

Partake Columbus

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University

2015

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Abstract

In my thesis work, I investigate the social web surrounding our ecological, cultural, and personal relationship with food. My work addresses the growing concern for health and sustainability in a consumer-driven society. As we turn away from whole foods and move towards a diet full of processed foods served in plastic and Styrofoam, this gradual shift has impacted the way we think about what we eat and how we eat it.

I use the ceramic vessel and human experience as a way to investigate the shift in society's relationship to food, eating, and the meal. My studio work is a consideration of form, function, and color of the ceramic vessel. These physical objects fuel community-oriented social impact projects in which the vessel serves as a catalyst in creating a dialogue around food. Through use, the vessel has the ability to elevate the food we consume and asks the viewer to reconsider what they eat, where it comes from, who they share it with, and how food affects our body and the earth.

Partake Columbus is a time-based project in shared eating. The course of the exhibition spanned thirty-three days and engaged seven individuals from different neighborhoods throughout the city of Columbus, Ohio. Each participant shared a meal with someone every day for the duration of the project using a sharing set of dishes. Their stories were recorded through daily posts on a group blog. *Partake Columbus* brought attention back to the meal as something nourishing to be shared and experienced together. The project can be viewed at partakecolumbus.wordpress.com.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband, Forrest for his unconditional support in both life and art and the intersection where those two meet. I want to thank my family, friends, and my supervisory committee who helped guide and support me through this journey. I am deeply grateful for all those who helped make this work possible; thank you.

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Vita.....	iv
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Important Works.....	2
Chapter 3: Partake Columbus.....	5
Artist Responsibility.....	16
Chapter 4: Research.....	18
Social Engagement.....	18
Where does our food come from?.....	21
What do we eat?.....	22
What We Eat From.....	24
Why do we eat what we eat?.....	25
Cooking.....	25
The Table: A Place of Gathering.....	26
Shared Meals.....	27
Food and Place.....	29

Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	30
References.....	33
Appendix A: Participants.....	35
Appendix B: Donations.....	36

List of Figures

Figure 1: Sharing Set of Dishes	6
Figure 2: Map of Columbus, Ohio	7
Figure 3: Gallery Portraits	8
Figure 4: Partake Columbus Blog, About the Participants, Dan Hsieh: Old North Columbus	9
Figure 5: Inaugural Meal at 400 West Rich Street, Columbus, Ohio	10
Figure 6: Partake Columbus Blog, partakecolumbus.wordpress.com	12
Figure 7: Partake Columbus Blog, Windyn Hines meal 28 shared with Calvin Hines	13
Figure 8: Gallery Installation	14

Chapter 1: Introduction

Objects carry stories. Often we look at the past story of objects, but as a maker I am interested in their future story. I want to know how and why they are used. During graduate school I transitioned from a vessel maker to a designer of experiences. As a result of this shift, my practice expanded beyond the medium of ceramics to now include developing, facilitating, and recording social impact projects.

The vessel in use serves as a mediator between the human body and the food consumed. My interest in food stems from its everyday importance, a physical need, and our unavoidable connection to food as a basic necessity for sustaining life. Eating is essential to human existence.

I consider the main components of my work: vessel, food, and human interaction. My work explores the choices we make daily regarding the food we eat, who we eat with and what we eat from.

I am interested in the health of the body, the environment, and the community and how these three entities are intertwined with the food system; why we choose to eat what we eat and what affect this has on our bodies. In deepening my relationship with food I began growing it. Growing plants brought questions into consideration about where our food comes from; what are sustainable practices? I continue to question what value we place on food and the packaging in which it is served. How does the ceramic vessel play a role in the way we eat and make food choices?

Chapter 2: Important Works

The Dish Set Challenges were a series of three projects that developed initially to reduce waste, then to bring intentionality to shared meals, and finally to engage members of the community. The structure of the projects existed within a set of parameters using time and the continued use of ceramic vessels.

In the first *Dish Set Challenge I*, I made a thirty-day commitment to eating and drinking every meal from a set of dishes I made for the project. The *Dish Set Challenge II* emerged from the significance of sharing meals during the first rendition of the project. I collaborated with my husband, Forrest Sincoff Gard, using the dish set to eat and drink every meal together for seven consecutive days. The dishes were designed as a connected set to focus our intention together. Using the dishes forced us to sit in close proximity, eat together, and encouraged us to engage with each other in conversation throughout the meal.

Upon completing these two personal projects, I decided to extend my work outward, meeting new individuals whose participation became a material in the creation of the work. I sent out a call to gauge public interest in a similar piece and a group of six individuals self-selected into the project. They committed to eating and drinking one meal per day from an individualized dish set for twenty-eight days, a time frame set by the exhibition schedule. The *Dish Set Challenge III* began with a group meal in the

gallery. The remainder of the project took place in the lives of the participants and later presented to the public through a group blog.

The vessel brought attention to personal food choices and required the participants to consider the food they chose to eat and how it fit on the dishes. One participant Aurellio Villa Luna Diaz commented, “It is going to be very hard to eat McDonald’s from this plate.” This remark makes clear that there is significance in how one views food choices when there is consideration for the context in which it will be consumed: disposable versus fragile ceramics. This project led me to better understand the power of the vessel to bring attention back to what we eat, where the food comes from, and how we choose to eat it.

The group shared a final meal together on the last day of the exhibition. Following the meal, participants left a final reflection on the blog regarding the impact the project had on their lives. Keith Karchella said, “For me meals have two parts; what you are eating and who you are with. This project made me slow down and experience each meal” (Gard, 2014). Aurellio Villa Luna Diaz described a newfound curiosity for preparing his own meals. He said “making time for family and friends . . . was the most rewarding part of the *Dish Set Challenge*” (Gard, 2014). The project concluded with a strong sense of community and lingering thoughts about the importance of sharing a meal with someone.

Project Share is a study of shared eating that addresses many of the questions from my previous projects: What does it mean to share a meal? Why share meals? How does the ceramic vessel impact eating, food choices, and where you eat?

