The Food "Chain:"
The Owned and The Ownership

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Artist Statement

The Food "Chain:"
The Owned and The Ownership

Industrial food production can make one feel ambivalent. Are taste and nutrition at the top of the list, or are convenience and ease of preparation more important? Many of us eat our meals alone, in front of the television or computer, on the way to class, and behind the wheels of our cars. Packaged foods are designed to convince us that our basic nutritional needs will be fulfilled; however, we cannot see what happens on the production lines. How do we determine what is "good" and what is "bad" for us to eat, if we don't know what is really in our food? Food is a basic part of our existence. I show that it is something we should take ownership of and strive to connect with on a personal level.

Acknowledgements

Rebecca and David Vines have been nothing but kind and patient with me. I cannot thank them enough for sharing their lives with me for this project. Their willingness to help in whatever way they could was comforting and a true indication of their passion of continuing their message of sustainable agriculture. Without them I would not have had the chance to learn about the wonderful work they do for our students and community.

My comp board, Darren Miller and Sue Buck, have provided constructive and much needed criticism throughout this entire process. Their thoughts and opinions have not only inspired me, but also transformed the way I saw my work. They are wonderful mentors and I have no idea what I would have done without them.

Meadville Fine Arts mounted my photographs and I would like to thank them for their great and timely service in helping me put the final touch on my photographs.

I would finally like to thank my family and friends for all their support in helping me through my frustrations and triumphs.

There are many societal characteristics that determine our eating habits. Industrialized production conforms food to fit into our fast paced society without focusing on the true importance of food, which is nutrition and replenishment for the body. This representation of our food influences us to be passive consumers. I have experimented with this problem in my past works, and immediately knew I needed to further this study for my senior comprehensive project. However, I wanted to find more perspectives outside of my own to fully understand different factors of our eating habits. With this in mind, I met farmer Rebecca Vines, and her husband David Vines. She is no ordinary farmer of today, and it was on my first visit that I realized her story was one that needed to be told and learned from. She thinks holistically about all the factors that go into growing food environmentally, nutritionally, and socially. I wanted my viewers to learn Rebecca's story, but I knew this was not the only view I needed to explore in order to impact my viewers.

I formulated a comparison between Rebecca's farming and a typical consumer, embodying the dominance of branding and corporate consumption. I followed these two stories to create one experience for the viewer to contemplate and connect to. I feel that the typical consumer photos can captivate the viewer and help them find personal connections, which oppose the photos from the Vines. The qualities Rebecca shares through the photos cannot be admired if there is not a way for the viewer to understand how little consideration they give to their own food and how little they actually think about the food they consume. The choices we make are not our own, but choices of the industrial markets selection on what food is made available to us, regardless of nutritional or environmental concerns. Within this experience my viewers can walk away not

feeling forced, but contemplative of their own habits and how uninvolved they are in their own food and food choices.

By starting this conversation about food, the viewers can gain a personal connection and understanding of our societies' food practices and why they are problematic. Food habits can consist of how we eat, where we eat, and what we eat. If we do not know any of the answers to these behaviors, our role in our own eating is lost. Rebecca helped me to first realize this when I took a bite of one of her fresh tomatoes off the vine. It was sweet and delicious, better then any tomato I have had before. When she asked me to think about the taste in comparison to other tomatoes, I could not remember any taste that compared. She encouraged non-tomato fans to try them, and one look at their doubtful to joyful expressions confirmed their approval. This taste is attributed to Rebecca's sustainable agricultural techniques. She chooses to farm in a way that involves no chemicals or enhancers to make her food production faster or easier. The taste I got from her tomato portrayed an accurate taste versus one that is altered by the chemicals. This type of farming dates back to the roots of agriculture and uses natural amenities and products to grow food, creating a cyclical approach that self sustains.

