

ELVIRA FINNIGAN AND LISA WOOD

Cafeteria



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Print on demand publication of the two-part exhibition
Cafeteria: Elvira Finnigan and Lisa Wood
presented at Gallery 1Co3, The University of Winnipeg
from March 2 – April 9, 2016 and March 2 – April 8, 2017

Curated by Jennifer Gibson

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Introduction: Jennifer Gibson
Graphic design: Susan Chafe
Photography: Kevin Bertram, William Eakin and Elvira Finnigan

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Cafeteria would not have been possible without the participation of nearly fifty people from the University community who agreed to be part of the art by eating their lunch in Gallery 1Co3 and allowing their images and leftovers to be made into works by Lisa and Elvira; your contributions are deeply appreciated. The artists and Gallery 1Co3 are also grateful to Diversity Foods for their partnership in this project by providing gift cards for the *Cafeteria* participants and allowing their products to be transformed into art.

Gratitude is also extended to *Cafeteria* installation technicians Glen Johnson and Michael Zajac, University of Winnipeg employees Gil Allard and Harald Weigeldt (Physical Plant) and Bruce Hanks (Centre for Academic Technologies), and Donna Jones of the University of Manitoba School of Art Gallery.

The artists also wish to acknowledge the Manitoba Arts Council for their support of *Cafeteria*.

gallery 1Co3



THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

INTRODUCTION

Gallery 1Co3 is pleased to present this publication to document *Cafeteria*, a series of two exhibitions in which Manitoba artists Elvira Finnigan and Lisa Wood collaborated to explore the culture of the university dining hall. For the last several years, both of these artists have used various media to consider the act of eating together and to question how sharing a meal might be recorded and remembered.

Finnigan and Wood began this project by transforming Gallery 1Co3 into a small replica of the university's cafeteria. They invited members of the campus community to eat lunch in the space on March 2, 2016 and recorded this "relational happening" with photographs. The following day the gallery opened to the public and, for the next five weeks, visitors experienced a process-based exhibition that included the artists' documentation of the lunchtime participants.

For the first exhibition Finnigan used the centre of the gallery as her lab. After the lunch ended, she doused the cafeteria tables, dishes, and leftovers with a salt brine solution which slowly evaporated, preserving the remnants and forming delicate crystals that gradually seeped across table tops and grew out of cups, dishes, plates and upon food scraps. She also photographed this crystallization process and its effects.

The far end of the gallery became Wood's studio where the artist shared the evolution of her figurative practise. Initially she displayed a large selection of photographs of the lunchtime participants arriving, eating, socializing and leaving the "cafeteria". In subsequent weeks Wood installed photo-collages and prints of them and, finally, she added drawings and painted studies of specific individuals.

After the first exhibition closed in April of 2016, the artists went back to their studios to consider and create works for part two. The second exhibition opened exactly one year after the initial lunch event. For this show Wood made three large, double-sided oil paintings of the cafeteria participants, using her previous studies as starting points and taking great care to capture the unique physical features and mannerisms of her subjects in mid-bite and in conversation with one another. These works occupied roughly the same location where the cafeteria tables were once positioned, thus further invoking the memory of the relational happening. Yet in these paintings Wood

uses artistic license to condense time and space, layering her subjects and bringing together individuals who did not necessarily eat with each other. The results are intense views of tables crowded with people who display a myriad of gestures, facial expressions and interactions. Wood's paintings masterfully reflect the hustle and bustle of a cafeteria lunch and suggest the spirited social and intellectual engagement of the campus community.

While Wood employs portraiture to consider cafeteria interactions Finnigan works in still life, using inanimate objects to record and recall the communal dining experience. Finnigan returned selected lunch remains to the gallery, presenting them in entirely new contexts and alluding to notions of expanded time and space. Lunchtime tabletops have been cleared and hung on the walls, the crystallized patterns upon them invoking celestial skies, constellations and deep time. Salted leftovers placed on pedestals resemble archaeological artifacts unearthed from the ground and signal evidence of past civilizations. Her photographs are aptly titled *Pangea*, named after the supercontinent that began to break apart 175 million years ago, thereby reinforcing this concept.

It has been a privilege to work with Elvira Finnigan and Lisa Wood on this project over the last few years; I have deep respect for their unique artistic practices, for their professionalism and for their commitment to engage with one another both collaboratively and individually to create this evocative body of work.