The project coincided with an exhibition held in EASE Gallery at St. Stephen Episcopal Church in Columbus, Ohio. The participants included four church members, who were each given two matching dish sets. They were asked to share one meal a week, during the exhibition, with someone they did not know well. One of the participants, Carl Stevens (2014) said, “My dishes sat on the coffee table in our living room for the month of October, a goad to staying true to my participation in the project and a reminder of the people I had eaten with.” The aim of the project was to bring people together who would not normally share a meal, to stimulate conversations, and to build relationships. Pollan (2008) states, “a shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from mere animal biology to an act of culture” (p. 192). My projects are designed to challenge the current American culture of eating, using the vessel to bring attention to the food we eat and in what company we share it.

Through these participatory projects the vessel enters into a rotation of use in the lives of participants. I found that the ceramic vessel is fragile, valuable, and has the potential to shift ones perspective in eating and sharing meals. In use it is a risk for pleasure.

Chapter 3: Partake Columbus

Partake Columbus is a project in shared eating, focused on seven individuals from different neighborhoods throughout the city of Columbus, Ohio. Participants engaged in sharing one meal each day, eating from a specifically designed dish set for two. The shared meals were recorded daily on the group blog. The project was designed to bridge the gap between people, the food they consume, and from what they consume it. Through a time-based project spanning the thirty-three days of the exhibition, *Partake Columbus* looks at the relationship between food and people, people and people, and people and place.

The *Partake Columbus* dishes were designed to accentuate the connection between two people when sharing a meal. The sharing set of dishes (see Figure 1) included two cups, bowls, plates, and one platter. The plates and bowls are half ovals that can be placed next to each other to make a whole oval. I designed the platter to serve multiple functions, as a serving vessel and as a nest for the dish set making them easier to carry. The surface design is a map of the highways in Columbus, Ohio, a reminder of the importance of place (see Figure 2). The map was made with a simple line drawing and then into a pattern that was printed on to the bottom of the dishes. The image was printed with a blue underglaze and the dishes were glazed with a semi matte glaze allowing the color to mellow below the glaze surface. I collaborated with Brandon Ault to design

leather strapped bags to hold the dishes. With layers of felt in-between each dish, the leather bag provided simple transportation for the dish set for those who wanted to venture away from home.



Figure 1: Sharing Set of Dishes

Partake Columbus has three parts. As a living project, it took place in the lives of the participants. This part of the work now exists as the story preserved on the blog. The second part was the documentation shown in the gallery exhibition. Lastly, the sharing sets of dishes still remain as a physical object in the homes of the participants.

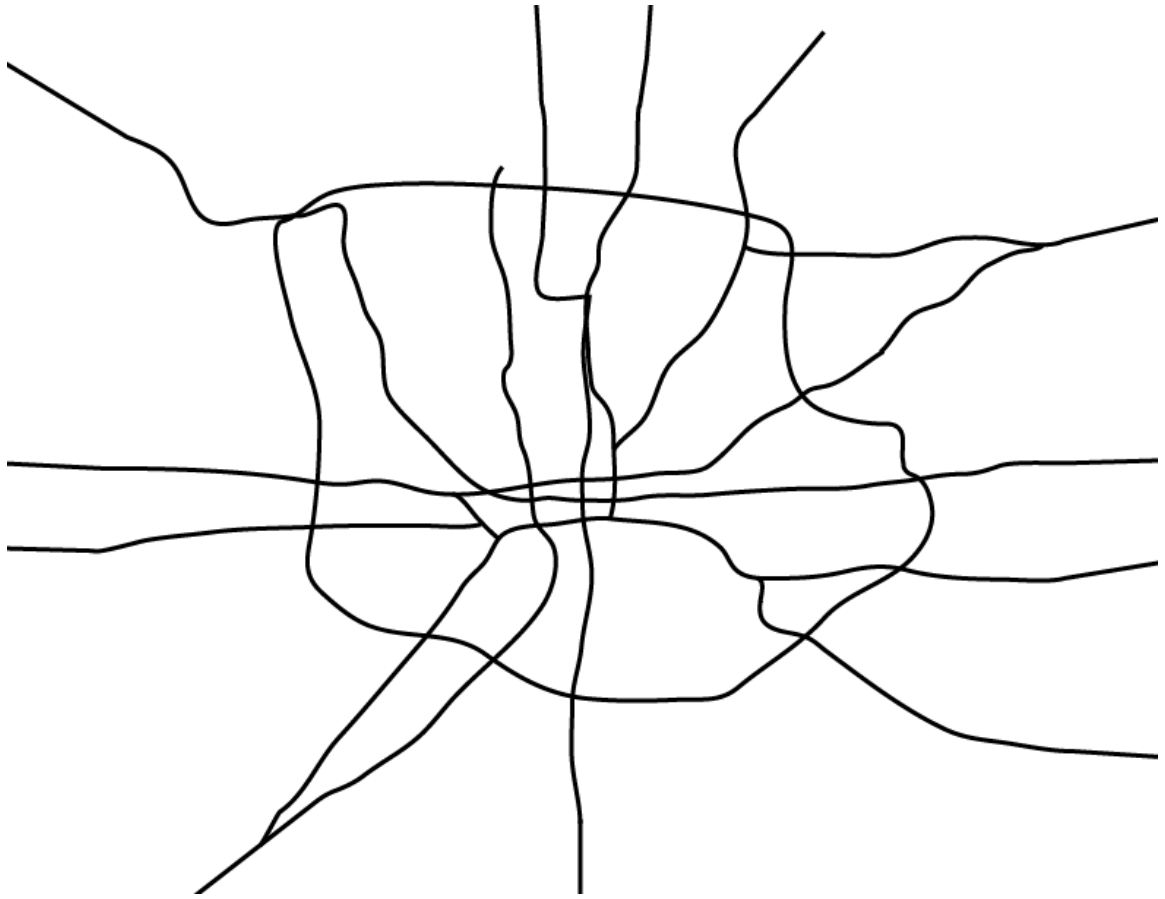


Figure 2: Map of Columbus, Ohio

Partake Columbus has three layers of participation. The first are the seven official participants who committed to the project. Second are the people with whom meals were shared with throughout the project. Third are the gallery visitor and the blog follower who experience only the documentation of the project.

