

## Public Art Works

SEASON 1 - EPISODE #2

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT—AND ART

Susan K. Freedman, Danny Meyer, Erwin Wurm  
& Joe DiStefano

TRT 28:00

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Hi everybody. I'm your host, Jeffrey Wright. And welcome back to the Public Art Fund podcast Public Art Works, where we use public art as a means of jumpstarting broader conversations about New York City, our history, and our current moment.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** We're talking art and food today, but before we get into the meat of things let's, well, get into the meat of things. And hear what both New Yorkers and visitors to New York had to say about the intersection of food and art recently while queuing up at the original Shake Shack in Madison Square Park.

**PUBLIC VOICE 1:** Street food is just like public art, you know, because it's everywhere.

**PUBLIC VOICE 2:** It's a very creative process, putting different ingredients together and how you present it. There's an art and a science to it definitely both.

**PUBLIC VOICE 3:** Yeah definitely does help represent that New York is a melting pot and you can experience so many different cultures from looking at art, and also definitely by eating food.

**PUBLIC VOICE 4:** They're both a platform for people to create something for others to experience.

**PUBLIC VOICE 5:** Food is something we share. Everybody has to eat, so that's a quite democratic start. But uh art is maybe... it requires a bit more attention

**PUBLIC VOICE 6:** Like, you know when you see a halal cart like one of those hot dog stands or pretzel stands you're drawn by the smell, right? When it comes to art you're drawn by the sight of it.

**PUBLIC VOICE 7:** Maybe... street food is public art for the common man.

**PUBLIC VOICE 8:** I mean art is everywhere nowadays. I mean, I could put a hot dog stand right here and call it an art piece.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** A hot dog stand as art? Interesting idea...



**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** In this episode, Public Art Fund invited three luminaries to partake in a trans-Atlantic conversation about the relationship between food and art. Here in New York we have, restaurateur Danny Meyer—he of Shake Shack, Gramercy Tavern, and Eleven Madison Park fame, and our very own, Susan Freedman, President of Public Art Fund. And the Austrian artist, Erwin Wurm, phoning in from Vienna.

**ERWIN:** Hello?

**SUSAN:** Erwin?

**ERWIN:** Hello, hello, hello. Yeah?

**SUSAN:** It's Susan.

**DANNY:** And this is Danny over here.

**ERWIN:** Hi Danny.

**SUSAN:** Where are we reaching you?

**ERWIN:** I'm in Vienna in my apartment. It's 6:20.

**SUSAN:** Oh,

**ERWIN:** In the evening, it's okay.

**DANNY:** I hope you have a nice Gruner Veltliner in front of you.

**ERWIN:** You know what I have in front of me? Greek mountain tea with lemon from house in Greece, and with some honey, and that's really great.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Erwin is a sculptor, and quite a renowned one at that. His work is highly physical and highly surreal. His forms often make reference to the human body, adding organic twists to things we typically think of as manmade. A chubby house, for example. Or bronze-cast sausage links with arms and legs.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Wurm has taken this idea one step further in his performance-based sculptures, which rely on human action and intervention to exist. As did Erwin's recent project with Public Art Fund.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The piece was called *Hot Dog Bus* and it was parked in Brooklyn Bridge Park in the summer of 2018. The form itself was a lumpy and distended mustard-yellow

Volkswagon van equipped inside with a grill. It was activated by a staff who served free hot dogs to park-goers on weekends.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** We'll soon dig deeper into all of this, but first, let's talk about Shake Shack. Yes, that Shake Shack. Not just because we're hungry, but because Danny Meyer and his beloved burger joint have a little-known and pretty unexpected connection to Public Art Fund. Here's Susan, to kick it off...

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** I'm Susan Freedman, President of the Public Art Fund, an organization which is in its 41st year and was started by my mother, I'm proud to say. And I say that with Danny near me because I know that family runs deep in his passions, in his commitment as it does, uh, in mine. And the reason we're speaking today goes back to a collaboration that Danny was behind in the early 2000s.

