

## **"DEVOURING THE SOIL'S WORDS" – MARGAUX SCHWAB FROM 'foodculture days' IN VEVEY ON MULTISPECIES CURATING AS GROUNDED PRACTICE AND ENTANGLED METABOLISMS**

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**Abstract** Founded in 2017 in Vevey, Switzerland, by Margaux Schwab, 'foodculture days' is a publicly funded cultural format that provides a platform –understood in the broadest sense of institutional framing– to share and build knowledge around food as a medium for convivial practices of nourishment for all species. By fostering longstanding relations and collaborations between local practitioners, such as farmers, cooks, gastronomes, winemakers, activists, and gardeners, with a globally interconnected network of artists, scientists, philosophers and researchers, the complexities of environmental and social justice in the realm of food are addressed in different strands and activities of the initiative. Its main project, a ten-day long festival that emerges every two years in the town of Vevey, is a moment of reflection, gathering and dialogue that allows the public and practitioners involved to rediscover the urban space and everyday locations, such as markets, streets, cafes, shops, agricultural initiatives, museums, and galleries, from a perspective where food, art and ecology intersect. Our conversation about the emergence, the different strands of 'foodculture days' and their vision for the future is based on a shared conviction that cultural programming attempting to address global topics rooted in a local context and focussing on more-than-human timescales and process-oriented art practices needs formats within different spacial and temporal regimes. **Keywords: multispecies curating, radical hospitality, conviviality, grounded practice**

### **Interview**

**MW:** How did it start? What led you to create 'foodculture days' and which different strands does the initiative encompass?

**MS:** Honestly, it started out of frustration and the need to create a space for experimentation. First, I have always been passionate about hospitality. That's why I decided to study at École Hôtelière in Lausanne. But I was disappointed by the business approach of the curriculum that didn't allow to address hospitality in a broader sense: as collaborative practice or addressing environmental issues. Secondly, I always have been interested in going to museums, galleries and exhibitions, but it often felt like entering spaces that belong to a closed circle. When I moved to Berlin, I discovered a multicultural,

experimental environment with a lot of different art communities and practices around food. Through food as a medium, but also as a subject of research, many conversations were initiated and the spaces felt a lot more convivial, open, and horizontal. The subject of food speaks to almost everyone even if we all have very different relations and access to it. This was an important insight, especially being Swiss-Mexican. In Switzerland one usually respects the status quo easily as we are all aware that we are rather privileged in this country. Why would we complain? I found that food was an amazing way to talk about concerns that I had for some time without necessarily using the language of a political discourse at first. In 2017, one and a half years after I arrived in Berlin, I started with 'foodculture days'. The initial idea was to broadcast the multiplicity of artistic research-based practices around food and nourishment in a yearly recurring festival which was a first in Switzerland. But realising a festival and being attentive towards ecological questions was complex in terms of production, curation and relationship building. This is why the two-year rhythm established rather quickly. For the time in between we started to concentrate on research-based grants. With Covid, through a "transformation in culture" grant, we got the opportunity to start our digital editorial format Boca A Boca ("word of mouth"), where we invite a guest editor, someone from our network who's perspective sparked some interesting conversations or insight, to assemble articles and multimedia content in a cycle dedicated to one specific question or perspective that might be complementary to ours. The format allows for a certain depth and to share our thinking processes with our international audience, in contrast to the event character of the local festival. We also started some perennial projects on the territory, i.e. the urban orchard and a project called "The Planetary Wheat Field" with the artist Alexandra Baumgartner in cooperation with the city of La Tour-de-Peilz and a school.

**MW:** Could you explain this project in more depth? It is an interesting example of what multispecies curating, as a practice that is not only centred around human perception and timelines but incorporates or is attentive to other species, means concretely.

