

Emma Hart Jonathan Baldock SUCKERZ

Ellen Mara De Wachter

Emma Hart and Jonathan Baldock have set the table for *Suckerz*, a co-authored sculptural installation that combines recent work by both artists. This collaboration has grown out of the artists' friendship, and demonstrates their shared taste for culinary-themed sculpture and a fascination for the body's performance in cultural rituals. It also reveals a common sensibility that tends to find its expression in manifestations of excess. For these artists, too much is never enough.

Hungry for an opportunity to work together and deterritorialise their ideas and sculptural processes, Hart and Baldock concocted an idea for an installation that would stage a dinner party in the gallery, with their works performing as the crockery, utensils, food and table decorations of the *tableau vivant* of an eccentric meal. For many, the dinner party is the epitome of refinement and culture, an elegant coming-together of likeminded peers. It's a ritual governed by unspoken rules, and a chance to be one's most charming self. It's often considered uncouth to talk shop here – this is tacitly agreed – but that doesn't mean people don't *do* business. Fine linens mask extra-marital affairs; resonating crystal ware is a clarion call to quell one's hunger for mingling, to feed at the trough of upward mobility. Hart and Baldock's *Suckerz* dinner party outrages these genteel conventions with a table heaving with artworks that blur the line between food, drink, finery and bodies.

The dinner table is the site of momentous beginnings and endings: couples fall in love; families fall apart. Deals are struck and bodies nourished. Cycles of consumption and production are set in motion: food enters the body; ideas, relationships and experiences ensue. The act of preparing a meal together is often emblematic of a marriage. In this case, the marriage is between two artistic

approaches that have enough commonalities and enough differences to build a fertile union.

Baldock and Hart have also provided the staff for the *Suckerz* dinner with a pair of regal busts stationed at either end of good ship Dinner Party. Festooned with an orgy of pearls and bells, they are reminiscent of court jesters. At this table, one imagines rich foods being passed around with detachment and cultured ladies flaunting the anatomical oxymoron of wasp waist and greedy mouth. Nearby, a gaggle of flustered 'skivvies' flaps around the table's edge, outstretched arms holding trays of glasses aloft. The help is evidently anxious to please, judging by the puddles of sweat that have gathered beneath them. Their trays are decorated with gaudy collages of tropical plants, licked all over with a generous coating of lacquer.

A rudimentary social hierarchy is evident in the positioning of the busts at the heads of the table: in literature the court jester – or king's fool – is the symbol of honesty. He is permitted to speak the truth to the monarch, though the truth is often cloaked in irony or mockery. This role endows him with significant unofficial power, a status evident in the solidity of these busts, whose meticulously stitched and padded felt forms imply knowledge and influence. The skivvies' outstretched arms, on the other hand, are emaciated. Their unhealthy hue suggests an allergic reaction to too much scrubbing or ill-advised exposure to the sun. They are accessorised with designer knock-off watches to keep them punctual on the job.

The table is laid with rosy 'boob' plates, which have a dusky, powdery finish. These breast plates sit alongside rolled cloth napkins held by ceramic rings in the shape of wet-look ouroboros tongues, tasting, licking themselves. Together, the breasts and tongues hint that this menu, perhaps, is for another kind of eating.

Clearly this dinner table is also a dissecting table. The installation repeatedly brings to mind the rhetorical device of synecdoche, a kind of metaphor in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa. Outstretched arms signify the workers catering to the table's every whim. The table itself stands in for the party of guests we do not see. The busts, as the official 'heads' of the table, preside over this banquet of body parts. They are truncated above the armpits and intricately bound in braided hair, every orifice plugged by seashells or a medley of tiny bells. They hint at an exquisite bondage devoted to culinary sensuality.

The tongue tastes and the tongue also talks. Classic dinner party conversations often follow a predictable structure, loosely themed around food, anecdotes and current events. The Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel was a master satirist of the dinner party, dedicating his 1972 masterpiece *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* to the story of a group of six elite members of society who repeatedly attempt to dine together. However, each time they sit down to eat, they are thwarted by an extraordinary event, the most striking of which involves the fourth wall of the dining room falling away to reveal an auditorium full of unimpressed theatre patrons.

