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## Reviews

# Super Farmers' Market

Richard Dyer

'Super Farmers' Market', curated by Mary Anne Francis and Lucy Heyward, took place under the banner of Director Fedja Klikovac's Handel Street Projects, an itinerant gallery which mounts exhibitions in disused spaces – in this case one of the now empty shops in Sicilian Avenue in central London's Holborn. It is the second incarnation of the exhibition. The first, curated by Klikovac, took place in Wigmore Street in 2008, and showcased twenty-four 'producers'. Every time the United Kingdom experiences a new recession we see a wellspring of alternative galleries and project spaces appearing in hitherto prosperous areas, many in the centre of cities, exploiting the ever-growing numbers of vacated commercial and sometimes publicly owned premises, the so-called 'pop-up' gallery. Paradoxically, it is at these times of greatest economic downturn that some of the most interesting and innovative curating takes place.

Klikovac has long championed unusual and original juxtapositions of ideas and production. I first met him in the early 2000s when he ran a small gallery in temporarily empty shop premises at 14 Bulstrode Street, W1 in Marylebone, called Medieval Modern. There he curated a series of exhibitions – very different from what was being shown at the time – which placed the work of contemporary artists in relation to the medieval world, our perceptions of it and its artefacts. He commissioned artists to make work or engage in performative practice in relation to specific medieval objects which were loaned to him by his 'silent' partner, who

ran a business dealing in medieval art and artefacts. We can therefore see that 'Super Farmers' Market' is the latest in an exploratory series of curatorial projects which conflate differing modalities in order to give rise to new and rich veins of critical, political and artistic enquiry.

In recent years farmers' markets have sprung up all over the capital, offering a variety of high-quality foodstuffs purchased directly from the farmer or manufacturer. The emphasis is on organic, sustainable, hand-crafted and bespoke delicacies for a newly enfranchised 'green-aware' middle class. The quality of produce is consistently high, but so is the price. The organic rhetoric, which usually issues from concerned, middle-class pundits, heavily critical of factory-farming and the consumption of unhealthy foodstuffs by the working class, often ignores the blatant fact that the reason that a factory-produced chicken selling in a supermarket for two pounds is bought by the underpaid working class rather than an organic one from a farmers' market for nine pounds is a choice not based on ignorance of animal welfare, diminishing environmental resources or health issues, but purely on the vastly disparate levels of income of the two economic groups.

'Super Farmers' Market' appropriately and ironically displays the 'artistic produce' in a former shop space, one which, considering the constituency of Sicilian Avenue, was probably a restaurant or food supplier. This, and the curatorial impetus of the exhibition, frames the work within the context of the market and the uncomfortable proximity of the cycles of demand, production and consumption between the artworld and that of the more visible consumption of the farmers' market. However, the participating artists were actually asked to make work from raw materials purchased, paradoxically from supermarkets, thus 'upgrading' lowly consumer staples of the mass market to the



Raša Todorović, *Nailed Bread*, 2010, bread, nails, wood, dimensions variable

‘specialist’ products of the contemporary fine art market.

Raša Todorović’s *Nailed Bread* (2010), originally exhibited in 1971 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, invoked a number of tropes around socialist notions of the right to the basics of sustenance, bread, the ‘staff of life’, and the ignorance of the ruling classes to its necessity: ‘Let them eat cake’ (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, probably erroneously attributed to Marie Antoinette) while conversely evoking biblical associations to the Eucharist, ‘Take, eat, here is my body’. We are reminded of Luis Buñuel’s early documentary, *Land Without Bread* (1932), which contrasted the poverty of the Spanish people with the luxury and riches of the country’s Catholic Church. Todorović first showed *Klikovac* this piece in 1998 at the height of Slobodan Milošević’s regime in Serbia when the country was suffering from economic blockades because of the ‘Yugoslav’ civil war, a situation that was probably the impetus for the work’s creation. In a text work, consisting of posters which could be taken away free from

the gallery, Rasheed Araeen engaged in a more overtly political critique of waste in the West with *Food for Thought*, *Thought for Food* (2010), a rallying call for support of a restaurant or chain of restaurants which would be exclusively supplied with free food from supermarkets which, although past its sell-by-date, is perfectly fit for human consumption. The food would be prepared into meals and sold, the twist on the usual recycling of supermarket food waste being that the profit from the restaurant would be used to fund agricultural and water projects in Africa, thus adroitly reimbursing the West’s exploitation of Africa with income generated from the products of its own hyper-capitalist overproduction.