**DANNY MEYER:** 2001.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** Right. Uh it was the second project, *Target Art In The Park*, to activate Madison Square Park and what better way than to bring the vision of artists to the park. And we had this artist Navin Rawanchaikul who did a project, *I Love Taxi*, and it was important to him to have a food component. And there was only one logical place to go. and that was to Danny to partner with us on this venture, which turned out to be quite the fortuitous uh move for you, I believe.

**DANNY MEYER:** Yeah, and what was, what was interesting was that almost everyone who worked in my company at that time—we had four restaurants Union Square Cafe, Gramercy Tavern, Eleven Madison Park and Table—and everyone told me, you're absolutely crazy to be doing a hot-dog cart. But I just want to go back to the vision.

**DANNY MEYER:** We had, for the first ten years of my career, one restaurant, Union Square Cafe. And we had really helped to revive that park, which had been a pretty dangerous place back in 1985 when we started. And it was without question the Union Square Greenmarket, the farmer's market, that served to bring all kinds of people to use that place. And so when we had the opportunity to open two restaurants overlooking Madison Square Park, we said this is great but now we gotta help to make Madison Square Park better. So we started something called the Campaign for a New Madison Square Park, which then lead to the Madison Square Park Conservancy, but what we didn't have was a big open plaza. So there wasn't going to be a farmer's market or a flea market or anything. And when we looked out at the park and said, how do we activate this park, because if you don't get people to use it, it's just going to turn and reverse course.

**DANNY MEYER:** And we looked around and the park has I think, one of the city's greatest collections of 19th-century statues, which is a form of art. Admiral Farragut, Seward, they're all there. And many, many more. And we said, whoever wrote the rule that we couldn't turn

Madison Square Park into a public sculpture park? And the first person we turned to was Susan Freedman. And with Target, they helped to fund um more than one...

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** Three.

**DANNY MEYER:** Three. I think we started with, was it Tony Oursler? Yeah I remember that, over Halloween, seeing those faces projected onto trees in a very cold bleak Madison Square Park....

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** That project was called *The Influence Machine*. And in it, as Danny said, the artist Tony Oursler projected faces meant to conjure the ghosts of New Yorkers past onto the trees and buildings surrounding Madison Square Park. The effects were haunting. As was the score, which was written by the late, great experimental filmmaker and composer, Tony Conrad.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** But we digress. Here's Danny again...

**DANNY MEYER:** And so when the idea was proposed that there was this artist from Thailand and he had this idea called *I Heart Taxi, I Love Taxi*, with these cartoon-like taxi cabs on stilts and he wanted to have a working hot dog cart that he would design that would accompany them. And we had a kitchen that was not being used that much upstairs at Eleven Madison Park at that time, and we said, well we'll make the hot dogs.

**DANNY MEYER:** I was trying to convince my team at that point that hospitality was not just for fancy restaurants but could actually be expressed as something that you see everyday called a hot dog cart. The artist was trying to convince the world that, I think, and Susan you'll have to say if I'm off-target but, my recollection is that his artistic expression was that everyone in the world has either been able to afford being driven in a taxi or had to be the guy driving it. And everyone else in the world could either afford to buy a hot dog or had to be the guy selling it.

**DANNY MEYER:** Why, I was eager to sign up was I wanted to prove that we could make people feel just as seen and recognized and happy in a hot dog cart as we could at a restaurant like Eleven Madison Park or Gramercy Tavern.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Let me paint you a bit more of a picture because Navin's work was really quite the sight.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The hot dog stand was at the center of the project. It was decorated with pictures of these superhero taxicabs, smiling through their bumpers and soaring through the sky. It was a friendly Transformer kind of vibe.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** So that was the hot dog stand component. But all around the hot dog

stand were these other sculptures. And they basically served as seating—wild takes on the typical park bench. The back of the bench was a painted cutout of the New York City skyline. And over each bench was this giant taxicab-shaped canopy, its undercarriage and windows all painted with pictures of New York City riders and drivers. It was an homage to the city—a love letter to the people and the vehicles that literally make New York run.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The timing of this project was significant in retrospect too...

