

## Kristyna Milde Interview about Á la Cart

for <http://littlepatuxentreview.org/>

**LPR: Could you please describe the arc of Á la Cart? I've seen a list of instructions for participants, and I saw the carts, but is it being documented and if so how? Do you think of this piece as having an end? Will participants' experiences be distributed to each other or an audience in some way?**

**KM:** Project Á la Cart is a participatory, edible workshop experiment, which started with the initial question, "If we are what we eat, who we are if we don't know the origin and the context of the production of our food?" It was originally created for [Smack Mellon's](#) exhibition [FOODshed: Art and Agriculture in Action](#), curated by Amy Lipton. We started by inviting members of the local community in DUMBO Brooklyn, inexperienced in gardening, to actively engage in the process of growing ingredients for a single dish of their choice. Each participant adopted one supermarket shopping cart filled with soil that served as a garden bed and attempted to cultivate ingredients for his or her favorite recipe. The development of the project was documented and the participants were asked to take notes about the experience. A formation of six carts functioning as the garden was parked at Old Fulton Plaza in a public space. The project took place in the growing season of 2014 starting in May and was finished in late September with a public event presented at the Dumbo Street Festival that featured the harvest and a gathering of the participants, who met to eat and to share their experience and ideas about the urban gardening and sustainable food production. The idea of Á la Cart is to serve both as a living sculpture and a platform for growing food. It is not meant to be a farm or a professional gardening course but rather a playground encouraging new experiences while reconsidering the limits of consumerism.

**Browsing your history of projects, I've noticed that food and agriculture are pervasive themes. What has drawn you to these themes? Did you have any salient intellectual or emotional experiences that pointed you in this direction? This is a similar question to what I ask from contributors to our blog's "[What You Eat](#)" series, trying to draw out narratives from our community's formative experiences with food.**

There have been several motivations for our interest in food. In our art practice we explore environmental contexts of the culture of living. The theme of food extends to projects in architecture and design in which we examine the cultural relationships of the constructed reality and natural world. Food, of course, is an important element in the environment at large and is very personal too, because to experience it means to internalize it. To follow the taste is for us a simple way to start exploring the complexity of food production. There is always a question why something tastes great while something else is just awful. While taste is a personal preference,

[my husband and I] both agree on one thing: highly processed chain- or factory-made food usually tastes bland, dull, and uninteresting while artisan or homemade food made with farm fresh produce always causes us excitement. We share similar experiences from early childhood of eating highly uniform and tasteless food in school versus the food made at home in the family and friends circles.

We both grew up in communist Czechoslovakia, where, before 1989, all food production was completely government controlled and produced. All farms were nationalized in the 1950s, which led to the creation of state-run unified agricultural cooperatives, the so-called JZD (*Jednotne Zemedelske Druzstvo*), an involuntary transformation that can be seen as a socialist version of the green revolution. The communists forced people to join the cooperative or just confiscated the farms. For the farmers it meant working on their former properties as employees for a unified salary with no relation to input or output. This, of course, damaged the whole social fabric of food production and inevitably the natural relationship to the land. The communist state, in order to create a class-free society, became the sole producer with a monopoly on everything, which resulted in no competition, no motivation or personal engagement, causing a state of alienation, a huge paradox and historic lesson as the Marxists strived to address the effects of alienation caused by capitalism.

The same model was applied in other food industries including restaurants, canteens in the factories, and schools, which cooked according to the governmentally unified recipes and norms. The result was uninteresting, average food, and one can say that with some rare exceptions the only culinary experience worth mentioning was to be found in the privacy of people's homes. Fortunately that changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall when totalitarian corporate-state monopoly broke down and before the Western corporate giants arrived. It always appeared to us that in the West there was a universe of choices; however, here in the US unification and monopolization is clearly happening too—for different reasons but with similar results. We think that it is alarming since it attempts the same thing we were trying to escape: total control of resources and food production. For the consumer it does not really matter if the totality is created by ideology of an oppressive state or a monopoly secured by aggressive lobbying and patenting natural resources by a corrupt state; both produce industries of a huge scale dehumanizing the process with consequences on food quality that projects further on the natural and social environment.

The production of food is inherent to the history of human culture and was for most people an important part of everyday life. Unfortunately we have lost the majority of our connection to it. At this point it is certainly hard to romanticize the return to agrarian society; but while today there is an extensive talk and emphasis on sustainability, it is also fair to admit that we have been voluntarily disarmed of the powerful tool of self-reliance that food production is. We have given up the power to others in exchange for the comforts of the modern life. Nation after nation changed their way of life from agrarian to industrial, which clearly improved life in some ways, but the production of food also changed entirely. For example, the tomato of today is not the

tomato of yesterday; it is a completely different product, a different species with a different chemical content rooted in the drug and oil industry anchored by the patent office rather than in the soil and trellis. The change is not limited to tomatoes; it extends to the whole commercial food production controlled today by few companies. Therefore we think that it is time that we reconsider the passive position of the consumer and claim back the power connected with producing food, in the sense that we support active engagement and awareness for the ways and methods food is grown and processed.