The project included seven participants from different neighborhoods throughout the city of Columbus, Ohio. They included Dan Hsieh, Ellice Young-Eun Park, Jed Dearing, Julie Jent, Nina Bressau, Todd Combs, and Windyn Hines (see Appendix A). The participants did not know each other prior to the start of the project. I used word of

mouth and social media to gain interest in the project. I met with everyone individually in person to explain the project and to build a personal connection before anyone committed to participating.



Figure 3: Gallery Portraits


The gallery functioned as a site for documentation and allowed visitors to access information about each participant. I hung portraits of each individual side by side (see Figure 3) including each name, neighborhood, location of portrait, a short introduction, and a QR code with a link to the website. On the website each participant has a page

under “About the Participants,” which includes a portrait accompanying written text that they each provided discussing food, place, community, and their personal identity (see Figure 4). The portraits were taken of each participant in their respective neighborhood in a significant place of their choosing (see Appendix A).

Home About Partake Columbus About the Participants First & Final Meal The Donors About the Artist Contact

partake columbus

Dan Hsieh: Old North Columbus



I was born in Taiwan, but moved to the United States when I was 2 ½ years old. I use to think how insane it was that out of all the states to choose from, my parents decided that Ohio was the place to be. Who wouldn't want to experience extremely hot summers and road freezing winters? I grew up in Dublin, which is like the suburb of Columbus. It is a nice city that seemed all too sterile. After grade school and graduation, my escape from this place was so close I could taste it. I ended up attending college at The Ohio State University and what I tasted at first was bitterness, but soon turned into sweetness, much like a grapefruit. What I thought would be pure dread for the next four years of my life soon became appreciation and admiration; I'm super weird I know.

When I first started attending OSU, I began realizing that I've visited certain parts of campus before, more specifically Old North Columbus. I was experiencing déjà vu on a daily basis until it finally clicked in my head that I had been coming to this district ever since I was a child. In fact, I attended Chinese School every weekend for 12 years in same old historic high school that sits on the corner of Arcadia and High street.

Ah, but it doesn't stop there! For the first 10 years of my life, I received my haircuts at the Santarelli Barber Shop, and these Asian grocery stores seem all too familiar as well. I guess I spent the last 15 years of my life day dreaming through all my weekend commutes to Columbus. Old North Columbus is a special area to me. I've unintentionally spent almost my entire life in this rather small district. I guess something about keeps luring me back, and honestly, I still have no idea what it is.

My Grandmother is extremely dear to me. In fact, a majority of my interests are strongly influenced by her. I often times view see her has my very own mother, not by choice but by circumstance. My parents worked very hard day and night when I was young to make our immigration work as comfortable as possible for us. Interaction between my parents and I were minimal at best, but I understood why. My Grandma raised me everyday as my parents worked. I remember following her around everyday watching her cook, garden, and clean. She was also a very crafty and frugal woman. If you give her some wire and string, I believe she can fix anything. Her daily tasks started influencing my interests at a young age. I wanted to help her cook, garden, and fix things, which at the time seemed fun, mimicking her daily ritual and viewing it as a game.

I soon realized that these tasks all boiled down to the idea of creating something, whether it is making dumplings from scratch or growing leeks in the garden. We were creating something from nothing, much like our lives here in America.

Figure 4: Partake Columbus Blog, About the Participants, Dan Hsieh: Old North Columbus

On February 17, 2015, the group shared an inaugural meal together using their sharing set of dishes, meeting and breaking bread for the first time to mark the start of the project (see Figure 5). A few days prior to meal, I invited the group to read “About the Participants” as an introduction to each other. This background knowledge gave way to the conversation that took place during the meal.



Figure 5: Inaugural Meal at 400 West Rich Street, Columbus, Ohio

Working with the specifics of a place in this case Columbus, Ohio, *Partake Columbus* addresses the local food system and its relationship to the participants. The inaugural meal connected the participants directly to food grown, harvested, and prepared

near Columbus, Ohio. Through donations, I collected food from twenty-six different farms and businesses in the surrounding area (see Appendix B). The meal was designed to make a direct connection to the place, food, and intention that was shared.

Following the meal each individual was given a sharing set of dishes—a nestled set of ceramic dishes designed for two people. To make the project feasible participants were asked to commit to sharing meals at least five days a week. Where, when, and with whom each participant decided to share each meal was at his or her discretion. The dishes were intended to function in use during the shared meals and as a visual reminder of the project both during and after.

The meals, sharing sets, and daily experiences are documented on a group blog chronicling each individual's journey through photographs and written reflection (see Figure 6). The vessels themselves and the act of documentation bring attention to the food being consumed and the person with whom the meal was shared.

partake columbus

Partake Columbus is a meal share. Focused on the city of Columbus, food, community, and our relationship to the food we eat and the people we share it with. Partake Columbus is a community-based project bringing together an individual from seven Columbus neighborhoods to participate in a meal share for one month.

