

of contact with the land and those who feed them, as well as with their traditions and health.<sup>9</sup>

‘Food sovereignty,’ declares Via Campesina’s Jakarta Call, ‘wrests control over our commons back into the hands of the people’, sparking people’s imaginations about alternatives needed and how to make a stand so that fresh, seasonal food is seen as a right, not a commodity.

## EAT 22: THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

### ELLIE HARRISON

When I was 22 I took a picture of everything I ate for a year. 1,640 meals and snacks individually photographed and meticulously archived online alongside a colossal spreadsheet detailing the exact time, date, location and foodstuff featured in each. *Eat 22* was the result of my then somewhat naïve fascination with food. I wanted to challenge myself, to attempt to take account of and to visualise what a year’s worth of the stuff might amount to.

It turns out that it wasn’t just me that was interested. In the early days of the internet, the *Eat 22* website<sup>10</sup> enabled the project to connect with people all over the world – perhaps drawn to the universality of its subject (food is, after all, one of our few fundamental human needs) or horrified by the excess and impact of the everyday act of eating that it exposed. But the introverted and narcissistic qualities of my repetitive proto-selfie process really bothered me. I later confessed that ‘I was so focussed on the minutiae of my everyday life that I became totally blinkered to everything else going on in the world outside.’<sup>11</sup>

What does interest me now about the project is its emphasis on our role as ‘consumers’ within a global system of food production. We live in a world that prioritises ‘consumerism’ precisely because we are now so removed from the land and skills required to produce food for ourselves. ‘Food growing’ is now ‘food buying’ for the vast majority of us, making us completely dependent on erratic environmental, political and economic events to fulfil our need to eat. Something I attempted to make visible in my 2009 *Vending Machine*, which, linked up to a computer reading the live news headlines, only released crisps when search terms relating to the recession cropped up.

Exposing the absurd consequences of capitalism – in our society and our individual lives – has become the central focus of my work. Nowhere are these more apparent than in a food industry driven by the profit motive, which is responsible for the dual crises of obesity (now affecting a quarter of UK adults) and food waste (15 million tonnes ends up in landfill every year). My 2013 performance *Anti-Capitalist Aerobics*<sup>12</sup> aimed to show how



*Eat 22* by Ellie Harrison, 'proto-selfies'.

this holy grail of 'growth' inevitably leads to us to producing and consuming more than we need.

*Eat 22* and the other 'data collecting' projects I undertook in its wake have certainly taught some valuable lessons. Firstly, that you really are what you eat – both in a material and an ethical sense. In consumer culture more than anywhere, it is essential to consider the real consequences of what you buy. They also showed me that the personal definitely can be political. It is only when we study in depth and disclose information about our own lives that it becomes possible to notice what we have in common and begin to identify the wider systemic causes of the problems that we all share.

## MAKING A STAND

Artist Agnes Dene, made a notable stand in two acres of wheatfield planted on rubble field near Wall Street, at the foot of the World Trade Centre, in 1982, by juxtaposing land use and food growing as a commodity traded on world markets. *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* reclaimed valuable New York real estate to draw attention to global hunger and the disastrous results of agriculture's mechanisation – separating agriculture and culture. 'Unless human values were re-assessed,' argued Dene, 'the quality of life, even life itself, was in danger.'<sup>13</sup>

Artists can draw attention to the dynamics of the system and the significant power we have ourselves to intervene. In *EAT 22*, Ellie Harrison documents a year of eating, underlining the choices she makes with each mouthful. In *All in a Day's Walk* Jess Allen<sup>14</sup> 'walks the food miles' sustaining herself from food grown, harvested and processed within the distance she can walk in reach of home each day: 'measuring out by foot my existence-subsistence-persistence'. She meets farmers, millers, bakers, apiarists, artisan cider-producers, foresters, road-workers, yurt-makers, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers along the way. The walk becomes an exploration of personal horizons; of 'endurance, edges and empathy.'

'I had not considered quite how vital the food would be to fuel the walking'.

She almost starves in winter (as a vegetarian) and gets ill in the summer (cutting out carbohydrates, eating meat and dairy for protein). The testing endeavour revealed the loss of much of Herefordshire's local food infrastructure and led her to take greater personal responsibility for alternative ways of sourcing food.<sup>15</sup>

These farmed landscapes are constantly changing and responding to the challenges of economy and climate. Less obvious, dramatic and dizzying than the melting ice-sheets...but still more fragile than we think.