The sparrow that turned salmon:

Unveiling the systems that govern food through art

Text by L. Sasha Gora

Black lentils and pearl barley, pomegranate seeds, and red peppers so blistered they peel like sunburned skin. Together these four ingredients—plus a dressing of thyme, vinegar, rapeseed oil, carob powder, and pomegranate molasses—compose Cooking Sections’s Drought Salad. Its ingredient list is business as usual, but its method gives away that much more is at stake: “If this year the water reservoirs in your area are at a minimum, you may want to avoid planting water-intensive species. Remove your sprinkler system and replant your lawn as a drought oasis.” After considering this, you should soak the lentils and barley and proceed with assembling the salad.

Based in London, Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe have been collaborating as a duo under the name of Cooking Sections since 2013. Their work explores the systems that organize the world through food. They describe themselves as spatial practitioners, which is another way of saying they are storytellers that critically use space—its architecture, infrastructure, and activation—to share documentary-worthy stories and academic journal-quality research.

The two met while studying at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths and now run a studio together at London’s Royal College of Art. In addition to their architecture training, Daniel has a background in urban design and Alon in theatre and performance. Often working in the context of contemporary art, their work has been featured in exhibitions around the world, from the 2019 Los Angeles Public Art Triennial and the 13th Sharjah Biennial to Manifesta12 in Palermo. They’re about to have solo shows at London’s Tate Britain and Istanbul’s SALT Beyoglu, too. Their projects take a myriad of forms, from videos and mapping to installations, audio tours, performances, and texts, including their 2018 book The Empire Remains Shop, named after a 2016 project exploring the British Empire’s remains.

But what makes Cooking Sections so compelling is also impossible to fully exhibit: their conversations with farmers, scientists, and so many others that inform each project and the conversations that, in turn, each project sparks. Overall, their work is smart in its questioning, yet subtle in its aesthetics. Although their installations present narratives that disrupt the status quo, they tend to visually fit in with their environments. Less like a bowl and more like a whisper that undresses the emperor—or in Cooking Sections’s case, the systems that organize the world’s food—and makes you realize that he was, as they say, never wearing any clothes.

Art has long courted food, but what Cooking Sections offers is distinct. “The duo doesn’t use food as a subject or even as a material. Instead, it casts food as a method for critically studying the financial and political structures that govern what is food, how it is produced, and how it gets to the table. Their projects do not use food for food’s sake, but instead to stage culinary provocations. “We rarely take any pictures of the dishes we make, almost never,” Daniel explains. “For us, it is more interesting how to unpack the systems that construct the world we inhabit. To link plants to a dish to a power regime to inequality.”

The name Cooking Sections also comes out of architecture. A section, Alon explains, is crucial. “Without understanding the section you cannot understand the building’s structure.” “It is important for us,” Daniel adds, “that you unpack or reveal the stories of how something was made.” In architecture, the section is a sort of x-ray of a building, a view you can never see but is necessary to understand and construct any form of dwelling. Cooking Sections “can also be a synonym for making infrastructure,” Alon says. “Cooking is an act of production or assembling, and the section is a form of analysis or disassembly line. What you need to be able to see in order to understand.” As Cooking Sections show, you cannot understand global food systems—and their many demons—without confronting their structures.

Eating as climate changes

Drought Salad belongs to a collection of CLIMAVORE recipes. Others include the Nitrogen-Fixing Mash and Banana Peel Mocktail For Your Garden—a concoction of alfalfa sprouts, buckwheat, peas, banana peels, and molasses, whose method recommends filling a lowball glass with ice, banana peel-molasses syrup, and a shot of rum “should you care to celebrate.
On Tidal Zones, 2017 - ongoing.

A series of CLIMAVORE projects have since addressed other landscapes: the health of mussels in California—Mussel Beach, 2019—and how to water citrus trees without water in Sicily—What Is Above is What is Below, 2018—and how an oyster table can facilitate discussions about the future of edible shores in Scotland—On Tidal Zones, 2017 - ongoing. Each project corresponds to a season: From “Polluted Shores” to “Movements of Deserts” and from “Subsidence” to the “Next ‘Invasive’” is ‘Native’.

