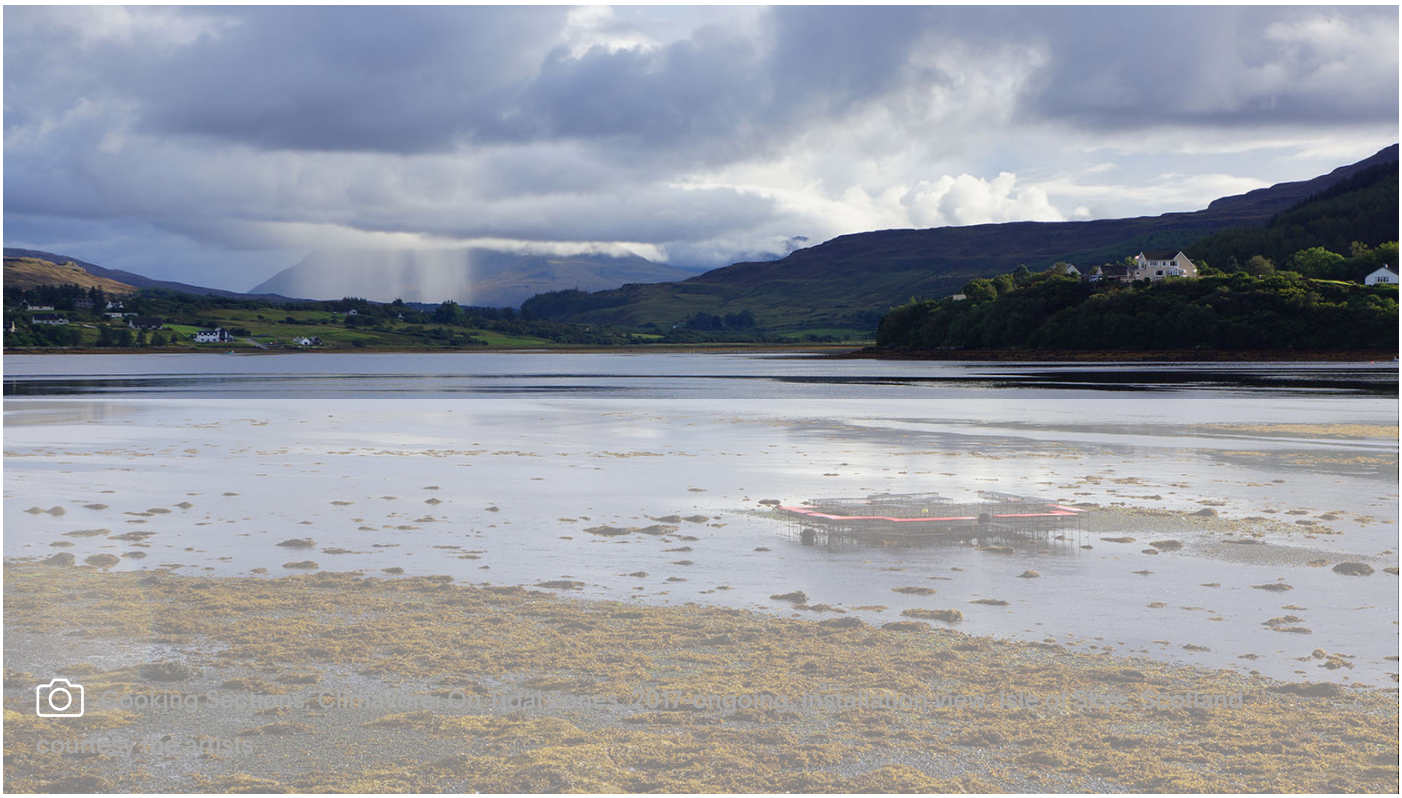
LONG READS

Cooking Sections and the recipe for a healthy planet



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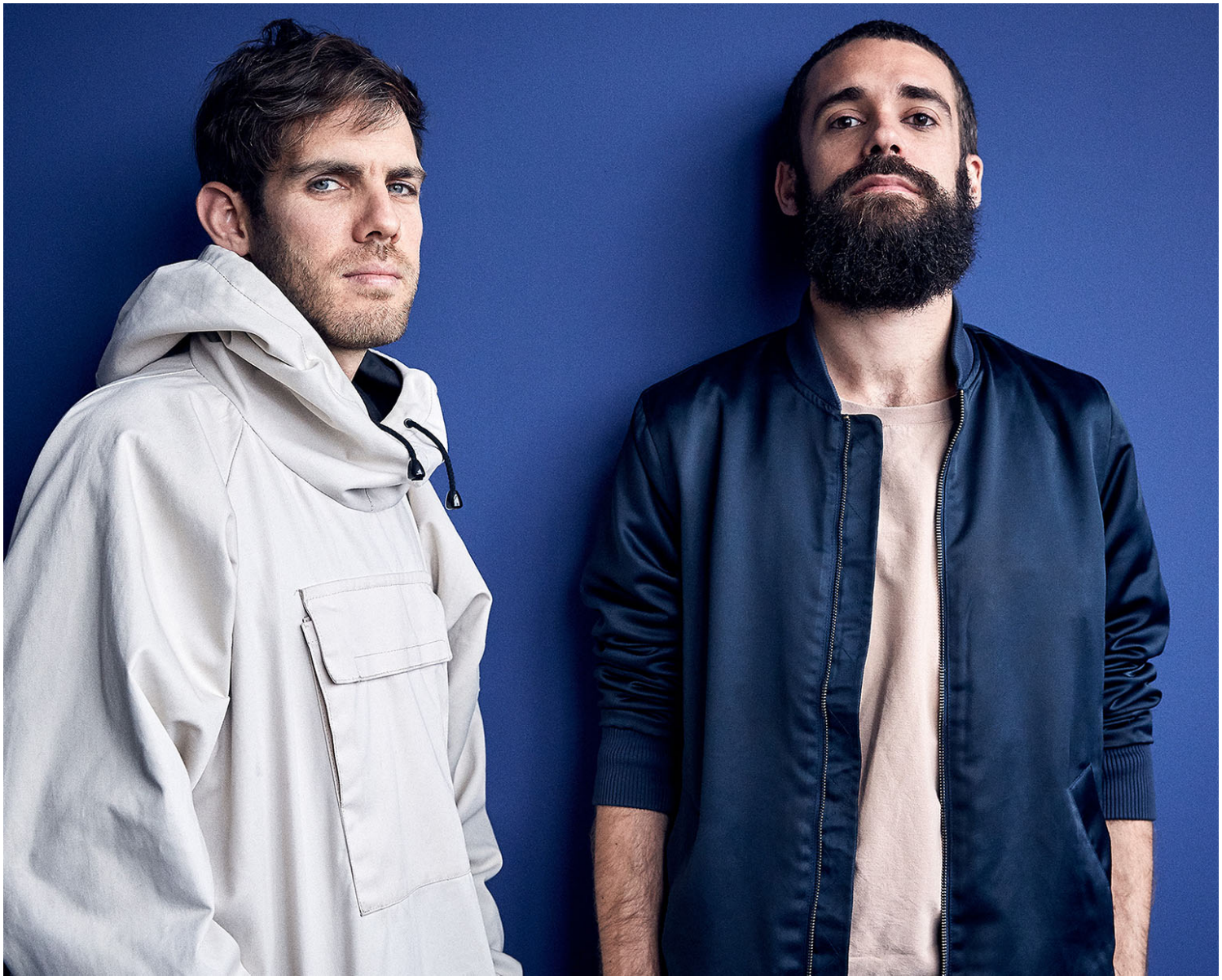
Central to the work of collaborative partnership Cooking Sections are the causes and effects of climate change, particularly in relation to global food production. Ellen Mara De Wachter profiles the Turner Prize 2021 nominees.

What, or who, is Cooking Sections?

Alon Schwabe and Daniel Fernández Pascual met in 2013, while studying at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, London, an experimental academic department that also produced 2018 Turner Prize nominees Forensic Architecture. They first collaborated on a project with three other colleagues, investigating the politics of relocation in communities affected by climate change, and have worked as a duo ever since, with Schwabe bringing his background in performance to the partnership, and Fernández Pascual his training in architecture. They chose the name Cooking Sections because of its range of associations, the most evocative of which may be the schematic cross-sections of buildings and landscapes, which show what things are made of and how they work.

Accordingly, Cooking Sections uses food as the gateway for its exploration of the workings of climate change, focusing on issues such as the transformation of food production from a seasonal to a year-round activity, the evolution of landscapes to support new farming techniques, and the environmental impact of accelerated production across a range of industries. The central axis of the duo's practice so far has been *Climavore*, an ambitious ongoing project with strands in multiple sites, from the Pacific Coast to the Persian Gulf. Its latest iteration is an exhibition at Tate Britain, titled 'Salmon: A Red Herring', which explores the environmental and cultural impact of the intensive aquaculture of the UK's most valuable food export, farmed salmon, and imagines more sustainable alternatives.