The first three weeks of my project involved learning exactly what Rebecca does to completely change the way she connects with her food, and how the connection stems deeper than growing food, through involvement with the community. She showed me how attached she is to local organizations that she buys her foods from. Rebecca provides a transportation service for Saegertown bottling company and delivers their water to the Erie Whole Foods Co-op. She started this connection when working for the co-op, which operates on membership of the community. Rebecca buys all her food at

the co-op that she cannot grow. She supports local dairy farmers, Bookamer's Farms, by purchasing milk from them. Her support also affects the students at Allegheny because she occasionally picks up milk for them. This gives the students a chance to have free range cow milk as opposed to highly processed milk they can buy at the store, as well as opening the door for students to connect with another family who is trying to share their sustainable farming techniques. The students can continue to be affected through volunteering on her farm.

These volunteers are not only there to help with regular farm chores, but to learn about the Vines' sustainable agricultural approach. The Vines take time to spend with the kids, teaching them how their own food choices affect their nutrition and environments. The Vines' baked goods at Allegheny's dining hall, McKinley's, also impact the students. These treats are purely organic baked goods, which include food from her farm that the students help to plant. This cyclical approach continues to educate and share the Vines' goals and message, hopefully changing the way people eat and see their food.

In my time spent with Rebecca I learned that her story is significant because it includes multiple ways of impacting all different types of people from Meadville and the surrounding area. Her lifestyle is very scheduled like anyone else, things to do and places to be. We are all busy with our jobs, families, and each of us have our own things to accomplish in a day. Rebecca may have this similarity, but there is something captivating about what she does that does not embody the fast paced world we live in today. She has more similarities with the past ways of doing things than she does with the present. She composts, heats her home with wood, uses the top of the milk to create

homemade butter, uses guard animals for protection of her farm and her chickens, and uses fertilizer and compost to grow her plants naturally. All of these lifestyle choices are a recollection of older ways of living that she has fit into our modern lifestyle. Not only are her connections with the community cyclical, but she also does the same from her lifestyle choices. This is why her story is so important because she thinks about every facet of her lifestyle choices and how each moment affects another.

Considering all these factors about Rebecca and my consumer point of view, several key points of research became important to study; including food history, documentary photography, and artists who focused on activism. The first artist I started studying was Dorothea Lange. Lange was someone who reflected all spectrums of research that needed to be accomplished. She photographed for the Farm Security Act and created images that were thought provoking and insightful to a world in which many Americans did not actively know about. Her work, specifically with the migrant workers in the mid-west, captivated her audience and educated them on the hard labor and lifestyles these people endured. Her images portrayed an educational, documentary, and activist stance, which made Lange important for me to study. I needed to think about the photographic image as a documented piece of evidence, as well as an intriguing photo that made my viewers take a second glance, like I do with Lange's work. She focused on turning the ordinary into the extraordinary, providing contemplation for the viewer.

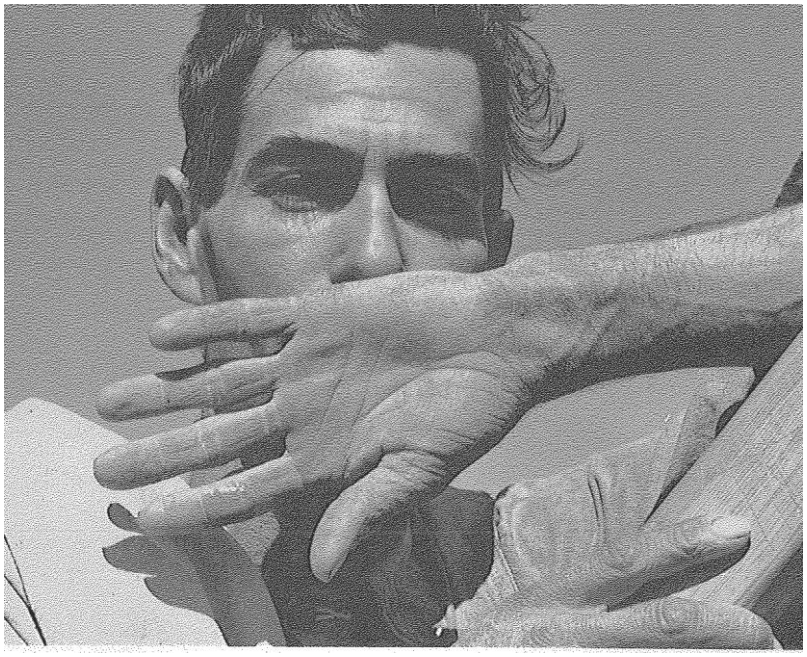


Figure 1
Dorothea Lange, *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona*, 1940, Gelatin Silver Print, 17 3/8 x 22 1/16, The Museum of Modern Art,
Elliot, George P. Introduction on Dorothea Lange. Dorothea Lange. By Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art. Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1966. 6-14