[more info](#)

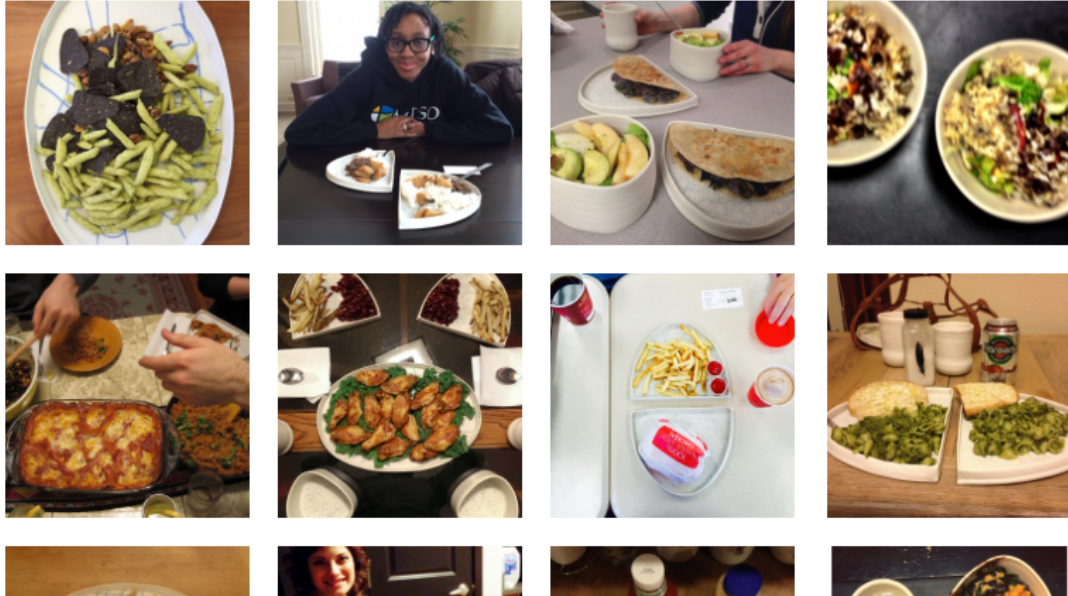


Figure 6: Partake Columbus Blog, partakecolumbus.wordpress.com

The group did not meet again in person until March 21, 2015, the final evening of the exhibition. On this evening, the group was invited to bring one guest whom they shared a meal with during the project and food for a potluck style meal.

The shared meals that were the focus of *Partake Columbus* took place in the lives of each participant in the days between the group's shared meals. After each meal, they contributed to the blog sharing an image and a written description from the meal (see Figure 7). As the project progressed, the group formed a supportive community in the

shared digital space of the blog. Everyone contributed and engaged in conversation with each other using comments on the blog. Participants began sharing meals with each other as part of the project.

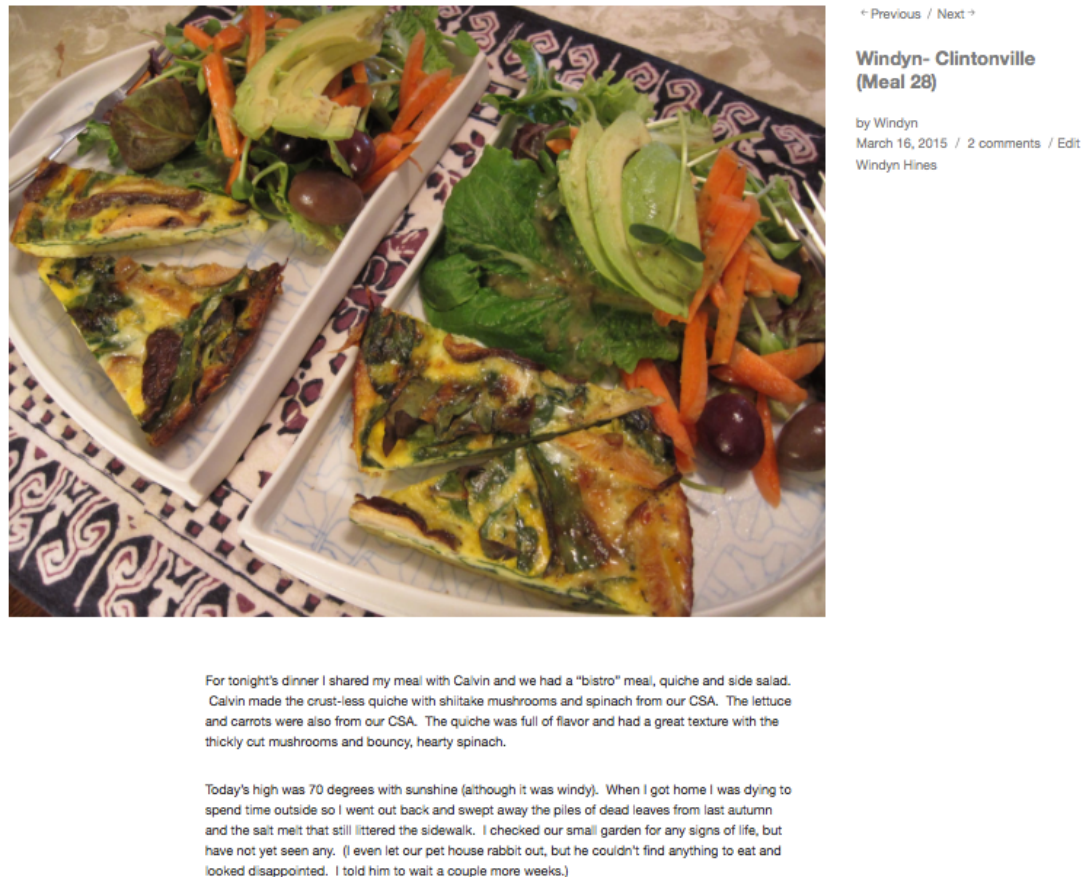


Figure 7: Partake Columbus Blog, Windyn Hines meal 28 shared with Calvin Hines

Within the gallery I included the seven portraits, a sharing set of dishes hanging in a leather carry case, vinyl text, a computer linked to the blog, and a table set for two (see Figure 8). The portraits were printed at 18 x 26 inches. I wanted the images to be large enough that the gallery visitor could connect with each individual. I chose to take vertical portraits including the whole body. This decision was made to include as much

information about the person and the significance of the place where it was taken. The sharing set of dishes hung from a hook in the gallery to visualize it being carried. Since the gallery acted as a secondary site to the project, the vinyl text offered a written explanation of what the project was. The computer was important as a link to the blog and the project as it was happening in real time. The table was placed in a central location with a place setting for two. It was built with reclaimed wood from an old barn in Columbus. The subtle color allowed the wood to fade into the background and accentuate the dishes on the surface.