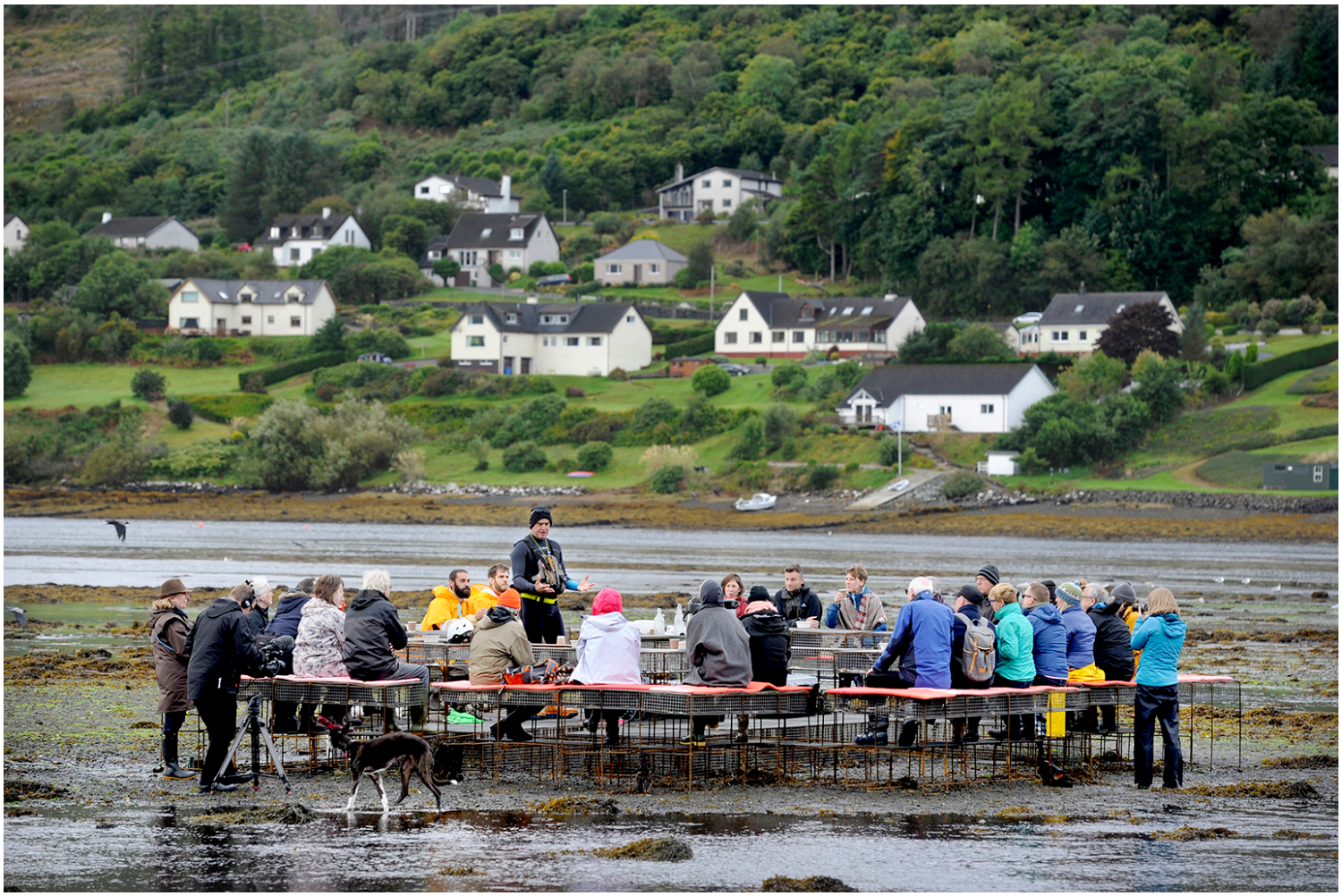
The artists Alon Schwabe (left) and Daniel Fernández Pascual, courtesy Surface.
Photo: Paul Plews

A Skye full of climavores

Cooking Sections defines a ‘climavore’ as someone who explores how to eat as climate changes. To do justice to such a complex topic, Schwabe and Fernández Pascual cast their research nets wide, and delve deep into the hidden relationships between global systems, from farming to finance, deserts to waterways. Their work is not limited to informing audiences; they also like to imagine and set in motion what they call ‘alternative metabolic systems’: new ways of facilitating the transfer of energy from the weather and soil into food in such a way as to regenerate traumatised ecologies. These aims are embodied in their ongoing project, the *Climavore Station* on the Isle of Skye, in Scotland, which they initiated in 2017 to respond to human-induced environmental damage on the island. This presents itself in the ill effects of intensive salmon farming in the

waters off Skye, a food industry that produces countless deformed and sick animals infested with sea lice, and pollutes the water with vast quantities of toxic fish manure that kills off other marine life.

