

Lettuce, Artichokes, Red Beets, Mangoes, Broccoli, Honey and Nutmeg: The Essex Street Market as Collaborator

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It was during the mind-freeing activity of washing dishes that the correlation between markets (as in food) and markets (as in real estate) dawned on me. I thought then that it made absolute sense to follow the most recent developments of the Essex Street Market, mainly through the trend-setting articles of the *New York Times*, at this period in the history of New York when the city as a whole, and not just the sites where carrots and pineapples are customarily expended, is being turned into as a market of a different kind. An example of this is provided by one of the buildings that Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia erected on Essex and Delancey Streets in 1940, as his solution to relocate pushcart vendors from the contested downtown streets. The site in question is the Essex Street Market which faces, 76 years later, a relocation triggered by the much dominant market; one focused on trading in land as commodity and less so on squash and plantains.

My first encounter with the vendors from the Essex Street Market took place in 2004 as part of *Takeout: An Edible Portrait of Home*. This was a project that I conceived for the Artist Alliance Inc's *Rotating Studio Program*, for which I asked merchants and people in the neighborhood to propose edible versions based on their interpretation of home and nationality; whatever this meant to them. At the turn of the millennium the conversation about the rapid gentrification of the Lower East Side was not as heated as today. The exchanges with those I collaborated with revolved mostly around the ingredients for the dishes to be prepared or the stories behind the donated items, like the elaborate Tefillin bag, shaped as a cake, that Ron Budinas and Ira Stolzenberg, the owners of Tra La La, created for the communal ceremony in which *Takeout* culminated. I do not recall any attempts by those who came across *Takeout* to sum up what we were doing under the rubric of social practice or socially engaged art. In the end, this would give me full freedom to plot some traditional Dominican recipes with Carmen, the owner of Three Brothers Clothing, without having to fit what we were doing into any artistic corsets.

Ginia Bellafante describes the Essex Street Market as existing at the intersection between the ubiquitous New York "...bodega and the universe of the gourmand..."¹ The locus she paints through her 2006 article for the *New York Times* is that of a place where different generations of Lower East Side residents converge, but also that of a homegrown institution "...where increasingly segregated social classes come together to share if not the actual experience of affluence, then the readily purchasable signifiers of it."² Bellafante goes on to cite Suzanne Wasserman, an expert in the History of Lower Manhattan, about La Guardia's intention to conceal the ethnic image that the pushcart exuded out in the open within an indoor architectural container.

Ten years after Bellafante's article and twelve after performing *Takeout*, I revisit the Essex Street Market in the role of the curator. As such, I invite six politically

¹ Ginia Bellafante, "A Market Grows on the Lower East Side," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2006, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/06/dining/06esse.html>

² Ibid.

conscious artists to participate in an exhibition entitled *Lettuce, Artichokes, Red Beets, Mangoes, Broccoli, Honey and Nutmeg: The Essex Street Market as Collaborator*. Individuals in this group are meant to engage vendors, customers and the Market itself in their artistic processes as a means of co-generating experiences centered on the life that unfolds outside Cuchifritos Gallery, the art space of the Artist Alliance Inc. The participating artists and their hosting collaborators bring to the forefront issues relevant to their respective trades, while paying attention to the narratives as well as to the material culture that their presence in the place spawns as a result of their encounters. Each of the foods listed in the title of the exhibition links an item sold by the merchants with the first letter of the name of the contributing artists and of the curator: Lettuce-Laia, Artichokes-Antonia, Red Beets-Ricardo, Mangoes- Mary, Broccoli-Beatrice, Honey-Harley, and Nutmeg-Nicolás.

In *Recetas y Gangas: The Essex Street Market Recordings*, Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga creates a political-poetic counter response to the ethnic curfew of which Bellafante speaks while quoting Wasserman. “La Guardia sought to regulate the markets...[as in food]...rigorously. Among the rules stipulated by the Department of Markets, in the 1930s, was a ban on shouting, hawking and the “use of abusive and lewd language.””³ Zúñiga’s process for *Recetas y Gangas: The Essex Street Market Recordings* consists of recording merchants peddling their wares and services together with customers narrating recipes, and in playing the resulting audio composition through a loudspeaker installed at the entrance of the building. In doing so, the artist and his collaborators link the past and present of a neighborhood where pushcart culture, far from being extinct, continues to thrive and morph. Additionally, the audio composition expands the bodily scope of the Market into its outer periphery. Zúñiga’s action grows out of his first-hand knowledge from treading the streets of the city with similar projects. One example of this is *Excedentes/Excess*, in which he salvages food about to spoil, but suitable for consumption, from willing vendors and stores. Of similar relevance in Zúñiga’s socio-artistic praxis is his acknowledgement of the immigrant experience, as he grew up in a family who relocated from Nicaragua to the United States and who spent time living between these two points in the Americas.

