't help but apply a curatorial strategy to my work as an artist.

**Over the years I've heard from many people, mostly non-artists, that making art is therapeutic, which indicates to me that there's a need for art to be involved in daily living. How did your collaborative project Hexacon come about?**

I made the Hexacon with my friend Ray Fenwick, a brilliant artist/designer/musician who now lives in Winnipeg. We were thinking at the time a lot about life coaching culture and the age of self improvement. The Hexacon is kind of this new agey work that we wanted to also have exist as a real thing online. We hoped that for anyone googling "audio for relaxation" would stumble across our site. Just the other day someone out of the blue, someone I didn't know, emailed me to tell me that when they are stressed, they listen to our audio soundtrack. This struck me as funny and bizarre and but also kind of amazing. I guess I always assume that no one really knows what I do, and then when I hear from someone, like yourself, that a work of mine has resonance with them, I feel deeply humbled and happy that my work has a life beyond me. And I think that's what motivates my practice. To make something, to release into the world and then to hope somehow some element of that thing comes back to me with new meaning and experience.

**Does this collaboration fall into the self-help category?**

Hmm. I wouldn't really say that my work falls into the self help category. I think I am just really interested in ways that people try to better themselves and lives, often in pursuit of happiness. That said, I am also very skeptical of the self help industry and strongly dislike the ways in which vulnerable people get taken advantage of. Ray and I have another project, called Life Couches that we really want to take on the road to explore this idea. I think this is a long term, perhaps life long project of exploration.

**Do you have a particular audience and impact in mind when developing a project?**

The art world is one kind of audience that I exist in, but I think for me, my most successful and interesting work tends to be relevant to an unexpected audience. Like for example, with the North Adams project, I discovered one day that a United Church Minister had engaged with my project, and then went on to write a sermon based on the ideas that she saw also having relevance to her faith. I found about this by finding a blog entry that she had written about it. For me, this was lovely because although I am not religious in any way, I appreciated that the work had relevance to her and she shared it with her congregation. For me, that kind of creative leakage, is far more interesting than getting attention from an art mag or critic.

**I'm curious to hear what projects you currently are working on and what takes you to the Yukon?**

I'm working on developing a couple film projects and also doing some research on swans. I am really lucky right now to be house sitting just outside of Whitehorse on a lake that every spring hosts thousands of swans for a few weeks. They stop here to eat, mate, relax, and gear up for their travels further north. I have no idea where this project is going, but right now I just spend a lot of time them watching and listening to them.

RuthBorgenicht.com  
Ruth.Borgenicht@gmail.com



Photo by Mike Peters

Ruth Borgenicht is a New Jersey-based artist who creates participatory installations that encourage communal engagement and interdependence. Between earning a BA in math from Rutgers University and an MFA from Montclair State University she completed residencies at Hunter College in NYC, Anderson Ranch in CO, Greenwich House Pottery in NYC, Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts in ME, Chester Spring Studio, PA and University of the Arts, PA.

Borgenicht received a NJ State Council on the Arts grant, and has exhibited in the US and abroad including the Cheongju International Craft Biennial in South Korea; Sevres Museum, Paris France; Puls Gallery, Brussels Belgium; Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey; Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza Italy; NL=US Art, Rotterdam NL; Bernardaud Foundation, Limoges France; Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia MO; The Parcours Carougeois, Geneva Switzerland; Sherry Leedy Gallery, Kansas City MO; Snyderman-Works Galleries, Philadelphia PA.

Her work is in the collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia PA; Sevres Ceramics Museum, Paris France; Ariana Museum, Geneva Switzerland; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington DE; Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia MO; Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred University, Alfred NY; Sparta Teapot Museum, Sparta NC; Topeka and Shawnee City Public Library, Topeka KS; Swedish Hospital, Seattle WA;

Publications include *New Ceramics: The European Ceramics Magazine*, Germany; *Art Jewelry Magazine*, USA; *Ceramics Bible*, USA; *Ceramics: Tools and Techniques for the Contemporary Maker*, Europe; *How to Look at Contemporary Ceramics*, Korea; *The Craft and Art of Clay, 5th edition*, London; *500 Ceramic Sculptures*, USA; *Working with Clay*, USA; *Contemporary Ceramics: International Perspective*, UK; *Monthly Ceramic Art*, Korea; *Ceramics Art and Perception*, Australia.



# COMMUNAL MARSHMALLOW RECIPE

Modified from Thomas Keller

## Ingredients

3 envelopes (3tbs) of gelatin	2/3 cup corn syrup
2 cups sugar	1/4 tsp. salt
1/2 and 1/4 cup water	Powdered sugar
1 tbs. vanilla extract	

## Prepare pan and base

Line a 10" springform cake pan with plastic wrap sprayed lightly with cooking oil. Create a wooden stick pedestal using twine, hot glue or whatever you got and place upside down in the plastic lined pan. The wooden framework should balance, be sturdy and have sticks that will lie directly against the bottom of the marshmallow for support once uprighted.

## Directions

Pour 1/2 cup water into mixing bowl and sprinkle all the gelatin on top of it. Let sit.

In the mean time place into a saucepan the sugar, corn syrup, 1/4 cup of water and salt. Bring it to a rolling boil and hold there for 2 minutes.

Turn mixer on to low with the paddle attachment and SLOWLY add boiling sugar mixture to gelatin. Once all the sugar mixture is added slowly start to increase the speed (carefull to avoid splattering the hot mixture). Once the ingredients start to fluff and turn white turn mixer to high. When the volume stops increasing, after about 8 minutes, add the vanilla.

Pour the goo into the prepared pan and let sit overnight. Carefully de-mold and set the piece upright. Optional: use a torch to caramelize marshmallow. Use torch again to caramelize and sterilize bitten areas between eaters.





Marcella and Eli playing , *Eat Where You Walk/Walk Where You Eat*

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