

## **Franca Formenti**

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Name of Project : Zona Franca

### **Proposal Abstract**

Zona Franca <[www.zonafranca.biz](http://www.zonafranca.biz)> is the continuation of a project which began in 2007 called FOODPOWER <[www.foodpower.it](http://www.foodpower.it)> about the concept of food accessibility with a performance where all visitors were asked to arrive on an empty stomach.

Each visitor received a stamp on their hand at the entrance: 20% had a green stamp, 80% had a red stamp.

Only the green 20% could access the table full of food and if they understood the mechanism, they could also distribute the food to the other 80%.

Very few people understood the mechanism to share food, thus creating a frustrating and anxious situation.

After the first FOODPOWER performance, other performances about the concept of food, accessibility and sharing took place.

In the years following FOODPOWER I've focused on ancient seeds that aren't registered in the official European seed catalogue, and so cannot be bought or sold, and so the products made with these also cannot be bought or sold. They may only be collected or traded.

I decided to transform the abstract FOODPOWER project into a Limited Business and open a take away, trying to break across the threshold of economics and bureaucracy and permits, haacp and a financial investment, to have the possibility to cook and sell food that is mainly produced with foods cultivated from ancient seeds, therefore creating a sort of "illegal food".

I tried to furnish the Zona Franca space with recycled materials that were then decorated with various craft techniques, from stencils to dying, drawing and other techniques.

I thought of putting all these furnishings on sale, including the plants, which were placed in old pots and pans and then hung to grids on the wall.

This decision to sell every modified and decorated object gave me the possibility to make the space in a continuous flux, so that even the client can perceive a sense of constant change.

The decision to transform the foodpower project into a small business could seem contradictory, but for me it's an attempt to cryptically create a constant activist environment so that the visitor can become aware of the problems of food monopolisation.

Clients are welcomed into a pleasant and diverse atmosphere and slowly, through the food, which becomes a medium, they "digest" the various themes of monopolisation of seeds that the multinationals subtly impose on us.

A year after opening I can make two considerations: the first is that it was very stressful due to the amount of work involved because working in a kitchen never lets you rest, especially if you want to offer something good and tasty at a good price.

The second consideration is that I'm very satisfied despite all this because the response has been very positive and the clients are happy and increasing.

I chose an area just out of the centre of my little town called Varese, a place close to the high schools, middle schools and elementary schools so I'm very happy to 'spread the word' around places of study, in fact many students and teachers are my main source of income. Soon I will propose an event calendar with evening events where artists work with food, mostly because they can cook and so offer a menu that will be the sole work of that artist. A young curator and a reporter are helping me.

It may seem banal and romantic but my own learning was paramount, and also my intuition was vitally important, of course I had to work on that, analyzing it and adjusting it without losing faith in the project, as crazy as it may seem.

The public perceived this positive energy and even if just out of curiosity, they keep coming back, so they consume.

I tried to break into the notion of consumerism and capitalism but with a different approach: through art.

I'm very faithful in my objective to open another Zona Franca in the city centre and one in Milan, too.

I've worn a business woman's hat and despite it being very tiring and stressful, I've had lots of fun because in the end, being an artist, I belong to art, so enticing clients to eat my food has an ethical message because they help to contribute to the increase and demand in unregistered ancient seeds, thus creating a kind of 'black market' of food that is camouflaged legally.

**Proposed Location for the Project : The location where ZONA FRANCA could be replicated could be a public space, possibly central, and that has a very high footfall, where people spend time shopping or relaxing or sipping drinks/teas.**

The important factor which cannot be dismissed is that the kitchen must be well-equipped, but if for organizational purposes there cannot be a kitchen in the location itself, then there's the possibility of cooking someplace else and then simply heating up the food on site.

The concept of truck food or street food is a winning strategy as it is nomadic, just like our contemporary society.