Recipes for polluted shores

The recipes that complement CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones—an on-going series on the Isle of Skye first commissioned by Atlas Arts—feature oysters, whisky, and seaweed, but not the fish so many associate with Scotland: salmon. On Tidal Zones began with an installation on Skye’s east coast. Cooking Sections designed what at high tide is an underwater oyster table and at low tide, a dining table for humans. The table recalls salmon’s historic importance for subsistence for communities in Skye and around the world. For instance, Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest, whose cultures formed around salmon, referred to the Columbia River as a “great table.” But farmed salmon—which Cooking Sections reports makes up ninety per cent of salmon in the sea and supermarkets—means something else. Aquaculture is big business on Skye and although salmon farming pays the bills for some locals, it does so at a great environmental cost. So instead of salmon, CLIMAVORE’s “great table” transforms meals into performances featuring environmentally resilient ingredients, “ocean cleaners” and “filter feeders” like oysters, seaweed, mussels, kelp, sea lettuce, scallops, duble, and clams. In fact, farmed shellfish “may be one of the most environmentally pristine foods we can slurp down.”

CLIMAVORE also poses a seemingly simple question: What is Scottish salmon? Just like how sustainability has become a slippery word, meaning one thing on these pages, but something else entirely in, say, a corporate advertising campaign, so has the word salmon. Cooking Sections collected a rainbow of Pantone hues. In their performative lecture Be Shellfish, Alon recites the name of one hue—1525—and then Daniel another—487—and then Alon again, passing the torch to one another in a back-and-forth relay. They then reveal the audience is “looking at Pantones of salmon.” These fifteen hues compose the SalmoFan, which grades a farmed salmon’s colour. As the environmental historian Peter Coates writes, “Just as a young girl [or boy] can choose her favourite pink tone for her bedroom walls, a salmon farmer can do the same for his fish.”

A bird now matches one of these hues. A house sparrow—as ordinary as its name suggests—did something extraordinary: it turned salmon, the colour of the UK’s bestselling seafood. As a video of this sparrow plays, Alon explains: “It was believed to have eaten one of the feed pellets from a salmon farm. Like a flamingo eating shrimp, the sparrow also turned salmon.” Farmed salmon feed on pellets made from fish, pork, and dye to colour their flesh. As they recite these words, Alon is dressed in light pink and Daniel in rusty orange. I ask where their shirts fall on the SalmoFan. Alon’s is “incredible” and Daniel’s “more wild.” Colour is also the subject of their upcoming Tate Britain exhibition and companion publication, both titled Salmon: A Red Herring. Without dye in their feed, farmed salmon would be grey. The lecture delivers a forensic assessment of your garden.” Some recipes, like Desert Stopper, a cake, suggest growing ingredients: “Plant a moringa tree, a cashew tree, and a gum Arabic tree. Wait some years and support their survival. In the meantime, ask your neighbour for moringa leaves and grind them to a fine powder.” Tidal Crispbread—an edible mosaic of spirulina, wakame, nori, oats, spelt flour, Demerara sugar, kumelo and flax seeds, and wheat bran—bakes for forty to fifty minutes, enough time to “start plotting your roof-grown seaweed farm.”

As should be clear by now, these recipes are not just about toasting together a salad or baking crispbread; they correspond with what Cooking Sections consider new seasons of food production. They have a similar feel to Yoko Ono’s 1964 “Instruction Piece” TUNAFISH SANDWICH PIECE, an icon of Fluxus art, but CLIMAVORE recipes should not be understood as “a fixed set of instructions.” Instead, they are open-ended protocols complementing new human-induced seasons.

Launched in 2015, CLIMAVORE is a long-term investigation that asks how to eat as climate changes. In response, it advocates restorative eating. The project argues the seasons we call spring and summer, autumn and winter are now obsolete. Instead, it follows climate change for clues on adapting our eating. This links CLIMAVORE to food historian Jeffrey Pilcher’s concept of culinary infrastructure: “the basic facilities and technologies used to convey food” and its knowledge. It is also a reminder that to study food is to study power, economics, and geopolitics.

CLIMAVORE’s name, a potential dietary label, relates to defined eating practices such as vegetarianism and veganism, as well as other “ores”—locavore, omnivore, and carnivore. However, the project is less interested in labels, but to reveal the structures that produce such opaque labels to begin with.