Figure 8: Gallery Installation

I designed *Partake Columbus* to bring awareness to the meal through the act of eating and sharing food. Through extended time, the thirty-three days of the exhibition,

the interactions became more honest and natural. The dishes and the meals became a part of daily life. When this transition happened midway through the project, the blog posts become emotional and the connections deepened. I created the dishes as a set that is only complete when the two sides are put together to make it whole. The dishes are visual and physical reminders of the project and the intention that was set by each participant.

Each participant took a distinctly different approach to the project. Julie Jent spent time eating with her husband, reflecting on her roots growing up on a farm, and learning about herself, food, and what meals mean in her life. She says, “after participating in Partake... sitting together and eating sometimes isn’t enough – I feel more conscious about the quality of the time we are sharing instead of the quantity.” Windyn Hines also shared the majority of her meals with her husband. She is a private person and initially expressed concern with the transparency required in blogging. Windyn admitted that the feedback she received fueled her continuation of the project creating an overall positive experience. She said, “this project made me more contemplative of my relationship with others and the meaning behind sharing a meal together.” Ellice Young-Eun Park took a distinctly different approach to meal sharing inviting a wide variety of guests to share meals with her. She had a strong presence on the blog posting daily, connecting with other participants in real life, and was a supportive member of the online community. She began commenting on everyone’s post asking questions, sharing stories, and encouraging. Nina was one of two participants who lived alone during the project leaving her slightly apprehensive initially in committing to the project. She missed sharing meals only two days and found that it gave her “a reason to ask others to share a meal together,

which likely wouldn't have happened otherwise" and the project allowed her to see "the importance of appreciating food at all times." Jed Dearing lived in a house with several roommates yet he extended the project into his community in many ways. His dish set traveled with him and he shared meals with many people within his neighborhood and Columbus. In his last post he shared that he "enjoyed getting to share the story of Partake over the meals, and the intentionality of sitting and eating with others I might not have normally, and seeing their eyes light up when they realize the print on the dishes is a map of Columbus." The final participant Todd Combs selected out of the project after a family emergency.

After the final meal participants hugged each other as though they were parting ways with good friends. This was evidence of the strong community that formed through the project. Ultimately, *Partake Columbus* is a reflection on our relationship to the food we eat and the people we share it with.

Artist Responsibility

As the artist, I made every effort to find a diverse group of people to participate. I used word of mouth as my primary means, which I supplemented with a call for participants in an artist community Facebook page. The participants were self-selected nondiscriminatory as they showed interest on a first come, first-served basis. I put out a specific call for a Columbus native and someone over the age of fifty. Later it was necessary to specify the call to men and residents of certain unrepresented neighborhoods. It was challenging to find a balance in gender because more women responded to the call than men. It was important that the seven participants came from

seven different neighborhoods. Toward the end of the selection process I had to narrow down the search for specific neighborhoods that I thought needed to be represented.

Participation was completely optional and open to those who showed interest. I met individually with the participants and through these conversations and emails those who chose to self-select understood the parameters of the project. The exchange allowed me to collect the necessary personal information to help frame each individual's identity within the project. Allowing them to shift from passive observers to actively creating the work. Empowering them to share a portion of their lives, to engaged in the project, giving them agency over the resulting piece.

The gallery served as a site to reveal this information through portrait photographs, text, links to the blog, and a digital monitor where additional details were available. The personalization and identity was a core element of the project. It served as a foundation in building their story and experience, which continued to develop on the blog, for the duration of exhibition.

Chapter 4: Research

Social Engagement

As a maker I began with a focus on the aesthetic and function of the ceramic vessel. This came with other considerations for the intended use, presentation, and meaning of the work. The vessel is inherently wrapped in the social sphere of human interaction. As a potter there is a natural connection to people and food in making objects for daily use. It could stop there, in the studio, as a place to contemplate the use and function of the vessels in the world.

Yet, I saw more potential in the objects that I was creating than was being realized outside the studio. I began to use my work as a place to investigate the human relationship in connection to food. Stepping outside the comforts of the studio, I began to think about the potential relationships that could form around the vessel. This journey led me to research Relational Aesthetics, Social Practice, and Socially Engaged Art. I looked closely at the work of artists Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jon Rubin, Theaster Gates, Mark Menjivar, and Michael Strand. As I examined Nicolas Bourriaud's book, *Relational Aesthetics*, I was fascinated by an art that could exist as a catalyst in human relationships. Bourriaud (1998, 2002) defines relational art as something that evolves around "the whole of human relations and their social context" (p. 113, p. 160). Claire Bishop (2004) gives a counterargument to relational art questioning the focus on the "relationship

between (people) rather than the object itself” (p. 11). Now my research draws on this historical context including both objects and relationships as equal in my practice.

As an artist I am interested in the relationships that form between people in specific situations surrounding food. Using social impact projects with a small group of people, I work to build community and address issues in our food system through introspective projects. These projects differ from the original definition of Relational Art in that they revolve around the ceramics vessel, an object to be used and contemplated. I am interested in the vessel as a functional object that is used to consume food. In this way, the vessel mediates between the food and the person in the moment of consumption. It also exists beyond the moments of use as a carrier of stories.

As a potter, the object is no longer the end goal but the starting point in which I see a potential relationship, reflection, and story. It is in this observation that I view my work in a different sphere from traditional potters, in which equal consideration is given to the object and the relationship that forms around it. There are three distinct elements that I consider of significance in my work: the vessel, food, and human interaction. These elements are interconnected but I address each in a different way.

There is a long history of the ceramic arts addressing the needs of society through the creation of vessels. With increased technology there is no longer a need for the village potter. Yet, I continue to make handmade vessels because I enjoy making objects and once they are brought into existence they can become a carrier of stories. Through design, surface, and content I use the vessel to convey a message that is not possible with mass-produced dishware. The dishes exist as a relational device of connectivity. My work

comes into existence through my hands, the forming of clay, and the heat of a kiln. This process in making objects is how the conceptual ideas surrounding the projects form.

