

**Itamar Gilboa: Food Chain Project**

Ronit Eden

*Food Chain* Project, Installation: approx. 6,000 sculptures, variable dimensions

"Tuesday—coffee, cereal with milk, a glass of water, two pieces of toast with cheese and salami, Diet Coke, beer, chicken soup, humus, tahini, two slices of bread, seven shots of whiskey, duck with carrots in soy sauce, two glasses of water. Wednesday—a cup of coffee, apple strudel, half a baguette with cheese and sausage, half an apple, a banana, two slices of bread with tahini, some French fries, rice, chicken and nuts in curry sauce, green salad, four glasses of wine, two cups of coffee, four glasses of water, a can of Diet Coke. Thursday—a cup of coffee, apple strudel, cheese and sausage sandwich, three glasses of soda water, two sandwiches with tahini, salami, and vegetables, three quarters of a bottle of red wine, two glasses of water, a cup of coffee, rice, chicken with nuts in curry and green salad, roasted eggplant with tahini, a cup of coffee."

Every day for an entire year, artist Itamar Gilboa kept a log of the food and drinks he consumed. The list does not include descriptions of flavors, colors, and aromas, nor does it indicate where the food was eaten or purchased, but only the dry facts, namely—the items of food he ate each day. A food inventory. Nevertheless, it is a list that accounts for the change the artist's body underwent following his move from Israel to the Netherlands, reflecting his attempt to acquaint himself with local foods, and at the same time, continue eating the food he has been accustomed to his entire life. During that period he developed new tastes and culinary preferences, his eating patterns changed, and with them his daily diet, - and he gained over 12 kg.

The work resulted from Gilboa's curiosity regarding his eating habits. He calculated and found that during that year he regularly consumed approximately 150 different products. He created molds shaped as these products and duplicated them, based on the amounts he consumed from each, thereby producing a visual manifestation of the log: 567 slices of bread, 155 lemons, 123 liters of Diet Coke, etc. The result is the installation *Food Chain*: a supermarket of white sculptures, which are groceries stripped of their labels and branding.

Gilboa has always been inspired by the power of numbers and the influence of science. His works, based on his own experiences living in Israel and in The Netherlands, are the result of thorough research and data collection. The body of work spawned by this research-based approach is consistent yet diverse. The project may also be regarded in the broader context of a movement called the Quantified Self, started in 2007 by the editors of *Wired* magazine, whereby individuals gain insight into their daily activities and experiences by using data collection and other technologies.

*Food Chain* is a 'dry' visual inventory, a matter-of-fact list attesting to an individual, his inclinations and preferences. A similar businesslike inventory, epitomizing the consumerist mindset, is provided by Georges Perec in his novel *Things (Les Choses)*, whose first pages contain a list of furniture and other objects such as tables, houseware, lamps, curtains and carpets, an endless list of objects which turn out to be the protagonists' objects of desire. In fact, it is an inventory of dreams which encapsulates their desires and preferences, illustrating the materialist, consumerist atmosphere in which they live, and determining their current level of happiness as well as the level of happiness to which they aspire. The quantity of clothing or furniture items they purchase will determine their social status which, in turn, will shape their identity and sense of belonging.

In Gilboa's work, as with Perec's protagonists, purchasing indicates predilections and habits, representing the individual's idiosyncrasies as well as common denominators with many others like him. The inventory is a reflection of tastes and passions. In Gilboa's case, these are manifested in the food he consumed, while in Perec's—these are the things obtained by the novel's protagonists.

Artist and viewers alike are well aware, however, that food is not only a supply of protein, carbohydrates, and minerals to the body; it is also associated with cultural and social status. We spend money on food and use it to celebrate; we turn to food to define wealth and class. Food defines belonging and common memories. It is associated with codes of social and cultural conduct. For Gilboa, as for us all, food is an integral part of a personal, familial, and ethnic affiliation, and the meal in our society often functions as a gauge for relationships and intimacy.

In his diet Gilboa combined Dutch dishes typical to his current residence, such as Herring, Croquette, and hard yellow cheese, with others associated with his former country, e.g. Humus and Tahini. Food subconsciously evokes memories and sensations. The aroma of a dish or a single bite may sometimes suffice to spark memories and yearning, as described by Marcel Proust in *Swann's Way*, the first volume of his magnum opus *In Search of Lost Time*, or *Remembrance of Things Past*, when he describes the way in which dipping the madeleine cookie in lime-blossom tea gave him the shivers and filled him with love. That specific combination of tea and biscuit triggered his childhood memories from the town of Combray, and the Sunday mornings when his aunt Léonie used to give him tea and madeleine. Proust filled with love for her through that memory of a flavor from his childhood.

Like the list of objects in Proust's novel, Gilboa's list of foods shows to what extent consumerism is a prime mover in Western society. Food is more industrialized and readily available. It is associated with technological and scientific developments more than with the seasons of the year. Man's relationship with food has transformed from a vital necessity to a shopping experience, from satisfaction of physical needs to satisfaction of social, emotional, and mental needs.

Gilboa's installation takes consumerist culture one step further, as described by Guy Debord in his *Society of the Spectacle*: "The commodity world is thus shown as it really is, for its logic is one with men's estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce."<sup>1</sup> Casting the products in white and stripping them of all labeling and branding focuses attention on the profusion, on the symbols of a sated society, underscoring the fact that this affluence is divided unequally in the world: while people in the West suffer from overweight and large quantities of food go to waste, children and adults in other parts of the world starve. Studies indicate that the number of people suffering from overweight in the Netherlands is 6.5 million, and similar figures apply to other Western countries. According to data of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1.3 billion tons of food are thrown away annually, while 5.6 million children die of starvation each year.

The engagement with hunger on the one hand, and waste and obesity on the other, have been a political concern and a market controlling force for many years.

Programs for improvement and change for both extremes have been regularly raised and ruled out. While politics is primarily a theoretical program for future implementation, art is both the concept and the execution, namely words vs. action. Gilboa's art project has its roots in an older form of conceptual art, Social Sculpture, originally advocated by Joseph Beuys, in which the artist creates work that can help transform society. In Gilboa's installation, each individual part of the installation can be bought separately at the exhibition. Seventy percent of the profits will be donated to NGOs fighting food issues, thereby creating a food chain: "What I ate turned into art, which, when sold, can again become food."

Notes:

1. Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle, trans: Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 26

The two NGO are:

Fairfood International is an international non-profit organization advocating for a sustainable and fair global food system

The Youth Food Movement (YFM) is a youth movement that is committed to a fairer and healthier food system.