

Food activism: say yes to tofu

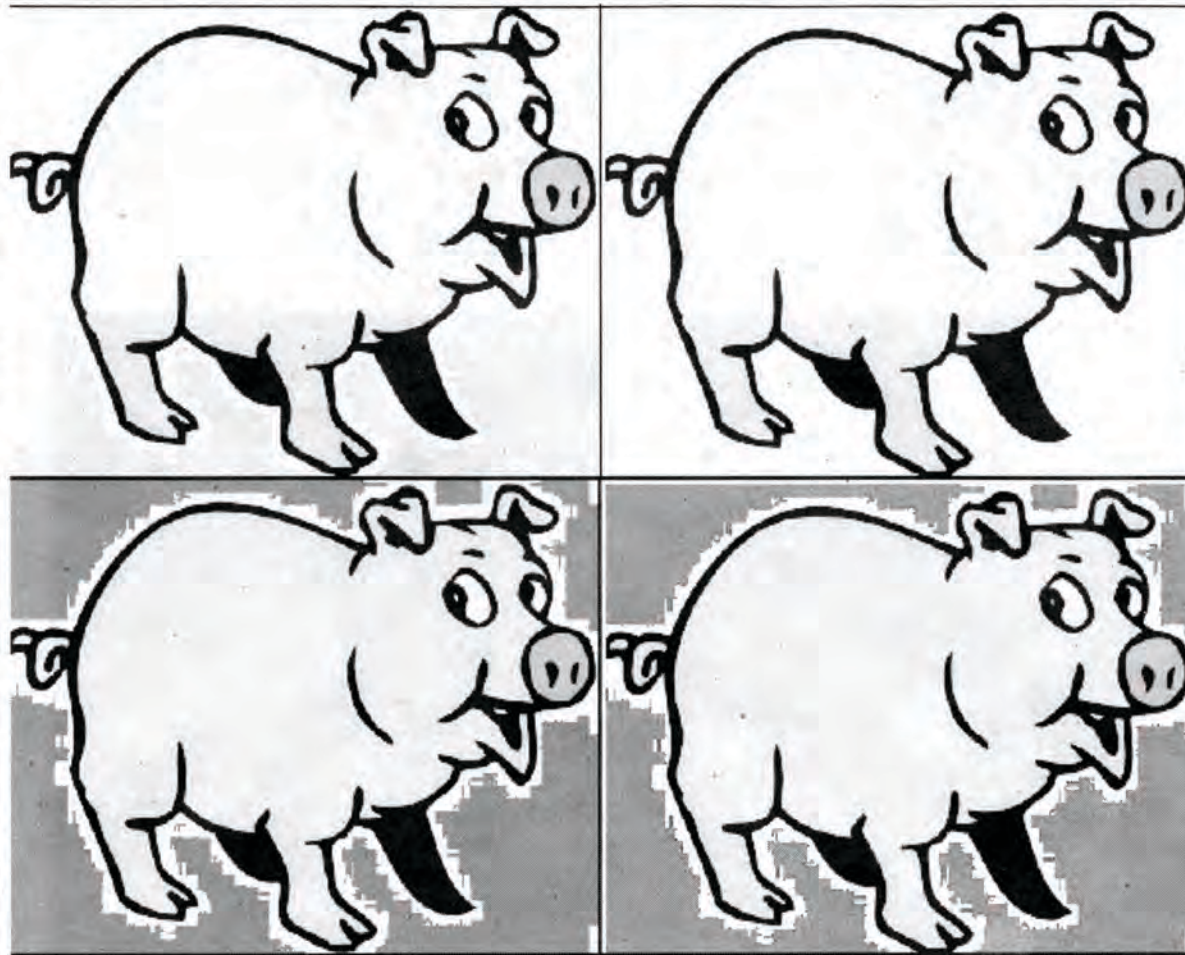
Hart House event mixes art, social justice, and food

HANNA RASHID

The curse of Generation Y is not that we have to pick up the burdens of our predecessors. It is that we are forced to care too much. Some may argue that our emotional investment is just the responsibility of living in a global economy. However, there has got to be something out of hand when we come to second-guess ourselves at every aisle in the grocery store. What are the implications of picking up an organic apple shipped from California over the one that costs a little less, is covered with pesticide, but grown locally? Should we support Ontario farmers over industrialized agricultural schemes? Or, should we support a sustainable-energy conscious farm, which produces organic food, but depends heavily on unpaid “volunteers” (free labour) who must face the challenge of earning a decent cost of living? And, what does all this have to do with art?

On March 9 the Hart House Social Justice Committee, Art Committee and Farm Committee explored the connection through a panel discussion, “From Field to Art: Discussing the Link Between Food, Art and Social Justice.” The panel was composed of four speakers, diverse in background: an artist, an event planner, a professor of Geography, and an undergrad. Each speaker brought their own expertise to the table.

Prior to the discussion I was completely ignorant of the term “food activism.” I wondered how a stack of



How effective is art in inspiring social activism? ART: HANNA RASHID

canned tomatoes arranged by an artist exemplifies the term. Ron Benner, one of the panel speakers, is a Canadian visual artist based in London, Ontario. Benner’s work emphasizes social justice issues like food security, globalization, and genetic engineering. After a year studying agricul-

tural engineering at the University of Guelph, Mr. Benner left his studies in disgust and frustration over the growing research in genetic engineering. From then on, Brenner dedicated his work to exposing human rights violations related to agriculture and militarism. One of his works is a large

display of a canned food pyramid constructed using items from his local grocery store. According to Benner, the grocery store stopped making food pyramids after one collapsed on and killed an elderly woman.

There has been a significant shift in the role of food art in the 21st cen-

tury, moving from Warhol’s “Campbell’s Soup Cans” to another form of pop-culture referent: socially-conscious consumerism. Warhol’s 1964 exhibit “The American Supermarket” was a pivotal moment in the counter-culture movement of the 60s. Its main concern was not so much exposing government corruption, but questioning just what constitutes “art.”

Young adults are reading *Fast Food Nation* and *Eating Animals* as part of their outside interests. The words “organic,” “vegan,” and “sustainability” have become badges of honour to be worn proudly on backpacks. Social-consciousness is *our* pop-culture, and being “in” seems as easy as saying yes to tofu. As university students the choice of causes seems endless. However, choosing one cause over another comes with repercussions. We seem to be at fault no matter where we turn.

I am a vegetarian, I have an “urban garden” on my roof, and I also love to eat tofu, but what surprises me most of all is how many UoT students still line up in front of the fries truck outside of Sid Smith but don’t know of the Hot Yam, the student-run vegan eatery serving every Wednesday at the International Student Centre, and charging only \$4 per meal.

How effective is art-media intervention in persuading Generation Y to make significant changes in their lives? Is it all just a passing fad? I leave it to the reader to decide.