## BIOGRAPHY

Franca Formenti was born in 1963 in Verona in Italy and is now living in Varese, her work taking her to Milan on a frequent basis. Varese is where, at sixteen-years-old, Franca Formenti cultivated an early interest in fashion, going on to attend the Secoli Institute for Fashion in Milan. Moving on in her artistic career and especially in the field of fibre art both in Italy and around the world, she wins several awards, including The Biennial International Textile Award in 2001, Ukraine/Kherson and

participating in exhibitions for Textile Arts, known in Italy as The Chieti Biennials.

Franca Formenti, the artist, uses various sources of expression, to include photography, videos, image editing and virtual art on the worldwide web, and has been, for a number of years, active in visual and social art in public spaces and on-line, throwing light on the more intriguing, even disturbing or socially relevant aspects of human behaviour.

In 2002 Franca Formenti creates her “Bio Doll” performance, a work in progress focusing on the use of the female body as an instrument of seduction on and off-line. Following a series of video performances, photos and actions which invade the public sphere, she collaborates with Derrick de Kerckhove, exchanging ideas and information, to create the virtual conception of a human being: the blokiwiki+blog,.

In 2007 Franca Formenti turns her interest to the world of food, paying particular attention to the various forms of gratification, to the force and power of the concept of nourishment which conditions the behaviour and habits of the public in general, in an attempt to exploit the appeal of food in order to persuade people to reflect upon the actual crisis of identity sometimes observed in contemporary society.

Franca Formenti has taken part in European and International exhibitions and conferences; recently, in 2008, at The Architectural Biennial of Venice for DomasLab Food; in 2011 at The Transmedial in Berlin, celebrating the centenary of Marshall McLuhan, in 2012 at The Umami Food & Art Festival and at Kreemart in New York.

Franca Formenti has working relationships with Derrick de Kerckhove, Massimo Canevacci, Antonio Caronia, Luisa Valeriani and Tatiana Bazzichelli.

In 2012 Franca Formenti was commissioned by the Italian association of Jeunes Restaurateur d’Europe, to produce videos and take photographs of the top 87 renowned restaurants throughout Italy for the July AD Condè Nast 2013 restaurant guide-book.

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## **Trasgressione, semi antichi e remix nella cucina di Zona Franca**

**<https://www.nastroazzurro.it/forward-magazine/articolo/Franca-Formenti/>**

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[Transgression, ancient seeds and remixes in Zona Franca’s kitchen](https://www.nastroazzurro.it/forward-magazine/articolo/Franca-Formenti/)

Franca Formenti is an artist, or rather, an activist: an artist who works on hacking, activism and art, in

the attempt to constantly comprehend and overhaul social and technological codes.

With a shock of red hair and a contagious, heart-warming laugh, one can often see her with a film camera or a reflex and a large lens: Franca observes the world and makes her own conclusions about it, transforming these into performances that have changed and developed over time, alongside her gaze.

Starting from the body and moving on to sexuality and then fashion, from 2007 Franca has dedicated her energy to the world of food; she has walked into the kitchens of famous artist chefs such as Ferran Adrià, she has collaborated with famous blogs such as Dissapore and Scatti di Gusto, and she has created radical concepts such as Foodpower, which gave life to performances such as Identità affamate (hungry identities) and Beggar's Food, which created a stir in Milan. But her latest release has been a surprise for everyone: **Franca, the eclectic artist, has decided to open a restaurant.** Not a temporary, pop-up restaurant, but a real restaurant with a licence, kitchen, a food health and safety course from the State, checks from the local health and safety officers, a dive into bureaucracy and all the investments needed for the opening: all the elements that, as she explains, are an integral part of the performance and the research at the foundation of the project.

But what is it?

Zona Franca is a new kind of restaurant, a performance, a place where objects and humanity is remixed, Zona Franca is the first restaurant where the food has mainly been prepared using vegetables, flours and fruit grown from ancient seeds, as well as been sourced locally, organic, "biodynamic" and seasonal: by walking across the threshold of Franca Formenti's restaurant, one walks into a grey area of legality and illegality, a place where these seeds give life to illegal commerce.