For over three years Cooking Sections has collaborated with local businesses and residents on Skye to initiate the transition from damaging aquaculture to regenerative practices. They have begun raising oysters and seaweed, which are potentially cheap sources of protein that also clean the water by filtering it, and which are important ingredients in *Climavore* recipes. An apprenticeship programme trains local students from Portree High School to become *Climavore* cooks, and provides work experience at restaurants around Skye, whose chefs have replaced farmed salmon with *Climavore* dishes.



Cooking Sections, Climavore: On Tidal Zones, 2017-ongoing, installation view, Isle of Skye, Scotland, courtesy the artists. Photo: Colin Hattersley

For the 18 months in the run-up to its exhibition at Tate Britain, Cooking Sections worked with Tate Eats, which caters across the four Tate sites, and whose chefs recently led a workshop instructing *Climavore* apprentices in the preparation of

hand-dived scallops and seaweed risotto. The oysters Cooking Sections has brought to Portree beach are raised in steel cages that emerge at low tide to double as a banqueting table, a community hub for free public talks, performances and tastings. Its long-term ambition is to make the Isle of Skye famous for its kelp, dulse, oysters and mussels – ingredients that 'regenerate' the water by breathing.

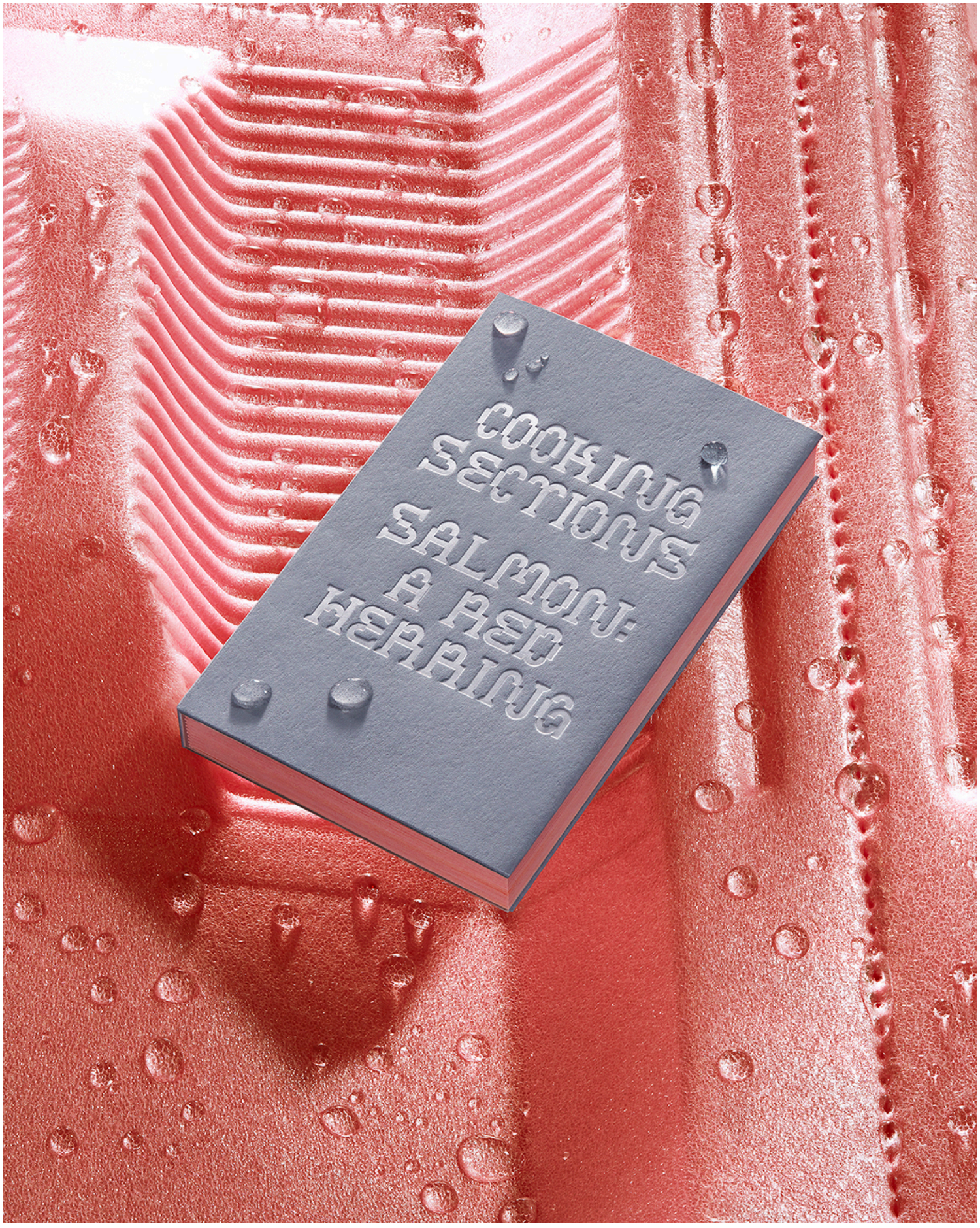
Connected to these objectives is Cooking Sections' aim to expose the reality of Scottish salmon as a commodity, a brand and, ultimately, a fantasy. In a tiny book – the dimensions of an ingot of smoked fish – published on the occasion of the 'Salmon: A Red Herring' exhibition, and sharing its name, Cooking Sections traces the origins of today's farmed salmon to the middle of the 18th century, when arable farmers across Scotland were displaced by the industrial sheep farms set up to supply the growing wool trade. Fishing emerged as a replacement industry, along with kelping and oyster raising, but it was salmon farming that really took off. As the global appetite for the fish grew – and it has been growing exponentially since the 1980s – the industry bloated to unhealthy proportions. Increasing year-round demand has led farmers to adopt a variety of disturbing practices such as the excessive use of vaccines and antibiotics, the clipping of fins, and overcrowding salmon into penned nets. All of which are devastating both for the fish and the marine ecologies in which they have to survive.

