Eating is an act of self-affirmation. What better example than Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, who, in choosing to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, declared their independence from God? This mythical gesture, perhaps motivated simply by desire, hunger or gourmandise, stands as the symbol of a deliberate act, the act of choosing one’s destiny and rejecting the ignorance imposed by a higher power. The creation myth no longer holds us in thrall, of course, but another form of authority has sprung up in the global garden, and it dictates many of our behaviours. In a way, the agri-food industry has become a new god from which citizens must proclaim their autonomy.

Eating is thus a deliberate act. It is no longer a mere reflex linked to bodily survival, but an action prompted by more or less conscious emotional, economic and political choices. While tastes may not be open to discussion, they entail consumer decisions that have repercussions on our environment. The provenance of foodstuffs and their methods of production (intensive or organic) and management (exploitation or fair trade) are political and nutritional options by which people manifest their social commitment and express their individuality.

On the art scene, food is a subject/object that has fascinated and “nourished” numerous performers. In many cases, their work goes far beyond the simple aesthetic event to address the eating behaviours of our society. Obviously, not all artists who use edibles as material are political or environmental activists, but most have eating-related experience or habits or attitudes that influence their every action. Food aversions, allergies, diets, special treats and childhood memories thus become food for thought in developing their art practices. Often prompted by a desire to blur the line between art and life, their performances resemble routine daily activities, such as cooking, eating, handling or sharing food. Some reveal a wish to retake possession of a body too often abandoned to the dictates of fashion and aesthetics; others, a determination to point up and alter social behaviours acquired over decades of industrialization.
Eating

Victoria Stanton’s food intolerances oblige her to compose and decompose her menus, to dissect her food and deprive herself of sweet treats. Like many North Americans, she was raised in an obsessively calorie-conscious, weight-watching family obnubilated by its love/hate of food, by the insatiable desire to eat and the guilt of doing so. For Stanton, the guilt is so great that everything she puts to her mouth sparks an inner debate between good and evil. This is no doubt what inspired the action *Today I Ate*, in which four women bound with measuring tapes and holding diet books ate rice cakes piled in front of them. The title alone speaks volumes, since the word “today” suggests that the eating was not a daily act, as it is for most humans. The performance alluded not to forced fasting caused by famine but, rather, to the voluntary abstinence of dieting or anorexia. The obsession with a perfect body and the oppression of beauty and slenderness were flagrant in this *tableau vivant*, where bodies of all shapes and sizes seemed determined to defy the imposed stereotypes.

With the performance series *CakeFeeding* and *Essen* – which are also pretexts for encounters with others through sharing food and exploring taste, smell and touch – Stanton observes the eaters’ attitudes. Describing her own issues, she writes, “How often have I sat down to eat a meal, my mind consumed by thousands of thoughts flipping through my brain at lightning speed until I find myself staring at an empty plate having absolutely no memory of what I put into my mouth.”\(^1\) For *Cake Feeding*, she has cakes made to replicate symbolic items (her university diploma, for instance) or iced with an evocative phrase (*Eat what you feel*) and then hand-feeds pieces to the audience. The expression “to swallow one’s feelings” takes on its full meaning in these performances, where the artist asks others to ingest food that gives her indigestion, or that evokes states of anxiety and compulsive eating (such as in earning a diploma). In *Essen*, meaning “to eat” in Yiddish and German, she invites participants to chic restaurants on the strict condition that they let themselves be fed by another guest. Allowing someone else to feed you requires giving yourself over to the other person and awakens a range of emotions. The process is fraught with the frustration of waiting for the next bite, as in childhood or invalidity, and means relinquishing control over the most instinctive of acts: feeding yourself. The result is a profound feeling of helplessness. On the other hand, a new awareness of what you are eating and of the very act of eating definitely gives food a whole new flavour.

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\(^1\) *Ascent Magazine*, no. 28 (winter 2005), p. 20.
Bread

Bread is one of the foods most widely used in performance art. A dietary staple in most cultures, a bodily symbol in Christianity, bread in performance inevitably leads to reflection on the artist’s corporeality. In this sense, *Bread Head*, by Karen Elaine Spencer (in collaboration with Jessica MacCormack), and *Losing Face*, by BBB Johannes Deimling with Franz Gratwohl, are significant. In both actions the artists appear like living sculptures, barely moving, their heads covered by sliced bread or bread dough. Concealing the face transforms the individuals into anonymous, identity-less subjects, effaced under the bread that here serves not to nourish the body but to hide or protect it. Paradoxically, these bodies command attention and seem to lay claim to the space.