My work engages participants in the naturally reflective process of observing and recoding what one eats to bring attention to food choices. This human involvement is what distinguishes my work and brings it into the sphere of Social Practice where “artists create forms of living that active communities and advance public awareness of pressing social issues” (Pasternak, 2012, p. 9). I explore food through human interaction with the ceramic vessel, something familiar and recognizable. Bishop (2012) says, “by using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and also at a remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels to participants and to spectators” (p. 45). The intended human interaction takes place in the sharing of meals surrounding the vessel.

I use a blog as a place to record this interaction, food, and story. The audience can access the work in the gallery or through the blog. The blog acts as a platform to bridge the gap between the participant and the viewer. It allows the audience to read the reflections and view pictures from each participant’s meal. During the project the blog served as a community journal developing with time. It will continue to exist long after the completion of the project and become the primary form of documentation.

The blog serves as a place to record the story of use. This story comes after the participant is presented with the cup and develops through time. In a similar regard, in his work *Misfit Cup Liberation*, Michael Strand collected stories surrounding cups. He uses a handmade ceramic cup as a primary object in an exchange: a cup for a cup. The general

public was invited to the gallery to exchange an unwanted cup from their cupboard for a new cup made by the artist. Each Misfit cup in the exchange is recorded with a written story, the parting words that accompanied the cup exchange.

The object stories Michael Strand has collected are stories from the past. I am interested in the future story that is created in such an exchange and how using the ceramic vessel impacts one's future story.

Where does our food come from?

Everyone eats. Eating is part of survival. Food provides nourishment and the act of nourishing one's body is required to live. For most Americans, however our food choices are changing. In the book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* Michael Pollan (2013) writes, "The rise of fast food and the decline in home cooking have also undermined the institution of the shared meal, by encouraging us to eat different things and to eat them on the run and often alone" (p. 8). How and what we eat are now choices. My work brings into question what we eat and what food means.

As a maker of functional vessels, I consider the relationship between the food that people choose to consume, the vessel, and the earth as the place where the food is grown. Where does food come from? How does it arrive on our plates? Was it shipped across the country or produced in the local community?

Industrialized food production and monoculture have made it possible to produce large amounts of food within a small amount of land, thereby increasing yields and decreasing the cost. Industrialized food is generally shipped out for distribution nationally if not globally. This means when one arrives at the grocery store, with an array of

choices, we no longer have a connection to the food as a product of our land. According to the food activist and trained ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan (2002), “More people than ever before in history have absolutely no involvement in producing the foods that sustain them” (p. 26). The majority of the food available at the grocery store is processed and packaged, continuing society’s shift away from whole foods.

I am interested in how contemporary artists are addressing current issues surrounding our food system. Artists Jeff Schmuki, Nichole Howard, and Amy Youngs have each taken a unique perspective in using the creative process to bring attention to food production and consumption. In Schmuki’s (2012) work *Sounds Garden*, he constructed a hydroponic garden within the gallery space. During the exhibition it grew over 35 pounds of chard that he donated to a homeless shelter. Similarly, Nichole Howard’s (2013) master’s thesis exhibition, *Cycle*, was composed of raised garden beds on the gallery floor as well as a small greenhouse. At the reception, she passed out plants and seeds to encourage others to begin gardening. Amy Youngs (2008–2010) work *Farm Fountain* addresses issues of sustainability through an in-home aquaponics system used to simultaneously produce plants and raise fish. Each of the noted artists is bringing attention to issues within the current food system by focusing our perspective on the possibilities of growing and harvesting one’s own food.

What do we eat?

Michael Pollan (2006) dedicates a whole book to answering the question, what should we have for dinner? *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, asserts the pleasures of eating deepen by knowing where food comes from. Following the

food chain from a cornfield in Iowa through processing to a McDonald's drive-thru, Pollan takes a narrative approach to writing about his preparations for the perfect meal. He foraged every ingredient from the environment surrounding his home in Northern California. Attempting to eat in full consciousness, bringing into perspective the challenges of preparing a meal through hunting and gathering.

In his project, *365 Days*, artist Mark Menjivar recorded what he ate for an entire year. His list includes a daily cup of coffee, usually a beer, and his most common meal choice was tacos. The list provides brands including Starbucks, Wendy's, Amy's, Whole Foods, and a few Butterfinger candy bars. He includes portions when he eats less than a whole serving. I observed that each day includes the mention of something processed and when it is processed he includes the brand but does not list the ingredients. When there is no brand listed it typically looks like an ingredient list. For example Day 28 he has a "Chick-fil-A sandwich, fries, coke" and on Day 29 he has a "grilled cheese with green peppers, black olives, lettuce, oil and vinegar, salt and lime chips with water." This leads me to believe that when one considers what basic foods we choose to ingest, we typically prepare the meal for ourselves. When we eat processed foods we lose personal choice in selecting the ingredients. This brings into question what we are eating.

In Menjivar's project, *365 Days*, he usually omits the details regarding where the food he was eating came from. His list included what he ate, but left no reference to where the food came from. In Nabhan's (2002) book, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*, he spends a year eating from what he calls his foodshed, A 220-mile radius from his home in Arizona. Nabhan uses narrative text to

share his process of gathering, growing, preparing, and eating food. On his personal journey, he focuses on the human relationship to food as nourishment and its cultural significance. His quest for food leads him to join together with family, community, and earth for shared meals. In a similar regard, five years later, author Barbra Kingsolver published *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, in which her family stepped away from industrial agriculture for a year of eating purely local food in rural Virginia. Kingsolver points out, “for the first time since our nation’s food was ubiquitously local, the point of origin now matters again to some consumers” (Kingsolver, 2007, p. 17). Her family’s journey to grow, harvest, forage, and prepare meals from scratch was an attempt to reconnect with the earth. She yearns to create a distinct food culture that she defines as an “affinity between people and the land that feeds them” (Kingsolver, 2007, p. 20). Nabhan and Kingsolver offer an unusual perspective of an extreme project in local eating and rediscovery of food culture in their respective areas.