It all started with fertilizer. The first CLIMAVORE project—Under the Sea There is a Hole—developed out of research about the growing number of sink holes around the Dead Sea, the result not only of water depletion (the sea level has been dropping around a meter per year), but also of a billion-dollar industry, the Dead Sea is one of the world’s top seven fertilizer sources. In other words, human actions are responsible.

Under the Sea There is a Hole is a collection of suspended, unstable dining tables. Taking a seat requires diners to “perform the geological consequences of food production on the landscape in front of their mouths.” Just like in the Dead Sea, sink holes weigh the tables down. Cutlery and plates risk falling through and so a meal literally becomes a balancing act. Instead of contributing to more extraction and, thus, more sinkholes, CLIMAVORE prioritizes “forms of eating that aim to make the planet fertile without fertilizer.” The ideal setting for shaking up a Nitrogen-Fixing Mulch and Banana Peel Mocktail For Your Garden.

What Is Above is What is Below
of the big business that is salmon farming. “Since the 1970s,” Daniel explains, “salmon slowly ceased to be an animal to become a profit equation.” The development of salmon farming also created so-called wild salmon. “It is when nature shows signs of collapse,” states Alon, “that the distinction of wild and non-wild begins to appear. Wild salmon should simply be salmon.” This echoes the work of social anthropologist Marianne Lien and sociologist John Law, who call salmon “newcomers to the farm.”

Without farmed salmon, there is no “wild.” Writing about the emergence of the Norwegian word villaks (wild salmon), they state the term “is relational, defined in contradiction with domestication, and draws on the idea of wilderness. It re-enacts a particular version of nature that has its specific historical origin in European thought, and that idealised nature as a non-human realm.”

This circles back to the question: what is Scottish salmon? The answer, according to Cooking Sections, is that “Scottish salmon today is neither entirely Scottish nor wholly salmon.” The examples they share range from eggs incubated, fertilized, and hatched in one facility and then shipped to another. Food labels have become a stage for marketing departments to perform magic tricks. One brand sources salmon from wild waters, “but wild here refers to the water and not the fish itself.” Another company peddling “Scottish salmon” harvests salmon in Norway and only smokes it in Scotland. This leads to Cooking Sections’s conclusion: “Scottish salmon has become a brand that needs to be critically rethought. Not only from an environmental and ecological perspective, but also questioning what Scottish and salmon mean in that construction.”

Moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a 2019 CLIMAVORE project peddled mussel tacos on Muscle Beach. CURRENT: LA FOOD, Los Angeles’ Public Art Biennial, commissioned new works and assigned Cooking Sections to Muscle Beach, an iconic mix of bodybuilders, skaters, protein shake stalls, souvenir shops, and palm trees. At that point, Cooking Sections were so immersed in their work around oysters, they heard Muscle Beach as Mussel Beach. But Internet searches kept turning up flexed biceps instead of bivalves. “We had been there before,” explains Daniel, “but we didn’t know it was called Muscle Beach. We took for granted it was shellfish and it wasn’t, which is when the joke became the project.”

Cooking Sections adapted the beach’s existing graphic identity, but introduced a different spelling to highlight the coast’s environmental history. This rebranding as Mussel Beach, as
Daniel summarizes, shows “it is a place that before there were muscles there were mussels.” A synergetic effort, like all of their projects, Cooking Sections produced Mussel Beach merchandise including postcards and t-shirts, and collaborated with a taco stall to offer mussel tacos, as well as a local fabricator to create terrazzo pieces made from crushed shells. They also created an audio guide for visitors to listen to while strolling the boardwalk. Dressed in Mussel Beach muscle shirts, as Daniel recounts, skaters “would skate between you at certain times, but you wouldn’t know if they were part of the project or not.” “It is also what we enjoy,” adds Alon, “how you put a spin on each place.”

