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## When Meals Played the Muse

By RANDY KENNEDY  
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THE artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who died in 1978 at age 35, loved to cook, but he could never quite unbraid his culinary passions from those of artmaking, with sometimes bizarre dinner party results. At one, recalled his widow, Jane Crawford, he cooked a lovely whole sea bass, but it emerged from the kitchen encased in a block of aspic nearly three feet long. He unmolded it, then gave the table a good kick, so that the aspic wobbled wildly and the bass seemed to fishtail upstream.

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Richard Landry, alteration by Gordon Matta-Clark

Gordon Matta-Clark, right, turned this photograph into a promotion for Food, the restaurant he and other artists opened in 1971.



Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, courtesy of Canadian Centre for Architecture

Gordon Matta-Clark was an artist also known for his unusual meals, like one mostly of bones.

“All the guests looked at it with this sort of horror and amazement,” Ms. Crawford said recently. “In the end my mundane chicken stew got eaten and everyone was too afraid to touch the fish.”

A retrospective of Matta-Clark’s brief, highly influential career opening tomorrow at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) will shine a new spotlight on the close but sometimes unsung affinities between the worlds of art and food, and also on one celebrated example of their coming together, the pioneering SoHo restaurant Food, which Matta-Clark helped found in 1971 at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets.

The restaurant lasted not quite three years in its original incarnation, as the artists who cooked in it and who ran it, more as a utopian enterprise than a business, burned out or moved on. But many of the vaguely countercultural ideas fostered there — fresh and seasonal foods, a geographically catholic menu, a kitchen fully open to the dining room, cooking as a kind of performance — have now become so ingrained in restaurants in New York and other large cities that it is hard to remember a time when such a place would have seemed almost extraterrestrial.

The restaurant, for example, served sushi and sashimi at a time when they were still not widely seen in New York. (It was the idea of Hisachika Takahashi, assistant to the artist [Robert Rauschenberg](#); one early menu simply described it as raw mackerel with wasabi sauce.) The same menu featured ceviche, borscht, rabbit stew with prunes, stuffed tongue Creole and a fig, garlic and anchovy salad. Big communal dishes of chopped parsley and fresh butter were kept on the counters. Bakers came down from the Mad Brook Farm commune in Vermont to make the bread. Two nights a week the cooks — modern dancers by trade — were vegetarians and so was the menu, a kind of flexibility that was Food’s trademark. At least once the owners opened one of the restaurant’s large windows onto the street and sold stalks of sugar cane to passers-by.

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Artists were also invited weekly to serve as guest chefs, and the whole dinner was considered a performance art piece. One of the most fabled, costing \$4, was Matta-Clark's "bone dinner," which featured oxtail soup, roasted marrow bones and frogs' legs, among other bony entrees. After the plates were cleared, the bones were scrubbed and strung together so that diners could wear their leftovers home.

"It looked like an anthropological site," said the artist Keith Sonnier, another guest chef and a member of the extended Food crowd, one that also included members of Philip Glass's ensemble, dancers from Trisha Brown's company and other artists like Robert Kushner and Donald Judd, who lived in SoHo before it was called SoHo.

"You have to realize at that particular time in New York," Mr. Sonnier added, "people did not eat bone marrow."

But while it was ahead of its time as a restaurant, it was also a perfect expression of its scrappy, hippie era, when many young artists and creative people in New York and elsewhere had little money for good food — and few options adventurous enough for them anyway. The same year, 1971, Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., as "a simple little place where we could cook and talk politics," sparking a fresh-and-seasonal-foods revolution in America. In 1973 a collective of artists and communal farmers founded the Moosewood Restaurant, the vegetarian standard-bearer, in Ithaca, N.Y.

Mitchell Davis, a vice president of the James Beard Foundation and an adjunct professor in [New York University's](#) food studies program, said that while restaurants like Food bubbled up from the counterculture, their influence eventually changed mainstream culture. "These people were not on the path to being chefs or restaurateurs or professional food people," he said. "They were like: 'Hey, we like to cook. We can do this. Why not?' And in doing it they ended up knocking down all these barriers of wealth and class and status in the restaurant world."

Caroline Goodden, a photographer and dancer who was then Matta-Clark's girlfriend, said the idea for Food grew partly out of a floating dinner party scene that materialized in many of the cheap lofts inhabited, legally or not, by artists and performers in Lower Manhattan, including a group of Louisiana expatriates who played with Mr. Glass and cooked Cajun feasts for their friends.