**MS:** It was a project following the whole cycle of wheat – the most widely consumed grain – in an urban context. We set up a field in a public park and invited inhabitants, gardeners, school children, wheat experts and artists to partake in the manual labour of growing wheat over the course of nine months. An educational programme was built around that, bringing together knowledges about the grain from different strands, such as social science, farming, and baking, as well as fostering artistic approaches. It was a big project that required a lot of (personal) investment, and constant care. Not only does tending to the field require regularity and presence, but so does involving all partners, explaining the project to people passing by and to funding bodies. We learned a lot about the aliveness of the matter, the wheat plants, – bringing up questions as who is working

for whom? But also, about the aliveness of a project that involves a lot of different people and exceeds the timeframe of a common cultural event as it is built around the timeline of a different species. You need to have the right infrastructures, more resources and time. The cultural committee of the city did not really understand what was different here and the transformative potential it contained. They had trouble understanding how food can be the subject of a cultural event and how agriculture could be artistic. The project is on pause now, but it was a good trial, and we want to continue in this direction of long-term research-based projects that relate to neighbourhoods or communities in a specific territory.

**MW:** You mentioned the aliveness of the matter. With conversations around the institution of the museum and its definition and handling of objects as passive and stable, the practice of preservation is starkly contrasted if you bring food into this context. Food is not stable at all, it is all about transformation of matter; you cannot own and exhibit it. It is meant to be shared and depends on multispecies contacts and collaboration, in the broadest sense – from soil microbes to microorganisms to gut bacteria.<sup>i</sup> What are your thoughts and experiences with that?

**MS:** The notion of the museum as something that is freezing things in time and is trying to preserve often by using practices and chemicals that attempt to keep species away that feed on them is very interesting. If you think about traditional practices of preserving food, there is so much aliveness, i.e. in a fermentation process. It is more a working-with than a working-against. In general, if you think about food in that sense, it evades all demarcations.<sup>ii</sup> The act of ingestion is something very intimate. The outside becomes part of your inside daily and is shaping your inner landscape. It is also shaping the outer landscape in a very tangible way, because our decisions in terms of what we consume is shaping what and how we are planting and producing which is sculpting the territory. In an ecological vocabulary one could say: how we tend to our world or to our environments is how we tend to ourselves. It is the same. The relationship to material becomes different. Some of the artists we work with tell us “My project is a success when there is nothing left.” I think it is powerful to think about the impact of the ephemeral and its potential. Most of the artists working with food are very conscious about these things. You must consider the cycle of waste, storage, hygiene, the hunger and moods of people, taste and spiciness, timing of preparation and serving, language that tells stories or highlights certain dimensions of the dish. But what's also important to emphasise here: I don't want to romanticise food as this universal force that connects everyone and everything. We experience it very differently due to global systemic reasons and power dynamics. A dish can be nevertheless an entry point to understand these global dynamics, especially when it is rooted in a local context.

The tension between the local and the global is oftentimes a challenge when you try to change something but in bringing different people, practices, and regions together I see also a lot of potential and possibilities, also get into conversation with marginalised communities.

**MW:** Can you speak a bit more about this potential? What kind of exchanges or interactions induced your initiative so far?

**MS:** I think there are two layers. First, the encounters that are possible in the condensed moment of the festival. You can come and have access to many types of knowledges, people from different fields and with a certain expertise. There is no agenda. You can just come for a day and taste, see, listen to, and exchange with who or whatever sparks your attention. The relaxed atmosphere is very fruitful and vital. We have people who met at 'foodculture days' and opened a restaurant together. Others started to meet having a meal once per month and might come up with ideas there. This is already an amazing outcome for a cultural event. Second, the collaborative aspect with projects that intentionally bring people from different backgrounds together, i.e. a sound artist and a farmer. Both sides have a certain knowledge, perspective and interest and it can be very powerful for both parties to discover new aspects through an exchange. I think it is very potent to say everyone is an expert in something and to observe what types of knowledge have been made invisible through history, also from a feminist perspective if you think about the domestic realm. If you take the knowledge of a recipe book, knowledge that you can find in songs or dances, there is a lot of potency in valorising those types of knowledge and combine them with scientific insights, artistic or artisanal practices.

