

THE CONVERSATION #3:

SOPHIE LEE AND CARLOS MONLEÓN GENDALL

The Conversation is a rolling project at SPACE. Over the last year we have staged a series of conversations between studio artists and selected interlocutors. The project began in January 2013 when Clunie Reid was joined by glamour model/internationally recognised body builder Jodie Marsh and continued with a dialogue between Patricia Lennox-Boyd and writer Alexander Zevin.

For the current installment, Sophie Lee, SPACE / Bloomberg ON studio awardee and Bread Show artist is joined by artist and cook, Carlos Monleon Gendall. In a wide ranging dialogue, bread and baking are explored from multiple viewpoints, including class, 'creativity' and history.

Sophie Lee (born Johannesburg, 1988) lives and works in London. She gained a BA in Fine Art from the Slade School of Fine Art, London in 2012. Recent exhibitions include Young London, V22 (2013) and 'Speak, Memory!', N/V_PROJECTS at The Dye House, PAMI, September 2012, London.

Carlos Monleon Gendall (born Madrid, 1983) lives and works in London. He has variously operated as a chef, baker and cheesemonger while simultaneously proposing an art practice concerned with the relationship between shifting material values, culturally engaged food-stuffs and diegetic digestions. He has recently directed an edible opera about an anti-farinaceous Fourierian revolution and has began fermenting 'speculative wines'.

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Carlos Monleón Gendall: Bread has long-been a symbol of corporeality; of the physical body. But it also symbolises the social body, sharing culture and being in company. And of course etymologically 'company' means to share bread together...

Sophie Lee: It almost has a sort of *drawing function*; it pulls people together.

CMG: Exactly, and this is something reinforced by the traditional way bread was made, in a communal oven as part of a daily routine. Bread was kind of like, well, a gel...

SL: Yes.

CMG: So tell me about some of the motifs that we see in the exhibition? I mean there's some more classic images relating to arable land and agriculture. But there's some other stuff going on, human hands making various signs, for example...

SL: We were always thinking of the show in very bodily terms, which I guess ties in to what we've just been saying about 'social bodies'. Initially we imagined various body parts arranged around the room, all looking quite cartoony with the sort of dumb cheerfulness a 'thumbs up' sign has. This got us into making hand signs and we kind of ran with that idea.

If bread is this kind of ultimately social material it contains within it great expanses of history. We can read it almost as a cipher of different times, from industrial bakeries, to these communal ovens, all the way back to when wheat was first cultivated -- the transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture -- so basically the beginnings of our civilisation. Of course there's something of a fool's errand in trying to deal with something so expansive, and it suggests quite a bombastic attitude to time and history, as if we could crunch together great expanses of time -- a sort of time-travel attitude. I think the hand gestures were a way for us to touch upon this without having to be too earnest. Being instantly recognisable they suggest a language or something that can be read, but then hit a point of muteness or opaqueness fairly quickly, are dumb in a literal way. We were happy to revel in a certain cheekiness and silliness.

CMG: I see...

SL: So central to the show are these hand signs, as mentioned the thumbs up, but also a peace sign, a lottery sign, fingers crossed and the vitality sign. But then we've also included some plaques, which are a bit more pictorial and gave us the opportunity to add a little more narrative. But again, even in these, there are body parts present. For example spraypainted gums and teeth or DNA. I guess it's like a kind of corporo-cosmic conflation.

CMG: A mandala of digestion!

SL: Yes!

CMG: Mandala of incorporation!

SL: Ha!

CMG: So what was the actual baking process like?

SL: Well, we started off baking in my kitchen, which is fairly small scale. Everything was limited to the size of my oven which meant that even if we pieced things together it still felt too domestic in scale. So we got in contact with an industrial baker in Croydon - Bloomers Bakery - which meant a significant change in the way we worked. It was of course an opportunity to go big, but also a chance to sculpt an entirely different quality of dough: it was amazing using industrial mixers after struggling in my kitchen using only buckets and our hands!

CMG: So what about the actual making of the pieces, your bodily interaction with the dough? You see when I was baking in restaurants it became a sort of choreography for me. One would have to be very sensitive with the dough, very smooth in the way one moved. And the whole was like a choreography repeated every day

SL: Yes, yes...

CMG: And we had space to move around, to almost engage with the dough as a kind of body. Sometimes when you're kneading a big batch of dough with your hands it's almost like you're struggling with someone, wrestling with another body...