Putting a spin on each place is part of Cooking Sections’ methodology. Returning to the salmon-coloured house sparrow, “it is a very simple story, almost naïve,” explains Daniel, “but at the same time it is devastating. If a bird is turning pink because it has eaten a feed pellet from a salmon farm, what is happening? How can we trace that bird to take us to the farms and the people living on the coast and to the global corporations?” Alon explains this is where anthropologist Anna Tsing’s work comes in, particularly her 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. By following matsutake mushrooms, Tsing explores contemporary precarity, capitalist destruction, and multispecies survival, all strung together with a single narrative. “It is not that Anna Tsing one day woke up and had this mushroom in front of her and this whole crazy global story. No. It is exactly her vision – how to piece together all of this,” says Alon. “To follow the mushroom,” says Daniel. Or, in the case of Skye, the salmon or the sparrow that turned salmon. Because they were part of the project or not. “It is also what we enjoy,” adds Alon, “how you put a spin on each place.”

When I met Daniel and Alon, it was still early enough into 2020 to call the year new. Terms like “flattening the curve” and “social distancing” had yet to enter our collective vocabulary and restaurants were still packed. Cooking Sections had come to Munich to deliver a talk about CLIMAVORE at the Academy of Fine Arts. “We really like the origins – how to camouflage Florence and the Machine, but by the time the Beatles advise to *Come Together* the lyrics are clear. Music is now a common feature in restaurants, but it wasn’t always. Nor were restaurants always common. There are countless ways cultures have consumed food in public and the restaurant is just one model. The very first restaurants opened in Paris in the eighteenth century, and, as the historian Rebecca Spang explains, did not offer the solid dishes we would expect today. They specialized in consommé, a healthful and restorative soup.” In fact Antoine Furetière’s 1708 *Dictionnaire Universel* defines restaurant as a “Food or remedy that has the property of restoring lost strength to a sickly or tired individual.”

Where do you go for dinner with two critical minds that spend their working days (and many hours beyond) dissecting the infrastructure behind the world’s food systems? I settled on a local favourite: the kind of place that acknowledges Bavarian tradition without rigorously adhering to it (and that serves excellent beer). After their twelve-hour journey by train from London, it was a late dinner. The train shouldn’t have taken that long, but, as they explained, the system isn’t set up for multiple cross-country connections. There was a fire, two tracks became one, plus additional delays. “Twelve hours of train doesn’t work,” Daniel said. “The system is not prepared and it ought to be if we are to change the ways we travel.”

I balanced my phone in the breadbasket to record our conversation. The emptier our plates, the quieter the restaurant became, but as I write this, in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, that recording feels archival. Restaurants are currently closed in Germany, like most of Europe and North America, and it is not yet clear how many will reopen. Industry leader and chef David Chang is publicly taking inventory of the upcoming challenges, but also considers this an opportunity for the restaurant sector to rebuild. To start again.

The first part of the recording is cluttered with restaurant noise: the hum of diners all talking at once, glasses bumping against tables, forks skating across plates. Chitchat loud enough to camouflage Florence and the Machine, but the lyrics are clear. Music is now a common feature in restaurants, but it wasn’t always. Nor were restaurants always common. There are countless ways cultures have consumed food in public and the restaurant is just one model. The very first restaurants opened in Paris in the eighteenth century, and, as the historian Rebecca Spang explains, did not offer the solid dishes we would expect today. They specialized in consommé, a healthful and restorative soup. In fact Antoine Furetière’s 1708 *Dictionnaire Universel* defines restaurant as a “Food or remedy that has the property of restoring lost strength to a sickly or tired individual.”

References
2. Ibid., 138.
3. Ibid., 136.
4. Ibid., 132.
7. Ibid., 122.
8. Ibid., 127.
14. Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2. 15. Ibid., n.p. Cooking Sections revisits the restaurant’s restorative history, but applies its meaning beyond the human body. As Daniel mentions, collaborating with restaurants is crucial for CLIMAVORE: “We really like the origins of the word restaurant, which connects to the place where you would get hot soup to restore the body, and we see the restaurant as a place to restore ecology. Not just the human body but also the more-than-human body and beyond.” In light of 2020’s many climate emergencies—from the fires in Australia to Covid-19, which many argue is symptomatic of broken relationships to animals and nature—CLIMAVORE’s collaborative and flexible approach feels more urgent than ever. Which is not to say that its ideas were not already urgent. They were. But like any alarm that turns from orange to red—or a sparrow that turns from brown to salmon—the message is louder than ever before.