The ancient seeds (in other words, the kind of seeds that a farmer receives from his grandfather) are a complex and controversial subject. To be sold, a seed requires subscription to the register, which in Italy is the ICQRF: a long and costly process that serves to enrich giants like Monsanto who sell "legal" seeds to farmers (which are also sterile, as can be seen in Zona Franca's video), creating economic dependence and damaging the world's biodiversity. The result is that these ancient seeds are exchanged and traded, passed from hand to hand, but that's not all: they creep into the holes in current law and spread their roots, feeding a semi-illegal economy. Because at the moment nothing can stop the selling of the fruits of these seeds. It so happens that many flours are made from these ancient seeds (which appear to have superior qualities compared to other seeds).

Franca plays with this 'bug', hybridising art, activism and business models into a concept that linguistically entwines three levels of existence: "*semi liberi/semiliberi/se mi liberi*". (*translated into English: free seeds/half free/ if you free me*”).

<https://vimeo.com/137808650>

**Semi Liberi:** a statement, almost a political slogan that expresses a desire, something to be achieved.

**Semiliberi:** a critical, tongue-in-cheek point of view of a fact (is it us, or the seeds, or both that are in a state of semi-freedom?). **Se mi liberi:** the possibility to perform (almost a call to action) where the seed is given to us and creates a dialogue with us, that “you” which is strengthened by the ellipse of the sentence interrogates us and makes us responsible on a personal level.

Zona Franca opens on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September in Varese, and is not just about food, but also art, performance, guerrilla, ‘fooding’, intellectuals mingling with farmers, sharing economy, recycling crafts: all of this is a part of its menu because Franca Formenti states: “*to remix humanity is a form of contemporary cuisine*”. To discover what you still don’t know about Zona Franca, we’ll let you discover it for yourself from the horse’s mouth.

- What does “eating” mean to you, Franca Formenti?

hahaha!

It means that a substance goes through your mouth and reaches your sphincter with various phases of transformation, at least three times a day.

It’s a route that lasts for several hours, sometimes days, but if you don’t want to die you **MUST** accept this reality whether you like it or not.

Many reactions and motivations can spur from this.

I believe that despite the fact that food has a huge place in the media, it is still in its embryonic phase when it comes to how other activities can be triggered from it, whether they be connected to aesthetics, chemistry or performance.

**Artist, housewife (as you often describe yourself), with an extensive research on food that has been going on for years. The kitchen and the hob are your tools: why open a restaurant? What pushed you to do it?**

Housewife because I always want to be in control of everything that I do and no one does that better than a good housewife, even if the people around you don’t even realise it.

I've been working on food since 2007 when I didn't have such visibility in the media and it was by pure chance because at that time I was working on another project, based on the body and sexuality, eroticism and the cyborg Biodoll.

I understood that in order to concretize my work the only way forward was to stop, give in and go through bureaucracy, get into everything that is law, licences, haccp, start up etc etc. to then try to flow from the land of activism and art to the land of economics.

It would have been easier to open a space dedicated to art, a kind of atelier or workshop that focused on different kinds of research such as food, taste and other current themes.

I thought about it many times but when it got down to it, it wasn't what I wanted.

So I gave in and began a food and drink health and safety course, organised by the Camera di Commercio in Varese, because I had to have that licence in order to open the business but also to have a deep understanding of the laws and regulations that exist in order to develop projects and performances without breaking the law, but just bending the rules. I think I must have been the teachers' and the inspectors' worst nightmare because my anxiety about doing things according to the law was very high. They were very patient with me.

It may seem irrelevant but for those people who work in activism, they know that the first rule is to have a deep knowledge of your territory. Then the rest just falls into place.

**Zona Franca has been your nickname on facebook for some time. What came first and since when have you had this project in mind?**

Zona Franca is an extension of the Foodpower project, which is the most ambitious project up until now as it mixes art, economics and activism. Foodpower was presented in Varese at the Duetart gallery on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2013 and was curated by Antonio Caronia and Tatiana Bazzichelli.

I thought of the name Zona Franca because, despite having thrown myself into the world of bureaucracy, licences and everything that could terrify anyone wanting to open a small business, I wanted to maintain one of the key objectives of the project: use food as a medium to make people think about various subjects, but in a playful and light-hearted way, so in a free way.