Alison Wilding fashioned an uncharacteristic mask from prunes, popcorn and toffee (*Pruneyes*, 2010), which confronted the viewer with the more lugubrious aspects of food; its post-digestive condition and strong association with the mutilated or diseased body inherent in its short ‘shelf-life’. Nicholas Pope also invokes an anthropomorphic, if rather malevolent alien

presence with *Gluttons, Plated on a Stack of Lime, Orange, Lemon Bombe* (2010), fabricated from different coloured layers of set jelly, its plinth the fridge in which it lurked when the gallery closed. It alludes to the excess of consumption which lies at the heart of Western culture, squatting on the fridge like some cryogenically resurrected mega-burger, double, extra, supersized. Susan Hiller further explores the visual aspect of the phenomenon of pareidolia, where our perceptual apparatus insists on finding organised and coherent forms, faces and the like, in random natural configurations such as clouds, stains and, in the case of *Vegetable Erotica* (2010), genitals in vegetables, echoing Giuseppe Arcimboldo's practice of composing faces from carefully arranged piles of vegetables or fruit.

'Super Farmers' Market' has succeeded in bringing together a truly impressive roll-call of contemporary artists to its humble location, from Richard Deacon (filo pastry and bamboo sticks), Phyllida Barlow (porridge cooked for four days and mixed media), Franz West

(chewed gum – spread into a large circle on the front window of the gallery), Richard Wentworth (full bottles of supermarket foodstuffs, mysteriously attached by their caps high on the gallery walls), David Batchelor (illuminated empty coloured containers and drug blister-pack structures), Sarah Lucas (concrete pie), and Bob and Roberta Smith (cold-painted bronze cast of vegetable picked up after Brick Lane market). There is something very current about the concept of the exhibition, which evidently succeeded in attracting A-list contemporary artists from several generations. The notion of excessive waste and over-production at a time when vast swaths of the developing world are suffering from chronic malnutrition and the planet is spiralling into an almost unstoppable crisis due to unsustainable exploitation of ever diminishing resources, married to the uncomfortable position of contemporary art as a luxury investment plaything for the super-rich, makes for a potent and provocative exhibition which will hopefully send ripples beyond the confines of the gallery.



Gerard Williams, *Tea & Biscuits with Haim*, 2010, tea, biscuits, galvanised shelf, 150 × 50 × 30 cm

It is, however, with work from some of the lesser known artists that the exhibition really gets into its stride. Gerard Williams' *Tea & Biscuits with Haim* (2010) is a sly take on the simulationist art of the late 1980s, substituting Haim Steinbach's slick Formica and plywood shelf for a cosy British one wrapped in blue cloth bearing packets of tea and biscuits from different supermarkets. We are suddenly made aware of the fact that although all the brands are different they all use blue, highlighting the pervasive, and persuasive, subliminal branding which is constantly at play in the consumer arena. Jane Simpson's small-scale black-and-white photographs, *Egg Photo (Near)*, and *Egg Photo (Just)* (both 2003), show a hard-boiled egg, first about to be sliced by an egg-slicing gadget from the 1950s and second when the multiple wires have just bitten into the plump flesh of the egg, a poly-punctal meditation on the fact that much of what we eat is flesh made food. The British Lacanian psychoanalyst, Darian Leader, explores orality through the banal artefacts found as 'free' gifts in commercial cereal packets with an

installation and text work in *All You Can Eat* (2010), and Mary Anne Francis renders icons of contemporary art such as a Patrick Heron gouache, an Andy Warhol banana or Kazimir Malevich's black square from that most humble of consumer goods, lavatory paper (*Finest Basics – A Selection*, 2010). Apart from the revelation that lavatory paper comes in black – a burgeoning market in the small room of rock-star apartments no doubt – and other surprising 'fine art' hues, the reduction of artworks to the material of the most basic utility recontextualises them as disposable assets, as indeed they are in the artworld market, traded like so many pork-belly futures on the art stock market.