Gallery 1Co3 is also grateful to guest writer Natalia Lebedinskaia for her contribution to this publication. Lebedinskaia has known Finnigan and Wood for several years and presented their art on a number of occasions. Here, she offers a sensitive and insightful text which considers *Cafeteria* in the context of the relatively recent development of "relational aesthetics" and also places it within a larger art historical framework.

In addition I wish to express my appreciation to photographers William Eakin and Kevin Bertram for expertly documenting the artists' work and the first exhibition installation, and to Susan Chafe for developing a striking publication design.

Jennifer Gibson
Director/Curator

Gallery 1Co3, The University of Winnipeg



Elvira Finnigan and Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria* installation

Cafeteria

On March 2, 2016, lunch tables were set up in Gallery 1Co3 at the University of Winnipeg. They were constructed to be identical to the ones at Diversity Foods, the nearby campus cafeteria that provided artists Elvira Finnigan and Lisa Wood with raw materials for collaboration—plates of food, cups, chopsticks, bags of chips, cans of pop—alongside willing students, faculty, and other participants who took up the offer of a free lunch. Inspired by the social microcosm of university eating establishments, *Cafeteria* is a series of two collaborative exhibitions that explores the dynamics of eating together, and questions how the experience of sharing a meal might be recorded and remembered.

A school cafeteria is a space shaped by the necessity of eating quickly, nearby ones' classes, and on a schedule; in popular culture, it has become synonymous with interpersonal politics and the dynamics of social inclusion. At the onset of the project, these were the questions that appealed to Finnigan and Wood: Who will sit together? Who will eat alone? How will they navigate these relationships? The plan was to bring the cafeteria into the gallery space, intact, through invitation to take part in the project in exchange for a meal.

At first glance, the proposition of transplanting the experience of a cafeteria into the gallery space falls neatly into Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of 'relational aesthetics', a term made popular through a text originally published in 1998 as: "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context." The gallery transformed through sharing a meal gives rise to artists as facilitators—rather than makers—and art becomes located within the shared experience of the artists and the viewers. However, in *Cafeteria*, the gathering was the impetus for the creation of the artwork as well as the artwork in itself, and the relations between participants and the artists were shaped by the task of documentation and the promise of future artistic interpretation.

The experience of the meal was shaped by this task; cameras were visibly present and participants had agreed to be photographed. Everyone who ate at Gallery 1Co3 that day knew that they might be painted by Wood, and that their dishes and leftovers would be preserved by Finnigan's salt brine. The gallery became a deliberate gathering space for raw material, a reference-collecting

point that doubled as a festive meal for everyone who took part. The event was a celebration of eating together with the goal of making art.

Image gathering strategies took familiar forms for both artists: Wood and Finnigan set up cameras that documented participants eating through automatic time lapse photographs and video. Finnigan waited for the meal to finish before drenching its remnants with a potent salt brine solution. As Wood organized hundreds (if not thousands) of images for a salon-style print installation at the back of the gallery, Finnigan compiled her video footage for screening on a monitor at the front. Meanwhile, Finnigan's salt brine evaporated, encrusting the leftovers, dishes, and tabletops of the makeshift cafeteria with delicate crystals.

Rather than looking to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, two genres of 17th century Dutch painting emerge as potential ways of approaching Finnigan's and Wood's bodies of work in *Cafeteria*: still life and 'merry company' paintings. The animated and joyful portraits of participants in Wood's work focus on capturing the experience of eating together, of people coming and going, staying for a meal, and transforming the gallery-cafeteria tables into utopian spaces of sharing the intimacy of food with strangers. Finnigan's salt brine intervention, on the other hand, focuses on the aftermath of the meal to preserve its inanimate objects.

'Merry company' became an increasingly popular genre with the rise of the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Brussels 1528-1569), as he began to paint elaborate tableaus of common people enjoying each other's company in the context of inns, brothels, bars, and homes. Still life flourished around the same time. Despite their differences, both genres of painting were utilized as vehicles to convey ideas of morality, class, and death; while the 'merry company' paintings warn of excess through caricature, still life is a reminder of death through visual cues of rotting fruit.

