

KRISTOFFER ARDEÑA

Translating Soy Sauce
(Nuevas recetas ibéricas)

CENTRO DE ARTE
DOS DE MAYO



La Suma de Todos



CONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA Y TURISMO

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**CENTRO DE ARTE
DOS DE MAYO**



'TRANSLATING SOY SAUCE', A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

'Translating Soy Sauce' is a multidisciplinary fun project, that, as the title suggests, focuses on the soy sauce and make use of different modes of reception that are linked to each other.

1) AS AN INTIMATE EXPERIENCE:

> A core group of about 30 homemakers (women between 40 – 65 years old) were each given a bottle of soy sauce and a tupperware with the challenge of incorporating the ingredient and inventing a new Iberian recipe. Designed as a work-in-progress, it is a series of informal meetings, discussions, food tasting sessions, lectures, one-on-one encounters that took place in the cafeteria of the museum.

> Each participant wrote 4 short stories relating to their first encounter with the soy sauce, their desire to participate in this culinary experiment and finally the recipe they invented.

> Each one was also given a disposable camera where they could take photographs of the whole creative process. This allowed the project to extend into the domestic sphere and into each person's intimate social network.

2) AS A COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE:

> A literary workshop called Cocinar con palabras (cooking with words) was created for people of different age levels. Just like the homemakers, each participant was asked to write a series of short stories relating to their experience and interaction with the soy sauce. The goal was to cook with soy sauce using only paper and pen resulting in recipes that were highly imaginative and innovative.

> A block party Tupperware Fiesta was organized at the cafeteria of the museum wherein the homemakers brought the food they invented in tupperwares. The participants in the literary workshop shared with everybody about how their culinary experience in cooking with soy sauce using words. Friends, family and the public in general were invited to partake in the experience of Translating Soy Sauce, thus expanding the notion of the activity from an intimate encounter into a dynamic community endeavour.

3) AS A VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE:

> Another format in which it took shape was through the blog we created: . This served as a vehicle by which we attempted to reach out beyond the geographical limits of the project giving Internet visitors a chance to participate. They could send their comments or suggestions and culinary experiments via email: .

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4) AS A SERIES OF STILL IMAGES:

> Working consciously to achieve a vernacular aesthetics, a series of photographs were created: the ones taken by the homemakers using disposable 35mm cameras and the ones documenting the activities.

5) AS A SERIES OF MOVING IMAGES:

> The activities were documented through video in a totally amateur way. Whether it consisted of out-of-focused images or excessive camera movement or even the low quality of the resolution, the aim was to give a "homemade" sensation.

I believe in exploring the aesthetics used in the vernacular use of technology, much like the videos found in , mobile phone videos, family travel videos, etc. that characterizes how people without any technical knowledge of the medium, is able to intrinsically express something that is artistically innate and personal.

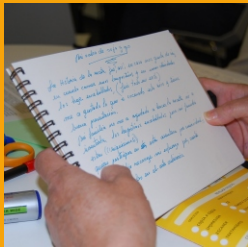
6) AS AN INTERACTIVE APPROPRIATED SPACE:

> In this project, the cafeteria of the museum was converted into an art installation. Different materials and other media were used to modify the way the space was experienced. The project appropriated elements often found in this type of social spaces (menus, table napkins, TV monitor, framed images, etc.).

> A huge 3x5 meter collage covered the huge window pane of the museum's cafeteria. Photos, texts, paper cutouts and drawings made by everyone involved in the project.

7) AS A RECIPE BOOK:

> Finally, an artist book was published in the form of a recipe book that contained the recipes created by the participants of the project.



Interview with Kristoffer Ardeña

TRANSLATING SOY SAUCE: AN ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Why use soy sauce instead of some other exotic ingredient? What role and importance does it play in this project?