On the true nature of salmon

As Cooking Sections points out in the book, salmon today ought to be grey, since it no longer feeds on the krill and lobster that previously lent it its trademark colour. To mitigate for this absence of natural pigment, fish are fed synthetic dyes that colour their flesh an acceptable tone of yellowish-pink. Farmers select the colour they desire for their fish from a Pantone chart called the SalmoFanTM and it is delivered in the form of a dye mixed into food pellets that routinely include animal fat.

Of course, 'salmon' is not just a fish. It is also a colour. Or perhaps, as Cooking Sections asks us to wonder, it is no longer either of those things. Colour is elusive and paradoxical: we think we know what we mean when we talk about colour, yet we also accept that people perceive colour differently. Eating is also a visual activity, and it can be wildly confusing when the colour and flavour of a food don't align with our expectations. Cooking Sections suggests that if salmon, the fish, is not what we think it is or expect it to be – a vigorous pinkish animal whose epic

runs take it from river to ocean and back again – then neither is the colour ‘salmon’, which fails to reflect the animal that ends up on our plates. Thanks to the pernicious practices of intensive farming we are left with the mutually assured destruction of our commonly held notions of salmon as a colour and salmon as an animal.



Cooking Sections, Salmon: A Red Herring, 2020, published by isolarii, courtesy isolarii

Colour shifts in living species are a visible consequence of changes in our ecosystems caused by farming, pollution and climate events. Cooking Sections has chronicled what it calls these 'chromatic alterations' in a video that features, among other oddities, a colony of bees producing iridescent red honey after feeding on waste from a candy factory, and a pink sparrow appearing in a Scottish garden, doubtless after feasting on salmon feed loaded with synthetic dye. Each of these visible mutations occurs as a result of the animal ingesting and metabolising synthetic or toxic elements.

Once these substances enter the food chain, their eventual presence in the bodies of humans is assured. But people are also affected in more immediate ways. A central concern of Cooking Sections' work is environmental justice, and it pays particular attention to the ways in which conditions and behaviours interlink to affect those on the front line of climate change – the people who live and work in coastal areas and places affected by desertification, flooding and toxic leakages, for example – by working with local businesses and in the training of young people in sustainable practices.

