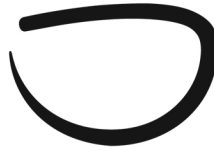


Canadian Food Studies



La Revue canadienne des  
études sur l'alimentation

## Event Review

### **BPLTC III: Food Control (Contrôle alimentaire)**

*OS Fermentation* (Leila Nadir & Cary Peppermint—Eco Art Tech)

*Milpa Polimera* (Arcangelo Constantini & Marcela Armas)

*Evigaturen* (Signe Liden)

Curators: Aurélie Besson, Ariane de Blois, Blake Hargreaves,  
Benoit Palop

Eastern Bloc, Montreal, QC. January 14 to February 3, 2016.

Review by Pamela Honor Tudge (Concordia University)

Food is an ever-compelling topic for artistic interrogation. In Eastern Bloc's recent exhibition, *BPLTC III: Food Control*, multimedia artists use digital technologies as a form of both presentation and mimicry to critique the technologically driven industrial food system. This exhibition was the last of a three-part series on biopolitics, and the objective of the show was to explore how research and technological advancements influence the ways in which food is distributed and made accessible within contemporary regimes—a familiar topic to many food studies scholars. The curators deem this “the control over food,” namely, the non-sharing of food resources by nations or industries versus community-driven responses. The three installations cover practices of domestic food knowledge, concerns about seed patents, and systems of seed

control. The works are derived from multiple contexts in different parts of the world—from just across the Canadian border to farther south, around Mexico City, and even to the far reaches of Norway. The orientation of the media used comprises a potent method for examining technology’s role in food control, while demonstrating how technology can also critique power. This way, the exhibition shows how technology itself is not the problem, but rather the ways in which technology is used to hold power over our food.

Starting close to home, and situated within the increasingly popular North American movements to revive domestic food practices, *OS Fermentation* plays with technology to bring novel aesthetics to fermentation processes. The artists Leila Nadir and Cary Peppermint describe their work as an “interspecies” installation, intended to create a “spiritual revival of human-microbial collaborations.”

The installation is made up of a large wooden food table with several different flavours of kombucha in mason jars for sampling. Select jars contain probes that capture data (pH levels, dissolved oxygen, and color values) as they change during the fermentation process. The data is gathered using a circuit board and then processed by a computer using custom software. This generates and prints out what the artists refer to as “microbiotic selfies.”

The installation also includes a chalkboard with a foodie manifesto and an old television set with one of the artists on the screen, demonstrating how to prepare fermented foods. Next to the installation, the artists include a projected stream of Internet videos that show people reacting to different fermented foods. The gallery audience is invited to sample the kombucha, blending the new media aesthetic and a sensory engagement with taste.



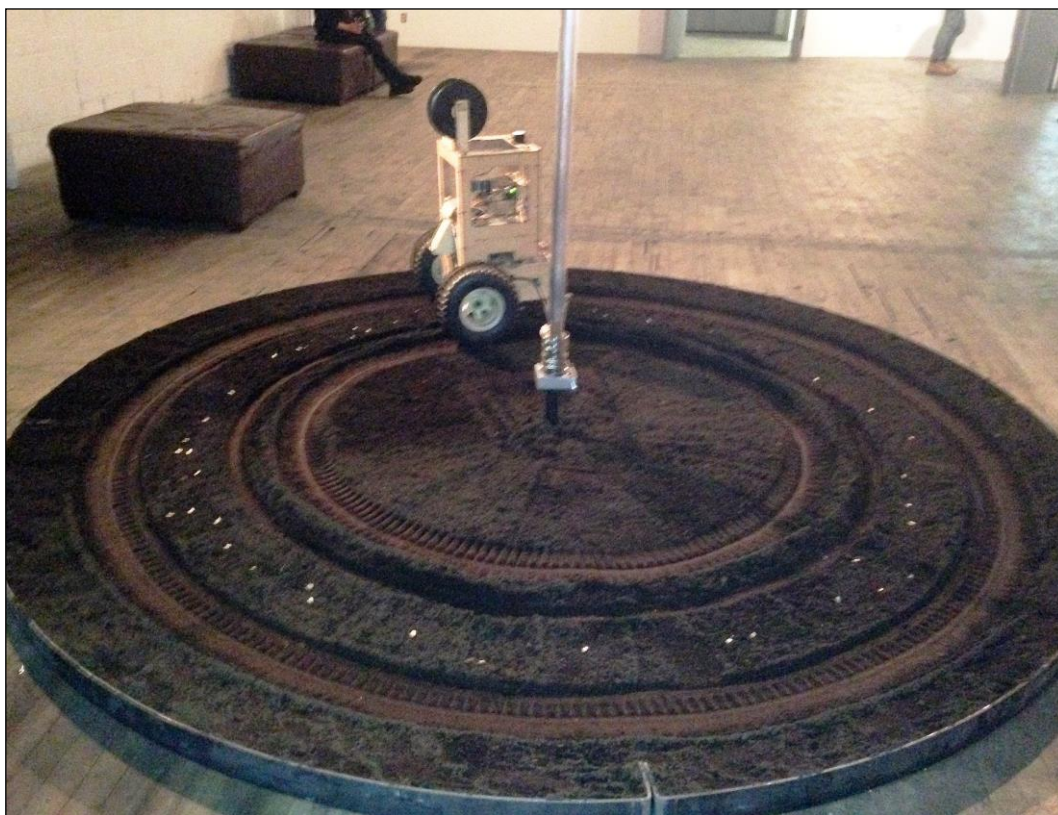
**Figure 1:** The *OS Fermentation* installation and manifesto  
(photo: Pamela Tudge)