Figure 1 depicts the intricacies of a migrant workers hand. The man's arm lies diagonally across the photograph creating a suggestion of the migrant worker quieting himself, but in a way that makes you wonder why he would be silencing himself when he is alone. The arm's position also gives a detailed view of the hard lines and dirt in his hand from the difficult labor he endures. His look is suggestive to the viewer in a way that would make one feel like he wants to speak about his trials and tribulations as a migrant worker.

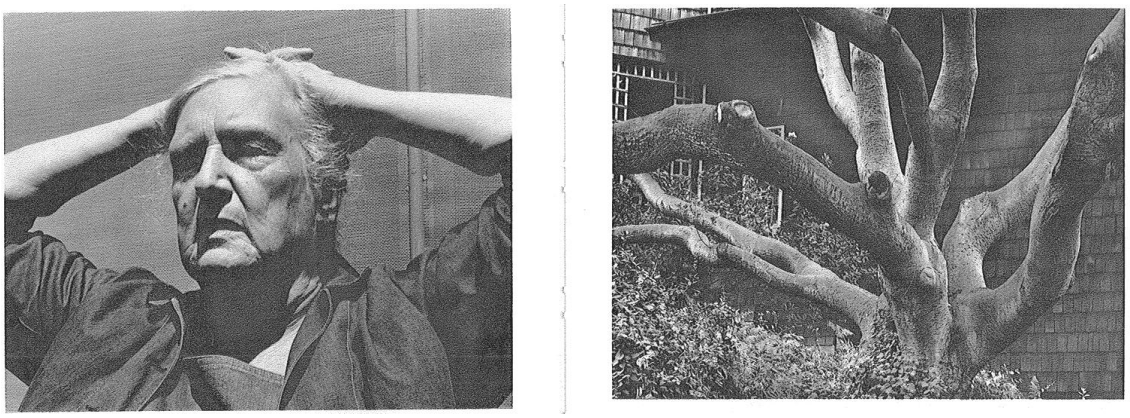


Figure 2
Dorothea Lange, p. 68 and 69,
Left Image: *Rebecca Dixon, Sausalito*, 1954, Gelatin Silver Print, The Museum of Modern Art
Right Image: *Oak, Berkeley*, 1957, Gelatin Silver Print, The Museum of Modern Art
Elliot, George P. Introduction on Dorothea Lange. Dorothea Lange. By Trustees
of The Museum of Modern Art. Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc.1966. 6-14

Figure 2 shows Lange's suggestion of diptych play, which I used later as an influence when thinking about placing my photographs together. The extension of the woman's arms and the tree branches create compositional comparisons and a thought provoking suggestion of permanent positioning of the woman's body like the tree. Her arms extended in a way that seem like she can never relieve them from their upright position, and her work is never finished. Her body's position and facial expression also portray a moment of contemplation and stillness that she might be doing during the middle or end of her day. Lange's composition helps the viewer to create an understanding of the women's feelings, but also her relationship to such an ordinary object as a tree. Her work oversimplifies a person in their ordinary setting, but in such a way that the viewer wonders what Lange is really trying to tell them. I knew Lange spent time formulating an image and really contemplating it before taking it, but in the beginning this was difficult for me.

I started by taking photographs documenting Rebecca's daily life and took notes on her thoughts and processes about food. She shared her schedule and things she does everyday of the week, every week. Her precise schedule made it hard to see what was important and what was not. I took pictures of everything for worry that all was important evidence of Rebecca's life. I was losing the importance of the image. In George P. Elliot's essay on Dorothea Lange, he defined her documentary style as, "context dissolving into vision" (11). This was something that Lange strived for by remembering first and foremost why she was capturing a particular image and what about that image was important. This was a struggle throughout the first few visits with Rebecca because there was so much to cover.