Is the soy sauce really an exotic commodity in Spain? Are Filipino culinary ingredients exotic? How does someone define the exotic? In Madrid alone, there are more than 40 types and brands of soy sauces sold in Asian markets and in big chain supermarkets like Carrefour, Mercadona or Hipermercado del Corte Ingles. It is easily accessible and inexpensive. If you think of the translation of exoticism as something strange or unusual, then we can consider the soy sauce as part of a commodified discourse of cultural marginality. The aim of this project is not to de-exoticise the soy sauce. This post-colonial imperative of domesticating the other (be it foreign people, objects and other cultural manifestations) is not my concern because it does not allow close contact and foment an interpersonal relationship with the other. The problem is, even though it's within arm's reach, people do not make an effort to experiment with it. This lack of enthusiasm is also apparent in local cultural manifestations. By defining something as exotic, one is already distancing his self from it. If one claims the other as exotic, one has prejudices towards it. So, one should confront the soy sauce or anything unfamiliar with the same cognizance as a kid learning to ride a bike.

In this project I use it as an iconic representation of self. It is a metaphor that expresses the vernacularity of displacement as an experience of being in an alter-space. It is a symbol that explores the construction of an identity nurtured by cultural displacement. In this project it is seen as a component of material culture, the vehicle by which habits, encounters, relationships, actions, food, objects, language and other referential characteristics peculiar to a community are manifested. In lieu, it is an agent for continued debate and critical response in rendering the invisible visible through one's personal interaction with the soy sauce. It is a heterogeneous response to an inquiry produced by the issue of social integration first as an intimate process, then as a dynamic community endeavor. This context plays a vital role in understanding the development and importance of the soy sauce.

Coming from the Philippines, has there been a fusion between local and Spanish culinary culture? Has this transcended into the social sphere?

As a Filipino living in Spain, I am often asked standard questions related to my place of origin such as "So what kind of food do you eat in the Philippines?" I only need to point out to the leche flan, the chorizo, the guisado, the embutido or other Spanish culinary variants within my

reach at the moment of responding. I always detect a degree of disbelief. How could these traditional Spanish ingredients or dishes be anything other than Spanish?

Let me start from an abstract vantage point... globalization has taken form in different historical manifestations. Its impetus has always been economic driven. Long before the Philippine archipelago was named after Philip II of Spain, trade between Arabs, Chinese, Malays, Indians was fundamental in the development of its pre-Hispanic culture. Magellan's arrival in 1521 was driven by the need to search for an alternative spice route. Eventually, in 1565 – 1898, Spain colonized the country. Hence after, Americans made it a commonwealth and in WWII, Japan invaded it. So, you see, the Philippines, in effect, its material culture has been molded by globalization for centuries. Thus, there has been a fusion in culinary cultures, not only between the local and the Spanish, but also between other cultures.

This culinary fusion has seeped into the social sphere in the Philippines. After centuries of Spanish colonization, it is inevitable. Although, it is important to note that this has not always been a dynamic process because there were times wherein it was done through coerced assimilation. Then again, the local Filipino culture was able to mend conditions of social fragmentation, polarization and exclusion.

Your project is geared towards experimenting with the creative process by introducing an ingredient derived from an immigrant culture. How did the idea come about?

The idea of developing the project around the soy sauce came about naturally. I love to cook and I use soy sauce a lot. Hmm, the next challenge would probably be using ginger... Translating Ginger. Can you imagine what would come out of it? The task was to find a mundane cultural agent that would fit into the dynamic of the project.

However mentioning the term "immigrant culture", I would rather subscribe to the idea of cultural displacement. Contemporary immigration is a very complex politicized phenomenon that is often directed towards citizens of a country from a weaker economy. In Spain, this term inmigrante is often referred to people coming from China, Latin America, Romania, Marocco, the Philippines who see Spain as a means to an end. On the contrary, citizens from the UK and other Central European countries, North Americans, even Japanese are considered guiri. It is the term used for people who

are attracted to Spain for almost the opposite reasons as the in-migrant. Till recently Spain was an emigrant country itself. Even locally, it has a high internal migratory flow, for example, people from Andalusia migrated to Barcelona. Even Móstoles has a high Andalusian immigrant population.

Young Spanish people tend to emigrate to bigger urban centers. By using the term displacement, we take into consideration both local and foreign cultural experiences without imposing political prejudice enabling everybody to empathize with the goal of this artistic endeavor.