What We Eat From

What we eat and the vessel we eat from have a direct relationship. Sometimes the decision is made for us. When we purchase packaged meals or fast food, it is usually wrapped individually for our ease of consumption. In these examples, personal choice is removed from food preparation because it comes processed and assembled, ready to eat. Removing the steps in preparing food minimizes consideration for how the food is presented and what it is served on. Through my research I have seen the ceramic vessel bring increased awareness to all aspects of eating.

Why do we eat what we eat?

It is no longer a simple decision to decide what to eat. In *Refrigerator*, the work of Mark Menjívar (2014), he makes clear that even though we have an expansive selection of foods available, our choices are related to “not only our personal relationship with food but also the larger society’s relationship to food systems” (p. 64). Today, we live in a country with an abundance of food. What is the value of this food both culturally and nutritionally? As Americans, in the land of plenty, our culture has embraced excessive eating through popular TV shows such as, the Travel Channel’s *Man v. Food*. Our system of food production has dramatically shifted in the last 100 years from whole to refined foods and in turn our eating habits have change with it.

Fast food chains have made eating a simple task. With the advent of the drive-thru, it is now convenient to have a quick meal in the car. Access to fast food, prepared meals, and processed foods has had a direct relationship to the food we choose to consume and how we consume it. As a society, we can now eat at our convenience and we no longer have to plan, gather ingredients, or spend time preparing it. The ease of food access and increased production of processed foods has impacted our relationship to the food we eat, those we share it with, and what we eat it from.

Cooking

The development of cooking created a culture of eating together. Gillian Crowther (2013) suggests that the act of eating and preparing food is linked to our social and cultural identity. As a society we have transitioned from cooking to eating processed foods that have already been prepared into meals. How does this affect our cultural

identity? What value do we assert on the objects that we eat from? Stepping away from preparing and cooking food means we are likely consuming processed foods served in plastic, paper, or Styrofoam packaging. Typically, this means we are not taking time to consider the ingredients, the nutritional content, or what we are eating from. I am interested in how what we eat from has the potential to bring awareness to the food we consume, where it comes from, and with whom we share it. In *Cooked*, Pollan examines how cooking engages us in “social and ecological relationships: with plants and animals, the soil, farmers, our history and culture, and of course the people our cooking nourishes and delights. Cooking, above all, connects us” (2013, n.p.). In this same way, my project uses cooking as a starting point and transitions to personal choice. *Partake Columbus* began with a meal that was shared together as a group. This meal was prepared from all locally sourced ingredients from farms and businesses in Columbus, Ohio. The meal used cooking to bring the participants together surrounding food.

The Table: A Place of Gathering

How does the table function? How does the table effect eating? In Adam Gopnik’s (2011) book, *The Table Comes First*, he says, “the table comes first, before the meal and even before the kitchen where it’s made” (p. 9). The table offers a gathering place for intentional shared eating. It was designed to allow several people to sit facing in toward each other. Gopnik suggests this arrangement of people at the table is the most important aspect of family life because it brings together food and conversation. I use the table in my work as a place of gathering that is naturally conducive to this type of behavior.

For the exhibition component of this project, I decided to include a table in the gallery displaying the sharing set of dishes for two people. The table allows the gallery visitor to see the dishes outside the carrying case and envision them being used to share a meal.

The first meal of *Partake Columbus* used cooking and the table to bring together the group of participants for a shared meal. The table sat eight people in close proximity creating an intimate environment that allowed everyone to see and interact with each other. The final meal was also shared at a table. Each participant was invited to bring a guest and the table was extended to seat fourteen people. The table functioned as a place to eat together where everyone can sit, rest their dishes, and pass food around the perimeter.

Several other tables of importance exist in the project. The tables at the homes of the participants and the tables throughout the city where the dish set traveled and meals were shared. Although all different tables, they all parallel as a place of gathering for shared meals. The primary thread of the project is the intention that is set in using the dishes and the table is supplementary, supporting the meal as it takes place offering a resting place for the bodies and the dishes.

Shared Meals

Everyone eats, but why do we eat together? What does it mean to share a meal? What is the impact of specific dishware? Pollan (2008) believes that eating together and sharing food is an important aspect of culture and community. Eating together, as

explored in *Partake Columbus*, is centrally focused on using a sharing set of dishes as a prompt for shared meals.

Rirkrit Tiravanija (1992) in his work *Untitled (Free)* uses the gallery as a place to gather and eat. As a conceptual artist he creates art through the audience's interaction, using the audience as a medium. Similar to *Partake Columbus*, Tiravanija explores the social experience of eating and sharing meals. In *Untitled (Free)*, he served rice and curry to anyone who visited the gallery and provided tables, chairs, and disposable dishware allowing the visitors to sit and engage with each other in a shared meal experience. In comparison, *Partake Columbus* revolves around a small group of individuals with meals focused around specific dishware.

My research (2013, 2014, 2015) suggests that influential shared eating experiences formulate from intention. Pollan (2008, 2013) believes that to eat with intention one should prepare and eat meals, eat with others, and eat at the table. In eating with intention we learn how to engage in conversation, share, and listen to each other. I am interested in using the ceramic vessel design as a way to set intention in a shared meal. Using the dishes as the starting point, it has become evident through the project that sharing, preparing, and eating from the table have become vital parts of the project. The cultural anthropologist E. N. Anderson (2005) suggests that "eating together means sharing and participating. We evolve as food sharers and feel a natural link between sharing food and being personally close and involved" (p. 125). We ingest food several times a day, but to eat together is an intimate act and gives food the power to bind our social relationships.

Food and Place

Food is connected to place; each region of the world grows and eats specific foods. With increased transportation, food can now travel across continents, yet it is still often bought and eaten locally. Anderson (2005) makes the connection between place, food, and taste, stating, “eating familiar home food is to be home” (p. 130). Foods help us form a sense of place through familiar tastes. *Partake Columbus* is aimed at engaging my local community in Columbus, Ohio, in a meal share focused on place. I am questioning what foods define these people and this place, Columbus, Ohio. I am interested in what we do with the product of agriculture, how we prepare food, and in what context we eat it.