Figure 3
Natalie Curtis, 2-13-12



Figure 4
Natalie Curtis, 1-26-12

Figures 3 and 4 are examples of lighting and compositional problems that I had. However, these pictures were not wasted because I was able to notice a illustration of narration and cyclical characteristic, which later supported the final presentation of my work. It would take time to find out what was necessary to accomplish the story I was trying to tell.

Although Lange's work was beneficial, I needed to find ways to incorporate all the things I was learning into a compositionally intriguing photograph. I felt continually stuck in the idea of forming evidence versus finding a composition to captivate my

audience. Thinking about this confliction and Lange's influences, I realized I needed to know more about food photography and vernacular art. Food photography is my overlying subject, and it made sense for me to discover more artists who used food as their subject. I was struggling with finding what was particularly intriguing about the food I was photographing, and I needed to find that spark again.

I first discovered the work of Peter Menzel and his wife Faith D'Aluisio. They have been doing research on food cultures across the world; "What I Eat" is a book encompassing a full view of the world's varying food culture. The couple studied 80 individuals to find all different viewpoints on food. They looked at different occupations and genders, as well as calorie counting, which proved to be difficult to measure equally among all cultures. Their work was documentary, but also includes intriguing composition because they found unique ways to photograph people in their own natural settings.



Figure 5
Peter Menzel, *Kenya 800 KCals Per Day* (*Noolkisaruni Tarakuai: The Maasai Herder)*, 2010, What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets,
Menzel, Peter, and Faith D'Aluisio. What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets.

Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2010



Figure 6
Peter Menzel, *Great Britian 12300 (Jill McTighe, The Snacker Mom)*, 2010, What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets,
Menzel, Peter, and Faith D'Aluisio. What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets.
Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2010

Figures 5 and 6 encapsulate the compositional techniques of Menzel's documentation of the subjects. He posed all of them with their daily intake of food, but also put them in their natural work environment. This placement creates a natural feeling even though it captures a very posed composition.

This type of work got me thinking about Rebecca and the food she eats and makes. I was capturing her in such a natural environment, but I needed to remember the place I was in was somehow unnatural. It was not normal to be growing vegetables in the middle of the winter. It was uncommon to wash eggs after picking them from the coop and placing them in a carton to eat right away. The process that was happening before my eyes was unusual because they were jobs that think about when we eat our food. I needed to remember that Rebecca had these special characteristics I needed to focus on

photographing them for my viewer. Like Menzel and D'Aluisio, I needed to show the differences in the ways we eat. Our food and the way we eat have a disconnection between the way it is processed, delivered, and purchased. What Rebecca was doing did not encapsulate this typical detachment, bringing to light what is normally secretive and unheard of. I needed to focus on bringing the two perspectives together into a common setting and show how oddly detached they are from one another even though they all encompass our food culture.

I found vernacular art as a good topic to further the ideas that I was finding through Menzel's photographs. Vernacular art covers common occurrences in an unfamiliar way through compositional elements. The way the photograph is produced under vernacular art is through "odd" angles in a way that "distorts" the way we see things everyday (Artdaily.org). The idea of angled arrangement was something I needed to bring to my photographs. Stephen Shore provided the additional compositional elements I was looking for. Shore was a photographer in the 1970s, whose work struck similarities to Dorothea Lange. Both artists found ways to make the viewer take a second look. However, his work focused on other elements of composition that brought out oddities in common space, which all Americans encounter everyday.

In "Uncommon Places," Shore works his way through the 70s on road trips discovering the Midwest. He sets goals to encompass American culture and does so through a view-camera. His large format camera exemplifies the first oddity of his travels. This large camera would have made Shore's presence so obvious and this is the first thing I took into consideration about his project. He chose a camera that put him out there, making him visible for all to see. There was nothing he was trying to hide and

nothing he felt needed to be hidden from his camera. His photographs show a raw reality with no hidden imperfections, including people looking at him oddly for what he was doing in the middle of public streets. The raw qualities of his photo make the viewer feel that they could be in this space as a typical part of their day. He wants to place the viewer right in the middle of the frame, just as he was. The angle he uses is straight on, but the composition he creates is less then straightforward.