**DANNY MEYER:** It was the foreboding summer of 2001, leading up to 9/11 of course. And we chose Chicago-style hot dogs because they have eight classic toppings and I wanted to see if our team could remember that Susan's the one that likes everything except pickle relish. And Jane is the person that likes everything except mustard. And lo and behold, not only did they do it but but we would have lines of a hundred people a day for this hot dog cart. The other thing is, we said we would contribute all of our profits to Madison Square Park Conservancy, which was really easy because we lost about ten thousand dollars that summer. So we didn't have a very big bill.

**DANNY MEYER:** The art, which completely made people happy that summer, went away just as it was going to do because it was always going to be temporary, 9/11 happened, the city went into both an emotional and financial depression. And the following summer, 2002, the community said, can we please bring back the hot dog cart because it made us happy, even though there would be new art in the park. So we brought it back. And we did it for a third year, in 2003. And the lines got so long that that's when we went to New York City and we said, "What do you think about if we philanthropically donate a permanent kiosk to Madison Square Park? It will be serving in Chicago-style hot dogs. We'll add cheeseburgers and milkshakes and french fries. And we'll donate it to the park so that the park can become the landlord. And if this works it will continue to attract people to use the park, morning, noon, and night and it will maybe create a little revenue stream."

**DANNY MEYER:** Well that became Shake Shack. And there was one Shake Shack for five years, and then there was a second Shake Shack five years later. And today there are over 200 Shake Shacks in the world. And that original Shake Shack that grew out of the hot dog cart that was part of this piece of public art now contributes almost a million dollars in rent annually right back into the park.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** For those of us who remember what it was like to have only one Shake Shack—the original Shake Shack—as opposed to 200, the experience of queueing up for your burger and fries in Madison Square Park in the early 2000s was something of a New York rite of passage. As the Queens-based food writer Joe DiStefano remembers...

**JOE DISTEFANO:** Yeah, I don't think anybody was doing that sort of like elevated fast casual, you know, in the middle of a park. This was sort of like hey, there's this one thing, this iconic food that everybody loves, and it's being made by a top flight restaurateur with very elevated

views of service, you know so that was very unique at the time.

**JOE DISTEFANO:** There was definitely an aura of this being a finer fast food. That coupled with the fact that it's just a classic food that resonates with almost anybody I think really contributed to the success.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** As with our other subjects, Joe, too, sees a connection between food and art.

**JOE DISTEFANO:** There's a performance aspect of street food. There's a bit of theater, you know, the hot dog vendors do this thing where they tap the tongs on the side of the cart to sort of get people's attention and I think it goes both ways in terms of it being a performance, you know there's the viewer and the performer.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Artworks like Navin's *I Heart Taxi* and Erwin's *Hot Dog Bus*—which we'll dig into soon—do of course have art-historical precedents. Most famously, perhaps, by way of Rirkrit Tiravanija, who initiated a series of performance pieces in the 1990s that revolved around cooking and serving Thai food to visitors in galleries and museums for free.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Just one year after Navin and Danny's collaboration, another Public Art Fund artist explored the relationship between food and art as well.

**JOE DISTEFANO:** So a while back, in Brooklyn there was a lady named Anissa Mack who set up a house, a small house, in front of the Brooklyn Public Library where she was baking apple pies and putting them out on windowsills.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Anissa's project was called *Pies for a Passerby*. It was installed right near Grand Army Plaza, at the entrance to Prospect Park. Anissa baked pies herself inside this original "tiny house," then invited viewers to "steal" them while they sat on her windowsill to cool.