Changing the menu, changing mentalities

Desire is the motivator for human behaviour. By revealing the ghastly and surreal truth about our current, human-made environmental emergency, Cooking Sections aims to generate a public debate about damaging practices. The hope is that people will adapt both their desires and behaviours towards new ways of eating. Which is where the most impressive aspect of 'Salmon: A Red Herring' comes in. As part of the project, the cafés and restaurants at each of Tate's four museums will stop serving farmed salmon, in perpetuity. They will instead serve *Climavore* dishes, introducing the notion of eating in response to climate change to a wide public. Cooking Sections sees this commitment from Tate as 'an action that other organisations can follow as part of a divestment from farmed salmon'. The artwork here manifests as policy reform; however, it still benefits from the same enduring status as any work accessioned into Tate's permanent collection.

Cooking Sections has never shied away from projects that develop over long periods of time before producing tangible results. It has recently begun imagining work on even longer timelines, and is increasingly interested in setting in motion projects that will outlive it by centuries. 'It takes the same amount of time to contaminate soil as to decontaminate it in a natural way', Schwabe and Fernández Pascual tell me, 'so if we consider the Industrial Revolution as the origin of many social and environmental problems, we need to start working with very different

timelines.' They would also like to work with governments and influential institutions that 'shape or limit everyone's future'. Their goal is bold and urgent: to disrupt powerful systems and imagine 'other forms of living'.

Cooking Sections in brief

Its *Climavore* project explores how to eat as climate changes

Cooking Sections' Tidal Crispbread recipe: Soak 300g rolled oats in water for six to 12 hours. Preheat the oven to 160°C. Add 1,200ml water, 240g spelt flour, 20g Demerara sugar, 5g kummel seeds, 500g flax seeds, 2 tbsp spirulina and 180g wheat bran to the soaked oats and mix well. Line baking trays with silicone mats and spread the batter evenly and thinly. With scissors, cut 1 pack of nori sheets into confetti-sized flakes and spread with 50g of dried wakame over the batter. Bake in the oven 40-50 minutes until the bread is dry, crisp and golden. While baking, you can start plotting your rope-grown seaweed farm. With as little as £50-worth of rope and buoys, you can set up a plot that would yield dozens of kilos of kelp a year.

Collaboration is at the heart of its ethos

Viewing collaboration as more than just associations with human experts across various fields, it also sees collaboration as working with non-humans to 'perhaps include their point of view from the start as a way to try to introduce less anthropocentric approaches'. A good example of this is *Becoming Xerophile* (2019), a project made for the arid landscape of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, which sets out an architectural solution for growing plants in desert environments, such as those caused by climate change. Bowl-shaped constructions produce shadow, depth and humidity to generate optimal microclimates in which these species can thrive. In return, edible plants that grow with little or no irrigation and salt-tolerant plants from the Gulf region provide ingredients for use in *Climavore* dishes.

It challenges definitions of 'non-native' and 'invasive' species

Its 2016 installation-performance *Devaluing Property Real Estate Agency* looked at Japanese knotweed, a so-called 'non-native invasive species', whose presence on a property can adversely affect its value. Cooking Sections set up a fictional estate agency that provided a range of services, including feeding people with the Plant That Can Sink Your Mortgage Ice Cream, flavoured with Japanese knotweed.

It highlighted the lack of evidence that knotweed is any more damaging to concrete than other plants, and the unscientific definitions of ‘non-native’ and ‘invasive’, linking the scaremongering surrounding an invasive plant to contemporary debates around immigration and nationalism.

Its work has become even more urgent since coronavirus

While the exact path the coronavirus followed before reaching humans is still unknown, it is widely held that it leapt from one species to another in Wuhan in China’s open-air wet markets, which sell meat, fish and animals killed to order, often in crowded conditions. As Cooking Sections puts it: ‘The pandemic is first and foremost an environmental crisis’, which gives ‘Salmon: A Red Herring’ added charge, prompting us to ‘think how we eat in the face of the climate emergency and become aware of misleading claims like “producing food at whatever cost, because the world needs to be fed”’.

A version of this article first appeared in the winter 2020 issue of Art Quarterly*, the magazine of Art Fund.*

'Salmon: A Red Herring' was on at Tate Britain, London, from 27 November 2020 until 30 August 2021.

The exhibition of The Turner Prize 2021’s five shortlisted artists (all collectives) was presented at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, from 29 September 2021 to 12 January 2022.

Array Collective were announced as the winners of the prize on 1 December 2021.