Figure 7
Stephen Shore, *Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, August 13, 1974* , 1974, Large-Plate 8x10, Uncommon Places, Aperture Foundation.
Hiller, Andrew, ed. Stephen Shore's Uncommon Places: The Complete Works.
New York: Aperture Inc., 2004.

In Figure 7, he uses all the angles of ordinary cars, parking lines, clouds, and a bridge to repeat a linear patterning creating an odd sense of relationship between all of the objects in the frame. The odd relationship brings out the mundane and repetitive shapes in the everyday view field of someone living in the city. However, the photograph gives them a chance to notice the similarities these objects have and how they create a beautiful scene. They might take notice to the color play in the photograph or the

relationships of blues in the sky, cars, and clouds. His play with composition, color, and familiarity is something I took into consideration when I moved forward with the Vines' photos through trying to find connections in color and similar forms.

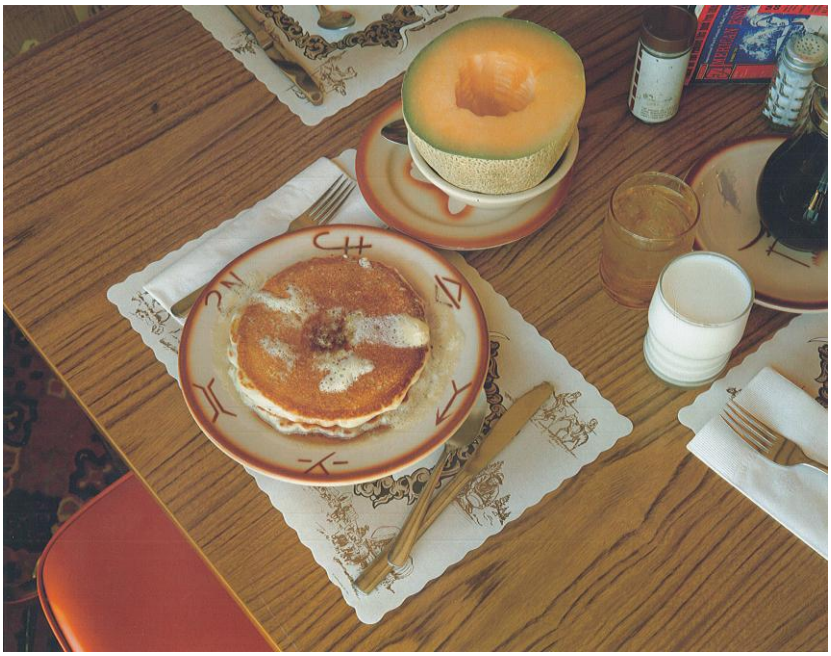


Figure 8
Stephen Shore, *Trail's End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973,* 1973, Large-Plate 8x10, Uncommon Places, Aperture Foundation.
Hiller, Andrew, ed. Stephen Shore's Uncommon Places: The Complete Works.
New York: Aperture Inc., 2004.

Along with these additional compositional elements, Figure 8 intrigued me. I was starting to work on the corporation viewpoint for my piece and I was struggling with accessibility to corporate entities. His photograph was so general including a typical meal along his trip, but I felt strange looking at it. What is really ordinary about a meal at a table anyway if it is in a restaurant? The angle over the plate also helped me to feel these odd emotions about a traditional place setting inside a not so traditional place to eat a formal diner in. I started to wonder about my own meals and the places where I eat. I gave myself a challenge to take photographs of all the meals I ate everyday for thirty

days. This way I could capture the idea of a meal and all the facets that go behind a meal, like convenience and quickness in preparation.



Figure 9
Natalie Curtis, 2-29-12

Figure 9 is an example of the photographs I took during those thirty days, this one including a breakfast meal. I tried to not only focus on incorporation of placement for where I was eating, but to also think about color and angles in the frame. I think Figure 9 is too dark, but I tried to use the color of the carrots and the odd shape of the bag leaning into the plate that is on a slanted angle in the frame to work with Shore's tools I was learning. I think this gives the viewer a different way to look at a meal on a coffee table, an odd place to eat. The angle of the table in the frame provides depth and relates to the angle of the top of the bag.