SL: I think we did develop a sort of choreography as we worked. I think it was something to do with working as a collective, four of us baking every week and sort of getting quite slick at knowing our different jobs. That said, sadly we didn't really get to experience what you're describing or get to have such direct contact when mixing the dough because we were using this massive mixer and a kneader maybe about a metre wide and metre deep! [laughs] It was just a case of chucking in huge amounts of flour into the mixer, pressing a button and letting it go. It was actually quite an alienating experience: being in Croydon at, like, 5am, having not had much sleep. Seeing this dough whirling round in a quite nauseating fashion, making this really distinctive slapping sound.

CMG: And how was the actual bread, what was the texture that came out—did you eat any of your creations?

SL: Yeah, we ate a few, it was really horrible actually! [laughs] It wasn't very nice bread.

CMG: And what did the other bakers think of what you were doing?

SL: [laughs] I think they were fairly perplexed by us, I mean it was very kind of them to have us there and they were very welcoming and incredibly helpful to us, but you could just tell: they weren't especially impressed with the things we were coming out with.

CMG: Sure, I guess on the technical side of things they strive for a very particular type of loaf, maybe closer to the industrial loaf or the Wonder Loaf which is this soft, white, fluffy and homogenous thing. Instead you come up with these flat rugged somehow deviant sculptures, these deviant breads [laughs].

SL: I think misusing industrial methods and machinery is interesting. When we started in my kitchen we had this hand-made, artisanal approach. And, perversely, we tried to carry that over to machines that really only want to make bread in one particular way. There was a kind of material struggle going on.

CMG: I see. It kind of reminds me of what Siegfried Giedion - a 19th Century cultural commentator who gets extensively quoted in Benjamin's Arcades Project- speaks about. He was writing at a very specific point in History. Technology was rapidly spreading to every aspect of life or, rather more specifically, mechanization: high speed processes and industrialisation. In one chapter he talks about the mechanical meeting the organic, and the example he uses is bread and bread making. Bread is ultimately a living organism until you bake it. Industrial, mechanised baking seeks to control and standardise it. He argues that this change - increasingly mediated by technology - allows for the expression of certain dormant societal desires for sweeter, softer, purer things. Through mechanisation, bread - in a way just like life - moves away from a kind of coarse peasant nature towards a softer, safer culture. And in a way that is exactly what the spongy homogenous industrial loaf we spoke about earlier is. He also talks about class. How this idea of 'refinement' is an aspirational issue. I think this question is kind of interesting to ask today, how - literally - taste is articulated across in different social classes and how taste gets embodied in different aesthetic regimes.

SL: Specifically in terms of bread you would think that the refinement of soft fluffy white bread would suggest a kind of pure and wealthy sensibility. With rougher, tougher bread being associated with a contemporary mode of peasantry. However the total opposite is true. A simple sourdough loaf now costs £4!

CMG: Well, I guess we're kind of used to food as being cheap. It can come as a bit of a shock when some food costs. Like this sourdough loaf, I guess it reappears as a symbol of a certain kind of—

SL: Gentrification

CMG: Gentrification, yes, but also the return of a particular taste and set of values, like going back to the land, connecting with the organic and traditions. We have already discussed how bread, through the mechanised pursuit of purity, lost all of its substance (and thus nutrients). The return to sourdough perhaps suggests a need for deeper nourishment often lacking today.

SL: This makes me think of a David Foster Wallace story called 'Mr Squishy'. It's about this bread company that produces incredibly soft, white, cakey bread -- the texture is described by their brand logo -- it's squishy. He basically uses the idea of 'cakey bread' as a kind of nihilistic endgame: the result of a really problematic desire economy that - in its need for instant satiation - will transform the most basic thing into a kind of cheap treat.

CMG: Exactly. So returning to the show, I'd like to talk about the issue of duration and temporality. I mean what is the future of these bread pieces?

SL: I suppose they have their end kind of built into them. You're aware right from the beginning that these aren't going to be around for long and they'll be up for this show but they aren't really saleable. They're kind of volatile actually, from the moment when wet meets dry, and even now, they're constantly changing in state -- shrinking, cracking, expanding..

CMG: I guess if you don't eat them, someone else is going to. In this case, moulds, or fungi.

SL: Well yeah, the mice have eaten them in my studio; they've been having a great time!
[laughs]

CMG: I'm quite tempted to have a bite. Do you have any pieces I could attempt to try now?

SL: To have a bite?

CMG: Yeah, can I have a bite?

SL: Yes, of course you can.

CMG: Yeah, I want to try. See how I fare, see if my teeth and gums can cope with them!

SL: Maybe try eating a lucky hand, you might need all the luck you can get!

CMG: This is a wonderful piece, sure you can you spare this?

SL: Sure.

[Carlos takes a bite]

CMG: [mouth full] It's alright actually [chomp] kind of dry.

SL: It's pretty old

CMG: Bit salty, but if you dipped it in some coffee, milky coffee, it would be a good snack.

SL: [laughs]