**MW:** 'foodculture days' is a platform, a container that allows these exchanges to happen. I would like to know more about your vision for the future, but also about the realities of fundings. You already mentioned that some funding bodies didn't understand the connection between agriculture and art, and even less what this means in terms of timescales and resources.  
**MS:** Our role shifted through the years, and this is where our vision and the realities of funding come together. It is not so much about showing the multitude of artistic practices around food anymore, as it is about questions of how we can provide an infrastructure that can host artists and interdisciplinary, process-based projects with decent resources and good working conditions. After focusing seven years mainly on the public's needs, which will always remain a priority for me, we would like to focus now more on the artists' needs in terms of creative sustenance as the art world is very precarious. The good thing is that we can apply to different types of funding with our approach. What is lacking nevertheless are funding structures that are decidedly interested in these different modes of working. So far, we are balancing a lot of short- term funds and are trying to anticipate the dynamics of irregular rhythms, also in terms of

uniting the various strands of the initiative. We could see how this creates precariousness in many ways. Right now, we are in a moment of consolidation where we reflect on our practice, the sustainability of it and the monetary realities. We realised it is about scaling down and question the notion of growth and progress. The goal would be to have fewer small and short-term funds in exchange for two or three bigger partners that can support our vision of long-term and process-based projects in different territories. Everywhere people are starting to realise that there is too much, too quick, too superficial. This holds also true for the cultural field. We don't want to be another space that runs on exhaustion. So, how can we be this container where we can address some urgent topics but, in a scale and a rhythm that is accessible and energising for everyone involved? Last year's festival under the topic of "Devouring the Soil's Words" was a good reality check. It was the biggest edition we ever had with a central pavilion at the lakeside, beautiful partners and artists. Somehow it was the edition I had always dreamed of, but we could also see that we're not there yet in terms of resources and being able to sustain that dream. We relied on a lot of voluntary help, which was amazing to receive but should not be the goal. In 2025 it is going to be a much smaller and more concentrated version that hopefully will allow us to live up to our vision. But this is what is great about 'foodculture days', we are small enough to be experimental, agile and flexible. We are like a para-institution that is not very bureaucratic and allows a certain freedom in these kinds of decisions.

**MW:** In this sense one could say you are trying to translate insights from content to form. I'm thinking here of a text from scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa on human-soil relationships and practices of care that are closely linked to a discussion about temporal regimes.<sup>iii</sup> Ecological soil care approaches exhausted soils as endangered living worlds and is attentive towards the different temporal rhythms of multispecies ecosystems. Taking your last year's curatorial concept of "Devouring the Soil's Words" seriously is then exactly picking up on questioning the anthropocentric fast-paced rhythm our world is currently caught up in and advocating for the integration of alternative modes of being and operating. Which brings me to another very interesting aspect of the situatedness of your initiative: Vevey is also the location of Nestlé's world headquarter. As one of the global players in the realm of food it epitomises the extractivistic, progressive, productionist and restless mode of technoscientific futurism Bellacasa describes. It literally stuck a fork into the Lake in Vevey and opened the Alimentarium in 1985, coined to be the first food museum, in a historical building at the lakeside. They are a very important and prominent player in the region. You don't position yourself against Nestlé, but you're offering an alternative. 'foodculture days' is a network that is growing around it. A lot of people from the region or the city that have a different vision how to interact with the world engage in your initiative. How would you describe the relationship or tension with this global player in town?

**MS:** We need to differentiate between Nestlé and the Alimentarium. People have a much more personal relationship to the Alimentarium than they have to Nestlé. Everyone knows someone working for Nestlé, it's a source of income and taxes for the city. One is aware of that. The Alimentarium is something else. Of course it is a branding strategy. But it also has the most beautiful (food) garden in the region, the best location at the lake, they offer cooking classes, school programs and it's a popular spot to celebrate a child's birthday and bake a cake. In terms of reconnecting with the land, with kitchens and food production they are doing a job that our schools are not doing. One must acknowledge that. But there is a big mismatch between the beauty they are presenting and what agenda the company is pursuing – operating within the logics of mass production, taking advantage of the power imbalances of free trade without any concern for human and nature, producing a lot of packaging and waste, and profiting of the invisibility of the ugliness in the agrobusiness' value chain.