Figure 10
Stephen Shore, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*, 1975, Uncommon Places, Apeture Foundation.
Hiller, Andrew, ed. Stephen Shore's Uncommon Places: The Complete Works.
New York: Aperture Inc., 2004.



Figure 11
Natalie Curtis, 2-20-12

Shore also helped me to explore with corporate landscape through his photograph in figure 10. I needed to make sure that the exploration with my own food was what I wanted for my corporate viewpoint. My play in figure 11 was a way to incorporate angle and color as well as irony through the placing of signs in the frame. "Get Go" is a direct

play into the convenience of our society and the role branding has in continuing the prominence of it. These photos provided me with good practice to work on angles to pronounce brand names and other food items in my photographs for the food challenge.

As I moved through the next 30 days I felt more in line with my idea. I was actually personally experimenting with the ideas I wanted to argue against. Branding and convenience became dominant in my photographs through the context I was eating in. I started to notice how much I bought into the industrial-driven food society. In conversations I had with others, I realized that no matter how educated I am on our food consumption I will always have struggles with the convenience of products that fill the selves in stores. The daily lives we live are hard to rearrange and the point I was trying to make through this challenge proved to show exactly what it was about. This challenge helped me to see how important it is to find ways to confront the issues we face daily, like branding that reinforces the food qualities of today, like convenience. If no one challenges these ideas they will never change.

Taking the chance to experiment with my own habits helped me to see what I needed my viewer to see. Shore provided this idea, but Menzel and D'Alusio reinforced it through the food culture I learned about in their book. As I moved into my mid-semester review I started to think more about what I was learning from photographing my food and how that related to the place settings Menzel and D'Alusio were creating. I started to think about the purpose of a place setting especially since modern day food culture's place setting includes computers, TV's, and cars. It was interesting to me that the traditional values I talked about earlier were becoming even more prominent when working on the photos I was taking of my food. There was nothing in these photos that

resembled the past values of our food culture. Even though new ways of doing things are good, the traditional values that the Vines' live on focus on the community and togetherness that a traditional place setting represented. Place settings were for guests and time to share together as a family or community. We are so busy today that the company during our meals is electronic objects.

My project ideas started to shift, and I needed to start thinking about how these ideas connected and how I could put them into a cohesive piece. With the place settings and differentiation between the past and the present, I thought it would be interesting to formulate a scene for my viewers to place themselves in. I wanted to put them into the past with a juxtaposition of the present to see how disjointed we are from the original meaning of a meal and how today's meal offers little room not only for nutrition, but to also grow in a community of people

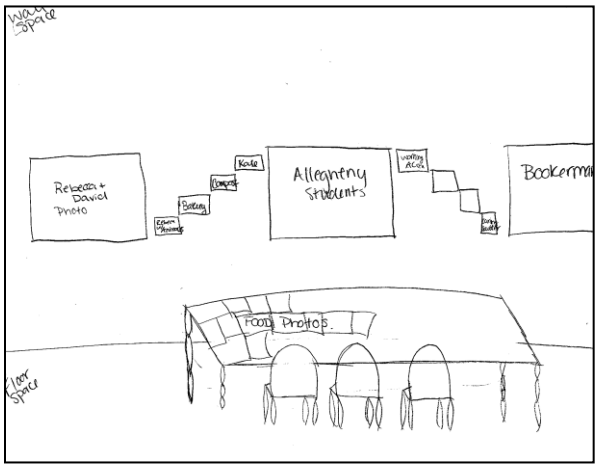


Figure 12

Natalie Curtis, Sketch, 3-3-12

I wanted to create a dining room for my viewers to walk through, sketched in figure 12. With a physical table present to create the juxtaposition, I wanted the photos I was taking of my food to be transferred or mounted onto the table in some way. This would hopefully provoke a contrast for the viewer and indicate an idea of a new "dining room table" that does not include any place settings for people, but instead for objects. To enhance the scene, I would place the Vines' photos on the wall almost in a set-up similar to a family collage of photographs on a wall in a house. This would hopefully further the connection of tradition because the photos would resemble traditional forms of agriculture, like hoeing and planting seeds without machinery. The photographs of Rebecca would provide the connection of people and food with Allegheny students and at the Bookamer's getting milk. I felt that this idea created the traditional composition I was aiming to reflect in my photographs, but I was losing the connection that my viewers would have to the photographs of my food.

I was asked in my mid-semester review if it was the setting or the food I wanted my viewers to care about. Other solutions were brought up that went back to my original idea of contrasting the Vines and corporate food that helped the viewer to see disconnections. This scene I wanted to create did not support my idea as well as I had hoped, and it was clear I needed to rethink what I really wanted to focus on in assembling the final display for my work. I looked back at some of the artists I had studied and started to think about the different ways they displayed their work. I looked at the diptych by Dorothea Lange, figure 2, for its compositional similarities, which I then used when I played with image placement. However, this still did not solve my problem of helping me figure out what I wanted the photographs to say to my viewers. The

photographs I put together may have focused on compositional similarities, but there was no other connection between the two objects, and I did not have enough photographs from each side that made sense together. The two perspectives, the Vines and corporate food, needed to be separate, telling their own individual stories.

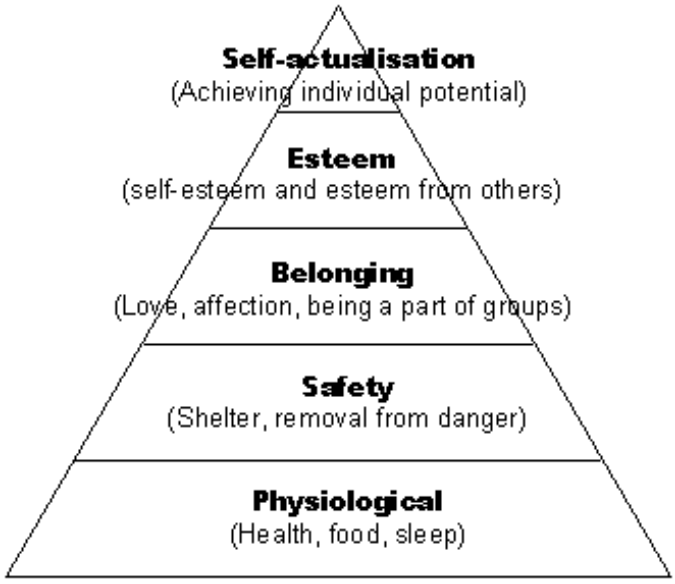


Figure 13
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 2011
Tay, L., and E. Diener. "Maslow's Hierarchy." *Changing Minds and Persuasion*. ChangingMinds.org, 2011. Web. 9 Apr. 2012. <http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/maslow.htm>.