I've been working on the concept for years, perhaps six years. But there was always something missing.

In February 2010 when I presented Beggar's Food in Milan with Antonio Caronia, I began to get curious about restaurants and everything that gravitated around them, trying to understand certain hues that could be irrelevant to some, but that weren't for me.

But as always at one point I get off the caravan and metabolize everything that I have absorbed up until that point.

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- ***Semi liberi, Semiliberi, Se mi liberi: seeds are at the heart of Zona Franca in many ways. Can you explain the situation of the ancient seeds and why they “fluctuate through the net of legality and transgression as f in a dark pool?***
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Seed savers began in 1975 in Iowa well before Vandana Shiva and Carlo Petrini were on the food and agriculture scene – that doesn't mean they didn't contribute hugely to the distribution and defence of many aspects of the world of food.

When I found out about this information my interest in seeds grew, until I decide to make it into an artistic/activist performance that would hybridise with economics, but in a cryptic way.

So even if I had made it into the world of food and star chefs through blogs, interviews, jobs and other things, I was already thinking of the next step and my attention toward them began to fade.

I signed up to the Associazione Civiltà Contadina (Farmer civility association) in Italy and the president, Alberto Olivucci, is very well-read on everything to do with ancient seeds and the laws that are applied to them.

It was a real eye opener, as was Alice Pasin, who as well as growing vegetables from ancient seeds, also writes books, is a raw chef and is also well-read and always available to clarify things and doubts to people who don't work in the sector.

The play on words of “*semi liberi /semiliberi/se mi liberi*” seemed to me to be the perfect description of these laws.

The seeds of any plant, vegetable, fruit or cereal, but be registered in an official registry in order to be sold in Europe but also in some States in America (with other laws, of course). Otherwise they can be exchanged, traded and collected but not sold.

To register them, the procedure, as the website states, seems to be relatively easy. But farmers say it isn't because the process is long and complicated, as well as being costly.

The result is that if a farmer grows wheat that came from his grandfather and wants to sell the seed, he can't.

But it seems that to sow them and harvest them to make flour is OK, so many farmers do this.

But if the ICQRF went to ask for clarification about a bread supply chain that some baker sells and was prepared with flours that come from flour that was milled using non-registered ancient seeds, then they are wading in the waters of illegality.

In other words the bread is kind of illegal, because this bread exists and is sold but no one knows how it was made and where it's from.

The dark pool is an environment where money is exchanged anonymously, it's a kind of clandestine experience: I thought that the comparison was very apt.

The ancient seeds that are either registered or not, produce vegetables, cereals and fruit with more

complex and nutritional qualities than other seeds.

**Locally sourced produce, organic and biodynamic are all words that we have heard of in one way or another and we can imagine how that supply chain goes. But these ancient seeds seem to be a radical novelty to us: do you know of any other similar experiments? how will you source your raw materials?**

Yes I agree locally sourced produce and seasonal produce are obsolete even if having those kinds of principles is a good thing, as long as it doesn't become an obsession.

No, I tried to look online in various restaurants that could base their philosophy on food cooked using raw materials that comes from ancient seeds, but there are only initiatives done by associations on biodiversity that promote the protection of agricultural and food heritage.

I found some restaurants that buy fruit and vegetables grown from ancient seeds but these only appear on a few websites that belong to associations and is not mentioned on the restaurants' websites.

As you say, people talk about locally sourced produce, seasonal produce and biodynamics but no one talks about ancient seeds and their relationship with current laws, their cultivation and commercialisation, therefore the finished product, cooked and served in restaurants or take aways like Zona Franca, isn't mentioned.

Are you saying I'm the first? Well, if that's the case then I hope it becomes a trend everywhere just as locally sourced produce was, and that would be a good thing!

How do I get hold of them?

It was tough, not so much because of the flours but mostly for the fruit and veg. But Civiltà Contadina and Aiab in Lombardy helped me.