One also thinks of Buñuel's 1974 film *The Phantom of Liberty*, in which the dinner table is surrounded by six identical toilets and guests pull their trousers down or their skirts up to sit together, sharing cigarettes and magazines, and occasionally excusing themselves to lock themselves in the tiny 'dining room' to eat in private.

When Buñuel exchanged one end of the digestive canal for the other, he traded the formality of the table for that of the toilet, but he also revealed the dual orthodoxy of social conventions governing our bodies' natural urges. Tucked away behind the *Suckerz* dinner table, the back room contains a group of works that extend the notion of the dissecting table and, potentially, the toilet. On one wall, a flock of ponytails made of shiny brown-stained strands held by oversized scrunchies suggests the unfortunate consequences of an indigestible meal, with the colourful scrunchies blossom out of the flat white wall like prolapsed flesh. On the floor below, an overturned wine glass seems to have produced a stiff brown skin of congealed liquid, curling up the wall. Someone has taken a bite out of the 'puddle'; their dentition punctures the clay with a mouth-sized opening and hints at the unappetising connection between ingestion and excretion. Across the room, two rectangular canvases made to the proportions of the artist's body stand on realistic feet cast from life. The raw linen is punctured with holes of various sizes, reinforced with thread to produce a textured sheen reminiscent of the fine folds and lines of the mucous membranes that ring each of our orifices.

Little has changed when it comes to the trappings of a shared meal. The furniture and equipment conceived centuries ago to facilitate social eating are still fit for function. Other than the marital bed, the dining table is the most generative item of collaborative furniture. It is the stage on which human dramas – the comedies and tragedies, the history plays – are performed for real.



The rules governing the art of social eating echo those that dictate our movements around the art gallery. You do not touch what is not yours; you wait your turn to speak and to partake of the dish of the day. You also do well to maintain a measure of control over your own body, its movements and functions. The art gallery, in contrast to the plush surroundings preferred for social eating, is an aseptic environment. And while it may seem fitting, from an aesthetic point of view, to find that particularly tantalising convention – the dinner party – staged in an environment designed for visual seduction, the act of eating itself still carries a frisson of risk and transgression when performed in the sacred space of art. It brings with it the makings of a tasty insurrection: impending spillages and stains menace bright white surfaces; wild fire threatens the controlled art-world environment.

In 1964, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the dichotomy between the ‘raw’ and the ‘cooked’ to differentiate between what is found in nature and what is produced by human culture. For Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, the theory guiding his anthropological studies, was simply ‘the search for unsuspected harmonies’ across cultures. Although they operate in subtly distinct aesthetic registers, Hart and Baldock share a fascination for the performance of the body across a range of social situations. They are interested in how nature and culture influence bodies, in particular during moments of excess and when these moments tip over into the grotesque. Individually, they each explore the aesthetics of ‘overdoing it’. Together, they generate a harmony with the conjunction of their works on the *Suckerz* table.

Through a series of sensual and formal dichotomies – wet and dry, masculine and feminine, crude and refined, gestural and poised – *Suckerz* produces a harmonious feast of body parts in their natural state and cultured condition. The material unifying these works is that most basic element: earth, or clay. Raw earth is the matrix within which plants grow, and thus an essential requirement for the production of food and the sustenance of bodies. Cooked earth becomes ceramic, which evokes a history of cultural production that runs from prehistoric earthenware vessels to contemporary fine art and design. Characterised by an extreme plasticity and expressivity, clay is the central element that Hart and Baldock have transformed into the food, tableware and bodies that populate *Suckerz*.

Ellen Mara De Wacher is an independent curator and writer based in London. She studied Philosophy at the University of Warwick and took an MA in History of Art and Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths. She later studied on the MA Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art. After working at the British Museum and the Barbican Art Gallery, she worked as Curator at the Zabudowicz Collection, London. In 2013–15 she was Curator of Public Collection Development at the Contemporary Art Society, where she was responsible for CAS’s acquisitions scheme for museums across the UK.

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Printed on the occasion of the exhibition

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SUCKERZ

25 June – 1 August 2015

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