At its core, Finnigan's salt brine work is about mortality. Her crystal-encrusted objects are *memento mori*—reminders of death and ephemerality—much like moths and skulls that often appear in still life paintings to remind the viewer that the abundance in front of them is fleeting. This project appealed to Finnigan because she

was always attracted to the piles of dishes and food that were left behind in cafeterias after a meal. By contrast, in her past projects, she was able to at least partly orchestrate the aesthetics of her salt-encrusted worlds: she chose traditional dishes and foods that she knew (or guessed) would be overtaken by crystals in desirable ways. Finnigan's salt brine method often took these objects outside of markers of our time to create exquisitely beautiful and fragile pieces: delicate bone china cups, ornate silverware, fish skeletons that looked like ancient fossils, wine glasses so overgrown with crystals that they appeared to foam. In the *Cafeteria* project, however, Finnigan had much less control over the utensils and food to be transformed. Instead she had to work with the plastic cups and plates, disposable chopsticks, bags of chips, and sushi trays that Diversity Foods offered its clientele.

As a result, the salted objects do not exist outside of time; they are potent reminders of what remains after we—in our current time and place—take part in a meal. As the memory of sharing a meal fades, it is transferred into fixed objects that are inevitably also fluid and unruly. The remnants are more abject and, as a result, act as potent reminders of what our times will leave behind without embellishment or flourish. Finnigan sees the transcendent in these salt crystal formations: patterns formed on dinner tables take on lives of their own and read as constellations; objects become precious remnants, in spite of their lack of exquisite beauty. The title of a series of still life photographs, *Pangea*, recalls the ancient supercontinent that split apart to create the current land masses, while *Ghost Tables* appear as constellations and moons, drawing parallels between the microcosm of the cafeteria meal and the powerful forces that shift continents and compose the night sky.

Wood's approach to *Cafeteria* was informed by her long-term engagement with themes of celebration, ritual, and food in painting. Through the composition of the three paintings she completed for the second exhibition, she directly referenced the 'merry company' genre. However, Wood's paintings are not about drinking to excess or ridicule of lower classes created for the enjoyment by the wealthy. Their moral message, if there is one, is

not as easily pinned down. Instead, they exist closer to the utopian space created through celebration and food. She presents the gallery-cafeteria as a space of diversity and coexistence across cultures, social divisions, and university hierarchies.

The anonymity of a cafeteria setting is subverted by the attention paid to each participant. Wood studied them through her photographs, spending countless hours with these images of strangers to convey their facial expressions and body language. In the first exhibition, she assembled the photographs to chart who came and went from each table. The result looked like a heartbeat of the meal wrapped around the gallery space, interspersed with a series of individual portraits of participants, mid-bite, at their most raw and vulnerable.

For the second exhibition, Wood constructed a series of three double-sided paintings on mylar, suspended in the gallery space and meant to be walked around as sculptures. Like Finnigan's salt pieces, these are ephemeral objects that challenge the authority of painting and its presumed solid place framed and hung on a wall. They are light, airy, and dreamlike—much like the act of recollection. Their composition too echoes the process of memory, of moving between the overwhelming whole and its individual moments that convey an exact expression, a turn of the body, a hand holding a fork just so.

Suspended in the gallery where the tables stood during the happening event in March of 2016, the tabletops in Wood's paintings fade away with a pale shade of blue. They echo Finnigan's *Ghost Tables*, which hang like multiple inverse moons on the walls around them. Wood's subjects are caught in moments of vulnerability, with mouths ajar, mid-bite, mid-chew, mid-sentence. Finnigan's sculptures and photographs likewise enshrine in salt the frequently discarded, or at least overlooked, elements of a lunch. Together, they question what it means to record and recall the fleeting experience of a meal casually shared with strangers.

Natalia Lebedinskaia



Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Table 3*
Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Table 2*



Lisa Wood, left: *Sidney Eating*
Lisa Wood, right: *Roewan Eating*
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria* installation (detail)

Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Table 3* installation (details)
Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Tables 1, 2, and 3*



Elvira Finnigan, left: *Cafeteria Table 3* (detail)
Elvira Finnigan, right: *Cafeteria Table 2* (detail)
Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Table 1* (detail)

Elvira Finnigan, left: *Cafeteria Table 1* (detail)
Elvira Finnigan, right: *Cafeteria Table 3* (detail)
Elvira Finnigan, *Cafeteria Table 2* (detail)



Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 2, Side 1*
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 2, Side 2*

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 2, Side 2 (detail)*
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 2, Side 2 (detail)*



Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 3, Side 1*
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 3, Side 2*

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 3, Side 1 (detail)*
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 3, Side 2 (detail)*



Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria* (Roewan)
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria* installation

Lisa Wood, *Woman Eating* (detail)
Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria* installation (detail)



Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: pitcher and glasses*

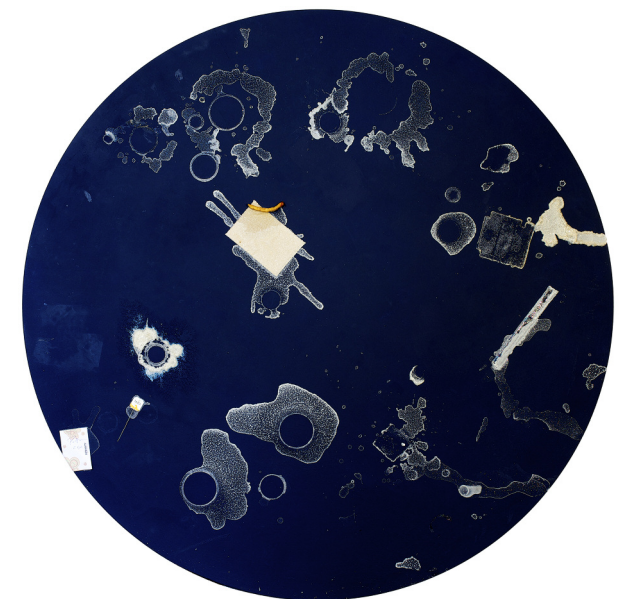
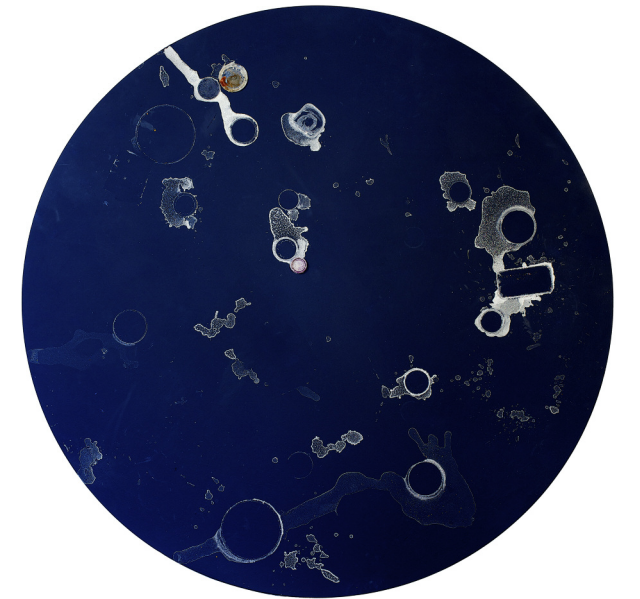
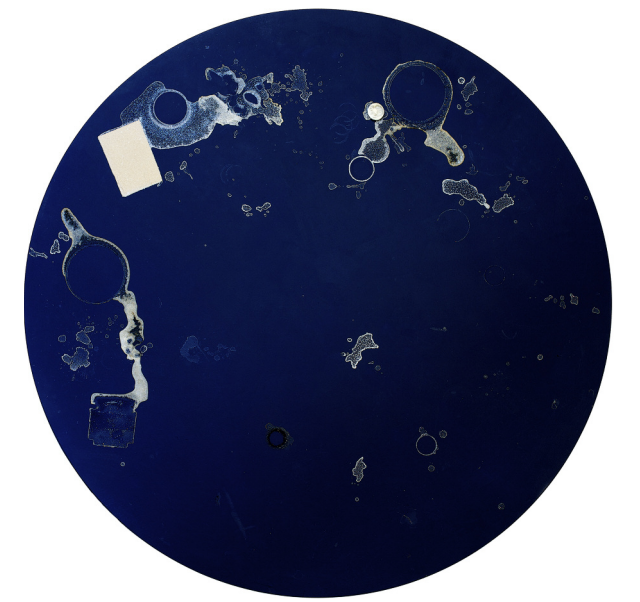
Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: sushi take-out tray, bowl with ball, cup*

