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CHINA USA

A BITE OF EVERYWHERE: SONG DONG'S EATING THE CITY

BY MIMI WONG



Participants nosh on cookies and wafers next to toppled buildings as part of **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, 2017. Photo by David DeKeyser for ArtAsiaPacific.

The struggle for self-restraint was evident in both curious adults and impatient children alike, their eyes and appetites appraising towers of neatly stacked chocolate and vanilla wafers, pristinette rivers of bright blue frosting lined with piped, green trees—all of which awaited the inevitable fate forewarned by the title of Song Dong's installation, *Eating the City*. Since 2003, the work has traveled around the globe, from Barcelona to London to Nepal to Shanghai. Hosted by Mana Contemporary in Jersey City, this American iteration of the Beijing artist's recurring installation and performance materialized as part of Asia Contemporary Art Week, co-presented with the Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation's inaugural Creative China Festival.

Constructed atop a custom-built table that took up almost the entire ground-floor lobby, the scaled-down skyline featured many skyscrapers of the traditional, boxy variety, a result of the artist's usage of rectangular wafers as his primary construction material. Cookies and mini cupcakes offered architectural accents. The generic structures mingled with more prominent attractions: what could be Toronto's CN Tower made out of bagels, an elevated bridge reminiscent of New York's Highline, a sprawling palace with biscuit-tiled roofs evoking Beijing's Forbidden City.



Visitors check out the installation prior to the interactive performance of **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, 2017. Photo by David DeKeyser for ArtAsiaPacific.

Yet Song resists explicitly naming these landmarks, just as he's reluctant to identify this edible city as a particular location. While viewers may infer a familiarity with the urban landscape before them, the place remains one squarely within our imaginations—of nowhere, but with bits of everywhere mixed in. "It's international," the artist said. "It's the whole world."

World-building via miniature models is nothing new. One might say it's a natural instinct, frequently expressed in how we play. Most of us probably have some memory from childhood of putting together train sets or fashioning toy towns out of Lego blocks. Many popular video games likewise indulge this whim, including *SimCity*, *Sid Meier's Civilization* and *Harvest Moon*. Fittingly, Song encouraged the local volunteers, who over the course of five days helped erect *Eating the City*, to infuse the buildings with their own creative vision. The artist likened each volunteer to an architect, himself to a city planner.



Visitors check out the installation prior to the interactive performance of **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, 2017. Photo by David DeKeyser for ArtAsiaPacific.



Fallen debris from **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, 2017. Photo by David DeKeyser for ArtAsiaPacific.



Miniature tower made of baked goods as part of **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, 2017. Photo by Mimi Wong for ArtAsiaPacific.

The act of destruction that ensued further echoes the impulses we had as children. For just as awe-inspiring it was to marvel at Song's city, the true anticipation was in the knowledge that these confectionary constructions would soon be reduced to crumbs. Once the hosts addressed those at Mana Contemporary, attendees began pillaging the monuments of sweets. Some delicately plucked cookies from easy-to-reach locations, while others deliberately tugged at weight-bearing wafers, causing entire edifices to come crashing down like unstable Jenga towers. Two teenagers wrenched the bulbous baked goods from the Tower and eagerly devoured them. Savvy adults scooped up trees made of green frosting with biscuits. Children swept entire mounds of cookie treats onto the floor, screaming in delight as they went.

While the obliteration of his creation continued in full force for many more minutes, the artist circled the spectacle, snapping photos on his phone and smiling. He seemed to derive pleasure from the chaos. Although the performance has been mounted many times, Song insists Jersey City's iteration was the best one yet. When asked how he felt when the demolition process was nearly complete, he simply said, "I'm very happy."

For Song, eating signifies life itself. In consuming the city, the audience actually participates in the communion. By ingesting pieces of it, they take the art away with them. This method of transference represents the essence of the artist's philosophy that allowing people to touch and handle his art thus provides him a conduit to impact their lives. According to Song, "Our world is like this: It's built up, it takes a really long time, but suddenly we destroy it." He hopes that those who partook in *Eating the City* left with something greater to think about. However, I suspect many might have moved on without a second thought once their bellies were full.

Song Dong's Eating the City took place at **Mana Contemporary, Jersey City**, on October 15, 2017.

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Fallen debris from **SONG DONG's Eating the City** at Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, 2017. Photo by David DeKeyser for ArtAsiaPacific.

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