In *Partake Columbus* each participant has a distinct cultural identity linked to place. The food of those places has made its way into the project and further built the identity of each individual. The project also explores the food of Columbus, Ohio. The blog serves as a personal narrative for each participant. Written through a reflective process the blog can be examined in relation to personal, regional, and cultural food choices.

Close to Home, a place-specific work by Lindsay Rogers (2012), explores the meaning of local food and its relationship to the consumer. She was influenced by her work on an organic farm in her community. She created food specific vessels that elevated vegetables to the status of flowers. Rogers has a desire, “to inspire a reconnection with our food.” (p. 6) Her work was influenced by the place she lived, volunteered, and was exhibited in the same city.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As a maker of objects I see my role as a facilitator working in the space between objects and people. In my thesis exhibition, it is in this space that interaction occurs and the intimacy of sharing a meal is presented through written and pictorial narrative on the group blog. The participants take on an active role in developing their story. My role as an artist begins when I initiate a project and open it to outside involvement, when in process my position shifts to that of a collaborator. Over the course of my time at The Ohio State University I expanded my practice to consider the relevance of my work beyond object making. The object is still important but my work now balances between the object and its use.

I have identified several key components within my work: time, objects, and set parameters. I discovered time offered a beginning and an end. With this my projects were able to have a clearly defined start and stop using the days prearranged by the exhibition schedule. The gallery has served as a site for my work to exist and a place to exhibit documentation. Involving people from the community in the creation of my work has allowed it to exist in the world outside of the traditional gallery.

Since my work is largely focused on the experiences that are clearly defined within the structure of my projects. I have found it is essential that I continue to make the objects that are used in my work. Making allows me time to develop the forms, surface,

content, and function. This is a necessary component that provides an avenue to direct focus and through the design I aim to heighten the experience of use. In making, I insert myself in the work through physically creating pieces that offer a specific tactile experience, controlling the content of the work through surface design.

I use a flexible structure to help define the parameters of my project. This structure regulates the daily task, duration, and the objective, yet allows freedom for each individual to develop their own outcome. The project framework required that each participant use the dishes to share a meal at least five days a week for the length of the exhibition. This built flexibility, some people posted everyday, and others as time permitted. I learned from past projects that it is necessary to make my work accessible, by allowing it to work within a manageable structure that allows people to make it a choice.

Partake Columbus developed from my interest in people, place, food, and vessel. I balance these elements bringing people together in a shared place using the vessel and meals to start a dialogue surrounding food. Through my research I have found that food naturally brings people together. I have used this to my advantage in designing projects around shared meals. In using the lives of everyday people as a platform for my work, this allows my work to take shape in multiple ways. The piece exists within daily life, the gallery exhibition, and on the digital blog where it is preserved for the future. This makes my projects not unlike a story; they follow a narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end. The objects serve as markers in the story, a physical reminder. Our current food systems are complex, and my desire with this work is to bring these issues forward

through conversations. In the future, I hope my work continues to expand upon these types of conversations—conversations that have to do with common experiences, reflection, and the creation of community.

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Appendix A: Participants from Columbus, Ohio
- *Location of Portrait*

Dan Hsieh from Old North Columbus

- *Dan selected Old North High School where he took Chinese lessons every weekend of his childhood.*

Ellice Young-Eun Park from New Albany

- *Ellice chose the steps of her home.*

Jed Dearing from Franklinton

- *Jed brought me to a place he eats with the homeless every week.*

Julie Jent from German Village

- *Julie and I went on a walk to Schiller Park with her dog.*

Nina Bressau from Downtown

- *Nina selected the gateway into her apartment complex, which is across the street from the Urban Arts Space.*

Todd Combs from Merion Village

- *Todd sat on the porch outside his apartment because porch living is an important part of his neighborhood.*

Windyn Hines from Clintonville

- *Windyn chose the Glen Echo ravine tunnel with painted colorful birds.*

Appendix B: Food Donations

Ann's Raspberry Farm, Fredericktown, Ohio
Jam

Dan the Baker, Columbus, Ohio
2x Sesame sourdough

Ebans Bakehouse, Grove City, Ohio
Dinner rolls

Gillogly Orchard, Albany, Ohio
Apples

Honey Run Farm, Williamsport, Ohio
Summer Harvest honey

Jorgenson Farms, Westerville, Ohio
Rainbow chard, dried Italian herbs, fresh rosemary, collards, garlic

Kingdom Fish, Rushsylvania, Ohio
Tilapia

Krazy Kraut, Columbus, Ohio
The Original Dill Sauerkraut

Lettuce Work, New Albany, Ohio
Lettuce

Mockingbird Meadows, Marysville, Ohio
Peppermint Tea

Ohio Farm Direct, Fredericktown, Ohio
Grass-fed cheddar cheese

Paint Valley Creamery, Wilmot, Ohio
Milk, cheese

Pleiades Maple, Mount Gilead, Ohio
Pure Ohio maple syrup

Probst Family Farm, Bluffton, Ohio
Chicken

Raven Rocks, Beallsville, Ohio
Eggs

Salad Bar Farms, Baltic, Ohio
Lettuce

Seminary Hill Farm, Delaware, Ohio
Beets, white radishes, purple carrots

Silver Bridge Coffee, Gallipolis, Ohio
Medium Roast Silver Bridge Blend

Sippel Family Farm, Mount Gilead, Ohio
Kokoborego Cheese Headwaters Tomme

Shagbark Seed & Mill, Athens, Ohio
Black Beans

Stone Field Family Farm, Baltimore, Ohio
Hampshire Pork, eggs

Stutzman Farm, Millersburg, Ohio
Quinoa

Sunsational Oil, West Salem, Ohio
Sunflower oil

VanScoy Farms, Ridgeway, Ohio
Lettuce

Wayward Seed Farm, Worthington, Ohio
Blue potatoes, carrots, cabbage, garlic, onions, shallots

Yellowbird Foodshed, Mount Vernon, Ohio
Kale Pesto