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: bowl, chip bag, pop can*

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: 3 plates*



Elvira Finnigan, *Pangea*



Elvira Finnigan
Ghost Table 3
Ghost Table 2
Ghost Table 1

LIST OF WORKS

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: 3 plates*, 2016
cafeteria plates, leftovers, salt crystals, dimensions variable. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: sushi take-out tray, bowl with ball, cup*, 2016
cafeteria ware, leftovers, salt crystals, dimensions variable. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: bowl, chip bag, pop can*, 2016
cafeteria bowls, debris, salt crystals, dimensions variable. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Fragments: pitcher and glasses*, 2016
cafeteria ware, salt crystals, dimensions variable. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Ghost Table 1*, 2016
birch plywood, salt crystals, debris, 60” diameter. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Ghost Table 2*, 2016
birch plywood, salt crystals, debris, 60” diameter. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Ghost Table 3*, 2016
birch plywood, salt crystals, debris, 60” diameter. Photo: William Eakin.

Elvira Finnigan, *Pangea*, 2017
12 iphone images printed on ink-jet printer on archival paper, each 12” x 12”.
Photos: Elvira Finnigan.

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 1*, 2016-2017
oil on mylar, 72” x 36”. Photo: Kevin Bertram.

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 2*, 2016-2017
oil on mylar, 72” x 36”. Photo: Kevin Bertram.

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria, University of Winnipeg, Table 3*, 2016-2017
oil on mylar, 72” x 36”. Photo: Kevin Bertram.

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria*, 2016, installation: colour photographs, 4 photo collages, 4 digital reproductions of photo collages, 4 coloured pencil on mylar drawings, 1 painted study, dimensions variable.
Photos: William Eakin and Lisa Wood.

Lisa Wood, *Sidney Eating*, 2016
coloured pencil on mylar, 11” x 9.5”. Photo: William Eakin.

Lisa Wood, *Roewan Eating*, 2016
coloured pencil on mylar, 10” x 12”. Photo: William Eakin.

Lisa Wood, *Woman Eating*, 2016
coloured pencil on mylar, 11” x 14”. Photo: William Eakin.

Lisa Wood, *Cafeteria (Roewan)*, 2016
photo collage, 4” x 8”. Photo: Lisa Wood.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Elvira Finnigan is a multi-media artist who uses time as a method and salt as a material. Her work employs salt brine crystallization to create poetic installations, video animations, photos and small objects. Elvira’s current work focuses on collective food experiences and the alchemical transformation of the detritus from these events. By dousing the remains of a meal with salt brine and allowing the crystallization process to make the work, she leaves much to chance. The patterns and objects created become the raw material for future exhibitions. Her recent exhibitions include *Reception* (2017) at the Dunlop Gallery in Regina; *Cafeteria 1* (2016) at the University of Winnipeg's Gallery 1Co3 (a collaboration with artist Lisa Wood); and *Salt Trade* (2015) at the RAWalmond pop-up restaurant on the frozen Red River in Winnipeg. Finnigan has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Manitoba. A recipient of numerous grants and awards, she has exhibited her work in Canada, the USA, and Japan. She has also worked extensively as an art educator: teaching teachers in Botswana, Africa, and in the Caribbean; with children and young adults in Winnipeg’s inner city schools; as Director of Studio Programs at the Winnipeg Art Gallery; and as the art educator at the Mattress Factory Art Museum in Pittsburgh.

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Natalia Lebedinskaia is a Manitoba-based curator and writer. She is currently the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba and one of the lead curators for *LandMarks2017*, a series of contemporary art commissions taking place in National Parks and Historic Sites across the country as one of Canada 150 Signature Initiatives. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Art History and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Art History & Studio Art from Concordia University. Her research focuses on negotiations of personal and collective memory within the public sphere.

Lisa Wood is an artist, collaborator, and educator. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Manitoba and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University. Lisa’s figurative-based artistic practice investigates transience and ritual. She has been the recipient of many awards and scholarships and has exhibited her painting and prints nationally and internationally at venues including: Actual Contemporary and Plug In ICA (Winnipeg), The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba (Brandon), and Julie Saul Gallery (New York City). Before moving to Brandon, Manitoba to become Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual and Aboriginal Art at Brandon University, she was an active contributor to the Winnipeg arts scene. Over the span of 15 years, she worked in various roles including: Studio Coordinator at Art City, Director at PLATFORM Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Instructor at the University of Manitoba, and Program Coordinator at Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art.