Interestingly, as the voices for transparency grow, the food giants spend tremendous effort lobbying against GMO labeling as if the transparency would reveal something that we should not know about. In the US we have easy access to an abundance of food but generally also know very little about its source and the mechanism of its production, which remains largely out of sight. The glossy and uniform food packages seem to provide the necessary information, the product data put together with stories written about authenticity endorsed by seals and marks; but they rather divert one's attention from the context and process of its creation.

The modern food industry and its marketing fit into genres such as mystery, ideology, sci-fi, or political thriller, and they hope we identify with its heroes. The project *À la Cart* attempts to reverse the passive model back to an active one. With *À la Cart* we hope to bring up ideas about a more active approach and conscious choices that will help to shift people away consumerism.

**Continuing in that direction, above you pose the question, “If we are what we eat, who are we if we don’t know the origin and the context of the production of our food?” Specifically, when you eat, what does the context of your food production make you? What impact in your identity do you personally feel when you participate in your food production?**

We share and prepare most of the meals we eat ourselves. We also have small backyard in Brooklyn where we grow vegetables and herbs, which of course is a rather symbolic operation. We often visit our friends who have an organic farm and shop at the farmers market. Living in New York City also of course exposes you to a plethora of great and exotic cuisine, which we enjoy, but it is obvious that homemade food from familiar sources makes you feel much more connected and grounded. Enjoying this kind of meal you may be able to enter the story of the food, take a virtual walk through a landscape where it originates, thinking of people who made it happen. For us the question of identity connecting to food is about awareness and integrity. Eating something means agreeing with it. It is an agreement and not vague one, as by eating we agree to the highest degree, making the subject part of our body. This makes us the end part of the food cycle, which comes with a responsibility. The question is how much we know about something that important, which sustains us. It seems in many cases we don't want to know, but that comes with a price. Today we have sad epidemics of morbid obesity and other eating disorders, and

many autoimmune and coronary diseases related to metabolism caused by modern food trends. It does not have to be this way. Food can be a wholesome, life-sustaining experience.

**À la Cart seems not just to encourage awareness of our foods' origins, but participation. As someone who clearly embraces the act of creation (kind of a DIY attitude), what do you make of the trend toward purchasing artisanal, local, and sustainable? Do you perceive such a trend as indicative of cultural transformation or as an act of fashion? (This is a false binary, so don't feel trapped by it.)**

As you mentioned many of our projects have a DIY aspect to them, so we think that spreading ideas and lifestyles is definitely way of transforming society. The new trend of purchasing artisanal, local, and sustainable products is definitely a big shift, which we welcome. Turning from fast food and consumerist culture to a more conscious and healthy one will consequently have a wider impact. People have to understand that eating an egg or potato doesn't end with the meal. It is not just the culinary or the satisfaction getting the protein and carbs and nutrients; it is a deal that supports complex mechanisms of entire industries and politics. The point today is to recognize the power that the consumer still has, which at the same time is difficult to acknowledge as the extent of the problem makes it almost invisible. The irony is when you want to eat "plain" potato or "normal" egg you have to look for a specialty item. "Normal" will be in the category of luxury items labeled organic, natural, local, and so on and priced at a premium. The regular "normal" also referred to as "conventional" comes for a lower price with an additional load of synthetic chemicals ranging from residual herbicides, fungicides, and fertilizers to antibiotics, growth hormones, and more. Sadly these facts are not listed on the label. Paradoxically to get the real and "normal" stuff today, if you don't produce it yourself—you need to make a big effort to get it. Artisanal food has a significant role for educational purposes, despite the fact that it is in the category of luxury items; as long as it is available, we can question and compare what conventional food lacks based on quality.

The good news is despite the accomplishments of the green revolution to feed the masses, the big food industry together with the capitalist and communist have failed to produce tastier food. The best food in the twenty-first century still comes from small operations handmade by people who care. Therefore there is a hope since we believe that, given the choice, people will choose to eat the best.

However, with trends there is always a catch. There is lots of nonsense out there. As green production hit the mainstream it became very important to distinguish between green and green washed. A few green printed bags and t-shirts won't make it. In 2013 we curated an exhibition project entitled Poison Green at the Czech Center New York. The show presented projects questioning the way we use the label "green" for things that in reality are not green. Today there

is a danger to the integrity of environmentalism as such because it is becoming the favored ideology of globalism, used as vehicle to push forward policies, products, and influence of power.

**À la Cart also places the time involved in food production at the forefront, displaying it in the way one might find a cooking time in a recipe or a price tag next to a stack of produce. What motivated this emphasis on time?**

As consumers we connect food with prices, but the actual process, the labor and time behind growing the food, is mostly invisible. By displaying the number of days as the price tag we wanted the viewer to realize the time that is really needed to grow the ingredients for the specific dish. We were actually surprised too, once we realized the amount of time we will need to actualize the meals. The project started at the end of May and ended in the beginning of October, so we were able to grow most of the plants—except the eggplant for ratatouille, that came out in ultra small size, resembling pickling cucumbers. Somehow the sort we had needed more than the four-months' time frame we had. Since then, having eggplant definitely is different, and part of the meal is appreciation of the farmer who patiently took care of this plant for such a long time.

Kristyna and Marek Milde