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“Art’s Work in the Age of Biotechnology” Response  
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“Eating each other properly requires meeting each other properly...”  
—Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

For many of us, it’s been over a year since we attended a dinner party. The social distancing measures necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19 took away a communal experience so common and foundational to our lives, that of eating together. The [Center for Genomic Gastronomy](#) (CGG) has been exploring the possibilities of such experiences through their work for more than ten years. Founded by Cat Kramer and Zack Denfeld, and later joined by Emma Conley, CGG and their diverse group of artistic collaborators explore the biodiversity and biotechnology of human food systems. Their varied artistic output includes installations, lectures, pop-ups, research publications, and, of course, meals. Some examples include the [Seedomatic](#), a vending machine that promotes agricultural diversity through quick and easy access to seeds and soil; [Cobalt 60 Sauce](#), barbecue sauce featuring radiation-bred ingredients; and [Smog Tasting](#), the use of whipped meringues to capture air quality in a particular location. I encountered CGG’s work several years ago as part of a research project; later, I collaborated with the Pittsburgh-based [Group Against Smog and Pollution](#) (GASP) to make [smog meringues](#) for a [community event](#). I’ve been thinking about CGG’s innovative work ever since.

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The dramatic change in the circumstances around our food consumption during the pandemic—what in theatre we’d call the *mise-en-scène*—revealed characteristics of food and eating usually accepted as second nature. As the pandemic wore on, I found myself thinking more seriously about meals. I’m very fortunate to have been working from home since March 2020, rarely leaving my apartment. The ensuing monotony changed my experience of eating entirely. The repetitive cycle of preparing, consuming, and cleaning up after meals felt

never-ending. If I wasn't cooking one meal, I was planning another. Based on social media, others were having a different experience, as more time at home led to experiments with sourdough starters and whipped coffee. Ingredients that unexpectedly rose to popularity quickly, like bucatini, disappeared from store shelves, and a yeast shortage led to frustration among newly avid bakers.

CGG works operate in a similar way, estranging the materiality of food and the experience of eating to give people pause, prompting questions of where our food comes from, what it is made of, and the implications of its production and consumption for ecologies. Their [Glowing Sushi](#)—made from genetically modified zebrafish—renders transgenic foods visible to eaters. A “Revived Passenger Pigeon” and other [De-extinction Deli](#) dishes highlight the ethical questions around resurrecting extinct species. CGG even jumped on the sourdough train, creating a [Wildfire Loaf](#) using wheat exposed to significant amounts of smoke from wildfires. Through these and other speculative aesthetics, CGG's work playfully uncovers the hidden dimensions of the food we eat, distilling complex systems with many (social, cultural, scientific, political, ethical) moving parts into an artfully plated meal.<sup>1</sup>

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CGG's focus on food also offers opportunities for important discussions about the connections that compose our food systems; few settings lead to better conversations than a good dinner party. While serving as artworks in and of themselves, CGG's creations are designed to spark considerations of (and perhaps changes to) systems which we accept as givens, a sentiment perhaps best encapsulated in the poster hanging in CGG's (digital) [O.F.F.I.C.E.](#): “We Have

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<sup>1</sup> I've written previously about CGG's work in the context of speculative aesthetics. See Shelby Brewster, “Food Futures: Speculative Performance in the Anthropocene,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2017), <https://jadtjournal.org/2017/05/15/food-futures-speculative-performance-in-the-anthropocene/>.

Always Been Bio-hackers.”

Humans have always altered the environment—including their food. From selective breeding techniques to crop rotation to genetic engineering, modifying foodstuffs has a long history. For me, especially in this time of climate upheaval marked by global warming, environmental racism, species extinction, ocean acidification, the inequities of global capitalism, and biodiversity loss, serious consideration about what we’re eating and how it gets to our plates is ethically imperative. As theorist Donna J. Haraway reminds us, “eating each other properly requires meeting each other properly...”<sup>2</sup> By reconceptualizing what and how we eat, CGG creates space for this consideration, so that we might not only eat each other properly but also meet each other properly.

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<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 73.