**We know you know the menu that you will present to your customers: can you talk to us about it?**

The menu will be based on soups, both hot and cold, salad made with grains, lasagne, cheesecakes and tarts, as well as a variety of cooked vegetables and meats, both grilled or stewed.

It's a take away and that's what it should be.

It's my intention to alternate "normal" days with others where the client who chooses the food from the menu or from the fresh selection will find themselves faced with a performance, sometimes these will be communicated via social media, but sometimes they will be impromptu.

I will also invite artists who work with the theme of food.

**Remixing and recycling in the kitchen, but also in the architecture: can you tell us about how you furnished the restaurant and what people can find in your Market remix?**

I furnished the restaurant with lots of things that I bought cheaply in flea markets, then arranged and decorated using various craft techniques. Each object that is a part of the furnishings is for sale and this isn't something new, because the planet is full of places that sell everything, even the chef if someone asks for him.

The novelty is that Zona Franca is a kind of sharing economy, so on certain days of the month it will host hobbyists and craftsmen, for free and only after having discussed the objects and the prices, and Zona Franca will not take any of their earnings, so anyone who has used clothing, furniture or objects.

I think that this choice is key to the fact that Zona Franca must develop in a positive and money-making way, because the exhibiting guests will create a market of clients who will eat the food.

**Intellectuals, farmers, guerrilla fooders, international chefs. You won't be alone at Zona Franca and it doesn't seem to be a normal restaurant to us: how would you define it?**

I have never been alone since the beginning, because I love working in a team and if I can, at home. If I managed to make Zona Franca it's thanks to Stefano Cesca who I have been working with for many years and who I would define as being "Leonardo-like", I still have to find something that he can't do.

My daughter Giulia has started helping me recently from a communications point of view, supported by Claudia D'Alonzo.

I want it to be a place that is in constant transformation, a liquid space as Bauman put it, but with the ambition of making the decadence and irritability of fluidity into something that is regenerating, be it intellectually or economically, something that can expand independently, which can be replicated into other artistic and economic endeavours.

My desire is to get involved with artists that can show their work to an audience who doesn't know much about this stuff, farmers who talk to intellectuals, because I think that remixing humanity is a form of contemporary cuisine. In other words, I want to cook and serve various trains of thought, mostly and especially those that are against the liberalisation of ancient seeds, so that they may explain their motivation to us.

**Zona Franca opens on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September: can you tell us about the inauguration?**

The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of September in Largo Forzinetti, in the heart of Varese, a Guerrilla food action will take place between 6PM and 8PM, and on the day of the inauguration on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September in Via

Severo Piatti 9, each customer will be given a bag of traditional seeds, while stocks last. We will tell them to take care of the seeds. This gift is also a political and social stance, because it sets in motion the reproduction of an illegal heritage which must be protected, shared and reproduced. The kitchen will be functional whereas the rest will not quite be finished yet as I want the public to see the transformation of the place, to feel it as they eat, so it's best to be clear from the start... this is Zona Franca.

Everything moves all the time, the objects enter and exit. If you go back 6 months later you won't recognise it, if not for the kitchen.

There are so many photoshopped videos and photos of pristine restaurants, the world is full of them and this is the flaw of many globalised brands in my opinion, if you've seen one you've seen them all, whereas cities change, they stay the same wherever you go.

My idea is to overturn the concept of a temporary shop connected to a place and make it divert onto an exterior aspect, a kind of temporary vision, internet was the first of its kind as with just one click you can change the page.

The world outside is changing every day, that's reality... moving, changing, the migration of peoples, the overhauling of codes, languages, rules and perhaps, or at least I think, it's time to take this overhauling into the capitalist economical system in a conceptual and physical way. That's what art is for and in this project I'm betting not on the success or the media attention I will receive, but I'm betting on my earnings, otherwise it will just be a living room, and the economy doesn't really care about living rooms.

The hactivist scene promotes and sustains self-production and the remixing of rules, so there's nothing new there! I have just changed environment and I've mixed up the food cards, disguising myself as an entrepreneur... It's a kind of camouflage because I belong to the world of art ;).

[Salvatore Iaconesi](#) [Oriana Persico](#)