As a child, Karen Spencer hated peas: “When I was very young, there was a law: one eats everything on one’s plate. My father would be feeding me and I would appear to eat everything on the spoon, but I would stash the peas, like a chipmunk, in the corner of my mouth. No one was going to make me swallow what I did not want.” As she explains, “It is a reflex to swallow. It is also a reflex to gag. To set up a barrier between yourself and this other. You spit out peas, you create divisions. You claim your body as your territory and you as the sovereign ruler.” This anecdote, which the artist sees as an act of power, reminds us that ingesting food is indeed a voluntary act. In her work, the use of sliced bread, onions and other edibles serves to question the place that the body (hers and others’) holds in a given space and in society. The white bread that came about with industrialization and long symbolized progress and wealth is now associated with an economically disadvantaged class. Thus, in Spencer’s performances, while the body effectively asserts its sovereignty through its central role and the attention it receives (for example, the right to rest, in *Bread Bed*), the situations portrayed allude to the lack of choice that befalls by many economically powerless people. In *Expect Nothing*, which involved a month-long stay at a rooming house in the Saint-Henri district, Spencer daily filled the room with slices of bread, left them to dry out and ultimately burned them. For the subsequent work-in-progress titled *Bread Bed*, she built beds of bread in various places, performing the same ritual every day: buying thirty loaves of bread, carrying them on foot or by metro or bus to an exhibition venue, methodically stacking the slices in rows of eight by eighteen, then lying down on them to rest. In Paris, she chose to create this installation on the street, at a place where

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2 Published in French translation in *esse arts + opinions*, no. 50 (winter 2004), p. 43.
3 Ibid.
homeless people sleep, and had to negotiate space with one of the occupants. *Bread Bed* aroused widespread indignation; people were shocked to see bread spread on the ground, wasted. Yet in Paris and Saint-Henri alike, no one seemed concerned about the poverty to which these actions pointed, just steps away.

The German artist BBB Johannes Deimling was born in Andernach, known as the City of the Baker's Apprentices [see http://www.justsaygo.com/fiesta/festivalbakerboys.html]. He grew up in a family of ten children where meals were seen as opportunities for communication. For his mother, feeding a dozen people every day was somewhat like running a business with a complex financial and logistical system. Deimling’s work is largely influenced by childhood memories – his performances often draw on anecdotes – but it also relates the pleasure he takes in cooking, from shopping for ingredients to preparing the dishes. His love of food makes him acutely aware of the act of eating, and of the act of “not eating.” In 1998, appalled to learn that thousands of Somali children were subsisting on a tiny handful of rice a day while the United Nations was shipping hundreds of tons of rice to the region, he undertook a ten-day action (*A Handful of Rice*) during which his daily diet consisted of a handful of rice and water. At the end of the process, he was exhausted and depressed, but no longer hungry.

Deimling associates food and performance because both are ephemeral, but also because he sees both as “social events.” And in fact, growing, selling, preparing and eating food are all micro events that engage people in encounters and negotiations. These contexts reveal diverse human conditions and form the bases of his performances. In *Speechless*, his body is covered with freshly cooked alphabet noodles that gradually fall off as they dry. The purpose is to denounce social situations that abound with talk but lead to no concrete action. For *Blanc* [White], he creates a series of *tableaux vivants* in which objects and people covered with a thick layer of flour are posed in positions suggestive of accidents or human drama. In another performance, he spells out the word *SUCCESS* on the floor with crackers. Then, masking his face with a loaf of bread fitted with paper eyes and a cut-out smile, he dances over the crackers, crushing them until the “success” is reduced to powder. Lastly, in *Geradeaus* [Straight ahead], Deimling goes to a bakery, buys two loaves of bread, puts them on his feet like shoes, walks around the city until the bread crumbles, then stops at another bakery and repeats the process, several times.

In many of these brief actions, humour and absurdity are used as a vector to draw attention to aberrant
situations. The food (chiefly bread or bread-based) is a pretext that supports the artist’s statement, rather than the main focus of his reflections. Like Karen Spencer’s performances, Deimling’s actions evince the evocative power of food, so much so that one forgets its nutritional properties and sees only the proposed metaphors.

If the use of food somehow seems to bring art and life together, as many artists intend, it goes without saying that, when taken from its normal context and incorporated into a work of art, food also acquires new metaphoric dimension. In performance, the body/food association unquestionably magnifies the intrinsic symbolic power of both components. Drawing on their food-related experiences, Victoria Stanton, Karen Spencer and BBB Johannes Deimling propose diverse “rituals” that invite us to take a fresh look at our lifestyles and consumer habits, and to rethink the body in its connections with food, in its relationship with others and with the environment. But they also invite us to open our eyes to other perceptions, including an awareness of the poetic dimension of food, which we may have overlooked.