**JOE DISTEFANO:** Taking art out of a rarified gallery atmosphere or museum and putting it into a public arena, it really resonates with the idea of you know, here's Danny Meyer who at the time, was most known in the public consciousness for fine dining and Union Square Hospitality Group, saying, "Well, guess what? I'm making hot dogs and hamburgers."

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Public Art Fund President Susan Freedman thinks so too.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** With this notion of what's populous. For Public Art Fund it's the street experience and it's what um what translates and we like to give voice and vision to an artist. So we loved Navin wanting to do this project. Simultaneously in the park were two other projects. One was Tobias Rehberger's sort of Japanese garden where we were making snow. And the other was Teresita Fernández's beautiful *Bamboo Cinema*. So we had these three

very different projects going on simultaneously. And for Teresita, this was a seminal work. Certainly for Navin this was a very important work. And crazy, but true, for Danny this was a pivotal work. And for the city.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** A lot of what Public Art Fund does is we do partner with people who have a vision. We know so often that artists can change the life of the city. When artists move in, artworks move in, it transforms the way people experience the city and each other. Very often people have a sense that somebody cares about them enough to bring art in. Of course, food, is the other great equalizer and the other great way to celebrate and begin an exchange with people you might not otherwise be talking to.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** This idea of exchange and, well, food was very much embedded in Erwin's *Hot Dog Bus* too, which, as we said, served free hot dogs to the public from a modified and somewhat anthropomorphic VW bus.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** We gave away 24,000 hot dogs. That seemed like a lot to us.

**DANNY MEYER:** That is a lot.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** I don't know if that's good day for you or uh, you know... But, but at the same time we got more than 400 million impressions. So no one can underestimate the value of surprising and delighting, let alone nourishing the public.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** For Erwin, food and art are connected not only in this sense of generosity and initiating a kind of dialogue with the public. He also thinks of food and art as both inherently sculptural experiences. I'll let Erwin explain...

**ERWIN WURM:** I'm interested in food quite often in my work because I would like to address sculptural issues and social issues. So when I make something in clay, when I make a figure in clay or something, then we have to add volume or we take volume away. When we gain weight or we lose weight we basically do the same. We add volume or we take volume away. So I said gaining and losing weight is also a sculptural work. Means when I become bigger or when I lose weight, I'm doing what sculptures are doing, so I make a sculptural work.

**ERWIN WURM:** So these these issues, this transformation from an action to a sculpture and vice versa was always a big interest for me. And with the hot dog with the invitation of the public to eat a hot dog, they experience something. They experience a sculptural work on themselves because they gain weight or they lose weight. And this is the whole thing behind. And this is so fascinating for me.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** There's something a bit sci-fi to this idea too, thinking about Erwin's big, fleshy bus.

**ERWIN WURM:** What I also found very interesting, that the combination of the technical system of a car and the biological system of growing. In a way it seems to be that our future will go this way. That we will have more and more technical components within us in the very recent future. This is another aspect of my work also.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** *Hot Dog Bus* was the second iteration of this project and the first in the United States. The original *Hot Dog Bus* was actually the *Curry Bus* and it was parked in front of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in Wolfsburg, Germany, for about six months in 2015. Wolfsburg is the home of Volkswagen, and Erwin collaborated with the company to custom-make the vehicle. When it came down to determining a menu, Erwin also turned to VW. The Curry Bus served a particular kind of curry sausage, that's—believe it or not—produced by Volkswagen as well.

**ERWIN WURM:** It's a very specific kind of sausage, very fat. First they cook the sausage then they put cheese in it and then they grill the sausage and then they put curry on it. So it's not easy for everybody's taste. But they love it. And the workers love to eat these sausages. So VW made a great business out of this, feeding the people and every sausage gets a stamp on it that it's an original part of VW, which I found very, very interesting.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** So, one might say, the currywurst is to Wolfsburg what the hot dog is to Chicago or New York City. Yet there was one key difference in their distribution.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** Erwin have you ever charged for the food in your projects? We certainly did not.

**ERWIN WURM:** No. This was for the first time free and I liked it very much. I love this idea that people could get free access because, you know, then more people come and just more people are interested when there's something free they are in a way delighted and they go and want to be a part of this, and want to have it and want to eat. And then when they realize something, okay, it's doing also something with me, what is it doing? You eat is to change energy, to take energy, and you produce energy and you grow, or you don't grow when you eat in a different way. And all these aspects I found very, very, very interesting, especially nowadays, now, in our world nowadays.

**DANNY MEYER:** There's a different theme I'm picking up on here, especially with the way Erwin is describing expanding your waistline and narrowing your waistline. And I think for those of us in the restaurant and hospitality business. On one hand, we're trying to open our doors to the public to help you have an experience that makes you see your life differently and enjoy it. We know that there are plenty of avenues for excess. You can eat too much, you can drink too much.

**DANNY MEYER:** We are purveyors of pleasure. We're purveyors of hedonism. And I think the artistic vision that you express by having cars that are corpulent, is, it's fascinating because



all of us who work in this business, and all the people we serve, whether they're saying it or not, are confronting how much is too much? How much pleasure is too much pleasure? And people don't talk about that. But everyone's got their way of trying to balance this. And I love that that's what you're expressing also via your art.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** *Hot Dog Bus* isn't Erwin's first foray into ideas of excess. In 2011, at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami, Erwin showed a series of his Drinking Sculptures as part of a broader exhibition dedicated to his work titled, "Beauty Business."

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The sculptures are modified pieces of furniture—dressers, side tables, credenzas—that are painted in patches and flipped on their sides. Each contains glasses, a bottle of booze, and instructions like, and I quote: "Open the cabinet door, take a bottle of alcohol out, pour it in the glass and get drunk. Do it seriously." End-quote. Many of the sculptures are named for hard-drinking artists of yore: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Francis Bacon among them.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** At best, it's the greatest party icebreaker ever. At worst, it's a somewhat more artful way to overindulge. The show opened during Art Basel Miami Beach, when this hedonistic city is, perhaps, at its most hedonistic. And the footage we found of gallery-goers interacting with the piece at the exhibition's opening is a fascinating document in and of itself. Especially as people loosen up throughout the evening and sips from glasses turn into big, long, triumphant swigs straight from the bottle.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** This is what both Danny and Erwin were talking about, that give and take we all must consider when we indulge, be it in hot dogs, eight-course tasting menus, or free booze. Which brings us to something Danny asked Erwin next...

**DANNY MEYER:** Have you even done a sculpture where the car lost a lot of weight? Maybe too much weight?

**ERWIN WURM:** No. I did, no, no. What I did is I made a Narrow House. I made my parent's house. They built the house in the 60s. It's a typical Austrian bungalow style and I squeezed it. The house was 20 meters long and 60 feet long, and it was uh 30 feet wide. But I squeezed it to three feet. But I left it 60 feet long and and the original height. And I invited people to go in. And I squeezed the furniture and I squeezed the rooms and I squeezed everything. And when you squeezed yourself, you could go in. And everything was there, windows and paintings and furnitures and the toilet and the bathrooms and the kitchen. But everything was squeezed. What the outcome was a strong message from the past of a squeezed society, of a restricted society. So, this is my answer. So I didn't make a thin car, I made a narrow house.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** There's one last body of work, we wanted to mention—one for which Erwin is particularly well-known. He calls them *One-Minute Sculptures* and you might have seen

them on the internet, meme-friendly as they've proven to be.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The sculptures in these sculptures are the people enacting them, the people following Erwin's instructions to use the props around them and freeze into a one-minute pose. Sometimes this means planking your body over the backs of two chairs. Sometimes it means sticking your head through a large hole drilled into the back of a sofa. Sometimes it means lying on a dolly with a bottle of toilet cleaner or standing on a pedestal with one foot resting on a tube of Lysol wipes.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The thing about these sculptures is that they only exist when activated. Without the participation of the viewer, there is no artwork at all. We saw a parallel here in Danny's world and work, which he explained in a way that elaborates on that classic baseball movie axiom: "If you build it, they will come." And they'll probably have opinions...

**DANNY MEYER:** I'm a big baseball fan, and I look at the restaurants, when they open, they're like a beautiful brand new baseball glove. And if you've ever had a brand new baseball glove it doesn't work until you play catch a lot. And then it becomes your hand. But it only became your hand in relation to someone else throwing the ball. And it changes constantly. If you go to any other our restaurants when they're one year old, or two years old, or in the case of Gramercy Tavern, 25 years old, it's a very different restaurant today because of our response to people's desire to use it in a certain way.

**DANNY MEYER:** We always do start off with a point of view for the menu, for the price, for the uniforms, for the art, for everything. And it has to change, because we go on losing streaks sometimes. Sometimes we go on winning streaks. But I do think there is a similarity in that we're making the thing we make for the purpose of people using it and experiencing life differently because of it.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** This idea resonated strongly with Susan and Erwin as well.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** *The Hot Dog Bus* closed is not the *Hot Dog Bus* open and functioning. It's totally...

**ERWIN WURM:** Absolutely.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** ...different.

**ERWIN WURM:** Absolutely yeah yeah. I agree. Like the *Narrow House* it is something else. It's dysfunctional. The same thing with the *One-Minute Sculptures*, so it needs the public to be alive.

**DANNY MEYER:** What drives me today, 33 years after I opened my first restaurant Union Square Cafe, is the same thing that drove me back then, and that's can we create culinary

experiences for people that contribute to feeling better? Whether you work for us or whether we open a restaurant in your community, or whether you're one of our suppliers. And that continues to drive me. Because I think this is a time in our lives where, if you look back over the period of time I've been in the restaurant business, we've gotten way more high tech and and the more high tech we are the more I think people need high touch. And I really firmly believe that restaurants and public places continue to be critically important for people's emotional and soulful well-being.

**SUSAN FREEDMAN:** I mean that's it, you know that's what we want to do. We want to bring a new experience and change the way people experience their city. And we want to give artists opportunities to be our partners in reenvisioning the way people connect.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Thank you all for joining us. And please be sure to visit our website at [publicartfund.org](http://publicartfund.org) for more information on all of the artists and artworks discussed in today's episode.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Next time, we talk to artists Kate Gilmore, Xaviera Simmons, and Paola Mendoza on the intersections they're all seeing in their work between public art and public action.

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**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Public Art Works is a podcast by Public Art Fund, produced with SandenWolff.

As the leader in its field, Public Art Fund brings dynamic contemporary art to a broad audience in New York City and beyond by mounting ambitious free exhibitions of international scope and impact that offer the public powerful experiences with art and the urban environment.

Public Art Fund is supported by the generosity of individuals, corporations, and private foundations including lead support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, along with major support from Booth Ferris Foundation, the Charina Endowment Fund, The Marc Haas Foundation, Hartfield Foundation, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Donald A. Pels Charitable Trust, and The Silverweed Foundation. Generous support is also provided by the Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Inc.

Public Art Fund exhibitions and programs are also supported in part with public funds from government agencies, including the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

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**PUBLIC VOICE 9:** Favorite street food? That would have to be falafel.

**PUBLIC VOICE 10:** Tacos. 100%. They're simple, but so delicious.

**PUBLIC VOICE 11:** Pretzels.

**PUBLIC VOICE 12:** Bagels are my favorite I think.

**PUBLIC VOICE 13:** The Halal cart.

**PUBLIC VOICE 14:** Halal Food. Chicken over rice.

**PUBLIC VOICE 15:** Taco Yaki.

**PUBLIC VOICE 16:** Oh, uh, probably hot dogs.

**PUBLIC VOICE 17:** Pizza. I'll go with pizza. New York pizza's the best.