Some of the work in the exhibition did seem to have a rather tenuous connection with the curatorial remit: Stewart Brisley's video *The Last Breath* (thirteen minutes forty seconds, 2006–2010), which narrates the memory of the artist witnessing a man burning to death in an East London park in 1998 interpolated with a man at Speaker's Corner in 1967 talking about his own impending death, over an intense one-



Braco Dimitrijević, *For Charles Darwin: Potato and a Music Historian*, 2010, suitcase, potatoes, bust, 54 × 44 × 45 cm

person performance by the artist. Although powerful and indeed emotionally harrowing, its relevance to the exhibition seemed somewhat vague. The same can be said for another ‘heavy-weight’, the highly respected French film-maker Agnès Varda, whose award-winning documentary about the poor gathering the discarded and rejected furniture and household items of others, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000), is obliquely connected to the remit of the exhibition by dint of the fact that the film was inspired by Jean-François Millet’s ‘pre-Socialist’ painting *The Gleaners* (*Des glaneuses*, 1857), which shows three peasant women ‘gleaning’ the leftover grains of wheat from a field after the harvest. The pioneering conceptual artist Braco Dimitrijević’s *For Charles Darwin: Potato and a Music Historian* (2010), places a small bust of Beethoven in an old suitcase full of potatoes. Dimitrijević, well known for his provocative juxtapositions of high art and humble fruit or everyday objects, here inflects the ethos of his museum-based ‘Triptychos Post Historicus’ through the prism of the modest potato; the lowest of foodstuffs elevated to the ‘highest’ form of art – conceptualism.

Two works in the exhibition more adroitly pinned down the real core of the curatorial concept: Hayley Newman (*The Smelly Hillock*, 2010) urged the visitor to take home a piece of discarded food packaging which would otherwise be destined for a landfill site, simultaneously saving the planet and adding to your collection of contemporary art, and Lucy Heyward’s *Stalk* (2010) invoked the ghost of Constantin Brâncuși’s *Infinite Column*, this time fashioned from discarded transparent plastic fruit containers precariously wedged between floor and ceiling, containing the stalks of the cherries which they once contained. Both works highlight the fact that it is what is discarded and left over after consumption that survives – the ‘valued’ part is absent; it is the skin, bones, stalks and pips which bear testament to the memory of the feast.

It is apposite that many of the works in the exhibition were displayed on plinths comprising empty cardboard packing boxes from the supermarket. The plinth, traditionally used to highlight the importance of the artwork and to isolate it from its surroundings, is here often conflated as part of the artwork itself, both

plinth and artwork subverting accepted hierarchies of value, taste and aesthetics.

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‘Super Farmers’ Market’, Handel Street Projects, 19–21 Sicilian Avenue, London W1, 18 June–17 July 2010

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## *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*

Nadim Samman

English-language writing about Soviet conceptualism has ping-ponged between journalistic efforts and charismatic offerings by insider theorists for some time. The shortcomings of these polar modes are keenly felt by the reader in different ways, but both issue from methodological oversight on the part of writers. The first group – to say the least – do not engage with theory or philosophical questions, while the latter do so with much flair but pay only cursory attention to Western academic approaches to art historical methodology/historiography. Boris Groys’s *Total Art of Stalinism* is a high-water mark in the latter respect, while Victor Tupitsyn’s *The Museological Unconscious* also delights in verbal pyrotechnics and counter-intuitive analyses. Neither effort is anything less than highly engaging, but their carnivalesque polemics can leave readers with the distinct feeling that they are studying the writer and not the artist(s) addressed.

This situation is understandable given the fact that the authors have been – and remain – close friends with the figures that they write about. More specifically, they are collaborators; part of a unique generation