In his introduction to *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, Tom Finkelpearl talks about historical moments and movements in the recent history of the United States, out of which social practice in general has emerged. His detailed timeline lists the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism, as well as a cadre of artists and activists working at the convergence of both of these fields: Suzanne Lacy, Mel Chin and ACT UP, among others. Finkelpearl describes how “By 2008 scores of exhibitions, projects and books were under way that addressed participation, but there was still no consensus on exactly what to call the art projects or how to narrate their genealogy.”⁴ While aware that much has happened in the arts since then, I resist collecting the actions, exchanges and encounters part of *Lettuce, Artichokes, Red Beets, Mangoes, Broccoli, Honey and Nutmeg: The Essex Street Market as Collaborator* under the homogenizing umbrella of social practice or socially engaged art.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 48.

I prefer to advocate for slippery engagements with art and life that circumvent pre-established categories and manufactured expectations, all the more so when these institutional or academic labels have very little meaning for those outside of the arts who participate/collaborate in the shaping of the creative experience. Because of this, I find Finkelppearl's explanation of his use of social cooperation, in the conclusion of his book, to be extremely encouraging. "The term is meant to be descriptive, not proscriptive."⁵

The subject of Saki Knafo's 2007 article for the *New York Times* is that of an Essex Street Market embroiled in discussions about prevalent affairs in the city: class polarization, taste, money and, of course, housing. In Knafo's piece one oxymoronic connection with the past takes the form of an eight dollar sandwich nostalgically named after La Guardia. "For decades its only occupants were a handful of merchants whose prices were commensurate with the incomes of people who lived in nearby tenements and housing projects. But in recent years, as rents in the neighborhood have climbed, the old-timers have been joined... by...higher-end businesses."⁶ Outside the cubicles of the Market, Bernard Tschumi's *BLUE* residential tower (2004-2007) corroborates these contrasts between the old and the new in a neighborhood where life has been traditionally defined by the "tenement" immigrant experience. It is interesting to note how Tschumi's design is aesthetically meant to blend into the Lower East Side's open skies and not so much with its chaotic grounds. *BLUE* stands aloof in a low-rise area of the city waiting patiently for other tall glass companions to pop up like asparagus or like the champignons a neighbor mentions in Knafo's article.

The early January afternoon that three of the artists and I visited the Market to discuss ideas at the monthly merchants' meeting, I identified several rows of 99 cent cans of *La Fe gandules*, pigeon peas, in one of the shops. The stack was not far from the indicators of more generous incomes: a diverse selection of gourmet and organic yogurts. Harley Spiller's *Torn Off* is a gesture that, in the act of assembling a material culture of the place, allows for some of these intricacies to surface of their own accord. His work for the exhibition requires him to travel from shop to shop to introduce himself to owners and employees from whom he requests business cards, flyers, menus, or any other multiples that he puts together as a yearbook. The late January morning that Spiller and I met for breakfast at Shopsin's, he had his eyes set on a menu that resembled *The Aleph* of Jorge Luis Borges: "I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw..."⁷ The document that we examined carefully, as we looked for food to order, comprised a selection of dishes from Mexico to India, with many other

⁵ Tom Finkelppearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 357.

⁶ Safi Knafo, "With Market Plans Afoot, Resistance Rises to More Fancy Foods," *New York Times*, August 26, 2007, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/nyregion/thecity/26esse.html>

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* (Toronto-New York-London: Bantam Books, 1971), 13.

places in-between. Spiller did NOT get the sought-after menu for the yearbook from Kenny Shopsin, but he left the restaurant with a book, and I with a mental doggy bag to chew on at home. One query this bag contained was about the relevance of art and the artist in a context where merchants, like the owners of Aminova's Barbershop, Shopsin's and Tra La La, were already creating their own museums, installations and performance art spaces. It also happens that Ann Saxelby, one of the vendors, is trained as a professional artist and cheesemonger. Yet this made me realize that without art I would not be able to posit such questions. This in turn made me appreciate the role of the "gallery space," even if it means plotting intently to collapse its white walls.

Long gone are the performative auras that butcher Jeff Ruhalter and clothing retailer Carmen imparted to their shops and their surrounding areas. Still around are Santa Lucía Religious and Aminova's Barbershop, with their signs telling curious onlookers, namely the uninitiated, to refrain from snapping pictures. A conversation with Mario from Santa Lucía Religious encompasses geography, genealogy, gastronomy, music and humor. Amongst all of these business styles and idiosyncratic personalities, vendors have continued to forge relationships with one another. All of this is of utmost relevance when thinking about Finkelppearl's mention of "service art," or what I see as art as service.⁸

In the case of Beatrice Glow, her action *Time Capsule for Essex Market* resonates with the interactions between the vendors that Cara Buckley describes in her 2011 piece for the *New York Times*. In Buckley's unlovely, as in non-glamorous, Market there is an affective connection amongst merchants such as Batista and Economou that makes the place transcend its unstately appearance. "When her refrigerator... [Ms. Economou's]... started to break down, Mr. Batista and his son, Luis Jr., quickly offered her space in theirs. After Mr. Batista noticed that Ms. Economou rarely had time for a break, he began sharing his lunch, which his wife prepares, with Ms. Economou every day."⁹ Glow's initial proposal for the exhibition involved a cooperative gesture dealing with offering vendors like Ms. Economou one hour of her time during which Glow was willing to run errands or help with chores. In exchange for this, vendors were to provide Glow with materials to be fashioned into an olfactory capsule representative of their stores. After a request from a vendor for a much-needed back rub, the artist wondered about the wide open-ended nature of her offering in relationship to social-professional boundaries. Instead she opted for establishing more subtle connections and for listening carefully to the merchants' narratives pertaining the scents that identify their shops. At the epicenter of this process is that of preserving some of the vital essences of an organism in the throes of life-altering changes. The aging unlovely but loving Essex Street Market of which Buckley talks in her article is being compared by the *New York Times* writer with its adolescent counterpart in Chelsea; the Chelsea Market. With youth

⁸ Tom Finkelppearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 26.

⁹ Cara Buckley, "In an Unlovely, Old Market, Bonds Run Deep," *New York Times*, May 20 2011, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/21/nyregion/at-the-unlovely-essex-street-market-bonds-run-deep.html>

and aging in my mind, my lungs keep wondering about the aromatic outcomes of Glow's poetic alchemy evocative of Paraselcian philosophy.

The Essex Street Market's birth happened at an interesting junction marked by the financial austerity of the post-depression years and at the dawn of the economic growth resulting from WWII and the industry that it fueled. In *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York*, Mason B. Williams discusses how "La Guardia's first priority upon taking office was to shore up the city's balance sheet and, by doing so, regain access to the credit markets...La Guardia considered it politically and financially essential to begin his administration from a strong fiscal position."¹⁰ There is a frugality inherent in the production of Mary Ting's *Refuse Redo*, as she titles her action for the exhibition that, like the building of the Essex Street Market, exists at another pivotal juncture: the extreme polarization of wealth in the city and the efforts by the ecological movement to counteract the impact of reckless consumerism. Ting's endeavor is reminiscent of the social programs implemented by the U.S. after the Great Depression and in consonance with the current consciousness behind the greening of the Earth. In *Refuse Redo* she uses her skills as an artist, educator and activist to collaborate with the vendor La Tiendita – The Lower Eastside Girls Club to create sculptures from the market discards. In preparation the artist scours the Market for leftover materials, which are transformed into artworks, such as cardboard bee and flower sculptures from the market produce boxes in this time of pollinator decline due to the chemicals sprayed on our crops. Ting's long-term intention is to explore the viability of introducing an in-house recycling system for Market patrons to use. Indeed- hard to believe - no such structure exists at the moment.

Finkelpearl explains how "A recurring theme of cooperative art and participatory activism is their antispectatorial character. Cooperative art is created through *shared action*, not by active artists for inactive spectators."¹¹ Antonia Pérez is one more artist in the group who takes recycling in the Market into her own hands. In *Heart in Hand*, she sets up shop in the Gallery space, where she diligently crochets the most pervasive element of the contemporary shopping experience, the plastic bag, into intricate patterns. Pérez' participation in *Lettuce, Artichokes, Red Beets, Mangoes, Broccoli, Honey and Nutmeg: The Essex Market as Collaborator* is formatted as an on-going action with a lifespan similar to that of the show. Through a sign posted on the glass door of Cuchifritos Gallery, she entices shoppers and vendors alike to chip into *Heart in Hand* by dropping off their unwanted stash of plastic bags. In Jean Merrill's children's classic *The Pushcart War*, Pérez's medium is the protagonist in a conversation among peddlers annoyed by false defamations regarding their trade. "'Plastic! said Old Anna. 'So you can't examine the fruit. That is why they...[meaning supermarkets]...have plastic bags.'"¹² Then she declares, "'You asked me what is the menace...And I will tell you. It

¹⁰ Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York- London: W.W. Norton and Company , 2013), 139.

¹¹ Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 343.

¹² Jean Merrill, *The Pushcart War* (New York: The New York Review Children's Collection, 1992), 51.

is plastic bags!”¹³

Eight years have elapsed since Bellafante wrote about the Essex Street Market in 2006, and the future she hints at is now just right around the corner. Literally. The old Market will be replaced by the construction of the Essex Street Crossing, a series of developments including 1000 units of combined market rate and affordable housing. “The project includes a site for Head Start programs, a community center run by the 100-year-old Grand Street Settlement, office space, retail space, a rooftop farm and a museum.”¹⁴ The time will arrive when the brick walls of the Essex and Delancey Streets building will come down, and the glass façade that characterizes much of New York City’s new architecture will come up in its place.

Laia Solé’s *e* seeks to do away with walls. Nevertheless, her impetus is not that of the usual downtown developer, but to efface the divide between Cuchifritos Gallery and the goings on of the rest of the premises. She issues a counter-invitation to the curator of the exhibition, myself, to perform with her, while in preparation for the action she approaches vendors to donate green items of any kind. The artist and I use these materials to collage portions of the gallery that are later erased digitally through Chroma Key technology. Solé’s action is an iteration of a performance for which she and myself erased the lobby of the Drawing Center in 2014, as a strategy to let the streets of SoHo and Chinatown seep into the white cube of the art gallery. Previous to this, Solé has organized interventions with neighbors in Barcelona, Catalonia, responding to loss and changes in their urban commons that is, the non-privatized spaces of public use where communities can discuss challenges, contest issues, exchange information and celebrate life.¹⁵

“New Mixed-Income Housing on the Lower East Side,” reads the title of Ronda Kaysen’s *New York Times* piece for the real estate section.¹⁶ In this article the bigger market (as in real estate) takes preponderance over the Market (as in food), and the sale of produce and the like is discussed side by side with the advent a new bowling alley and a museum. Kaysen’s narrative revolves primarily around the future of the sites to be developed, and includes a list of the amenities that will come to what she describes as a vibrant neighborhood. Chain-link fences will give way to glass panels. The relocation of the Essex Street Market, she tells us, will allow it to be twice as big as it is now. This spatial increment leads one to reflect about the survival of the layers, figuratively speaking, that the place has generated up to the present. Will its etheric body, to name one of its many strata, be able to outlive the grafting of Market as a unit onto a new and larger body? How much of this thinking applies not only to the Essex Street Market but

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ginia Bellafante, “A Move for the Essex Street Market,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2013, accessed January 24, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/nyregion/a-move-for-the-essex-street-market.html?_r=0

¹⁵ My mention to the urban commons in Laia Solé’s work references some of Tom Finkelpearl’s ideas in his introduction *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*.

¹⁶ Ronda Kaysen, “New Mixed-Income Housing on the Lower East Side,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2015, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/realestate/new-mixed-income-housing-onthe-lower-east-side.html>

also to a city that changes faster than one's memories and emotions can adapt to, and which Jean Baudrillard sees as the "...heir to all other cities at once. Heir to Athens, Alexandria, Persepolis..."¹⁷ Kaysen's insight into the past and future of the neighborhood where the Market is illustrates some of the allegories implied in Baudrillard's statement "The community and the city spent years hammering out an agreement for the site, finally reaching one in 2013, settling a bitter dispute that started when the area was bulldozed in 1967, displacing nearly 2,000 residents in the name of urban renewal."¹⁸ Last but not least is the question about the survival of spaces of public use and urban commons in the midst of new real estate developments. I dare to say that it will be harder for transgressive acts, like the celebration of a vendor's birthday in an empty cubicle in the Market in 2004, to happen surreptitiously at the Essex Street Crossing! I might prove myself wrong.

An Aleph within an Aleph; a city within the city. The image of the Essex Street Market as a living organism is one that reverberates with Solé's, Pérez's, Zúñiga's, Ting's, Glow's, and Spiller's presence in the place, and in how their projects are considering three points that I identify as crucial when co-creating with communities: gut, heart and brain. Gut as in intuition, heart as in emotion and brain as in concept. This is a triad whose absence can render mechanical in my opinion, a socially engaged, social practice-based or cooperative endeavor. While at the time of writing this essay, the artists are still finding their way from shop to shop, forging connections, collecting materials and testing the relevance of their plans, there is indication of how the activation of the three elements discussed is triggering reflexes amongst all of those involved. There is ample questioning on behalf of the artists about paring down ideas to get to the core of the projects, given the tight schedule for production and some of the red tape that has to be negotiated. And there are the pragmatic responses coming from vendors about purpose and intentionality. Most everyone involved is struggling with time, trying to make end meets, focused on the practicalities of running a business in New York City or reflecting on the actual effectiveness of the artistic gestures performed. It is at this uncertain axis where the creative experience is meant to rise up or to simply fail to do so, amidst *Lettuce, Artichokes, Red Beets, Mangoes, Broccoli, Honey and Nutmeg*, and despite the mercurial dictates of the market (as in real estate)!

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¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London – New York: Verso, 1988), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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