Your project is directed towards the local community, specifically the participation of homemakers (amas de casa) in Móstoles. Why do you value their contribution? Creating the project with them in mind, don't you think their behavior and reaction conditioned their response?

It was my intention from the start to involve homemakers in this project. I am collaborating with 30 (between 40 – 65 years old) from Móstoles. 20 of which brought food to the fiesta. I prefer to use the term homemaker instead of housewife referring to the person primarily responsible of managing the family household. I personally believe that homemaking is a task that should not concern gender roles nor societal conditioning, but a personal choice. However, this role is predominantly held by women called *amas de casa*. Sadly, the homemaker's artistic and social contribution is often ignored. Without getting into classificatory dispute over the nature, the meaning nor the value of art, let me consider art as an experience intrinsic to everyone. It manifest itself in the most banal of human activity. That is why, in collaborating with homemakers in realizing this project, I wanted to create a link between a common household activity such as cooking and art practice. This project is very successful because the participants have placed a lot of effort in it. Take for example Laura's recipe *Pastel de Móstoles*, I mean who could think of making a dessert out of soy sauce. Carmen combined soy sauce, beer and quail eggs. Paquita liked it so much that she made about 5 recipes. Can you imagine a dish made with *rabo de toro* (bull's tail) and soy sauce? Well, in the Tupperware Fiesta you had a chance to try it. The idea is to push the definition of art beyond its quasi-professional use and to create an opportunity for this sector to engage directly in contemporary art practice. This opens up the spectrum to a wider public. In this endeavor, the homemakers, the project team, and I become collaborators. The dicotomy between the active artist and the passive spectator mutates into an active component. You become part of the work when you immerse in the experience. Aside from the homemakers, through the literary workshop *Cocinar con palabras* the activity expands its scope to a diverse public belonging

to a wider social profile. Creating a blog and allowing people to send in commentaries, suggestions and participate in sending their recipes via email.

So, at what level of social integration do you think Spain finds itself in today? Do you think that your project mirrors this situation?

Puff, I really do not know at what level of social integration Spain finds itself today. I get the feeling that I should know more about it because I am doing this project but my response is highly subjective and will never legitimize the discourse. Instead, hmmm, let me tell you an anecdote about how this topic affects me: Last Friday around midnight I was walking around the supposedly "multi-ethnic" neighborhood of Lavapiés in Madrid on the gentrified street of Argumosa and a group of *modernitos*, a Spanish urban tribe that consider themselves hip, cultured, open-minded and trendy, were laughing out loud and shouted at me "Chino, chino, chino!"

I believe artists should not be to asked to do social regeneration projects. Artists are not social workers. Artists may appropriate methodological strategies from ethnology, sociology, anthropology and other fields of study, but have to be vigilantly auto-reflexive in their role. This project is not an alternative solution to social integration dilemmas. I think, this project coincided with the cultural policy of the local authorities in their pursuit to foment social integration. So, by all means, a project like this should be used for that purpose.

My thematic leanings do not directly concern the socio-political. In *Translating Soy Sauce*, it obviously tackles the topic because it affects me directly. I have socio-political concerns just like anybody else. There are a number of artists who deal with socio-political themes in Spain. The problem I when the artwork stagnates within the rhetoric and only serves to justify the social consciousness of the bourgeois that, in the end, becomes useless (Although I have to admit that when the work ends up in an art space, it is visually delicious, at times spectacular). Nobody is really apolitical, but in my projects, when I explore this as a theme, I take an autobiographical approach.

I am a Filipino living in Spain who is forthrightly experiencing the disparities of social integration and reflecting upon it. My sense of belongingness, how I become part of this new country is not based on heritage but as a result of a lived-in process and the social relationships I develop in my community. Cultural displacement is a domestic experience, a heterotopic space wherein both cultures clash and interchange. That is also why this project is relevant, because aside from the series of group activities, each homemaker continues this challenge and expands the dynamics of this project precisely in their home environment where their family gets involved.