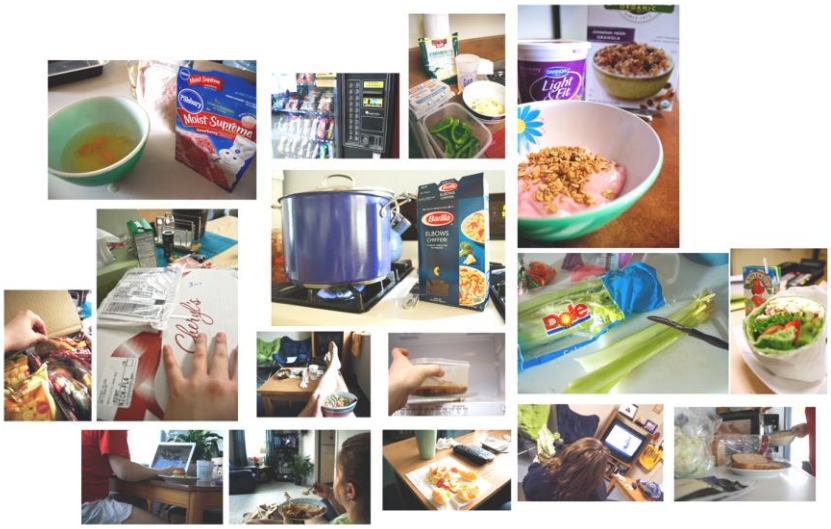


Figure 14
Natalie Curtis

Sketch of final, The Owned, 4-6-12

In trying to forcefully place these images together I realized the ideas I wanted to really focus. Each side had a story, and this seemed to be what I needed to evaluate in order to formulate a final display for my project. The photographs I had taken of my food had only one person in them or even just a limb of a person. There was nothing personal or social about the photographs. This was exactly what I wanted my viewers to notice. The disconnect of food to people is what I felt so strongly about in the beginning, and I needed to make that clear through a collection of my photographs placed together. The only way they seemed to be significant was through a collection of them. I enlarged the photographs, which focused on branding and put them in an arrangement that reminded me of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, figure 13. Instead of our personal and social connections being at the top of the arrangement, brands and convenience were placed up high while our basic needs for nutrition is at the bottom as seen in figure 14. I placed all the images where I was actually eating at the bottom because I was accomplishing the basic needs of eating but not the needs of social interaction, which are accomplished in the Vines' photographs. The brands and corporate slogans replace the higher needs of social interaction and belonging because the brands use slogans that share ideals of belonging, like "Light and Fit" yogurt promoting being slim as a way to fit in with societal norms.



Figure 15
Natalie Curtis
Photo from collection, The Ownership, 4-8-12

I also needed to work on this for my collection of the Vines photographs. I needed to remember the cyclical story that I found so fascinating about Rebecca. I needed to find a way to show this connection, so I chose a circular display, which includes several sizes to focus the viewer's attention, but to also create focal points of important moments in these events. In figure 15 Rebecca is seen conversing with a student at a Sunday volunteering event, showing Rebecca's relationship with the group of students that come to help, as well as showing her joy in spending time with the students.



Figure 16
Peter Menzel
Left to Right (No Formal Names) A McDonald's restaurant sign in Shibuya district, Tokyo. A table at a food court inside the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. The snack aisle of Food City grocery store in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Curtis Newcomer eats an MRE (Meals, Ready to Eat) ration during training at Fort Irwin in the Mojave Desert, California. A Jumbo Corn Dog stand at Napa Town and Country Fair in Napa, California, 2010, What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets,
Menzel, Peter, and Faith D'Aluisio. What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets.
Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2010

Figure 16 is a collection of photographs Menzel took for an article from their book, "The End of Cooking," written by Michael Pollen. The article and this collection of photographs also helped me to remember what I wanted Rebecca's photographs to tell the viewer a story. I felt the best way to accomplish this was through a circular display.

Now that I knew exactly how I wanted to look at my photos I needed to figure out how they worked together. I thought about the two stories and the disconnection they have with each other. Although they both exist within our world they no longer are associated together. Still, I wanted my viewers to learn from my work, so I needed to find a way to put the two collections' ideas together. Having them face each other would emerge the viewer into the two experiences at the same time, putting the viewer in the middle of the conversation to hopefully have them reflect how they felt personally about each piece individually and then together. Farming and production have a lost connection in our society, and putting them back together in a format that produced conversation for the viewer to explore seemed to make the most sense. In this set-up, I would not be forcing my opinions on food, I would be starting a conversation for the viewer to contemplate their own views, formulate connections, and produce questions of concern on things that did not connect. Although the gallery did not offer the ability for the collections to face across from each other, the corner angle works to my advantage to submerge the viewer into a corner. The viewer can feel part of the piece and really take in an easier angle to compare these contrasting ideas, and hopefully feel motivated to ask questions about their food.

In today's industrialized economy major, brands and public relations tools rule the outlook we have on our food perceptions. Unlike David and Rebecca, we cannot

pinpoint on a map where our food is from. We can only know what brand produced it. Branding has become our reasoning for choosing the foods we buy in the grocery store. These brands provide an economy boast, but they are hiding much more from us. In my semesters work on this project, I have learned so much about “sustainably grown” food from Rebecca, and I hope that I can shed light on this journey and the impression it has left on my viewers and me.

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