

Art in Review — "Feast" at SITE Santa Fe

Michael Abatemarco | Posted: Friday, April 4, 2014 5:00 am

***Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*,
SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta, 505-989-
1199; through May 18**

Visitors have enjoyed a steady stream of Conceptualist art at SITE Santa Fe over the years, sometimes at the expense, often deliberate, of aesthetic considerations.

Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art, now at its third venue since its inception at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art in 2012, is not the most memorable exhibit to pass through SITE. The

exhibition's focus is the critical role of food in fostering human interactions in social and political spheres through the simple act of sharing a meal. It attempts to position the work of contemporary artists and artist collaboratives within a historical context — and that is part of its problem. Many of the projects and performances commemorated here were public events or happenings staged long ago with little left over to sink your teeth into other than photographs, video recordings, and documentary materials. Bonnie Sherk's *Public Lunch*, for instance, a performance piece the artist did while sitting in a cage by the lion exhibit at the San Francisco Zoo in 1971, was an unexpected and perhaps uncomfortable sight for zoo-goers. The newer piece of the same title, comprising Sherk's photographs of the event, was included in last year's *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*, also at SITE. Earlier and more recent confrontational happenings are also documented in *Feast*. Many of the original projects stand on their own merit, but the current installations based on them do not. The supporting material, which threatens to drown entire installations in memorabilia, does little to enhance or deepen appreciation for the artwork. Textual components discuss the relevance of and ideas behind the art and documented performance pieces. When the text is more interesting than the art, the experience is like a meal that doesn't live up to its description on the menu.

One of the larger works on view is Suzanne Lacy's *International Dinner Party*, a project Lacy began in 1979, when she engaged with women around the world over shared meals. The problem is how to make a fascinating contemporary installation around that, and *Feast* comes up short, relying on personal correspondences and news articles about the project. The glass-encased ephemera, including envelopes and letters, is set as part of the installation but is a poor substitute for the visceral



Rome

Laura Letinsky: Rome, 2009, chromogenic print; courtesy SITE Santa Fe

experience of her performance art. A large map of the globe dominates one wall, pinpointing all the locations of Lacy's dinners, but it is hardly illuminating. As large as the map is, it doesn't manage to fill the cavernous space at SITE.

In fact, despite an abundance of site-specific installation work in *Feast*, the galleries are curiously empty. Most of the work is on or up against the walls. One or two room-sized installations fail to instill a sense of total immersion in an environment. A case in point is Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Communist Body/Fascist Body*. The piece was staged as a performance in 1979. Abramovic and Ulay invited a small group of friends to their Amsterdam apartment before midnight on the eve of their shared birthday. Guests were greeted with two contrasting tableaux, one an elegant dinner with silver, crystal, caviar, and champagne, and the other a table set with a poor-man's version of a similar meal. The guests arrived to find the artists asleep in their bed. *Communist Body/Fascist Body* is about the two artists, their different backgrounds growing up in different countries under different political and cultural ideologies. Abramovic is Serbian, and Ulay is German. In the present installation, a recreation of the original, the element of surprise, present in the first piece, is lacking. So is any sense of intimacy, and not just because there are no warm bodies in the bed (included as part of the installation). Now visitors are merely observers rather than participants.

SITE-generated exhibitions are generally more thought-provoking and illuminating than *Feast*, but its concept-driven shows often suffer from a cold, clinical feeling that also pervades the current offering. An exception was last year's *The Pearl*, Enrique Martínez Celaya's SITE-wide installation that was designed to instill a cathartic experience in the viewer. To pull it off required a little bit of magic and invention in the visuals. There is little in the way of aesthetics to draw you into *Feast*, but that cannot entirely be laid at the feet of SITE, as this is a traveling show organized by another venue. Still, more could be done with the space to bring greater cohesion to the disparate installations. Visitors move from one work to the other, forced into reading. Art venues often struggle with the question of how much information is too much and to what extent an artwork should stand on its own merits. Here the explanations are necessities, but the visual components are inelegantly executed. For instance, the installation for *Potluck: Chicago*, a community project by London-based collective Motiroti with artists Ali Zaidi and Tim Jones, staged in locations around the Windy City with the purpose of fostering dynamic social interaction, is composed of sticky notes, paper plates, and a dirty apron, haphazardly arranged like a memo board in an office lunchroom. *Potluck: Chicago*'s website states that art-making is among its activities, but instead of including work from *Potluck: Chicago*'s community art projects, we get sticky notes.

Tucked away in a room of its own is Axle Contemporary's project *The Royal Bread Show*. The installation documents a project in which Axle invited members of the public to create small ceramic figurines to be baked into bread by local bakeries, an idea inspired by such festivals and holidays as Mardi Gras and Epiphany. The public-made figurines will be displayed in Axle's mobile art gallery, outside SITE Santa Fe on May 2. The sense of communal spirit and frivolity in *The Royal Bread*

Show is an exception to the contrivance of the rest of *Feast*.

There is a disconnect between the social aspect of the projects and our experience of them as artistic displays. *Feast* is not unlike other recent exhibits at SITE that position Conceptualism and activism of the 1960s and '70s as a benchmark. The exhibit feels like an adjunct rather than a separate show and leaves you hungry for the social interactions implied by the term “radical hospitality.”