There is a tendency for contemporary artists to focus their practice on themes instead of investigating formal art structures. I mean, let's face it, art today is diverse

and plural. No more art movements to belong to. So, to differentiate yourself, its better to pick a theme and exploit it. I like to move from one theme to another. This project might be about social praxis but in the future I might tackle a theme that deals with pleasure and sex. So who knows which direction I might take.

What is the link between the project, the museum Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo and Móstoles? Why did Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo commission 'Translating Soy Sauce'? Can you please talk about the specificity of the context?

I have to admit that I was very excited when I was approached to create this project for the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo. I think Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo is in a unique and privileged position as an art institution. As a site of critique and critical cultural reflection its context within which it is located conditions its purpose and not the other way around. In this manner, it expands its spaces and opens itself up to the popular and making it accesible. Unlike, its high profile counterparts located in the city center which attracts tourists and the usual art public, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo not only attracts the local public, but most importantly, has the advantage of tapping directly into it as



an artistic resource. Móstoles has a very high index of community-oriented activities and participation. Thus, the participants were able to investigate ways in which the project could develop. This is why Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo and Translating Soy Sauce work together.

The fact that the Móstoles has a long history of community participation, the challenge was to create a project that was conscious of this and go beyond it. I wanted to go indepth and experiment with popular cultural strategies geared towards social intergration. How? One popular method done to sensibelize the local population to the influx of immigrants are workshops wherein they present their culture through music, dance or food (Imagine a thematic Filipino Fiesta Night and I'd have to dance or sing an "authentic and traditional" Filipino song and I'd have a Spanish audience). The goal was to inverse this sensibilization process. This precept served as the artistic strategy and the soy sauce the agent of engagement. Instead of a Filipino presenting himself as "exotic and authentic" why not convert the spectator into a participant? Let's think of it like this... instead of showing a kid how a bike is ridden, show him how to ride it, right?

The next challenge was creating a public art intervention that would allow intimate dialogue to be acted out within the framework of the strategy and the agent used in this project. I wanted to avoid the pitfall of community-oriented public artworks that target collective social groups and have collective social goals that are never really achieved leaving only false consciousness. This project is not geared towards micro-utopia. This project does not pretend to solve the problem of social integration. This project allows individuals to create an aesthetic response to the strategy and the agent employed. This is evident in the short stories each participant wrote, in the recipes they invented and in the photos they took. So, even though it seems like this is another community-oriented artwork, if one really analyzes its intricacies, the project is really a cluster of individual artworks / performances that later on is redistributed as shared experiences.

You have talked about the context, what about the specificity of the site, what is its relevance to Translating Soy Sauce?

All three complement each other. The project was conceived for the museum in relation to the neighborhood of Móstoles. Ultimately, the site shapes the idea of the project. It grows roots in relation to the place where it is developed. It is clear that here I opt to generate an integrated approach as to how the site was intervened. In Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo the cafeteria, a social space construted around the concept of food, was the natural the choice for holding project-related activities like the block party called Tupperware Fiesta and converting it into a workshop space. The physical space was even intervened using elements that recall accesories that are in use in cafeteria spaces in Madrid. The project also expanded into the intimate space of each homemaker's home environment and made the project a private interactive performance of their own. Hmm, you really cannot separate the site from the context. Besides I am not worried about the dialectics of site specificity (much like the issue of medium specificity). The project whether you like it or not, becomes site specific because of the uniqueness of its reception.

What other factors stand out in the process of making this project? Have you encountered hindrances along the way?

The compexity of the project offers a wide variety of factors to consider. It would be impossible to discuss each one in depth. The problems that came up had to do with the production process. If it all seems to go smoothly, something is wrong with it. Problems are vital. They allow the work to be constantly accessed. Contingency is very important in creating interdisciplinary projects. I think it is very exciting to work with the unpredictable.

Is Translating Soy Sauce part of a wider project or series? What similar activities have you realized to date?

