

Making Food Sovereignty Conversations Accessible: A Report on The Food (R)evolution Exhibition 12 May 2016

By Rudo Chikara & Ayesha Ludick



The Food (R)evolution Exhibition is a “travelling documentary photography-as-public-art outdoor installation,” designed by the Sustainability Institute, the Center for Complex Systems in Transition, and the School of Public Leadership at Stellenbosch University. The exhibition consists of “images that tell the story of the daily diets of citizens from all walks of life¹”. The multi-disciplinary method of the exhibit was used as a research tool to explore how visual texts (especially photography) may prompt people to share diverse perspectives on the complexities of the local (and global) food system. According to the Food (R)evolution Exhibition website this exhibition has been designed to be shown in public spaces as opposed to art galleries and the overall objective is to facilitate broader popularised understanding of the complexities of Africa’s food system and to enable a shared conversation on these issues with various stakeholders particularly students, researchers and academics in the field. In seeking to generate public conversations, it is, therefore striking how the food exhibition seeks to move beyond the more familiar route of prioritising the expert knowledge produced in the academy.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1008630172557164/>

The exhibition centred on the different daily intake(s) of food that people eat around the world and the photos were a representation of the different food contexts that people around the world have access to; how many food calories they eat daily as well as the social and health implications that their diets had on them. Practitioners from The Southern Africa Food Lab, and the Center for Complex Systems in Transition at the School of Public Leadership guided participants through the exhibition on Rooiplein². After taking the tour and exploring the various images around the world we were treated to a packed lunch which proceeded with a discussion at the Sasol Museum in Stellenbosch.



Some of the photographs displayed on Rooiplein at SU

The workshop was particularly interesting in involving a diverse group of participants which included students from various subjects including visual and graphic design, researchers as well as curators who showed particular interest in the ongoing and developing conversation around food and food security. What was clearly visible was the contrast in food intakes for different countries, for example the diets consumed in developing countries and the food consumed in more developed countries as well as the social and health implications of these diets. On one level, the organization of the exhibition seemed to reinforce the practice of creating knowledge for an audience to

² <https://www.facebook.com/FRehibition/>

passively “learn from”, since the various images were linked to captions that clearly explained or instructed the viewer. During the tour of the exhibition, participants discussed the different things that came to their minds when they saw the images, as well as the key contrasts they saw in each image for example a model from the US who ate less but the food had a higher calorie count, or the truck driver who ate more food, which actually had less calories. We found this aspect of the talk particularly interesting as sites of food consumption reveal the massive inequalities in the global food system.

After lunch at the Sasol Museum, we were addressed by the curator of the museum Erhardt Thiel who spoke about his *#iMadiba* project installation and his intention for the sculpture to become a 'speaking out' platform. The sculpture, he explained, was both a representation of Nelson Mandela's struggle for freedom as well as a reminder of the gap that still exists in South Africa between a privileged minority and the majority of citizens who still live in poverty.



Erhardt Thiel speaks to participants at the Sasol Museum, about the sculpture the students are sitting on and its history and meaning.

We were also addressed by Jon De Wet, Facilities manager at SU who is responsible for the refuse collection from Stellenbosch University. He gave a detailed explanation of the process of how refuse is collected and how they manage to separate the refuse that can be used from what cannot be used and how the Stellenbosch University waste recycle plant composts 50% of its food waste from 25 kitchens.



Jon De Wet, Facilities manager at SU

Although there was no discussion on food consumption versus refuse disposal in relation to the South African context particularly within Stellenbosch, which on one hand food abundance leading to waste, and on the other, forms of hunger and malnutrition that speak volumes about certain groups' social status. It is ironic that Stellenbosch itself is a site of huge contradictions: for example, Stellenbosch is home to excellent restaurants and wine farms, and is a popular destination for tourists eager to sample South Africa's best wines; on the other, poverty is starkly evident in the streets of Stellenbosch, where many children beg for food, where the legacy of the tot³ system still remains, and where it is clear that farm workers must confront homelessness, food deprivation and other injustices on a daily basis.

³ The Tot System, also known as the Dop System (after the Afrikaans word 'dop' meaning an alcoholic drink), is a notorious truck system which was used in South African wine farms particularly in the Western Cape. Farm workers would receive payment in the form of money with a daily measure of cheap wine as a fringe benefit. This practice increased and exacerbated alcoholism among farm workers, which resulted in widespread social damage among communities, particularly the Cape Coloured community

In conclusion food sovereignty movements have argued that the current food crisis between the haves and the have nots *must* involve those who are marginalised and oppressed by dominant food systems playing a central role in finding solutions. Maybe one question that should be asked about events such as the exhibition is whether, despite their noble intentions and their many positive effects, to what extent they might fail to address the deeper problems associated with South Africa's current food system.

More information can be found about the Food Revolution Exhibition on

<http://www.foodrev.net/>

<https://www.facebook.com/FRehibition/>

<http://www.sustainabilityinstitute.net/programmes/food-systems/food-exhibition>