At one of her parties, organized around a flower theme — edible flowers were served to guests who came dressed as flowers — Matta-Clark half-jokingly suggested that Ms. Goodden start a restaurant. She took him up on it, sinking substantial sums of her own money into it. Taking over the lease from a failed Puerto Rican restaurant, she, Matta-Clark and another downtown artist named Tina Girouard set about gutting and rebuilding the space in June 1971 with help from other friends, creating one of the few places to eat in the neighborhood at the time, besides Fanelli's bar.

From the beginning, the idea was to establish not only a kind of perpetual dinner party but also a food-based philanthropy that would employ and support struggling artists, the whole endeavor conceived by Matta-Clark as a living, breathing, steaming, pot-clanging artwork.

"To Gordon, I think everything in life was an art event," said Ms. Goodden, who now lives in a small town in New Mexico. "He had cooking all through his mind as a way of assembling people, like choreography. And that, in a way, is what Food became."

In a catalog to accompany his retrospective, Elisabeth Sussman, the curator of the Whitney show, describes it as providing "the best picture of an artists' utopia, in all its extraordinary ordinariness, that Matta-Clark imagined."

Artists, of course, have long imagined their utopias coming equipped with kitchens. "The Futurist Cookbook," Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1932 manifesto, declared war on pasta and demanded that eating be an ecstatic experience, almost a derangement of the senses. (One dinner includes perfumes that precede each dish, wafted by electric fans.) Food has also served as a visual, conceptual and sometimes consumable conceit in the art world since long before Arcimboldo's much-reproduced 16th-century portraits of men's heads composed of fish, fruits and vegetables.

Beginning in the 1960s, partly for political reasons, food began playing a more prominent role in artists' work. Allan Kaprow, the artist who coined the term "happenings," frequently used food; in 1970 he built a wall of bread, with jelly for mortar, near the Berlin Wall. In 1971 Matta-Clark cooked a whole pig under the Brooklyn Bridge and served 500 pork sandwiches as part of a performance. In the 1990s Rirkrit Tiravanija's performances famously turned New York galleries into kitchens, where the Thai curry was both art and

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dinner.

But food as medium and muse is not necessarily the same thing as food that needs to balance the books. Ms. Goodden and the founders of the restaurant had little experience with accounting and payroll, taxes and inventory, and less interest in running a conventional business. “I had the ridiculous idea of serving a glass of milk for 5 cents for pure nostalgic reasons,” Ms. Goodden recalled, in a memoir she is writing.

She added that on the occasions when the art overtook the food, art was usually allowed to carry the day, cash register notwithstanding. At one dinner performance, Matta-Clark served live brine shrimp swimming in broth in the middle of a halved, cooked egg white. “Some nonartist customers were furious and claimed there should be a law against us,” she wrote. “We told them guest chef days were no holds barred days and they could leave if they wished. So they did.”

About 60 artists are estimated to have worked at the restaurant as cooks, waiters and busboys over the first three years. Most came and went frequently, depending on their whims and artistic fortunes. In one scene in a short film made by Matta-Clark with the help of the photographer Robert Frank, “A Day in the Life of Food,” a group of cooks can be seen on a break, trying to figure out who will take the morning shift. In the middle of the discussion one lights up a joint and passes it around. Ms. Goodden’s big Alaskan sled dog, Glaza, can also be seen occasionally wandering through the kitchen.

Throughout those early days Matta-Clark was more of a guiding spirit than a full-time employee. “Gordon wasn’t a regular cook,” Ms. Girouard said, laughing. “We wouldn’t let him.”

And so even as the restaurant was becoming an increasingly fashionable scene, a precursor of the SoHo to come — “Pretty much the whole art community was coming in there at one point,” Ms. Girouard said — its proprietors were sometimes struggling to keep it going, and Ms. Goodden often found herself mopping floors at midnight only to get up again at 4 a.m. to make the rounds at the Fulton Fish Market.

“We put our hearts and souls and butts into that place,” Ms. Girouard said, adding, “I could talk to you for months about it.”

By 1974 Ms. Goodden and the others still involved decided to sell the restaurant, which endured through the 1980s in various forms before closing, its space taken over by a women’s clothing boutique.

“Though we consumed food, Food consumed us,” Ms. Goodden once wrote. “It was a free enterprise which gave food away much too freely.” But, she added, with all the enthusiasm of the times: “The joy is the idea. The idea, as an idea, worked. It was a beautiful, nourishing, vital, stimulating new concept, which was a living, pulsating hub of creative energy — and piles of fresh parsley.”

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