*Milpa Polimera* tackles contemporary concerns around corn. The artists Arcangelo Constantini and Marcela Armas, from Mexico City, focus their installation on Mexico’s ancient staple, recognizing its vitality and diversity, and the ways in which it is a central part of the Mexican identity.

Arcangelo was at the *Food Control* opening, and during my conversation with him, he elaborated on the significance of the piece, mentioning the current biopolitical conflicts in Mexico, particularly in the rural regions where he has spent an increasing amount of time. There, traditional corn varieties and new industrial varieties are key actors in heated legal standoffs.

Within the installation, the artists’ tractor robot runs in never-ending circles—reflecting the economic system within a closed “self-justifying” loop. The robot is constructed as two opposing systems: a 3D printer built from an open-source design, and the “seeds” the printer makes from patented, genetically modified corn plastic. The seeds are then planted in the soil of the installation. Similar to genetically modified terminator seeds, the “sterile” plastic seeds become an artefact of our contemporary industrial food system.

The installation situates technology as an instrument of corporate control, particularly through legal, technologically driven mechanisms like seed patents, which give special favour to private companies and place control of our food in the hands of private corporations that are supported by capitalist-driven governments.



**Figure 2:** *Milpa Polimera’s* crop circle (photo: Pamela Tudge)

The third installation, *Evigaturen*, by the Norwegian artist Signe Liden, comprises a film and a sculptural “recording” machine. The subject of the work is the Global Seed Vault, which houses seeds from around the world as a form of nation-state food security, protecting coveted seeds against potential disaster. The machine is a sculptural representation of an actual recording device, made by the artist and sent by ship to the seed vault, located between the North Pole and Norway.

The original device (now located at the vault) records the sound of a given seed’s activity, and is based on ancient principles of recording. Sounds are inscribed on a rotating record by what the artist describes as “a needle fixed to a Tibetan ball.”

The installation’s intent seems to be to demystify the seed vault, a high-security, multiple-chamber facility that is located exceptionally far from society. The film projected on

the wall next to the sculptures depicts the recording machine’s journey to the vault on a shipping vessel. The diverse group of passengers that accompanies the machine are shown going about daily activities, with shots of everyday life on board the industrial vessel—an isolating experience of travel to the frigid far north.

Together, the sculptures and the film do not convey one particular message, and instead serve as a reminder of the vault’s existence—an important statement in and of itself—and that the security of the global food system lies beyond corporate food labs, deeply embedded within our geopolitical structures.

For food scholars, this exhibition asks how aesthetic representation can affect our understanding of food control and biopolitics; what happens when multimedia art produces a kind of activist artefact?



**Figure 3:** Artifacts from the sound recordings of *Evigaturen* (photo: Pamela Tudge)

The digital microbiotic selfies of *OS Fermentation* demonstrate the distinct liveliness of the fermentation process—an important reflection of diversity at the micro-scale—and the established resistance to industrial-scale homogenization of our food. *Milpa Polimera*'s power is in the ways by which the artist confronts technology as an instrument for control and manipulation, acutely illustrating how robots, 3D printers, and corn plastics can be used to erase Indigenous peoples' rights to their own food supply. Finally, the *Evigaturen* sculptures reveal that the most isolated parts of our food system remain connected to the greater whole, interacted with and capable of generating new activity, however subtle.

All three installations work at once to demystify the instruments of food control—security, patents, processing—while delivering a multi-sensory jolt to our understandings of food control.

*Pamela Tudge is a PhD student in Concordia University's Individualized Program, an adjunct professor in the faculty of Fine Arts, and an active member of Hexagram. She teaches We Are What We Eat, a food and culture course that examines contemporary food practices through research-creation–style projects. Her research employs material- and media-based practices to explore understandings of domestic food waste and space. Over the last 10 years, she has done work in the areas of food studies, environmental science, new media, and social movements.*