This project is not part of a series or a wider project, although, as I had mentioned earlier, I would be interested in experimenting with ginger instead of soy sauce. If we think of food as the focus of similitude, I have done a few projects along the lines. I am often asked why I work with food. It's a fun activity that everybody can relate to. If you do not like to cook, you certainly enjoy eating, right? I actually started my food projects in 2006 while on an art residency at the



Spanish Academy in Rome. The whole idea would not have started if it weren't for Mercedes Cebrian. She is a writer and a journalist. We share the same fondness for food and in Rome we'd have endless discussions about it. So, it was just a matter of time before it would transcend into an artistic medium. Besides, being Filipino, food is a social activity. This is something that is also apparent in Spanish culture, anything related to food becomes as social interaction. That is also why this project fits very well into the context in which it is played out. Food is a malleable vehicle that is fundamental in any culture. It is a neutral material that is always in constant evolution, depending on the context in which it is used. This project explores the significance of food and the role it plays in the construction of identity.

Here are three other food related projects I've done:

1) The earliest one is called Hapunan (means supper in Filipino). In this intervention Spanish residents in Rome were invited for dinner and were lead to believe that authentic Filipino food would be served. Instead they ate Thai, Japanese and Indonesian dishes and drank Chinese jasmine tea.

An actor was hired to reveal the complot by distributing theater brochures that explained the whole fiasco and how the public unknowingly converted themselves as the actors without knowing it, making the intervention a theater play.

2) In Monumentos Comestibles (Edible Monuments) a street fiesta with music and a food stall was installed in a plaza. Beer and other refreshments were sold and in return free tapas were served. Instead of the typical Spanish tapa like Spanish omelette and ham, olives, etc. they were substituted by 5 recipes from foreigners coming from different geographical background living in Madrid. Food becomes a homage to the unknown culturally displaced individual.

3) The most recent project, Homeland: Rice Mapping, a Spanish topographical map was created on a platform in

the supermarket Carrefour in the mall Gallerie Feeria in Bucharest to express the tension between homeland (origin) and hostland (destination). The rice was then given for free and the map slowly disappeared.

You had mentioned that your food projects started in Rome when you met Mercedes, how did you start making public interventions or multi-disciplinary projects in general? Are you inspired by another artist or an artistic tendency?

After finishing my formal fine arts studies in the US I realized that what I had learned was inadequate. It was too narrow. Learning all these classical modes of practice and Western art history imposed on me and left me with a lot of questions. Just like everything else, art is a power struggle based on a hierarchical structure. It felt like I had to adapt to the mainstream and culturally dominant way of thought. This problematic scheme leads to cultural hegemony. Basing my art practice on this paradigm was not enough. I wanted to find artistic references within Filipino cultural practice itself but without negating Western modes of practice. I am interested in negotiating with both types of approach. I started exploring the vernacular artistic manifestations in the mundane and in complex intricacies of art as manifold experience and not as a contemplative aesthetic exercise. These constituencies are pivotal in creating debates that would lead to new dialectics. Then again, who is interested in seeing this alternative position? Artistic undertakings are almost exclusively analyzed, critiqued by Western discourse and eventually succumb to it. The discrepancy is to become a new -ism (albeit japonism or orientalism). Then again, let's not get into this discussion right now. Besides, artists nowadays flux between one medium or another. Medium specificity is an obsolete argument. I think that each project is dynamic and warrants a different if not multiple formats. I do not like to circumscribe my practice (technically, financially, geographically, time, etc.). The process, by which the project is subjected to, reveal these limits. It is my responsibility to push myself beyond this barrier. With regards to whether I am inspired by other artists or tendencies, well, like everyone else, there those that I like. That too is inevitable. Then again, "to like" here refers to the same fondness I may have for music, food, etc. It does not let it influence me.

Lastly, what other projects are you working on or are you planning to make?

I am currently developing a few projects. Right now I am in the middle stage of a complex series of photos, videos and other formats that has to do with cultural heautoscopy in relation to the homosexual body. There's also Nightswimming, a series of small erased drawings on paper and it's also going to be a series of ink stained bedspreads. What I am preparing for right now are the public art interventions that I am going to do in the Philippines as soon as I finish my project here at Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo.