One Third

A project on
food waste

„I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children‘s teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don‘t grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identidy – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can‘t get through the day without a cup of tea. Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India.“
(Stuart Hall, 1994)

One Third

Global food waste and starvation - a contradiction?

Think of a random item of food. An orange, for example. This orange, cultivated on a plantation in South Africa, harvested and transferred to Europe by plane and truck over a distance of 15.000 km, sold in a supermarket and finally, although still in good condition, discarded by the consumer. Fiction? Fact!
Waste of food around the globe has increased to worrying dimensions: According to a study, commissioned by the UN and carried out in March 2011, one third of all food products go to waste worldwide.
The series of photographs 'One Third' focuses on this particular percentage. It highlights the issue of food waste through photographs and reports, which are combined to offer an insight into this phenomenon, ranging from its geopolitical background and cultural history to individual consumer behaviour.

In March 2011 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) published a study about food waste. It revealed that, on average, a third of all products of the food industry go to waste worldwide, ranging between 25 and 75%, depending on the product. Altogether, 1.3 billion tons of edible goods are discarded each year, while the global south is hit by recurrent periods of severe starvation. This problem has increased dramatically since the hike in food prices on the global market after the 2007 'Food Price Crisis'. This state of affairs is not as paradoxical as one may assume, however- it is part of the neoliberal global economic system, which the globalized food industry is a part of.

Unsurprisingly, the worldwide percentage of food waste per person varies greatly: In Europe and North America, each consumer wastes between 95 and 115 kilograms of food, whilst only between 6 and 11 kilograms of edible goods are discarded per person in Sub Saharan Africa and South/ South East Asia. Considering the underlying reasons for food waste, however, comparisons between the global north and south seem to make a lot less sense: Taking a look at the 'Food Supply Chain', ranging from production, logistics and retail to the end consumer, it becomes apparent that losses occur at different stages of the process, depending on the standards of living in individual countries.
In countries with low income, losses of food predominantly occur during the early stages of the Food Supply Chain, usually as a result of problems during the process of harvesting, storing and the refrigeration and distribution of goods. Altogether, these issues could be categorized as infrastructural problems.

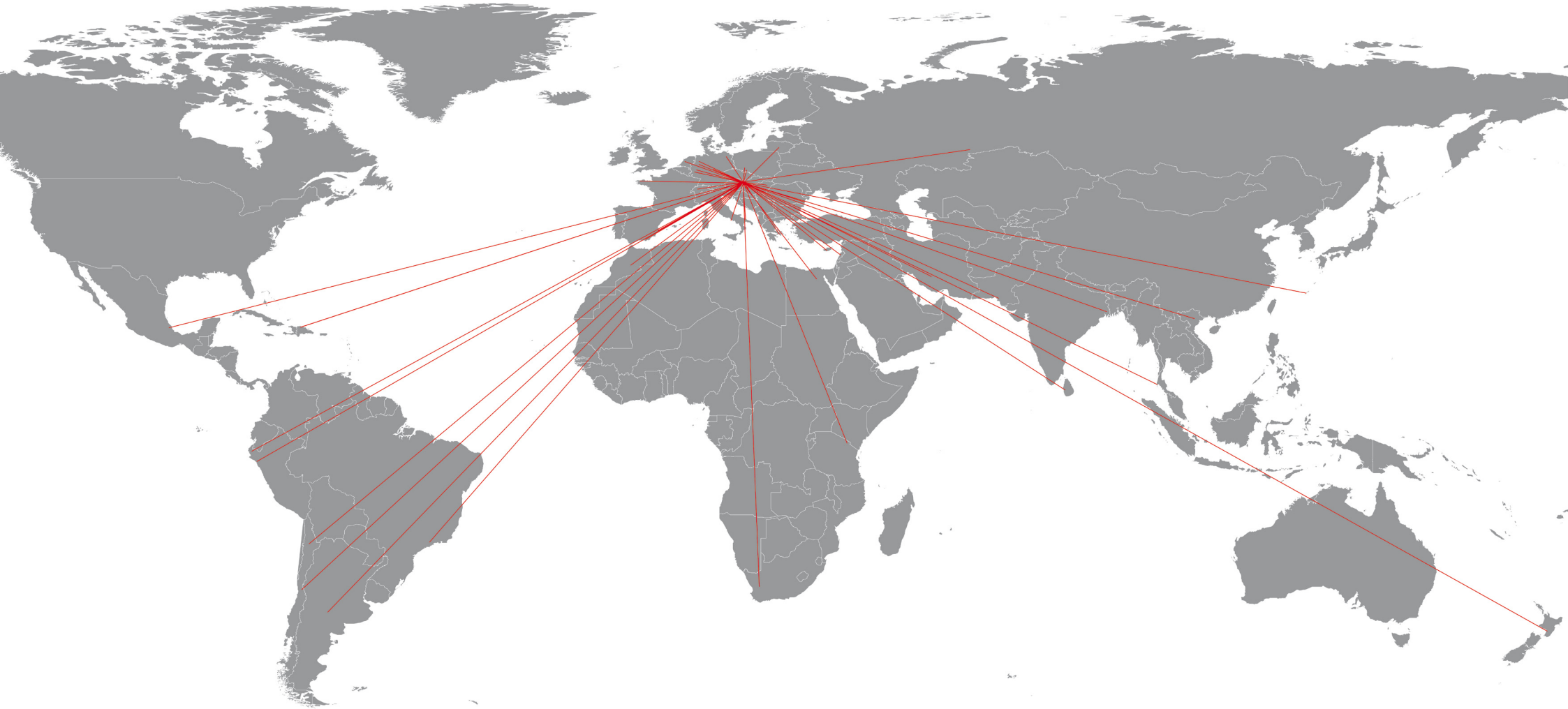
In the wealthy industrial nations of Europe and North America, however, food mainly goes to waste during later stages of the Food Supply Chain: buying and selling practices of supermarkets and consumer behaviour are to blame for the enormous amounts of food products going to waste.

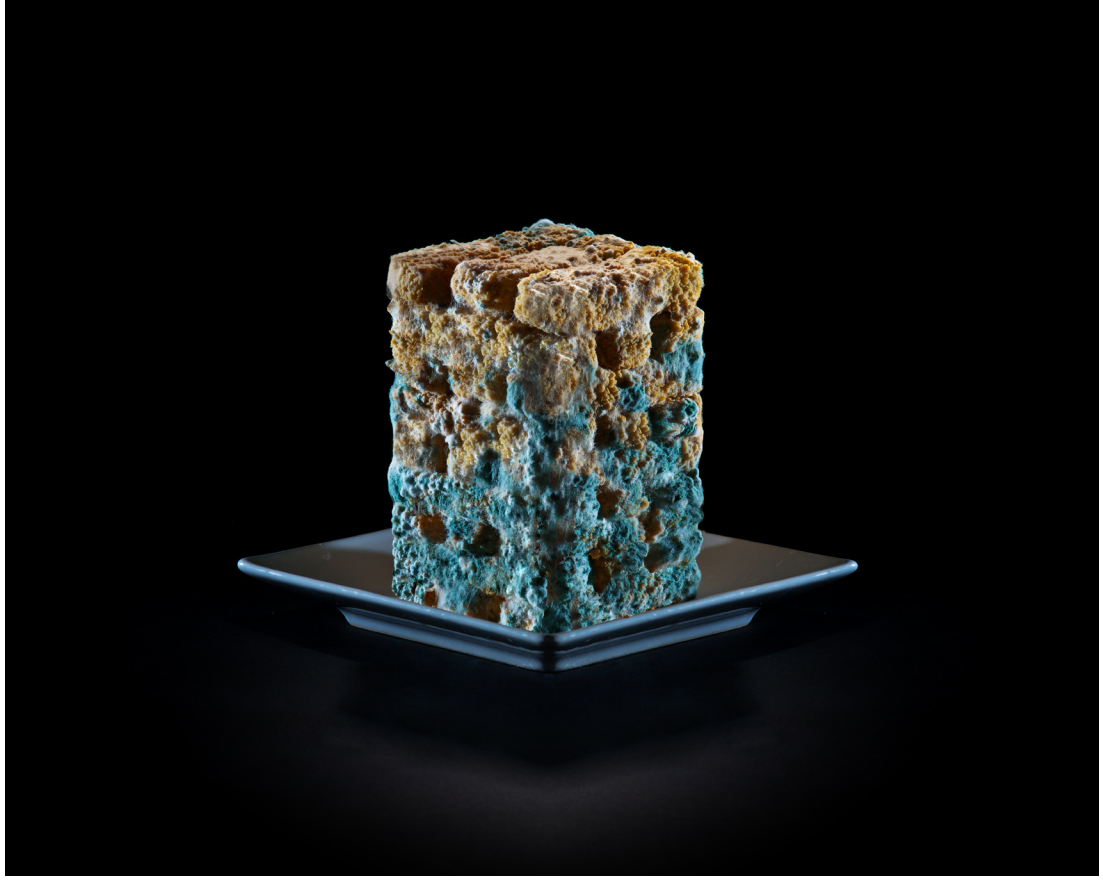
Since the 1980s the world market has been dominated by neoliberal structures, which further increased the colonially flavoured economical gaps between the global north and south. So called 'Structural Adjustment Programmes', run by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have led to a liberalization and deregulation movement across the agricultural sector, along with the enforcement of free trade systems, which increased hunger and poverty in the global south. Under pressure of unfair 'Economic Partnership Agreements', agricultural production in large parts of the global south was switched to the production of 'exportable goods', which led to a drastic increase in subsidies for agricultural production in monocultures whilst small scale businesses for the supply of local markets suffered severely. Therefore, the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund laid the foundations for an increased level of dependency on imported food products, combined with aggressive export policies. This resulted in the fact that, as stated by the FAO, two thirds of developing countries which were net exporters of food products in the 1980s are now net importers, forced to buy food products from the global economic market. The concentration of the market in the global south which was induced by the 'Structural Adjustment Programmes' destroyed local economies as well as vital natural resources which made it difficult to guarantee a good supply of staple foods for the local population. This, in turn, led to further periods of starvation. Multinational enterprises and supermarket chains, which are able to offer an all year round supply of exotic food to the consumers of the wealthy north, emerged as the winners.

‘Food Miles’- International transportation of food

Along with the globalization of trade throughout recent decades, the transport of food products has increased drastically. It is not unusual in industrial nations to find supermarket shelves stocked with goods from all around the globe. Consumers take it for granted to have a constant supply of fresh fruit and vegetables available throughout the winter months. However, they don’t seem to be concerned about the fact that transportation of these goods often covers vast distances and huge amounts of CO_2 and waste gases are produced.
The global economic north south divide is to blame for the fact that it is cheaper for producers to move the cultivation and production of goods to distant parts of the world. In other words, the abundance and constant availability of food would hardly be possible without the unfair division of power between the global north and south. Critics label this state of affairs as neo-colonialism, referring to the still ongoing dependency structures between former colonies and colonial nations. A flow of migration, which has resulted in the existence of ‘colonial enclaves’ in agricultural areas of the global north, is another indicator of neo-colonial tendencies. The area surrounding the southern Spanish town of El Ejido is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Greenhouses covering an area of 36.00 hectares (the equivalent of 50.000 football pitches) have turned the landscape into a sea of plastic. Working against significant logistical difficulties, the town is one of the main suppliers of the European food market, particularly in winter. Aid organizations for migrants as well as the international media regularly report about inhumane working conditions in greenhouses, which predominantly northern African migrant workers are affected by. Similar conditions prevail in other parts of the world where food is produced on an industrial scale- Chile, Thailand, Southern Italy, Egypt or China, for example.

The routes of transportation of the food products, which were photographed for this project, offer information about the north-south-divide in food production.





Global food trade and individual consumer behaviour in industrial nations

As well as being embedded in global economic structures, wasteful consumer behaviour is also closely linked to the food industry and its methods of operation. This branch of economics, which is supported financially with significant resources drained from the profits of producers, is one of the leading factors which create the frameworks for food consumption. The frameworks for food consumption do not only include geopolitical economic dependency structures, but also the European culture industrial usage of the product 'food', as advertising and pricing determine consumer behaviour.

The collaboration between culture industry and trade contributes significantly to the current culture of food waste in industrial nations. This is indicated, for example, by the tendency for supermarkets to put pressure on food producers to supply them with 'perfect' products. This pressure is to blame for the common practice of goods being discarded and destroyed immediately after harvest because of minor imperfections. Furthermore, it is not unusual for supermarket chains to purposely acquire a surplus of food, so shelves can remain fully stocked with perishable items (pastries, meat, fruit and vegetables) right until closing time. Supermarket chains also dispose of a large amount of goods before they even reach their sell by date, even though they are in perfectly satisfactory condition. The food retail industry and supermarket chains in particular, are therefore partly to blame for the alarming amount of edible goods which are destroyed day by day.

Food Culture and Food Waste in Industrial Nations

'Eating' does not just describe the intake of food; it also incorporates an important social element. Despite increasing individualization, the activity of eating remains to connect people across all social classes, as people everywhere enjoy eating together and turn this into a creative process. The culinary culture of western industrial nations has created a culture industry focused on food, which provides accessories, creates new designs, produces cookery shows on television and sets new trends.

On the other hand, little value is attributed to food products themselves: They are readily available goods which are bought and used whereby any surplus is simply disposed of. The lack of interest in where, by whom and under which working conditions the consummated goods were produced, as well as the behaviour of individual consumers can be defined as disturbing developments. This particularly refers to the careless attitudes of consumers who pride themselves in being wealthy enough to live a life of gluttony, which comes with the privilege of being able to waste food. According to a recent study, 40% of food wasted by consumers is still in its original packaging when ending up in the waste bin, not ever having been part of a meal. We all know the types of behaviour which lie at the heart of this issue: discount bulk buys in unmanageable quantities, the waste of leftovers which are discarded without consideration whether they could be used for a meal after all, or the waste of products which have only just exceeded their sell by date, but are still in satisfactory condition.

However, people do seem to be conscious about food waste to some extent: Recent studies revealed that approximately 69% of all German households feel guilty when throwing away food and consumers do not feel good about their own behaviour.
Numerous action groups and NGOs attempt to deal with the problems of the global food market and food waste, ranging from an individual to a geopolitical level. NGOs which put pressure on higher ranking authorities as well as dealing with this problem on an individual level and offering a platform for involvement and participation are listed in the appendix.

The pictures of the series ‚One Third‘ show food which is no longer edible, at various stages of decay. The products used for this study were once tasty items of food, for sale in supermarkets after being transported there from various parts of the world. ‚One Third‘ exceeds the sell by date in order to document the full dimensions of global food waste.

The title of the series- ‚One Third‘- refers to this particular percentage of food products which, according to a study by the FAO, goes to waste worldwide. Food products come with their own individual history and are produced in different ways in different parts of the world. They only have one thing in common: They are thrown away.

‘One Third’- a project on food waste

The immediate idea behind this series was to picture food products at different stages of decay in order to highlight the issue of food waste. This waste is strongly linked to the culture industry and therefore also to people's ways of life, especially in industrial nations. In the photographs, this is made obvious through the combination of food with accessories of the culture industry focused around food (e.g. dishes, cutlery). Therefore, the pictured food items are portrayed as part of a European culinary culture and history. This culture is closely intertwined with the history of exploitation of European colonies and, as a result, the import of cheap food products from other continents. Because of these historical aspects, an artistic examination of the issue of food waste in industrial nations of the 21st century has no alternative but to give consideration to geopolitical inequalities which have developed throughout history.
The products used for this project originated in various parts of the world, ranging from locally sourced products to those who have been transported over tens of thousands of kilometres. The majority of the pictured products are unprocessed food items as it is possible to trace their origins and to examine production methods. This is usually difficult with processed food, however, even though this would be particularly informative as the transport distances covered by the various ingredients would add up to an unbelievable number of kilometres. The pictured world map offers an overview of the locations where the food was produced and their transportation routes before being sold in Vienna/ Austria. The destination of Vienna was chosen at random (it is also the location where this series was produced, by the way) but any city in northern industrialized nations could have been chosen without resulting in major changes in the overview of transportation routes.
The selection of food products ranges from staple foods, dairy products, meat, cereals, to fruit and vegetables, sweets and exotic delicacies. As a result, it covers the whole spectrum of items which are found on our plates. The ingredients used for this project were all bought- predominantly in supermarkets- in order to be left to rot and to finally be disposed of after the photographs had been taken. Of course, this should be considered to be provocative: Consumers do not waste food on purpose, it ‘happens’ as an unwanted side effect. In this project, however, food products are wasted consciously and purposely.

This project is dedicated to the workers of the global food industry.

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Migrant Organizations & NGOs

www.afrique-europe-interact.net/
www.noborder.org/
www.viacampesina.org/en/
www.socalmeria.wordpress.com/
www.attac.at
www.fairtrade.net
www.global2000.at

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