**MW:** Beyond the building's and the garden's beauty, Alimentarium's scenography projects a very cold, deliberately scientific engineering approach towards food with a lot of lab spaces and on the other hand makes use of exhibition displays one knows from anthropological museums to evoke a more personal approach.

**MS:** The scenography feels very dehumanised and depersonalised to me if you consider how rich and diverse our food landscapes are and how personal food is. Nestlé's logo with the little bird in its nest and the motto "Good food, good life" is no better. One must ask: a good life for whom? What we are trying to live and broadcast with 'foodculture days' is a web of relationships, pluralism and diversity of tastes, species and knowledges, small scale actions within a network of trust, support and solidarity and agro-ecological practices. One way to regain power from the industrial food complex is through our taste, and I'm not speaking about something gentrified, inaccessible, or elitist. Taste is a body intelligence that everyone has but that needs to be cultivated. This is why our approach is to build a community around our initiative that shares values and sensibilities, to trigger encounters that don't necessarily need the initiative as a centre, but can continue on their own. One part is rooted here in the town of Vevey, but the network is international. It's important as a cultural initiative to be rooted in a landscape with partners, with people knowing the project, but at the same time to initiate new conversations by connecting to people, projects and practices from different backgrounds. Connecting to other projects and geographies in this context one learns quickly that it is an exchange and not a translation of the exact same thing or format. It's an important departure from the universalist mindset of taking one formula, one solution and applying it everywhere. It is about sharing experiences and being attentive to the site-specific conditions and realities.



**MW:** The strength and beauty of a cultural initiative around these topics is that it does not come with a fixed agenda. Addressing food politics can become easily very activist, which is important. But speaking about the universalist mindset and the rush to find solutions, spaces that open conversations, that allow heightened sensitivities and that build consciousness around certain topics without having a clearly defined goal, might be equally important.

**MS:** With 'foodculture days' we are not inventing anything new, but we are shifting the focus, asking different questions, and trying new approaches. It became a point of reference. Its sheer existence already brought a lot of reflections on the topic around the importance of food in the cultural and artistic field and inspired some programmes in museums and galleries. Moreover, I really believe that culture is a way to synchronise our bodies, as well as our intellect. Its strength is especially that it is not moralistic or solution oriented. If you think about the planetary crisis we're in, it's safe to say that it is not an issue of lacking information or knowledge, but one of a deeply felt conviction that how we act in and with the world has to change on a very fundamental level. It is crucial to find ways to gather information, understand systemic structures but also to let these insights become part of your being and cultivate them on a small-scale daily basis. If you have a community who is sharing this approach one can change a lot on a regional level. Seeing these exchanges, solidarities, discussions and the motivation to contribute happen on this scale is very rewarding and nourishes our ability to connect to other regions, especially where raising these topics are a personal high-risk and high-stake choice of facing struggles.<sup>iv</sup>

## Endnotes

- i Donati, K. (2014). 'The Convivial Table: Imagining Ethical Relations Through Multispecies Gastronomy.' *The Aristologist: An Antipodean Journal of Food History* 4: 127-143.
- ii Landecker, H. (2013), 'Metabolism, Reproduction, and the Aftermath of Categories,' *Feminist & Scholar Online* 11(3). Available at: <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/metabolism-reproduction-and-the-aftermath-of-categories/> (Accessed 19 April 2024).
- iii de la Bellacasa, M. P. (2015) 'Making Time for Soil: Technoscientific Futurity Pace of Care.' *Social studies of science* 45.5: 691–716.
- iv Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). *Hospicing Modernity. Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. Berkeley, North Atlantic Books.

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